Eric Auerbach Thinks *Yvain* is Romance, But He’s *Lion*

David Perretta ‘14

Chrétien de Troyes was a 12th century poet best known for his five Arthurian knight tales: *Erec and Enide*, *Cligés*, *The Knight of the Cart* (*Lancelot*), *The Story of the Grail* (*Perceval*), and *The Knight with the Lion* (*Yvain*). Traditionally, these stories are classified as medieval romance literature as they are mostly considered with chivalry, knightly duty, and courtly love. *Yvain* is concerned with its titular character, Yvain, as he defeats Esclados, marries his wife, takes over his kingdom, is exiled, and must ultimately regain his stature.

In 1946, Erich Auerbach’s literary criticism *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* was published. Auerbach’s work attempts to bridge two representations of reality in western literature: One from the Hellenic world, as seen in Homer’s *Odyssey*, with the worldview presented in the Bible. In chapter six, he uses Chrétien’s *Yvain* in order to define the romance genre.

This essay is concerned with the holes presented in Auerbach’s definition of romance as a genre separate from epic. It points out that, by his definition, *Yvain* should be classified as epic rather than romance. Furthermore, its goal is to point out an underlying commonality between many epics, which have traditionally been a genre slightly too slippery to properly define. The hope is that this new definition of epic could be applied to the works of Homer, Vergil, and other classical authors.

When Chrétien de Troyes began the story of *Erec and Enide* with boasts not only of his storytelling abilities, but the immortality of his works, he could not have foreseen the development of modern printers and the Internet – two innovations that have allowed for the proliferation of his narratives as well as the expansion of the scholarly debates surrounding them. With added discourse comes a need for clear definitions with which to discuss
the works. One hotly debated topic is which characteristics separate the intertwined genres of epic and romance. A quick Google search reveals that, while certain traits exist to distinguish the two categories, there is much grey territory that allows for certain works the claim to both. Fortunately, in chapter six, “The Knight Sets Forth,” of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, the door is opened for a decisive definition of the term “epic.” Ironically, Auerbach achieves this by misclassifying Chrétien’s *The Knight with the Lion (Yvain)* as romance literature. From this faux pas, a new definition of epic is born; a definition in which the term “epic” is invariably affixed to a narrative pertaining to either the creation, advancement, or destruction of a political landscape.

Auerbach’s insightful misstep occurs when he claims that the world of Yvain is one in which “the colorful and vivid pictures of contemporary reality seem, as it were, to have sprung from the ground: the ground of legend and fairy tale, so that…they are entirely without any basis in political reality.” Here, Auerbach asserts that one of the defining features of romance is that it is devoid of politics. In the case of Yvain, however, this is simply not true. Much of Auerbach’s folly may be seen through a brief passage immediately following Yvain’s marriage to Laudine:

“So now my lord Yvain is lord of her land and the dead knight is fully forgotten. The man who killed him is married: he has taken his wife and they sleep together, and the people feel more love and esteem for the living knight than they did for the dead. They served him well at the wedding feast, which lasted until the eve of the king’s arrival at the marvel of the spring and stone.”

Once unpacked, this short paragraph reveals that Yvain’s story is in point of fact highly politicized. Initially, Yvain exists as part of King Arthur’s entourage. This group – this “round table” – is comprised of knights all seeking to be “first among equals.” For this reason, Yvain sets out ahead his companions in search of the land with the magical stone, basin, and fierce knight from Calogrenant’s story. By leaving without the others, he hopes to vanquish the villain himself. Yvain’s reason for doing so is simple: prestige. Within his circle, reputation is currency. Knights with more power are granted preferential treatment – as Yvain notes in his desire for the battle, which he believed would go to either Kay or Gawain should he
have travelled with the group. What Chrétien displays here is both a political and economic system. Like in the modern era, those with more capital (stature) are granted greater power within society. In Yvain’s world, where his esteem is his credit statement, the same is true: he will be granted a higher place amongst equals and thus be granted an elite position at the round table with more opportunities. He is playing a political game, trying to climb the proverbial ladder towards a higher office of sorts. However, once Yvain manages to find this new land, he enters into a whole new governmental order.

Yvain eventually finds and kills Esclados. He did this for no reason other than political gain within King Arthur’s court. However, he falls in love with Esclados’ widow, Laudine, and becomes dead set on marrying her. The marriage, while containing mutual affection, also has a blatant political aspect: protection. One of the primary reasons for the existence, formation, and maintenance of governments is to protect its citizens.\(^3\) Thus, Laudine’s seneschal calls for somebody to wed her when it is revealed that the land is at war with a king (presumably Arthur) who is fast approaching. The husband of Laudine would become king, making it his responsibility to guard the locals as their champion in battle. Chrétien’s description of kingship within the story resembles political office and civic duty more than simple nobility. Once Yvain marries Laudine and assumes the role of king, he not only weds the woman he loves, but takes on the responsibility of defending the kingdom.

As the passage above notes, Esclados is forgotten and the people feel greater love for Yvain. In lieu of the democratic process, the murder of Esclados serves as an election of sorts. Yvain has proven to be the superior knight – the superior leader – and that is reflected by the praise bestowed upon him by his subjects (which reads as a medieval version of the modern day concept of “approval ratings”). Though the people do not choose, a new leader has arrived as the result of a recognized procedure, which, theoretically, allows for anybody to achieve the rank of king (by simply killing the old one). The presence of a common practice is a linchpin of all political systems, thus furthering the evidence that Yvain’s tale is indeed one of politics.\(^4\)

Furthermore, Chrétien points out that people love Yvain, who is living, more than Esclados, who is dead. If “living” is taken
to mean “in power” and “dead” is understood as “removed from office,” this statement is not only less cruel, but extremely logical within the context of the story. Of course the people love Yvain, he is their new king as a result of the aforementioned “electoral” process. He has gained greater popularity by proving his power over Esclados, who is no longer loved because he has been shown to be weak. Here, a standard has been established: constituents adore those in power so long as they remain the strongest. As soon as the incumbent is shown to fail, he is willed away – a motif repeated through Yvain’s own actions.

Almost immediately following the wedding, Gawain convinces Yvain that he must uphold his reputation by traveling to tournaments. Yvain concedes, and Laudine grants him permission to disappear for one year. However, if he fails to return after the prescribed amount of time, Laudine promises to hate him. As the story unfolds, Yvain fails to make good on his word and is essentially exiled from his kingdom. To believe that he remains away simply because Laudine no longer loves him is naïve; he has let his wife down, and, likewise, has proven to the people that he is incapable of leading. This blunder has cost Yvain his political position, and, thus, he spends much of the remainder of the story adventuring to restore his reputation and regain not only the love of his wife, but the office that he once occupied.

Finally, the last line of the passage presents readers with a glimpse of Yvain’s political position in action. As previously mentioned, one of the reasons governments exist is to protect its citizens. During the wedding feast, there is great joy to be found within the kingdom. This represents an era of prosperity; the people have a new, more powerful king, and are that much safer because of his presence. However, once King Arthur arrives and summons a storm, the tone shifts. With his people under attack, the ceremonies cease and Yvain militarizes and mobilizes. He fulfills his political duty by racing towards the source of the storm to defend his constituents. Fortunately, Yvain finds that his attackers are actually his friends, but, nonetheless, he has fulfilled the obligation of his office. By demonstrating the execution of a political office, Chrétien has shown that a governmental structure does indeed exist in Yvain’s world – a fact that Auerbach fails to pick up on.
Furthermore, Auerbach does not understand that political pressure and advancement is the impetus of this story, as opposed to the actual romance between Yvain and Laudine. Yvain initially sets off on his journey with nothing but political gain on his mind; Laudine ends up being a pleasant surprise, a serendipitous discovery he makes only after he has defeated Esclados (and thus, has gained prestige and power within King Arthur’s court). Once he meets and weds Laudine, their love serves as a catalyst for future events, but nothing more. In a true romance (a story lacking a political focus), the lovers are constantly together and act in ways that will allow their love to flourish. *The Romance of Tristan* provides a great example: Tristan and Yseut risk their lives multiple times simply to be with one another. *Erec and Enide*, from another Chrétien story, are similar, as Erec proves time and time again that he is willing to put himself in danger to protect Enide (though, admittedly, he does emotionally batter her for a large portion of the story). In these traditional romances, the lovers act in and for the name of love. In Yvain, the knight with the lion acts for himself. It is his reputation he is attempting to rebuild. Though he is hoping to win back Laudine’s love, he has no guarantee that she will reverse her decision to hate him for eternity – this is in stark contrast to the other famous lovers, who not only recognize, but also celebrate their love with one another. Thusly, Yvain’s actions are not romantic in nature; they are in fact political. Only once he has regained his honor may he, at the very least, resume his place at the round table. Much like the first time he wins Laudine’s love, the second time is sheer happenstance.

Another, symbolic way which shows that politics not only exist in Yvain’s tale, but are the focus, is the presence of the lion. It is no mere coincidence that this ferocious cat accompanies Yvain throughout the latter portion of the story; it points to the fact that Yvain holds office. Traditionally, lions represent pride, power, and royalty. His companion is a constant reminder of his (former) political position within the kingdom he is adventuring. While romantic heroes quest with their lovers, epic heroes travel with their political prestige. The kings in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s indisputable epic *The History of the Kings of Britain* do not go to distant lands in the name of love, but in the name of empire. These kings are constantly moving with political gain in mind as they wish to broaden their realm, their power, and their influence. Likewise,
Yvain travels within his domain, constantly increasing his reputation in the hopes of getting back in bed with Laudine, and, by extension, returning to his former political glory.

Erich Auerbach denied the existence of politics in the world of Yvain, but he was wrong: they are the center of the world as represented by Chrétien. However, whether consciously or unconsciously, he also stumbled upon the definitive characteristic that separates epic and romance: politics. Epic, as a term, must be understood as a narrative in which political gain, whether on the provincial or global level, is the key focus of the story. By acquiring prestige, capital, resources, and/or land, the heroes of epic are engaging in and shaping the politics of their time – making for the best way to differentiate epic and romance. Through this new, more precise definition of epic, scholarly debates regarding medieval texts may proceed with greater clarity, thus allowing the text themselves – not their genres – to be examined.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Auerbach (1964) 133.
3 This concept is most clearly (and anachronistically) illustrated in the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, which states that the government has been formed to “provide for the common defense” of its citizens (US Const., Preamble). Anachronistic use of the Constitution for this argument is fair as it is – and has been – applicable to any situation in which a political system is created.
4 Again, the US Constitution – as well as the constitutions of any government – is ample proof of this concept as it codifies political structures and establishes due process. That rules may not have been written down within Yvain’s story is irrelevant, as instances of common practices – a concept paralleled by modern day governmental documents – are rife throughout the narrative.