

ROMANCE, MEDIEVAL (also called a **chivalric romance**): In medieval use, **romance** referred to **episodic** French and German poetry dealing with **chivalry** and the adventures of knights in warfare as they rescue fair maidens and confront supernatural challenges. The medieval metrical romances resembled the earlier *chansons de gestes* and **epics**. However, unlike the Greek and Roman epics, medieval romances represent not a heroic age of tribal wars, but a courtly or chivalric period of history involving highly developed manners and civility, as M. H. Abrams notes. Their standard plot involves a single knight seeking to win a scornful lady's favor by undertaking a dangerous quest. Along the way, this knight encounters mysterious hermits, confronts evil blackguards and brigands, slays monsters and dragons, competes anonymously in tournaments, and suffers from wounds, starvation, deprivation, and exposure in the wilderness. He may incidentally save a few extra villages and pretty maidens along the way before finishing his primary task. (This is why scholars say romances are **episodic**--the plot can be stretched or contracted so the author can insert or remove any number of small, short adventures along the hero's way to the larger quest.)

Medieval romances often focus on the supernatural. In the classical epic, supernatural events originate in the will and actions of the gods. However, in secular medieval romance, the supernatural originates in magic, spells, enchantments, and fairy trickery. Divine miracles are less frequent, but are always Christian in origin when they do occur, involving relics and angelic visitations. A secondary concern is **courtly love** and the proprieties of aristocratic courtship--especially the consequences of arranged marriage and adultery.

Scholars usually divide medieval romances into four loose categories based on subject-matter:

(1) "**The Matter of Rome**": stories based on the history and legends of Greco-Roman origin such as the Trojan war, Thebes, mythological figures, and the exploits of Alexander the Great. The medieval poet usually creates an **anachronistic** work by turning these figures into knights as he knew them.

(2) "**The Matter of Britain**": stories based on Celtic subject-matter, especially Camelot, **King Arthur**, and his knights of the round table, including material derived from the Celto-French **Bretons** and Breton *lais*.

(3) "**The Matter of England**": stories based on heroes like King Horn and Guy of Warwick.

(4) "**The Matter of France**": stories based on Charlemagne, Roland, and his knights.

A large number of such romances survive due to their enormous popularity, including the works of Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1190), Hartmann von Aue (c. 1203), Gottfried von Strassburg (c. 1210), and Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1210). England produced its own romances in the fourteenth century, including the *Lay of Havelok the Dane* and *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight. In 1485, Caxton printed the lengthy romance *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a prose work that constituted a grand synthesis of Arthurian legends. Gradually, the poetic *genre* of medieval romance was superseded by prose works of Renaissance romance. See **romance, renaissance**.