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John Fowles and the Medieval Romance Tradition

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

John Fowles and the Medieval Romance Tradition

Janet E. Lewis (bio) and Barry N. Olshen (bio)

John Fowles has Repeatedly drawn attention to the importance of

medieval courtly romance in his own writing and in modern fiction more generally. Many critics (see list of Secondary Works Consulted) have remarked on the references to medieval romance in Fowles's fiction, but no one has as yet provided a detailed case for the continuing presence of courtly love conventions and the curious, deft parallels between the actions and adventures of Fowles's protagonists and those of the heroes and heroines of medieval stories. In her study of Marie de France and Fowles, Constance Heatt observes that readers of Fowles who know medieval literature "will have noted its pervasive influence in his work, cropping up in some pretty unlikely contexts. In *The Magus*, for example, there are references to the Tristan story, to the folktale kings who fell in love with pictures before they had laid eyes on the ladies concerned, and to Blondel singing under the window of Richard Coeur de Lion" (352). The more one works on Fowles's writing, the more convincing it becomes that medieval romance constitutes, consciously and unconsciously, the very roots of his fiction and his thought.

In his essays and translations,¹ and even in interviews and occasional **[End Page 15]** remarks, Fowles has indicated his close familiarity with and on-going interest in medieval stories of quest and love. In an interview with Lorna Sage (1974), for example, he notes that many of his own preoccupations—love and sex, problems of freedom, search and quest—are already present in the earliest of Celtic romances (37). His translation of Marie de France's *Eliduc* (in *The Ebony Tower* [1974]) and the Foreword he has provided for the recent English edition of her *Lais* (1978) indicate considerably more than an amateur's interest in medieval literature. In the "Personal Note" that precedes his translation of *Eliduc*, Fowles remarks that the Celtic romance is the one field, or, as he more appropriately calls it, "forest," that refused to subside into oblivion when he completed his Oxford studies in Old French:

The extraordinary change in European culture that took place under the influence of the British—in the original Celtic sense of the word—imagination has never, I suspect, been fully traced or acknowledged. The mania for chivalry, courtly love, mystic and

crusading Christianity, the Camelot syndrome, all these we are aware of. . . . But I believe that we also owe—emotionally and imaginatively, at least—the very essence of what we have meant ever since by the fictional, the novel and all its children, to this strange northern invasion of the early medieval mind. One may smile condescendingly at the naïveties and primitive technique of stories such as *Eliduc*; but I do not think any writer of fiction can do so with decency—and for a very simple reason. He is watching his own birth.

(118-119)

Even in *The Tree* (1979), the subject of which is ostensibly forest landscapes, Fowles several times discusses the woodland setting in terms of its importance for storytelling, especially in the specifically medieval terms of quest and adventure:

It is not for nothing that the ancestors of the modern novel that began to appear in the early Middle Ages so frequently had the forest for setting and the quest for central theme. Every novel since literary time began . . . is a form of quest, or adventure. . . . Never mind that the actual forest is often a monotonous thing, the metaphorical forest is constant suspense, stage awaiting actors: heroes, maidens, dragons, mysterious castles at every step.

It may be useless as a literal setting in an age that has lost all belief in maidens, dragons and magical castles, but I think we have only superficially abandoned the basic recipe (danger, eroticism, search) first discovered by those early medieval writers. We have simply transferred the tree setting to the now more familiar brick-and-concrete forest of town and city.

(60-61)

Although Fowles does not structure his novels as imitations of medieval **[End Page 16]** romances, he is nonetheless a man clearly





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Marxism, going to the study of stability of linear gyroscopic systems with artificial forces.

Social Rank, The Rise of the Novel, and Whig Histories of Eighteenth-Century Fiction, intent,
according to traditional ideas, transforms Flanger.

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hardness of the Mobs scale captures the relief

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