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# From Chariclea and Theagen to Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng: How romantic fictions inform us about the cultural evolution of pair-bonding in Eurasia

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# From Chariclea and Theagen to Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng:

## How romantic fictions inform us about the cultural evolution of pair-bonding in Eurasia

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In *Love and the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont famously suggested that 'romantic love', the idea that love is key in human existence, emerged suddenly in 12th c. France. More recent scholarship in literary history suggests that the emergence of romantic love is general phenomenon in history. Similar increase in the importance of love can be detected in the Arab world, in India, in Persia, in China and in Japan. In this paper I discuss the idea that feelings depicted in narrative fictions correspond to the modern scientific characterization of romantic love, and thus may function as an indicator of a behavioral and psychological change in people's preferences for pair bonding. I also show that literary transmission chains (e.g., the Trojan War, from the Greek epic *Iliad* to the Hollywood film *Troy*) can help us study cultural shifts in the importance of love, as the increasing importance of love has greatly transformed the original stories, infusing them with romantic elements and sometimes radically changing the nature of the relationships between the original characters. Ironically, I suggest that this very phenomenon hinders the ability of modern readers to detect the absence of love in ancient fictions, as modern readers have first encountered the older stories through their modern, more romantic rewrites, whether in film, play, novel, or children's story form, and cannot help but project the modern version onto the older ones.

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# 1. Detecting romantic love and pair-bonding in narrative fictions

In the brain and behavioral sciences, romantic love is conceived as a commitment device composed of passion, intimacy, and caregiving that ultimately evolved to motivate pair bonding in humans and thereby help provide the massive investment required to rear human children (Buss, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2015). It is universal, it suppresses mate-search mechanisms, and it has specific behavioral, hormonal, and neuropsychological signatures (Fletcher et al., 2015).

From a behavioral point of view, a narrative will thus be more “romantic” if it insists on 1) mutual attraction, 2) emotional attachment (e.g., love at first sight, intrusive thinking about the love object), 3) long-term commitment and 4) the priority of love over other life goals (e.g., love suicide, lovesickness, broken heartedness) (Gottschall, 2008a; Harris, 1995; Karandashev, 2016).

Is it possible to use this characterization of romantic love in ancient literature? Let us consider the two examples of ancient Greek novels and Chinese *caizi-jiaren* stories.

## ANCIENT GREEK NOVELS

The “romantic complex” closely corresponds to what Konstan (2014) has called “sexually symmetric” stories in Greek and Latin. In contrast to a range of stories in ancient literature focused on male characters, their desires and their actions, these highly romantic love stories are characterized by a certain degree of symmetry between the two main characters (Point 1). These stories also insist on the depiction of feelings (love at first sight, emotional attachment) (Point 2). They put more emphasis on feelings of commitment than on the sensual and sexual pleasures of love (Point 3). Finally, both characters are active in the pursuit of love and display very high levels of commitment, committing suicide when their love becomes impossible or when their partner dies (Point 4). In a nutshell, they exemplify all the characteristics of what psychologists call “romantic love” (Fletcher et al., 2015).

Since these novels are not well known, and are no longer read (in contrast to early modern plots such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and *Werther*), it might be useful to quote one of them verbatim at some length. Here are some extracts from Heliodorus of Emesa’s *Æthiopica* (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.), illustrating the different points in the romantic complex:

(1) Reciprocity and (2) attraction:

"For, as soon as they beheld each other, they loved; it seemed as if their souls had recognized that they were akin, as if, conscious that they were related by nobility, they hastened with a bound each towards its affinity. At first they remained dumbfounded and motionless; she, still holding out the torch, and he, extending his hand to take it. For a long time they continued thus, their eyes fixed upon each other, as if, instead of having now met for the first time, they had met before, and were trying to remember where. Then they smiled, gently and almost imperceptibly, which was only betrayed by the movement of their eyes; soon, as if ashamed, they both blushed; and, a moment later, when passion had reached their hearts, they grew pale. In a word, a thousand changes overspread their faces in a moment, a thousand changes of colour and features betrayed the agitation of their soul." (II, 5)

He swore that he had never known a woman, that he had always spurned them and despised the idea of love and marriage, until Chariclea's beauty had proved to him that he was naturally weak, but that he had never until then beheld a woman worthy of his love. (II, 17)

(3) Emotional bonding (associated with long-term commitment and dissociated from sexual attraction and sexual promiscuity):

I have kept myself pure from all illegitimate intercourse with you; I have frequently repelled your advances, waiting for the opportunity of legitimately consecrating that union to which we have been pledged from the commencement, and which has been confirmed by most solemn oaths. (I, 1)

(4) The priority of love over other goals:

It's Theagen who will marry me or the fatal day will come for me. (IV, 11)

Evidently, these paragraphs could hardly be more romantic. They correspond point by point to the behavioral characterization of love, and can be tracked in isolation from each other.

#### CHINESE CAIZI-JIAREN STORIES

The same remark holds for Chinese romantic stories, referred to as “*caizi-jiaren*” (scholar-beauty). Consider, for instance, this modern characterization of *caizi-jiaren* stories (adapted from Song, 2004):

- 1) It is a love story between a handsome young scholar and a beautiful girl, both of whom display an exceptional gift for poetry and prose.
- 2) Both the hero and the heroine come from distinguished families.
- 3) They meet under an unexpected circumstance and fall in love at first sight.
- 4) Some hindrances occur in the way of their marriage; it is usually the girl's mother or father who is opposed to the match because of the scholar's lack of an official rank.
- 5) The love stories invariably end with the happy reunion of the couple, which in most cases is made possible by the *caizi*'s success in the imperial examination.

*The Story of the Western Wing* (13<sup>th</sup> c.) matches this pattern perfectly. Again, because medieval Chinese stories are not well known to modern readers, it is worth presenting one of them in more details.

The play has twenty-one acts in five parts. It tells the story of a secret love affair between Zhang Sheng, a young scholar, and Cui Yingying, the daughter of a chief minister of the Tang court. The two first meet in a Buddhist monastery. Yingying and her mother have stopped there to rest while escorting the coffin of Yingying's father to their native town. Zhang Sheng falls in love with her immediately, but is prevented from expressing his feelings while Yingying is under her mother's watchful eye. The most he can do is express his love in a poem read aloud behind the wall of the courtyard in which Yingying is lodging.

However, word of Yingying's beauty soon reaches Sun the Flying Tiger, a local bandit. He dispatches ruffians to surround the monastery, in the hopes of taking her as his consort. Yingying's mother agrees that whoever drives the bandits away can have Yingying's hand in marriage, so Zhang Sheng contacts his childhood friend General Du, who is stationed not far away. The general subdues the bandits, and it seems that Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying are set to be married. However, Yingying's mother begins to regret her rash promise to Zhang Sheng, and takes back her word, with the excuse that Yingying is already betrothed to the son of another high official of the court. The two young lovers are greatly disappointed, and begin to pine away with their unfulfilled love. Fortunately, Yingying's

maid, Hongniang, takes pity on them, and ingeniously arranges to bring them together in a secret union. When Yingying's mother discovers what her daughter has done, she reluctantly consents to a formal marriage on one condition: Zhang must travel to the capital and pass the civil service examination. To the joy of the young lovers, Zhang Sheng proves to be a brilliant scholar, and is appointed to high office. The story thus ends on a happy note, as the two are finally married. (*Romance of the Western Chamber - Wikipedia*, s. d.)

By contrast, the first version of the same story, *The Biography of Yingying*, written in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, departs markedly from the *caixi-jiaren* pattern. In this story, the beauty Yingying does not fall in love at first sight, but instead rebuffs the scholar at first. She eventually sleeps with the scholar without clearly expressing her feelings. Finally, there is no happy ending. The scholar passes the exam successfully but never comes back to marry her. By comparing *The Story of the Western Wing* and *The Biography of Yingying*, and their respective distances from an ideal romantic plot, we can track the relative importance of romantic love for the public of these two stories (for a more comprehensive study of the story of Yingying, see Baumard, 2021).

## 2. Was 'courtly love' about romantic love?

It might be worth spending some time discussing the concept of courtly love. Early students of courtly love, such as Gaston Paris, C.S. Lewis and Denis De Rougemont, thought that Western medieval culture had invented a specific concept of love, exclusively concerned with adulterous love and detached from marriage. However, in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, works in cultural history have demonstrated that the romantic feelings described by 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary historians match the modern characterization of romantic love: reciprocity, steadfastness, sincerity, detachment from the pursuit of mundane goals, exclusivity, spontaneity, self-control (over sexual urges in particular) and emotional attachment (Duby, 1992; Otis-Cour, 2005; Schnell, 1989a, 1989b).

Thus, the attacks on traditional marriage, and the associated defense of adulterous love, instead should be seen as a way to defend the importance of feelings and love in romantic relationships. Medieval writers defended a new kind of marriage based on love and attachment. Nickolaus (2013) notes that the narrative framework of two thirds of the novels of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is built on marriage (especially for love). Similarly, Duby notes that “Chrétien de Troyes exalts the value of marriage in high terms. He proposes that love should be its prelude and its invigorating ferment. He holds that to undermine this fundamental institution is forbidden.” (Duby, 1994) Far from making love an act of adultery, the authors of courtly literature closely associate it with marriage and, in so doing, remain so faithful to ecclesiastical norms that these novels can be described as “canonically correct” (Otis-Cour, 2005). As Otis-Cour concludes: “These novels reject not only polygyny, divorce and adultery, but also premarital relationships, what theologians called ‘simple fornication’” (Otis-Cour, 2005)

But if medieval discourses about love were in keeping with the universal characterizations of romantic love, why did medieval writers feel the need to coin new terms such as *fin'amor*? In the early Middle Ages, the Frankish, Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian cultures did not accord much place to attachment, passion, and marriage based on love (de La Roncière, 2009; G. Duby, 1981; Joye et al., 2013; R. Stone, 2011b). In these cultures, romantic love was characterized as a negative passion that disturbs dynastic strategies (often polygamous), which were deemed more important than attachment and reciprocity. But from the 11<sup>th</sup> century on, new, much more favorable views of romantic love emerged: love was now seen as a positive motivation, it was thought that marriage should be based on attachment and that women should be respected. This

is reflected in literary works. “Male fidelity, new in social norms, is warmly proclaimed in these novels; ‘loyalty’ is respected by heroes as well as heroines. Women insist on the fidelity of their lovers” (Otis-Cour, 2005). Also, “But men are invited not to dally with the women of others, not to take the virgin who tempts them by force, not to go on the attack unless they are sure of her agreement, and, if she consents, to take her only legitimately, making of this friend a wife.” (Duby, 1997). It is in this context that the expression of *fin’amor* (*fin* etymologically has the idea of completion and perfection) appeared, to defend and explain the new mentality.

To sum up, while the theory that a special form of love—courtly love—was invented in the 12<sup>th</sup> century seems incompatible with the idea that romantic love is a universal, species-specific motivation, a closer inspection of medieval views on romantic love shows that they fit the pattern described by psychologists. Medieval writers and philosophers defended a view of love that was 1) opposed to mere sexual attraction (being based instead on long-term attachment), 2) opposed to socially imposed unions based on family strategies (being based instead on mutual attraction), 3) based on contentment (and thus on reciprocity) 4) a central goal in an individual’s life history (one should aim to marry one’s love). Thus, “courtly love” or “*fin’amor*,” rather than being cultural intentions, are actually *culturally specific labels* that Western Europeans invented to describe and defend a totally universal feeling (romantic love).

Before concluding, it is worth mentioning that in order to further defend the value of romantic love against the old social norms based on strategic marriage, polygamy, and loyalty to lineage, medieval Europeans also developed a dualistic philosophy, opposing love and sex, soul and flesh, the spiritual and the material, the divine and the earthly. Love was thought to be sublime, transcendent and pure. These reflections probably contributed to the impression that Europeans had “invented” a new emotion, while what actually they did is attain new levels of investment in romantic love that did indeed seem “sublime” or “divine” compared to the lower levels of investment in previous societies.

No such metaphysical opposition between love and lust existed in China and Japan until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lee, 2006; Pan, 2015). And yet it is striking that when the Japanese and the Chinese started to share European views of love, its indispensability to marriage, its idealization and sublimity, and its exclusivity, they also started to embrace the same opposition between lust and love and to create new words to qualify the new intensity of romantic love (Lee, 2006; Pan, 2015). In other words, it may be that philosophical reflections opposing love and lust are themselves a product of a very high level of investment in romantic love (Baumard et al., in press).

To conclude, cultural scientists should not confuse what cognitive psychologists call “intuitions” and “reflections” (Baumard, N. & Boyer, P., forthcoming; Haidt, 2001; Sperber, 1997). Intuitions are automatic, implicit, and unconscious processes, while reflections are conscious and explicit justifications or elaborations of these intuitions. In this perspective, it is important to distinguish between the universal intuition of romantic love and highly variable reflective thoughts, justifications, folk theories, and linguistic labels concerning romantic love. People around the world may experience the same intense feelings of love, but elaborate widely different reflections about them (*fin’amor* in medieval Europe, *aiqing* or *qingai* in modern China, *rabu* in modern Japan).

The consequence of this observation is that we should not take the absence of labels such as *fin’amor* in other cultures as evidence of the absence of romantic love. For instance, up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese and Japanese languages did not have an equivalent to *fin’amor* or to romantic love (Lee, 2006; Pan, 2015). And yet from at least the Song dynasty and the Tokugawa

period, a highly romantic literature emerged in China and Japan. Explicit labels are poor markers of psychological preferences.

To conclude, there is a continuum, from cultures where individuals place very little value on romantic attachment (although they surely experience it in their daily life) to cultures where individuals value romantic attachment very highly, to the point where it is commonly thought to be the most important part of life, and the most sublime. In this perspective, it is likely that the more romantic people are, the more likely they are to coin a specific term for romantic attachment (and possibly the more likely they are to take a dualist turn in their treatment of love and sex). However, the existence of this label should not be taken at face value in cross-cultural research, as it is only a cue among many other about people's views of romantic love. A better approach would be to use a quantitative index, rather than a dichotomous one (Baumard et al., in press).

### 3. Testing the validity of markers of romantic love in literary works: Romantic plots and sexual symmetry

Is there a way to test whether behavioral characterizations of love in literary works are consistent from one period to another, and from one culture to another? One way to assess the robustness of markers of romantic love is to study what Konstan has called “sexual symmetry” (2014). Romantic stories are very “sexually symmetric” because the authors need to show, through various adventures and hardships, how important the romantic attachment is to both of the partners, how much they suffer from the absence of the beloved, and how much they are ready to sacrifice to get them back (2014). As Isolde Stark writes: “If love and fidelity are to be confirmed as unchanging, then they must necessarily be subjected to trials. The result is a continual sequence of trial situations” (Stark, 1989). A logical consequence of this literary necessity is that the two lovers should be equally important in the story, as overly emphasizing one of the two characters would suggest that the relationship is not so reciprocal (and hence so not romantic). This leads to the prediction that each character's name should occur more or less equally often.

Consider the paradigmatic medieval love stories as a benchmark. In *Tristan and Iseult*, *Aucassin and Nicolette*, and *Floris and Blanchefleur*, the male and female characters are mentioned relatively similar numbers of times (see Figure 1). In a perfectly symmetric story, the ratio of occurrences of the male and female characters should equal 1. These highly romantic medieval romances are close to this number: 1.02 for *Aucassin and Nicolette*, 1.15 for *Tristan and Iseult*, 1.64 for *Flore and Blanchefleur*. By contrast, Beroul's version of *Tristan and Iseult*, in which there is less emphasis on feelings than in the more canonical versions (Baumgartner, 1987; Marchello-Nizia, 1995), is also less symmetrical (3.07). The Icelandic *Tristrams saga*, a Norse adaptation of *Tristan and Iseult*, is also less symmetrical (2.45). This matches the findings of qualitative studies showing that these two works are less romantic (Kalinke, 2011; Marchello-Nizia, 1995; Wilms, 2009).

Turning to the Greek novels, the ratio of mentions of the names of the male and female characters is also very close to 1 (sometimes even below 1, suggesting that the role of the female character is more important): 1.11 for *Daphnis and Chloe*, 0.92 for *Callirhoe*, and 0.97 for the *Aethiopica* (see Figure S12). Although counting name occurrences is a very crude measure of romantic love, it appears to concord with assessments based on plot content.

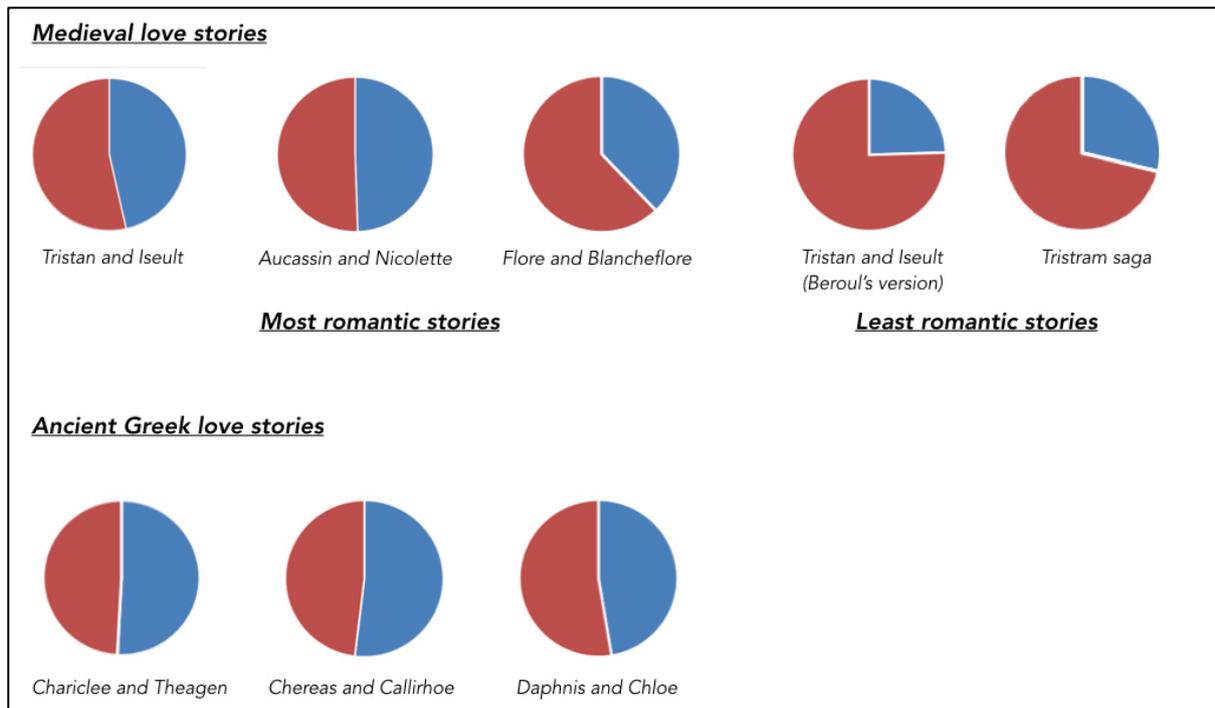


Figure 1 | Ratio of the occurrences of the male (in red) and female (in blue) main characters in love stories

Clearly, this is a very preliminary work. An appropriate test would require a much more systematic investigation. For the time being, such an investigation remains difficult to carry out because most of the texts have not been digitized and cannot be studied with this method.

#### 4. Literary transmission chains

One benefit of using literary works is that, in many cases, they are related to each other by way of long cultural transmission chains in which story lines are transmitted from one generation to the next. However, the chains of transmission do not consist in faithful transmission (like a fax machine) and blind imitations, but rather in transformations, mutations and innovating reworking (Claidière et al., 2014; Morin, 2016; Sperber, 2000). As historian of English literature Helen Cooper puts it:

New readers make new texts'; every generation brings different cultural expectations to works of the past and so finds new meanings and new things to respond to. (Cooper, 2004).

As a result of this process, love stories and romantic plots of the past are reworked generation after generation:

While the motifs of romance remain largely the same, the usage and understanding of them changes over time, in the same way that words themselves change meaning. (Cooper, 2004).

By comparing how the same story is told from one period to the next, the difference between each version can tell us how readers' preferences have changed from one period to the next.

The following section presents four examples of such cultural transmission in detail in order to demonstrate how the same story line can be reworked very differently in different contexts. To do

so, I re-use analyses and citations included in *The Ancient Literary Fictions Values Survey*, but present them in a novel way.

## THE WAR OF TROY

In the original story of the Trojan War (or at least in the earliest extant versions), romantic elements are rare if not absent. Set during the 10-year siege of the city of Troy by a coalition of Greek states, the *Iliad* recounts the battles and events during the weeks following the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. When the *Iliad* evokes erotic passion, it is usually from the male point of view, and the audience's attention is directed not to the love story but to its political and social consequences (for a recent behavioral approach to the *Iliad*, see Gottschall, 2008b).

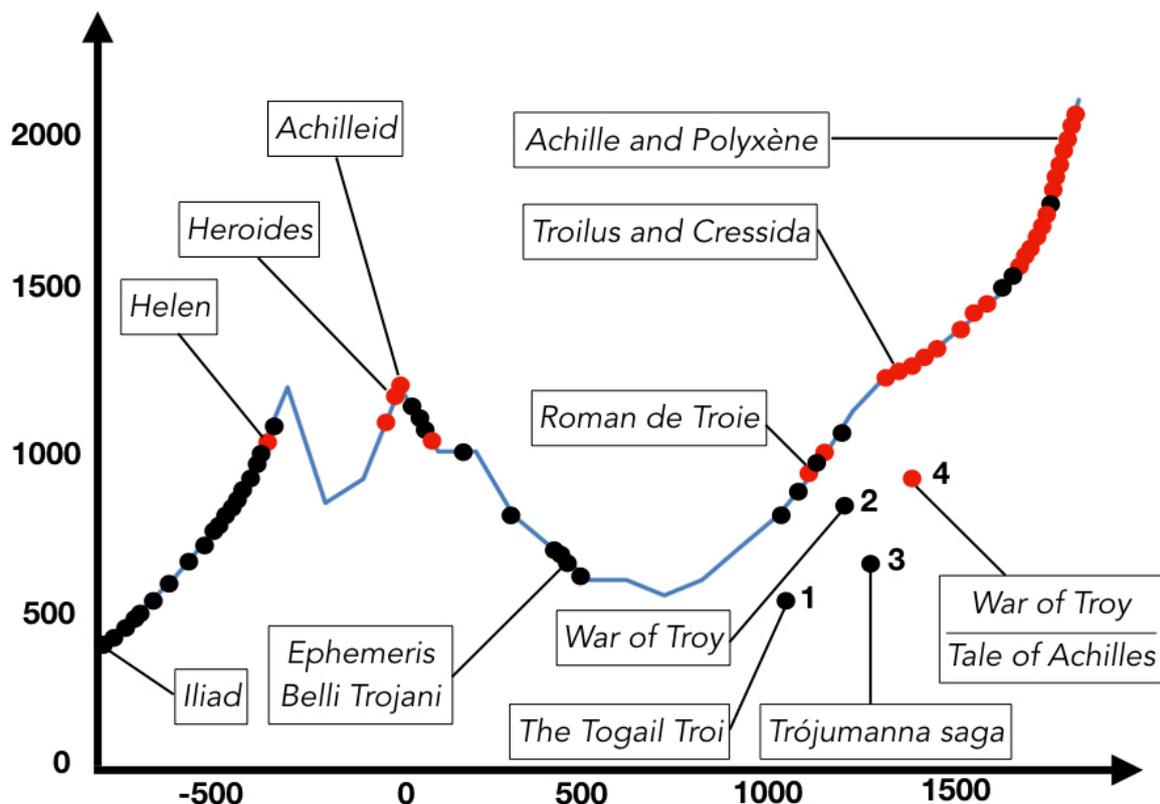


Figure 2 | The literary transmission chain of the War of Troy (X axis: time ; y axis : GDP per capita in the most developed area of Europe; in red, the most romantic works, see discussion in the text)

The *Iliad* inspired many subsequent works during antiquity, from tragedies to epics and epistolary poems (see Figure 2). While many of the most ancient stories are not romantic, the later ones, such as Euripides' *Helen*, Statius' *Achilleid*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Heroides* give much more importance to romantic love. All these works are relatively well known, and I shall not discuss them further here.

Medieval authors rewrote the Greek archaic epics. The *Roman de Troie* (1155) is a rewriting of the war of Troy by the French writer Benoît de Sainte-Maure (though Benoît de Sainte-Maure probably did not have access to the *Iliad* itself, only to the late Roman works of Dictys' *Epheris belli Trojani*, and Dares' *De excidio Trojae historia*). In his rewriting, Benoît injected love stories (Achilles-Polyxena, Diomedis/Troilus-Briseida) into the original story. Compared to Dares, the focus is less on martial

deeds and more on psychological elements. Historian of Greek literature Kostas Yiavis summarizes here the differences between Benoît and Dares:

Love had played no substantial part in Dares’’: heroes had been attracted to heroines (and vice versa) on account of their beauty, not the nobility of their souls (§§10, 27). Helen had been besotted, not quite in love, with Paris only to regret it later (§11). Love had not inspired magnificent deeds: nothing good had come out of Achilles’ passion for Polyxena but betrayal and death (§§ 27, 30, 34).

Benoît, by contrast, centralised love – and courtly love at that. He interlinked four love affairs (Jason-Medea, Paris-Helen, Achilles-Polyxena and Diomedis/Troilus-Briseida) with the Trojan War which he turned to a chivalric campaign. The narrative relied on the idea that nobility in rank and soul ended in prowess in the battlefield, which in turn entailed, according to courtly conventions, true love. Benoît’s characters were no longer the one-dimensionally fierce warriors of Dares, but were capable of delicacy and yearning. (Yiavis, 2016)

In turn, Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s rewriting inspired subsequent versions in Western Europe. In Italy, the *Roman de Troie* was later adapted into Latin prose by Guido delle Colonne in *Historia destructionis Troiae* (1287). In Spain, it influenced the *Historia troyana polimetrica* (1270), a cycle of eleven poems ‘dominated by the rhetoric of courtly love’ (Gies, 2004, p. 83). In Germany, *Liet von Troje* (*The song of Troy*; 1190-1217) by Herbort von Fritzlar and the *Trojanerkrieg* (1280-87) by Konrad von Würzburg also based on the *Roman de Troie*. ‘Special attention is paid to the love relationship of Helen and Paris’ (Palmer, 1997). Konrad also ‘transforms the story of Achilles and Deidemia he found in Statius’ *Achilleis*—a tale of disguise, passion and rape—into a narrative of young love of nearly 4000 lines.’ (Schultz, 1995). In the Netherlands, *Historie van Troyen* (c. 1264), is a translation and amplification of the *Roman de Troie* of Benoît (Meijer, 2012, p. 14).

Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s rewriting also inspired new versions in less developed areas such as Norway (*Trójumanna saga*) and Byzantium (*War of Troy, Tale of Troy*). Strikingly, these versions, while following the example of Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s work in many ways, diverge from it when it comes to depicting romantic feelings and giving love a role in the development of the story (Goldwyn, 2010; Goldwyn & Nilsson, 2018; Yiavis, 2016). Here is what Yiavis wrote about the Byzantium version of the *Roman de Troie*:

On the one hand, it retained the structure based on the four love-affairs introduced by Benoît. Dozens of details were drawn from some evidently chivalric source: the battles were jousts in which heroes unseated their opponents (for example, II. 3610-11, 3738-41). Vriseida encouraged Diomidis, her subsequent suitor, by giving him a sleeve as a token of interest (II. 6521-2). Medea boldly invited Jason to spend a night of passion in her room (II. 412, 523-4). (Yiavis, 2016)

On the other hand, the Byzantine version was clearly less romantic than the French original:

All love was proclaimed to be flawed and women fickle. Love hardly inspired the heroes to deeds of valour... it consistently caused devastation.... The romance rarely passed on a chance to drive home that when a young woman trusts a man, there ensues sexual permissiveness which is condemnable. (Yiavis, 2016)

Yiavis concludes: “Somehow this distance which the *War of Troy* placed between itself and the courtly ideals of the *Roman de Troie* brought it closer to Dares whose muscular narrative had had no space for love.” (Yiavis, 2016)

In contrast to the Byzantine writers, the Western European writers who drew on Benoît de Sainte Maure made romantic love more important in their stories of the Trojan War, rather than less. Boccaccio, however, ‘breathes new life into the old romance genre by shaping a narrative which, differently from his sources, focuses on the emotional effect on Troilo of separation from his beloved, and his despair when he discovers Criseida's betrayal’ (Usher, 1996, p. 75). Thus, Boccaccio’s version is more romantic than Benoît’s:

Unlike the writers in the romance tradition, who generally described the events of the war from beginning to end by translating the entirety of their source, Boccaccio drew from Benoît only those sections having to do with the love triangle between Priam’s youngest son, Troilus; Cressida, the daughter of the Trojan prophet Calchas; and the Greek hero Diomedes. (...) Indeed all the essential elements of the love triangle in *Il Filostrato* are present in Benoît’s *Roman de Troie*: Troilus’s love of Briseida (later Criseida), Calchas’s desertion to the Greeks, Briseida’s transfer to Greek control in a prisoner exchange, and her ultimate betrayal of Troilus by falling in love with Diomedes. With respect to the plot, Boccaccio’s contribution was in selecting the disjointed threads of the pre-existing story and weaving them into a unified whole that had tragic power. (Goldwyn, 2010)

Boccaccio eventually inspired Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and, through Chaucer, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.

The same trend continues in the early modern rewritings, in tragedies, but also in ballets and opera. Oftentimes, the love story becomes the center of the plot. Consider for instance the story of Troilus, a Trojan prince, murdered by Achilles in the *Iliad*. While the archaic works focus on his death, the early modern works (Henryson, Shakespeare, Dryden) are centered on his relationship with Briseis (later called Criseida) (Boitani, 1989). It is worth noting that this also contrast with ancient rewriting by Sophocles or Phrynichus which did not focus on the love story (Sommerstein et al., 2006).

Similar developments can be seen in the case of Achilles. For instance, Statius’s anecdote of Achilles disguising himself as a girl to stay with his love Deidemia (known as “Achilles on Skyros”) inspired dozens of operas, ballets and plays by Haendel, Tirso de Molina, Scarlati, etc. *Achilles and Polixène*, an opera by Lully, starts with the anger of Achilles against Agamemnon, just as in the *Iliad*. But instead on focusing on Achilles’s martial exploits, it tells his love story with Polixene, the daughter of Priam.

Obviously, the phenomenon culminates in Hollywood movies. Consider for instance *Troy* a 2004 film directed by Wolfgang Petersen and written by David Benioff, featuring Brad Pitt, Eric Bana, and Orlando Bloom. In this film, the beginning is similar as in in the *Iliad*:

“Achilles claims Briseis, a priestess and the cousin of Paris and Hector, as a war trophy, but is angered when Agamemnon spitefully takes her from him and decides that he will not aid Agamemnon when they lay siege to Troy.” (summary from Wikipedia, 2019)

But then, the story become strikingly more romantic:

“Briseis sneaks into Achilles's quarters later that night intent on killing him. However, Briseis quickly falls for him, giving up her virginity as Achilles seduces and sleeps with her.” (summary from Wikipedia, 2019)

And the ending is very romantic:

“Achilles fights his way through the city and finds Briseis, but is shot through the heel by Paris seeking revenge for the death of his brother (...) With his dying breaths, Achilles implores Briseis to leave the city with Paris.” (summary from Wikipedia, 2019)

*Troy* is a case in point. Hollywood is first and foremost an industry, and aims to sell its product to the widest audience. The transformation of the interactions between Achilles and Briseis thus demonstrated that modern audiences really crave for romantic story. In the 21th century, even an epic, martial film like *Troy* must incorporate a romantic story to meet its audience.

## TRISTAN AND ISEULT

The story of Tristan and Iseult inspired many works in French (Baumgartner, 1987; Marchello-Nizia, 1995), English (Baumgartner, 1987; Marchello-Nizia, 1995), Italian (Psaki & Allaire, 2014), German (Jackson & Ranawake, 2000), Icelandic (Baumgartner, 1987; Kalinke, 2011; Marchello-Nizia, 1995), Welsh (Bromwich et al., 1991), Spanish (Torre, 2015), Dutch (Jackson & Ranawake, 2000) and Belarussian (Kalinke, 2011). It probably originated at the court of Henry II of England around 1150 through the form of the so-called *Estoire de Tristan* (now lost), and then spread all over Europe (see Figure S13).

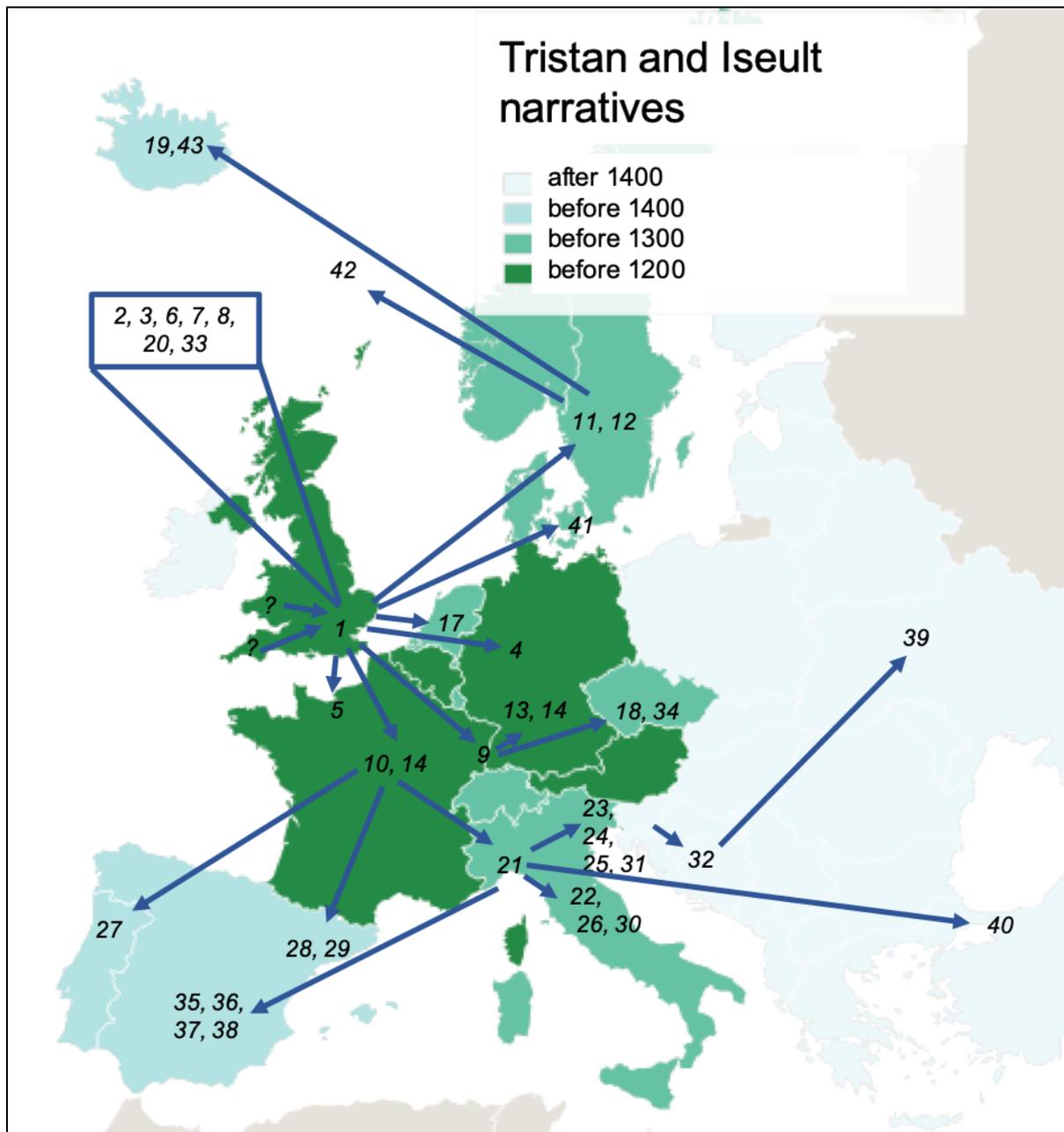


Figure 3 | The cultural chain of the story of Tristan and Iseult. Blue arrows represent cultural transmission. 1. *Estoire de Tristan*, Anon., 1150 (lost); 2. *Chevrefoil*, Marie de France, 1165; 3. *Tristan*, Thomas, 1170; 4. *Tristrant*, Eilhart of Oberg, 1180; 5. *Tristan*, Beroul, 1180; 6. *Donnei des amanz*, Anon., end of 12<sup>th</sup> c.; 7. *Folie Tristan of Berne*, Anon., end of 12<sup>th</sup> c.; 8. *Folie Tristan of Oxford*, Anon., end of 12<sup>th</sup> c.; 9. *Tristan und Isolde*, Gottfried of Strasbourg, 1210; 10. *La continuation de Perceval (Tristan Ménestrel)*, Gerbert de Montreuil, 1226-1230; 11. *Tristrams Saga ok Isöndar*, Brother Róbert, 1226; 12. *Geitarlauf*, Anon., beg. of 13<sup>th</sup> c.; 13. First continuation of Gottfried of Strasbourg's *Tristan und Isolde*, Ulrich of Türheim, 1230; 14. *Prose Tristan*, Luce del Gat, 1235; 15. *Tristan als Mönch*, 1210-1260; 16. *Roman de la Poire*, Tibaut, 1240-1250; 17. *Tristan le Nain*, Anonymous, 1250; 18. Second continuation of Gottfried of Strasbourg's *Tristan und Isolde*, Heinrich of Freiberg, 1300 (from Strasbourg); 19. *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*, Anonymous, 1300; 20. *Sire Tristrem*, Anon., 1300-1350; 21. *Roman de Roi Artus* or the *Compilation*, Rustichello da Pisa, end of 13<sup>th</sup> c.; 22. *Tristano Riccardiano*, Anon., end of 13<sup>th</sup> c.; 23. *Tristano Veneto*, Anon., late 13<sup>th</sup> c.; 24. *Zibaldone da Canal*, Anon., Venice, 1290-1300; 25. *Tristano Palatino*, Anon., 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 26. *Tavola Ritonda*, Anon., end of 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 27. *Livro de Tristan*, Anon., end of 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 28. *Tristany* (manuscript of the Arxiu de les Set Claus), Anon., 2<sup>nd</sup> half of XIV<sup>th</sup> c.; 29. *Tristany*, (manuscript of the Ayuntamiento of Cervera), Anon. end of the XIV<sup>th</sup> c.; 30. *Tristano Panciatichiano*, Anon., 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 31. *Tristano Corsiniano*, Anon., end of 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 32. *Tristan*, Anon., (lost); 33. *Tristram a Izalda*, Anon., early 15<sup>th</sup> c.; 34. *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, Malory, 1485.; 35. *Códice de Tristan*, Anon., beg. of 15<sup>th</sup> c.; 36. *Cuento de Tristan*, Anon., end of 15<sup>th</sup> c.; 37. *Tristán de Leonís*, Anon., end of 15<sup>th</sup> c.; 38. *Tristán el Joven*, Anon., 1534; 39. *Trysčän*, Anon., 16<sup>th</sup> c.; 40. *Greek poem*, Anon., 14<sup>th</sup> c.; 41. *Ballad of Thisterom and Isall*, Anon., 17<sup>th</sup> c. (poss. 13<sup>th</sup> c.); 42. *Ballads of Tristan*, Anon., (date unknown) 43. *Tristrams kvæði*, 17<sup>th</sup> c. (poss. 13<sup>th</sup> c.)

The Tristan and Iseult story has Celtic origins (see Figure 3). The name of Mark, Tristan and Iseult first appear together, and the story of Tristan and Iseult bears clear resemblances with Celtic tales such as 'Deirdre and Naoise', and 'Finn and Gráinne' since many of the elements of the plot of the latter are already present in the Celtic tales (the magic origin of love, the love triangle with the king, the flight into the forest, the sword that separates the sleeping lovers, the names of the characters, etc. (Cormier, 1976). The story of Tristan and Iseult probably started as a story of the wife (Iseult) of an aged lord (Mark) forcing (with the help of a magic potion) a reluctant warrior under this lord's command (Tristan) to escape with her, just as in some Irish tales such as *Finn and Gráinne*.

As Pierre Gallais writes:

Remove the *geas*, make Gráinne a true lover—which she is not (she does nothing to rejoin Diarmaid after he loses her at dice; she does not die on his body, but resigns herself to sharing the old chief's bed)—and, especially, make Diarmaid a lover: we would have something like a sequence from *Tristan*. (Gallais, 1974, p. 92 the translation is ours)

What the English author of the *Estoire de Tristan* did was to twist this original plot by focusing the narrative on the love story, rather than on the pursuit.

All subsequent versions retain the basic elements of the original plot: the adulterous love of Tristan and Iseult, their hiding from King Mark, and the lovers' eventual death. However, it is striking that each version was adapted to its audience. In particular, the romantic elements flourished in the most developed areas of medieval Europe (France, Germany, Italy), but were toned down in the least developed areas, such as Norway and Belarus. For instance, the author of the Old Norse version, Brother Róbert, choose to omit much of the passages dealing with feelings, love and despair (Leach, 1921; Marchello-Nizia, 1995; Wilms, 2009). What interested Brother Róbert and his audience are the actions of Tristan, his combat against Mark and his feats, rather than his doubts about whether he should pursue his passion for Iseult.

Similarly, there are many differences between the Belarusian version *Trysčán* and the traditional legend of *Tristan and Yseult*. To begin with, Trysčán and Ižota fall in love before taking the potion. This decreases the dramatic potential of the story for the two characters cannot be the start-crossed lovers that they are in the original story, attracted to each other because they mistakenly drank a beverage that was not intended for them (Prieto, 2011). The absence of interest in the love story is also visible in the lack of intimate episodes between the two characters. In the Belarusian version, they do not escape to the Forest of Morrois. There is actually no forest in the version. Therefore, they do not spend time living their love in isolation as in the other European versions. Historian of East Slavic literature Torres Pietro concludes: "The Belarusian Trysčán is, paradoxically, not a story about love, either doomed or of any other kind. It is an account of the deeds of a bold hero and his fights, adventures and death" (Prieto, 2011).

In Western Europe, the Tristan and Iseult story also evolved over time. The later versions notably offered a more positive view of romantic passion. In the *Prose Tristan* (1230), for instance, Tristan becomes a Knight of the Round Table and joins the quest for the Holy Grail, and love is no longer a destructive passion.

Like Chrétien and the author of the *Lancelot in Prose*, the author of the *Tristan in Prose* makes love the living source of the knight's prowess. It is thanks to Isolde's love that Tristan triumphed over all his rivals and became almost equal to Lancelot. (Baumgartner, 1987)

The same observations can be made for many later versions, in particular in Spain where the Tristan and Iseult tradition continued well into the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Hook, 2015)

## THE STORY OF YINGYING

The *Biography of Yingying* is one of the best-known short stories of the Tang. More importantly, it is the original story on which is based one of the most famous literary works of the Chinese literature, namely the play *The Story of the Western Wing*. Another interesting feature is that some intermediate versions between the Tang tale and the Yuan play have survived (other are no longer extant though). Finally, because *The Story of the Western Wing* was so highly regarded during Chinese history, it has been commented and edited by later scholars. In particular, the edition of Jin Shengtan, with its important changes and its cut of the fifth and final act, can actually be considered as a version on its own. This version became so famous that it eclipsed the original version and that many readers (including the earliest western translators) became convinced that the fifth act was from another author. Thus, in the end, there are at least 5 versions of the story of Yingying, spanning eight hundred years:

1. *The Story of Yingying*, a *chuanqi* (short story) by Yuan Zhen (around 800)
2. *The Story of Yingying*, a *guzi ci* (drum song) by Zhao Lingzhi (1051–1134)
3. *The Story of the Western Wing in All Keys and Modes*, a *zhugongdiao* (ballad) by Dong Jieyan (fl. 1190)
4. *The Story of the Western Wing*, a *zaju* (play) by Wang Shifu (1250-1337)
5. *The Story of the Western Wing*, a *zaju* edited to be read by Jin Shengtan (1610-1661)

Scholars of Chinese literature have shown that the evolution of the story of Yingying parallels the general trend in favor of more romantic stories (Lanselle, 2015; Mair, 2012; Song, 2004; West & Idema, 1995). In the Tang version, there is no love at first sight. On the contrary, Yingying first rebukes the advance of Zhang. Even if she eventually accepts to sleep with him, we have no explanation about her change in mind, and the reasons behind her actions. Also, contrary to the Yuan version, there is no happy ending. Zhang goes to the capital for the imperial examination and abandons Yingying.

There are also other subtler differences. Compared to the later version, the first versions appear harsh and misogynistic. For instance, the narrator likens Yingying to the *femmes fatales* of the past who brought down the rulers of antiquity and declares for instance that he has “resolutely suppressed my love” in order to resist her “evil influence.” (Mair, 2012, p. 1007) By contrast, in the second version, Zhao Lingzhi seems to condemn the behavior of the male protagonist and put more emphasis on the innocence and suffering of Yingying. The end of the work clearly condemns the male protagonist for his lack of love and his betrayal of Yingying.

The major turn seems to have occurred under the Song, between versions 2 and 3 when Dong Jieyan changed the ending of the story (in which the male character leaves Yingying once in the capital) and replaced it with a happy ending. Moreover, the characterization of Yingying is now well developed: while in the Tang story, Yingying appears unpredictable and unreliable, in the Song story, she is portrayed as a passionate and intelligent but well-educated maiden, torn between her emotion and her equally strong sense of morality.

Wang Shifu's version does not alter the plot in dramatic manner, yet some change makes it more romantic. For instance, in Wang's play, it is not student Zhang who wants to leave to take part in the examination, but Yingying's mother who demand that Zhang succeed in the examination to agree to the couple's marriage. More generally, student Zhang appears more idealized and put in a morally more advantageous position (Song, 2004).

Jin Shengtian's version illustrates the fact that at least from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on, Chinese readers became increasingly uncomfortable with the fact that Yingying and Zhang had sex before the marriage. The play was considered by many as "irreverent" and "light". One of Jin Shengtian's concern was thus to safeguard Yingying from any accusation of indecency. He attempts this by proving that she remains chaste under all circumstances—even when she gives herself to the student Zhang (Lanselle, 2015; West & Idema, 1995) In another Ming version, the author even outdoes Jin Shengtian in preserving Yingying's virginity by having the maid stand for her during the night with Zhang (Dong, 1981).

Thus, during more than 800 years, the basic plot was transmitted from one generation of writers to the next, and even passed from one genre to the other, despite the sometimes contradictory requirements of each genre (Lanselle, 2015; West & Idema, 1995). Yet, the story changed dramatically through this process probably in response to the change in the test of the public.

## ROLAND

In France, it is possible that early versions of the first epics such as *The Song of Roland* and *Raoul of Cambrai* were already in circulation by the late 10th c. (Zink, 1990) If this is the case, there are strikingly non-romantic:

The general tone of the epics was one of dignity and formality, and they offered little scope for the portrayal of the more intimate emotions. The women who figured in the earlier epics were apparently those who were admired for their ability to support their husbands and to administer their lands in a crisis; the interest lay in the capable matron rather than in the young beauty. Roland's unfortunate fiancée appears only at the very end of the poem, and her sole function is to lament him inconsolably. (Morris, 1987, p. 34)

The best example of a rewriting of a central medieval plot is *The Song of Roland*, the oldest French *chanson de geste*. In the original version and in all subsequent medieval developments (*Rolandslied*, *Aspremont*, *Girart de Vienne*, *Entrée d'Espagne*, *La Spagna*), the plot centered on Roland's martial exploit, his relationship with his friend Olivier and his king Charlemagne, and of course his death in battle (see Figure 4).

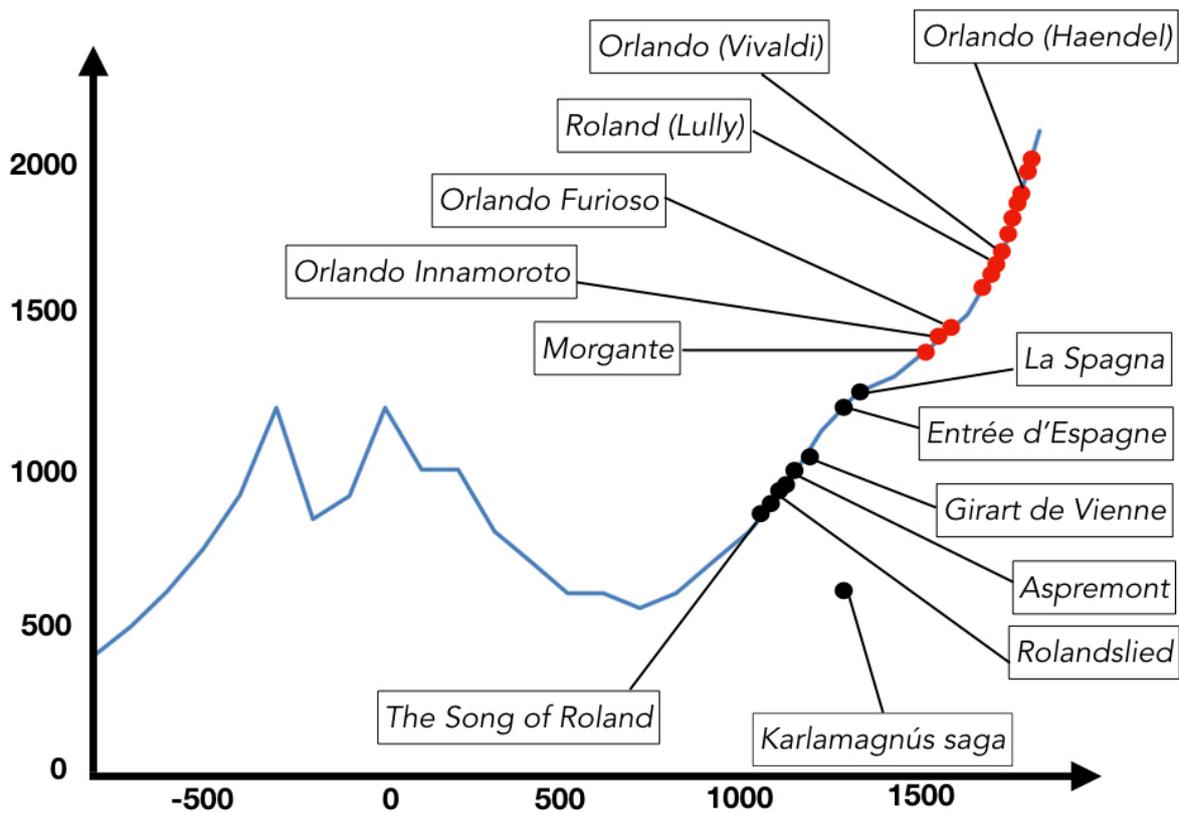


Figure 4 | The literary transmission chain of Roland (X axis: time ; y axis : GDP per capita in the most developed area of Europe; in red, the most romantic works, see text)

Yet, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> c., the cultural tradition of Roland evolved toward a higher level of romantic love with Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1483) which introduces a love story between Orlando (Roland) and Angelica, the daughter of the king of Cathay (Laradji, 2008). These adaptations notably contrast with the Norse adaptations such as *Roland og Magnus kongen* where there is no emphasis on romantic love.

*Orlando Innamorato* will be followed by another, more famous work inspired by Roland, namely the *Orlando furioso* by Ariosto which in turn inspired many operas by Vivaldi, Rossi, Puccini, Lully, Handel or Haydn (Laradji, 2008).

## 5. Romanticizing ancient stories: The problem of modern perceptions

One apparent problem with the idea that romantic love increases with social development is that love stories seem to be present in archaic periods: Ulysses and Helen in the Greek epics, Diarmuid and Gráinne and Deirdre and Naoise in Irish epics, Layla and Majnun in pre-Islamic poetry, etc. This is mainly because we, the modern consumers of these stories, have first encountered them through their modern popular rewritings, either as a film, a play, a novel or a children story. We are under the impression that we have access to the original version, while in most cases, what we are reading (or worse, viewing) is a highly romanticized version of the original story. In most cases, these modern rewritings have greatly transformed the original stories, infusing them with romantic elements and sometimes radically changing the nature of the relationships between the original characters.

The *Odyssey*, for instance, is one of the most well-known stories from antiquity. There are numerous children's books and Hollywood movies dedicated to this story, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to read them with a fresh mind. Another good example of this phenomenon (among many others) is the historical transformation of the *Four Great Folktales* that was so well analyzed by historian of Chinese literature Wilt L. Idema. Today, these four tales are known to all Chinese. They appear to belong to a venerable tradition, and to give access to the literature of the premodern and illiterate Chinese people, reflecting in particular their interest in romantic love. And yet, as Idema notes, this is not the case of the original versions of these stories:

It is difficult to discern a common theme in these four legends in their premodern manifestations, but perhaps we can say that they are all stories of failed relations (and, in some cases, the way such a failure may be remedied). In the dominant modern interpretation, they all seem to have been reduced to the simple message that in the old society young people's search for true love was doomed because of the evil patriarchal system. In the twentieth century that reading has become so naturalized that many of our students find it difficult even to entertain the thought that these stories might not be a celebration of love but rather cautionary tales warning against the danger of inappropriate passion. (Idema, 2012)

Idema concludes: "Romantic love has become such a common notion in the twentieth century that modern interpreters will find love even where it cannot have existed in the premodern versions." (Idema, 2012)

In this section, we review in more detail four famous examples of stories that appear romantic in their modern form, but were in fact much less romantic in their original version.

## DEIDRE AND NAOISE

One reason modern readers tend to 'over-detect' love in archaic literature is that the modern vision of these stories has been greatly influenced by their modern renderings. What is striking is that in many cases, the rewriting was carried out in perfectly good faith. Consider for instance the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers of the "Celtic revival," whose aim was to popularize Celtic literature (McCurry, 1992; Mercier, 1987; Oosterhout, 2006; Pereira, 2007). To do this, they often transformed the tales they wanted to popularize. Here, for instance, is an excerpt of Lady Gregory's "Dedication of the Irish Edition to the People of Kiltartan," written for the first English edition of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902):

It is what I have tried to do, to take the best of the stories, or whatever parts of each will fit best one another, and in that way to give a fair account of Cuchulain's life and death. I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another.... (Mercier, 1987)

This is immediately followed by Yeats' famous preface, which begins:

I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world – and it tells them perfectly for the first time. Translators from the Irish have hitherto retold one story or the other from some one version.... But few of the stories really begin to exist until somebody has taken the best bits out of many manuscripts. Sometimes, as in Lady Gregory's version of *Deirdre*,

a dozen manuscripts have to give their best before the beads are ready for the necklace.  
(Mercier, 1987)

In other words, the British writers who translated and rewrote the Irish tales also greatly changed them to adapt them to their audience (McCurry, 1992; Mercier, 1987; Oosterhout, 2006; Pereira, 2007). Modern readers, who probably first heard of these stories through the modern tradition, thus have a biased view of the original tales.

Consider, for instance, the scene in which Deirdre and Naoise first meet. In Lady Gregory's story, Naoise falls in love with Deirdre at first sight:

So Naoise turned back and met Deirdre, and Deirdre and Naoise kissed one another three times (...) and he gave Deirdre, there and then, the love that he never gave to living thing, to vision, or to creature, but to herself alone. ((Gregory, 2001)

The account in the original tale contrasts sharply with Lady Gregory's romantic scene: there, Deirdre is the aggressor, putting Naoise under *geasa* (bond) to do as she asks:

"Are you rejecting me?"

"I am," he said.

Then she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head.

"Two ears of shame and mockery," she said, "if you don't take me with you."

"Woman, leave me alone!" he said.

"You will do it," she said, binding him. (Kinsella, 2002)

In the original tale, not only is love absent, but Naoise does not want to be with Deirdre. It is only because of the *geasa* that he reluctantly follows her.

Today, the story of Deirdre, often called "Deirdre of the Sorrows," (This title is from Synge and Yeats's 1909/1910 work) is read as a love story, while in fact the original story, called *Longes mac nUislienn* ("The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu") is much closer to an antique tragedy. The original story opens at a banquet in the house of King Conchobar's storyteller, Fedlimid, whose wife is "full with child." As the pregnant woman is going to bed, the unborn child screams "in her womb," frightening everyone present at the feast. A druid, Cathbad, places his hand on the woman's belly and makes the following prediction: "It is a woman child who is here: Deirdre shall be her name, and evil woe shall be upon her." After the baby is born, the predictions become more specific: this future woman's beauty will be so destructive that it will cause great torment in Ulster, the exile of the three sons of Uisliu, and ultimately the departure of Fergus. The men of Ulster wish to kill her. However, to defy the prophecy, the king orders to rear her in isolation until she is "ready for Conchobar's bed." Eventually, Deirdre grows up and meets Naoise. The two escape together, but Conchobar's warriors catch up to them and kill Naoise. Deirdre commits suicide by throwing herself from a chariot, smashing her head against a rock.

The transformation of the story of Deirdre is not new. In a comprehensive study, Lucie Pereira has compared all the literary versions from the original 9<sup>th</sup>-century tale to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poems (Pereira, 2007). The level of romanticism begins to change in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with Geoffrey Keating (Seathrún Céitinn, ca. 1569 – ca. 1644). Although Keating's aim was to be as faithful as possible to the original (his aim was to highlight the literary treasures of Ireland), he could not help but change the story to fit the preferences of his audience. For instance, he removed many pagan

aspects of the story (the marriage taboos), as well as immoral behaviors such as the men's heavy drinking and Deirdre's suicide.

More importantly for this study, Keating altered the original story to make it far more romantic. For instance, he removed the first encounter between Deirdre and Naoise, for it was too openly sexual, and based on physical attraction. Here is the original version:

"That is a fine heifer going by," he said.  
"As well it might," she said. "The heifers grow big where there are no bulls."  
"You have the bull of this province all to yourself," he said, "the king of Ulster."  
"Of the two," she said, "I'd pick a game young bull like you." (Kinsella, 2002)

Keating made other changes. His Deirdre became a "Lady," raised in some "dwelling apart" (cited by Pereira 2007). She is chaste, which contrasts with the indecent girl in *Longes mac nUislenn* who seeing that "Noisiu was out there alone... slipped out quickly to him" (Kinsella, 2002) and exchanged gallant words with him before pulling his ears. In the same way, although Deirdre confesses her amorous feelings for him, in Keating's version it is Naoise, the man, who takes the first step. Pereira concludes: "Keating thereby gives a conventional form to the whole seduction scene that is no doubt more influenced by medieval romance and chivalric literature than the Celtic tradition on which the legend is based." (Pereira, 2007)

The subsequent versions are even more romantic. In O'Connor's version (1723), Deirdre is imprisoned "in a Tower well-fortified, (...) almost inaccessible" and "strictly guarded" (Pereira, 2007). This more elaborate setting renders Naoise's venture all the more heroic, as "the Enterprise was of the utmost Danger" (Pereira, 2007). The story is thereby given a more romantic flavor, with the young girl in her lonely tower awaiting the arrival of her courageous knight. The most striking alteration is probably in Naoise's readiness, despite the danger, to deliver Deirdre "or die in the Attempt" whereas Keating's Naoise, like the hero of *Longes mac nUislenn*, had followed Deirdre "with reluctance, as he feared Conchubhar."

Moreover, O'Connor provided psychological motives which were lacking in Keating's version and which did not form part of the primary medieval tale. For instance, on their first encounter, Naoise and Deirdre discuss her deliverance: "after many Endearments and solemn Protestations of Love, she entreated that he would deliver her from Confinement, and remove her out of the Castle." (Pereira, 2007) The same concern underlies his attempt to account for Deirdre's sudden vision of the man she desires after she sees a raven drinking the blood of the calf spilled on the snow: "This Sight occasioned a strange Passion in the young Lady"; "Deirdre began immediately to be in Love with him." (Pereira, 2007) Pereira concludes: "Rather than treating the legend as an ancient Celtic myth, O'Connor was clearly adapting it to an eighteenth-century context and readership."

The romanticization of the tale of Deirdre went on during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. O'Halloran totally transformed the signification of the colors associated with Naoise's appearance. In the original tale, the colors are part of a prophecy. Deirdre sees her foster-father skinning a calf on the snow and a raven drinking the blood. The colorful sight reveals to her that she "could desire a man who had those three colors there: hair like the raven, cheeks like blood and his body like snow" (Kinsella, 2002). Years later, she then meets Naoise, who satisfies her criteria, and they elope. There is no love, only the realization of a prophecy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these signs are transformed into romantic feelings:

We may judge of the personal accomplishments of the first of them, who loved and was beloved of Deirdre, by the strong terms in which she expressed them. Attended by her

confidant on a snowy day, she beheld a butcher at a distance killing a calf, and... a raven came to feed on the blood. The whole woman, absorbed in love, turns to her governess; "Behold," says she, "the whiteness of that snow, such is the skin of my hero! his cheeks are more blooming than the blood scattered round it! and his hair is smoother and blacker than the feathers of the raven that feeds upon it!" Metaphors inexpressibly bold and strong! (Pereira, 2007)

In Charlotte Brooke's 1816 version, Naoise, who is described as a "gallant" young man, is introduced to the well-mannered Deirdre through the intermediary of her preceptor, Leavarcam, who urges him to "free the fair captive" from her fortress and promises that in return he shall be free to "make her his wife." Brooke's Naoise indeed delivers Deirdre from her tower, and their first encounter soon develops into feelings of mutual respectful love, naturally leading to marriage:

they met; - mutual astonishment and admiration concluded in vows of the most passionate love! Naoise, with the aid of his brothers, Ainle and Ardan, stormed the fortress, and carried off his prize; and escaping thence to Scotland, they were there joined in marriage. (Brooke, 1816, cited in Pereira, 2007)

To conclude, it is clear that the original story of *Longes mac nUislenn* has been radically transformed over the centuries. While modern readers of Irish tales may feel that they have access to the original story, more often than not this is actually not the case.

## DIARMUID AND GRÁINNE

The story of Diarmuid and Gráinne is one of the best-known Irish tales. At first sight, it seems to be a love story: Gráinne is engaged with the aged Finn, but she prefers the younger Diarmuid. They flee together. Finn and his men hunt the two lovers and eventually kill Diarmuid.

In essence, the story appears to be not very different from that of Tristan and Iseult. However, a close reading of the story clearly shows that the resemblance is superficial, and that love is not central to the plot (Cormier, 1976). First of all, romantic feelings are absent:

Although Diarmaid and Gráinne do indeed eventually become lovers in the technical sense, we have no indication of tenderness between them, no inner analyses of motives. Diarmaid simply resents Gráinne's menacing demands (by means of the *geasa*) to take her away from Fionn. He also resents having to leave his companions. And, of course, he is reluctant to break faith with his overlord, Fionn. In fact, the couple communicates only when necessary and treats each other with some diffidence (up to a point) during the exile. (Cormier, 1976, p. 595)

Also, it is worth noting that this is not a story of love at first sight. Like Naoise in *Longes mac nUislenn* (see above), Diarmuid is reluctant to flee with Gráinne, and only does so to avoid losing his honor:

Diarmaid is the reluctant, pusillanimous, unlover-like lover, unwillingly forced to carry off the devastating Gráinne, a kind of Irish Helen of Troy. Once he realizes, it seems, that a continued conflict with Fionn is inevitable and that he cannot avert his fate, Diarmaid submits in the end.... There is, then, no idealized, mutual enchantment here, nor any suggestion of *partage*, as in the *Tristan*. (Cormier, 1976, p. 595)

Gráinne's attitude also contrasts with Iseult's:

By herself Grainne provides a significant contrast to Isolt. She refuses to remain with Fionn ostensibly because he is too aged, whereas Isolt turns from King Mark for other reasons, not *necessarily* because he is too old, for, in fact, the king possesses great beauty and, besides, as is known, he has a deep love for his spouse. Gráinne, it may be said, appears as a true *femme fatale*, a strong woman moving imperiously toward her own goal of power and sensuality. (Cormier, 1976, p. 595)

In other words, the impetus of the story is not the love between Gráinne and Diarmaid, but rather the desire of a strong and independent woman (Gráinne) to leave an aged husband and elope with a younger man. As Cormier (1976) suggests, the theme is not the conflict between fated love and duty (as in *Tristan and Iseult*), but rather the personal feud or struggle between Fionn, the aged ruler, and Diarmaid, his best warrior.

Comparing *Tristan and Iseult* with *Deirdre and Naoise*, and *Finn and Gráinne*, Gallais reached the same conclusion:

In the Irish story, it is the woman who takes the initiative. Does she feel love for the young man she is forcing, through her *geis*, to take him away? Perhaps, but his first concern is to escape from an odious marriage and leave, duly accompanied and protected. Above all, it is a refusal of marriage, of the conventional and political union wanted by the girl's parents (Diarmaid and Grainne) or decided by a king to avoid or mitigate prophesied disasters (Noise and Deirdre). But one thing is certain: the hero does not love the one who imposes herself on him in this way to lead him into rebellion and exile, and to certain death; he will never love her, even if he lies with her. (Gallais, 1974, p. 90 the translation is ours).

Gallais concludes: "These stories are therefore not love stories, but - indeed, and only - 'kidnapping' or 'pursuit.' In short, a variety of the genus 'Razzia.'" (Gallais, 1974, p. 90 the translation is ours)

In line with this idea, Tomas O Cathasaigh (2014) has observed that although the beginning of the tale looks like a love story (a young couple fleeing a situation that threatens their love together):

the rest of the story is dedicated to Diarmaid: his youth, his adventures as a member of the Fian, his feats during his elopement with Grainne, and finally, his death. [In fact,] O Cathasaigh says, Diarmaid's death does not result from his submission to Grainne's charms, but goes back to the injunction placed on him as a result of the quarrel his father, Donn o Donnchadha, had with his steward" (p. 71).

From this perspective, as Cormier notes, the tale of Gráinne and Diarmaid is closer to a Greek tragedy than to a romance:

the central theme of *Diarmaid and Grainne* is, like that of the Deirdre story, tragic drama, illustrating the overwhelming nature of *geasa*, before which humans are helpless. Such a view is reinforced, for example, by stressing Diarmaid's pathetic situation and the empathy expressed for it by Fionn's close associates. The triangle of tragic conflict here, then, is between fate (Diarmaid), passion (Gráinne), and duty (Fionn). From this perspective, it is a story of overpowering destiny, recalling the "human condition," and reminds us of a Greek conflict-tragedy between two great forces or loyalties. (Cormier, 1976)

In this perspective, notes Edyta Lehmann (2010), Gráinne should not be considered as a “sexually symmetric” heroine, as suggested by the modern title. Instead, she is “a mere accessory to the completion of the tragedy which has its source a generation before.”

This interpretation is confirmed by Gráinne’s role in the tale:

In the beginning, the tale appears to be about the elopement of Grainne and Diarmaid and the tragic resolution of the conflict caused by this elopement, but it then turns into a tale about Diarmaid and his relationship with Fionn and the Fian, finally employing Grainne's character again as the speaker of the concluding poem. The contrast between her character’s indispensable presence in the beginning and conclusion of the tale and her virtual absence throughout the majority of the tale invite [sic] and necessitate [sic] a further look at the interplay between the appearances and disappearances of her character. (Lehmann, 2010)

In the end, Grainne is “an excuse for the telling of yet another story about the men of the Fian.” As Lehmann notes, the older story of Diarmaid and Gráinne “is more accurately a story of Aongus (Diarmaid’s foster father), Fionn, and Diarmaid, and the bonds of loyalty.”

## ULYSSES AND HELEN

Love is obviously present in the ancient Greek epics. The reunion of Ulysses and Penelope and the separation of Hector and Andromache are famous examples, and there is little doubt that they are attached to their respective partners. However, as Konstan notes, these stories cannot be considered love stories:

The *Odyssey* is a story of separation and reunion, to be sure, but the narrative is not constructed primarily around the motive of erotic passion. Odysseus seeks to recover his household, or *oikos*, of which his wife is part... After their night together, in which Odysseus recounts to Penelope the tale of his adventures, the hero is reminded of his responsibilities to his father and of the threat posed by the family of the slain suitors, and the poem ends with an image of Odysseus among his male kin and retainers, defending his ancestral property against his enemies. (Konstan, 2014, p. 192)

As many literary theorists have noted, the *Odyssey* is first and foremost the story of a “quest,” rather than a “reunion” (Booker, 2004).

Other cues suggest that the importance of love in the story is limited. For instance, as Finley noticed in his classic book *The World of Odysseus*, love and attachment between spouses are seldom mentioned. For instance, when it comes to evoking Odysseus’s sad longing for his home, Penelope is rarely mentioned:

More often than not Penelope was omitted from the image of home, for the standard formula was the one used by Nausicaa: “Then there is hope that you will see your friends, and come to your home good to dwell in, and to your native land.” (Finley, 1965)

Love also appears to be much less important than the attachment between father and son, or between male friends:

Neither in the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope nor in any other relationship between man and mate in the Homeric poems was there the depth and intensity, the quality of feeling—on the part of the male—that marked the attachment between father and son on the one hand, and between male and male companion on the other. The poems are rich in such images as this: “as a father greets his dear son who has come from a distant land in the tenth year” (16.17-18); but there are no similes drawn from a husband's joy in his wife. (Finley, 1965)

Odysseus’s short relationships with Calypso and Circe also do not involve love: “Though Odysseus submits to sexual relations with Calypso and Circe, there is no indication that he is moved by *eros* and he thus is considered to remain faithful to his spouse” (Konstan, 2014, p. 192).

Finally, in comparison to later stories such as the Greek novels of the Roman Empire, the relationships between male and female characters are very unequal. In the *Odyssey* for instance, Ulysses is the one who performs all the actions, while Penelope is mostly passive. In the Greek epics, “asymmetry, inequality and domination of one party by the other are universal in male-female relationships,” and “reciprocal fidelity is not an epic ideal” (Naerebout, 1987).

The limited importance of love in the economy of *The Odyssey* is also apparent quantitatively. As we have seen (section 2, Figure 1), one important feature of a romantic story is the reciprocity of the feelings between the two characters, which is often reflected in the relative proportion of occurrences of the names of the male and female characters.

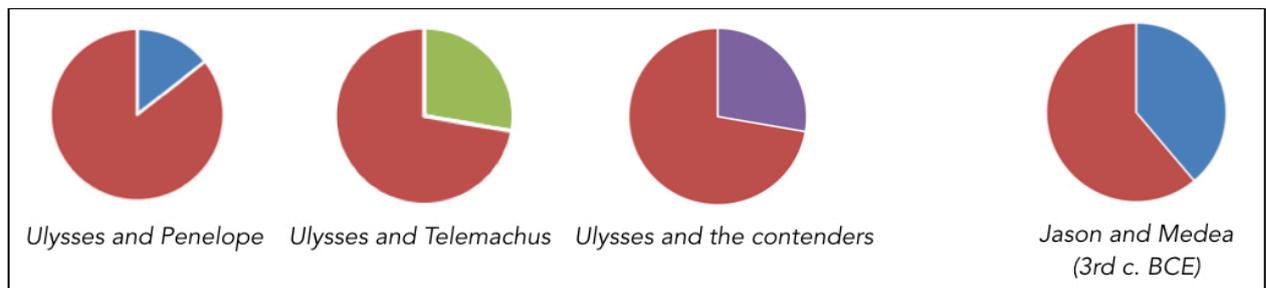


Figure 5 | Proportion of occurrences of characters in the *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica*

With a ratio of 5.96, it is clear that “Ulysses” is much more present than “Penelope” (see Figure 5). In line with Finley’s qualitative assessment, Penelope is also less important than Telemachus (2.6) and less important even than her own suitors (2.6). It is worth noting that this cannot be due to literary constraints specific to epic works. As an example, in the *Argonautica*, a Hellenistic epic, Jason and Medea have equal importance in the plot (despite the fact that Medea is absent at the beginning of the story). This is reflected in a quantitative assessment of the ratio of their occurrences (1.57). To conclude, this quantitative comparison demonstrates further that the love relationship between Ulysses and Penelope, although it was surely real in the eyes of Greek audiences, did not play the same role as the relationship between Tristan and Iseult or Daphnis and Chloé.

## LAYLA AND MAJNUN

The great Arabic love stories, such as *Layla and Majnun*, *Qays and Lubna*, and *Kuthair and Azza* are another example of misperception. They are supposed to have happened in the Arab Peninsula during pre-Islamic period, in the ‘Udhri tribe, which was widely known for the importance it gave

to love. If this was true, then it would be a great counter-example to the association between affluence and romantic love.

However, modern scholarship has shown that all the famous love stories of the pre-Islamic periods are late inventions of Abbasid poets, and that the “courtly” love of 'Udhri poetry was a backward projection of the Abbasid culture onto idealized Bedouin origins (Blachère, 1952; Meisami & Starkey, 1998; Vadet, 1968). As Bausani observes, the theme of love is not one of the main themes of the Bedouin poetic world. These themes are the Bedouin virtues such as courage, fidelity, generosity, the spirit of tribal solidarity, and the pride that comes from the nobility of one’s ancestors or from one’s warlike deeds (Gallais, 1974). In his book on courtly love in Arabic medieval literature, *L'esprit courtois en Orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l'Hégire*, Vadet writes that “passionate love is an inappropriate thing among Bedouins, clearly shocking, contrary to morality and, it seems, to the constitution of society” (Vadet, 1968). Vadet thus opposes the pre-Islamic idea of love as negative, hopeless, mad, sick, associated with black magic and the golden age idea of love as courtly, positive, and sophisticated.

As Miquel and Kemp write in their study of the myth of Majnun and Layla, the poet Majnun probably never existed. In *The Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Jacobi explains the emergence of this myth:

In the course of the second/eighth century, 'Udhri poets and their beloveds – 'Urwa and 'Afra', Jamil and Buthayna, Qays and Lubna, Majnun and Layla, Kuthayyir and 'Azza – were transformed into heroes of romantic stories about chaste lovers, who were separated, but remained faithful and died of sorrow (cf. Blachère, *Histoire*, 760-3). About the same time, the concept of courtly love developed in the intellectual climate of 'Abbāsid urban society was labelled *al-hubb al-'udhri* and projected back into an idealized bedouin environment. 'Udhri verses, sometimes of dubious authenticity, were quoted in treatises on love theory, and influenced the vocabulary of Sufi poetry. (Jacobi, s. d.)

The ancient love stories are thus “collective enterprises” (Blachère, 1952) produced by many anonymous poets over several generations. These poets progressively put together short narratives and isolated verses, which eventually lead to the impression that was such a thing as a unique, coherent love stories. This myth of Arab origin then propagated to Western Europe and to the Western educated audience. For instance, ‘The legend of the 'Benou-Azra', who 'when loving, die', has been introduced into European literature by Stendhal's treatise *De l'amour* (1822), and inspired Heine's poem 'Der Asra.' (Jacobi, 1998, p. 790). But, again, the existence of these modern love stories does not mean that similar love stories existed in the arabic archaic poetry.

## 6. Conclusion

While love and love stories are universal (Gottschall, 2008a), highly romantic stories are less universal than the most modern readers of ancient literature might think. Modern renderings of the most famous tales have been romanticized by modern writers (in particular by the Romantics) and by the modern film industry. Even when we read a very faithful translation of an ancient story, we cannot help but project our sensibility onto the plot. We cannot help but imagine the love between Deirdre and Naoise as they flee from Conchubhar's warriors. We cannot avoid empathizing with Penelope as she waits for Ulysses. We are bound to cry with Gráinne when Diarmaid is killed. Because love is important to us, we grant more attention to love in the fictions we read, and we fail to notice its marginal role in the plot and in the flow of events. Careful literary analyses, however, clearly demonstrate that the most ancient tales were mostly about revenge,

honor, status, and fate, rather than love. The importance of romantic love, thus, seems to have increase throughout Eurasian history.

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