

COURTLY LOVE IN THE WORLD "WITHOUT A HERO":
W. M. THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR*

AGNIESZKA SETECKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

Medieval romance is a genre difficult to define: it can be written in verse (like romances of Chrétien de Troyes) but also in prose (like Malory's works) and the length of a romance might vary. Some see in the romance an antecedent of the novel, although at the same time they indicate how the real world is permeated with the supernatural in a romance. Moreover, as a literary genre, the romance invokes social and moral codes of the times, and contributed to the construction of the ideals of courtliness. The ideal of courtliness and of courtly love constructed in romances proved to be a very potent one, as it has survived in Western culture well into the 20th century, even if in a "vulgarised" form. The 20th century witnessed a strong fascination with the medieval culture, which is evident in Alfred Tennyson's poetry. The aim of this paper is to analyse the ways in which some ideas of courtliness survived in the 20th century fiction on the basis of W. M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The altered social and political situation, as well as the dominance of realism in fiction, required a form different than romance and a new ideal of love. Therefore, the romance had to be "displaced", to borrow Frye's (1990) term, in order to fit the form of a realistic fiction and comply with Victorian morality. Adulterous love, as presented in Tristan or in the stories of Sir Lancelot and Guinevere, was either pushed to the margins, stigmatised and rendered unwholesome as it leads lovers to ruin (as is evident in Becky Sharp's relationship with Lord Steyne in *Vanity Fair*), or it could be pushed down from the pedestal to the level of imperfect characters of *Vanity Fair*, acquiring a comic, or at best pathetic quality.

The contemporary popular image of the Middle Ages, perpetrated by novels and films alike, is that of wars, crusades and the romance. The narratives of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table or of Tristan and Isolde, function in a number of versions or adaptations, as stories, films or operas. The still evident popularity of the romance might result from the fact that it is a source of certain ideals, or myths,¹ which contributed to the development of the Western culture.

¹ In his classic text, *Love in the Western culture*, Rougemont (1956) claims that the story of Tristan provides with one of the most powerful myths in Western culture, the myth of passionate adulterous love.

In his study of medieval culture Jaeger (1985) points to the concept of courtliness as an example of “a civilising force” (1985: 9), and claims that it is “in origin an instrument of the urge of civilising” (1985: 9). He claims that courtly literature blossomed in the second half of the 12th century as a result of new ideals of courtliness (1985: 14), but it also helped to propagate these ideals. Thus, the courtly romance had “a pedagogic function”; the genre “put forward an ideal model of the civilised warrior” and was “the single most powerful factor in transmitting ideas of courtesy from the courtier class in which they originated to the lay nobility” (Jaeger 1985: 14). The “civilised warrior”, or a knight, of medieval romance was later transformed into a refined courtier of the renaissance and a gentleman of the 19th century, as Ossowska (2000), Gilmour (1981)² and Girouard (1981) indicated in their works. The knight was supposed to be loyal to his lord, pious and courageous. Significantly, he was also supposed to have a lady of his heart, to whom he might devote his services.³

The love that a knight would bestow on his lady could be described as courtly love, *amor courtois*, although many critics now express their misgivings about the term as a critical concept.⁴ The debate that has been conducted for a long time on the subject does not so much provide a definition of courtly love, as points to complexity and elusiveness of the phenomenon. Indeed, there is no single definition that would be wholly satisfactory. As Bumke wrote,

Courtly love could be unrequited love or it could culminate in sensual fulfilment. Love could be directed at a lady of high nobility or at a woman of more humble descent. If the chosen lady was married, courtly love was adul-

² Gilmour, in fact, claims that the Victorian middle class tended “to stress the gentleman’s origins in the gentry rather than the aristocracy” (1981: 6). Still, “the gentry remained a club that was run by old fashioned rules” (1981: 6) and belonging to the group of gentlemen depended on possessing certain qualities that used to be characteristic of aristocracy. She writes that the idea of a gentleman was based on “the principle of exclusion ... the possession of money ... historic origins in military service and landed society” (1981: 9).

³ How important the lady was to a true knight might be seen in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Although knight errantry is there ridiculed, the novel nevertheless shows what were the necessary attributes of knights. When Don Quixote decides to turn a knight errant, he prepares his weapons and secures a horse. Then he needs nothing but a lady of heart: “And now, his armour being secured, his head-piece improved to a helmet, his horse and himself new-named, he perceived nothing but a lady, on whom he might bestow the empire of his heart; for he was sensible that a knight errant without a mistress was a tree without either fruit or leaves, and a body without a soul” (Cervantes 1993: 12).

⁴ Many critics stress the fact that the term courtly love “reflects modern critical assumptions more than medieval practice (Kay 2000: 84), and is “essentially a modern invention ... with little corroboration in medieval texts” (Ferrante 1980: 686). Burnley claims that the influential article by Paris in 1883, and in particular Lewis’ essay, contributed to making the phrase “courtly love” “an unanalysable label for a sharply defined set of beliefs about love in medieval literature rather than simply meaning that kind of love characteristic of courtly contexts” (Burnley 1998: 149).

terous in nature. On the other hand, love for one’s own wife could also be courtly, as could the love between two unmarried people. Courtly love frequently required lengthy service by the man, yet sometimes it was quickly consummated without service. (Bumke 2000: 361)

Even the work of Andreas Capellanus, the author of the late 12th-century treatise, *De Amore (The art of courtly love)*,⁵ does not much help to understand courtly love because, as numerous scholars pointed out, his perspective might have been ironic (Burnley 1998: 151; Bumke 2000: 362). However, it is not the aim of the following article to analyse different definitions of the phenomenon or to discuss its role in the medieval world. Rather, the main concern of this paper is to present the ways in which ideals associated with courtliness and courtly love survived in the 19th-century novel. Obviously, the altered social and political situation, as well as the dominance of realism in fiction, required a form different than romance and a new ideal of love and manners. Still, the romantic concepts persist, even if they are transformed, or “displaced”, to borrow Frye’s (1990) term,⁶ in order to fit the form of realistic fiction and comply with Victorian morality.

The displacement of ideals presented in romances work in different ways in the Victorian novel. One possibility is the displacement in the direction of the moral, which Frye mentions in his essays. He defines it as an attempt to “make the desirable and the moral coincide” (Frye 1971: 156). Therefore, although “love and marriage are not yet indissolubly linked” (Belsey 1994: 107) in medieval courtly literature, Victorian writers aligned passion with the institution of marriage in order to comply with the strict moral codes of the 19th century, as it could be seen in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Adulterous love, the moral implications of which are often ignored in romances (Bumke 2000: 396), could hardly be glorified in 19th-century fiction. Rather, it was pushed to the margins, stigmatised and rendered unwholesome as it leads lovers to ruin, as it is exemplified by George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*. William Makepeace Thackeray, whose *Vanity Fair* will be the subject of analysis in this paper, presents yet another attitude to the ideals of courtesy and courtly love: in *Vanity Fair* they are pushed down the pedestal to the level of imperfect characters, acquiring a comic, if not ironic, quality.

⁵ Kay suggests that Andreas Capellanus’ work might have been just a rhetorical exercise, in the tradition of Ovid: “This clever and ironic text humorously applies medieval techniques of intellectual codification and argument to the Ovidian erotic tradition, with such success that for a long time scholars accepted it as a serious treatise on love” (2000: 88). Similarly, Burnley indicates that his perspective is ironic (1998: 151), and Benson claims that “he was trying to be funny” (1984: 238).

⁶ Frye defines displacement as “the alteration of a mythical structure in the direction of greater plausibility and accommodation to ordinary experience” (1990: 148-149).

Whereas medieval courtly poets “described a fairy tale world with none of the political, economic, and social problems and conflicts that confronted noble society in real life” (Bumke 2000: 275),⁷ the 19th-century narrator in *Vanity Fair* mockingly points to sober reality behind the appearances of honesty, nobility and love that his characters are determined to keep. He adopts the tone of irony, which, according to Hutcheon (2002), is a trope characteristic both for satire and parody. Hutcheon points out that whereas the object of satire is outside the text (human vice), parody is strictly textual (or, in fact, intertextual), because it refers to other texts or literary conventions. *Vanity Fair*, then, could be seen both as a satire (as it stigmatises human vice), and as a parody of heroic or courtly conventions, much in the tradition of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. For parody to be effective and recognisable, the two texts must overlap: the old text is incorporated into the new one, in order to undermine the earlier conventions (Hutcheon 2002: 169). Indeed, on the surface, the world of *Vanity Fair* seems to be built on the ideals reaching back to the medieval period. However, the ironic attitude of the narrator not only reveals that the conventions of courtliness and courtly love are no longer valid in the 19th century, but also offers a critical comment on the conventions themselves.

The action of *Vanity Fair* is set at the beginning of the 19th century, in the period of Napoleonic wars. Although at that time Britain could boast a great degree of democracy, the novel seems to reconstruct the system of feudalism characteristic of medieval Europe.⁸ The apparently more democratic relations are, in fact, only well masked feudal dependencies. The poor remain at the bottom of social hierarchy, their fate depending on the whims of their betters. Children internalise the rules of the system already at school, where the richest dandy, Cuff, became “the unquestioned king of the school” and he “ruled over his subjects and bullied them, with splendid superiority. This one blackened his shoes; that toasted his bread; others would fag out, and give him balls at cricket during whole summer afternoons” (Thackeray 1992: 50). Dobbin’s attachment to George Osborne is also reminiscent of a relation between a liege lord and his vassal. Moreover, not only do birth and wealth, so crucial for an ideal courtier in medieval romance, remain the two most important factors contributing to success in society, but also the two main male characters, as soldiers, are descendants of medieval knights. As the narrator indicates, wars and the courage of knights has been the subject of literature: “Time out of mind strength and courage have always been the theme of

⁷ Bumke (2000: 330-335) indicates that in some romances the harsher aspects of reality could be seen between the lines. On the whole, however, courtly literature tends to idealise life at court, the beauty of the ladies, and the valour of the knights.

⁸ “Thackeray’s was the last generation in which the aristocracy held its prestige, threatened already by the rise of industry ... but still dominant socially and politically (Humphreys 1988: 191).

bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to to-day, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero” (Thackeray 1992: 400).

However, if the world of the romance reappears in *Vanity Fair*, it is in a displaced and less desirable form: the liege relations, much idealised in medieval courtly literature, are presented here in a more critical (ironic) light. The necessary attributes of a courtier in the shape of wealth and birth are not necessarily accompanied here by personal traits like beauty, nobility of character and courtly language. Sir Pitt, for example, this most desired man for any young girl to marry and a great statesman, is described as “a man who could not spell, and did not care to read; who had the habits and cunning of a boor; whose aim in life was pettifogging; who never had a taste, or emotions, or enjoyment, but what was sordid and foul: and yet he had rank, and honours, and power, somehow; and was a dignitary of the land, and a pillar of the state” (Thackeray 1992: 108). Similarly, when the narrator recounts the excitement of young men about going to the war, he adds: “I wonder is it because men are cowards at heart that they admire bravery so much, and place military valour do far beyond every other quality for reward and worship?” (Thackeray 1992: 400), thus checking a little the readers’ admiration for the young soldiers. In any case, instead of concentrating on great deeds, as a romance writer might have done, the narrator claims not to be a “military novelist”, and remarks that his “place is with the non-combatants” (Thackeray 1992: 388).

Significantly, there is a striking parallel between the configurations of characters in *Vanity Fair* and in some romances. In fact, the relationship between Amelia, George Osborne and William Dobbin brings to mind the two famous love triangles in literature: Guinevere – King Arthur – Lancelot, and Isolde – King Mark – Tristan. Becky, who apart from being married to Rawdon has a number of admirers, might also remind of a noble and beautiful lady of courtly literature, although in the novel she fulfils the role of a dangerous temptress. Still, neither are the *Vanity Fair*ians created on a grand scale, nor do their feelings seem to have the passionate quality characteristic of courtly love. Moreover, not a single character in the novel deserves the name of a courtly lover, and it is not only because the social reality has changed.⁹

George Osborne, for example, is a hero only in Amelia’s eyes: she “loved, with all her heart, the young officer in His Majesty’s service ... she thought about him the very first moment on waking, and his was the very last name mentioned in her prayers. She never had seen a man so beautiful or so clever; such a figure on horseback, such dancer, such a hero in general” (Thackeray

⁹ The materials concerning courtly love very often stress the background of the court a necessary precondition for courtly love (for instance Bumke 2000: 361).

1992: 146). Although she must have been dimly aware of George's unworthiness, Amelia "did not dare to own that the man she loves was her inferior; or to feel that she had given her heart away too soon. Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too tender, too trustful, too weak, too much a woman to recall it" (Thackeray 1992: 225). Even when she married him, and the spell was broken, she still obstinately refused to leave the world of romance she invented for herself; she did not want to "own to herself how different the real man was from that superb young hero whom she had worshipped" (Thackeray 1992: 345). Thus, Amelia constructs George in a romantic manner, and invests their love and their marriage with the romantic significance. It is only Rebecca who finally makes Amelia face the truth. And the truth is that, apart from his good looks, George is deprived of all the features of a noble knight. Not only is he not faithful to the woman of his heart, but also he is a "selfish humbug, that low-bred cockney dandy, that padded booby, who had neither wit, nor manners, nor heart" (Thackeray 1992: 941), to use Rebecca's words. Even George, although usually rather conceited, considers himself "selfish, brutal and black with crime" in comparison to Amelia (Thackeray 1992: 388). George's self-complacency and his selfishness make him an easy prey for the temptress Becky. Unlike Lancelot who "had only one heart, and it was no longer his; he had entrusted it to another [Guinevere] so that he could bestow it nowhere else" ("The Knight of the Cart", Chrétien de Troyes 1990: 185), George neglects Amelia to enjoy the company of other women within a week of their marriage. In fact, he is seduced¹⁰ by Becky's "twinkling green eyes" (Thackeray 1992: 345), and thus fails the test of faithfulness and truthfulness.

Moreover, the relationship between George and Amelia reminds more of the medieval marriage policy than of courtly love celebrated by minstrels and romancers alike. Medievalists indicate that "marriage was primarily a political institution, and instrument of dynastic politics" (Bumke 2000: 380) and that "the conditions and contracts of marriage were negotiated between the families, at best between the groom and the father of the bride. Sometimes children were betrothed as infants" (Bumke 2000: 381). Similarly, George and Amelia "had been bred up by their parents for this very purpose [marriage], and their banns had, as it were, been ready in their respective families any time these ten years" (Thackeray 1992: 40); their marriage was arranged also for financial and dynastic reasons. In addition, instead of letting Amelia rule completely over his heart and fulfilling her every whim, as a courtly lover should, George enjoys his

¹⁰ Dobbin compares Rebecca to a snake (Thackeray 1992: 378), and George's note urging Rebecca to clope with him is described as being "coiled like a snail among the flowers" of the bouquet (Thackeray 1992: 385). The snake (or the serpent) suggests temptation, like that of the first people in paradise.

power over his wife: "He saw a slave before him in that simple, yielding, faithful creature, and his soul within him thrilled secretly somehow at the knowledge of his power. He would be generous-minded, Sultan as he was, and raise up this kneeling Esther and make a queen of her" (Thackeray 1992: 252). Thus, there is a contrast between Amelia's romantic vision of her marriage and the truth about her union with George, a contrast that corresponds to medieval construction of love in romances and the contemporary actuality.

Paradoxically, the profligate Rawdon proves to be a more faithful lover, and most devoted to his mistress and then wife Rebecca. Not unlike Sir Lancelot who "find[s] grief in no act suits [Guinevere], since her will is [his] pleasure" ("The Knight of the Cart", Chrétien de Troyes 1990: 242), Rawdon, this heavy dragoon, was completely under the sway of his wife:

No one will say it is unmanly to be captivated by a woman, or, being captivated, to marry her; and the admiration, the delight, the passion, the wonder, the unbounded confidence, the frantic adoration with which, by degrees, this big warrior got to regard the little Rebecca, were feelings which the ladies at least will pronounce were not altogether discreditable to him. When she sang, every note thrilled in his dull soul and tingled through his huge frame. When she spoke, he bought all the force of his brains to listen and wonder. If she was jocular, he used to revolve her jokes in his mind, and explode over them half an hour afterwards in the street to the surprise of the groom in the Tilbury by his side, or the comrade riding with him in Rotten Row. Her words were oracles to him, her smallest actions marked by an infallible grace and wisdom. (Thackeray 1992: 200)

However, as the above quotation clearly indicates, for all his virtues and achievements in the "noble sciences" of "boxing, rat-hunting, the fives court, the four-in-hand driving" (Thackeray 1992: 117), Rawdon Crawley does not seem to be a character fit for a courtly lover. The narrator's use of irony depreciates his valour, and underlines his stupidity and his bad manners. The love talk, so celebrated by courtly poets,¹¹ is reduced here to Rawdon's misshapen sentences and his awkward complement: during the early days of his courtship he pays Rebecca the compliment of being "a neat little filly" (Thackeray 1992: 127) and his uncouth gallantries make him a ridiculous figure. Interestingly enough, however, his love for Rebecca improves him, he finds himself "converted into a very

¹¹ A number of scholars indicate the importance of language and the art of conversation. Benson (1984), for example, writes that "the form of speech ... is an essential part of any style of love. Courtly love, however, is especially dependent on the forms of speech, since not only is every lover a poet, but the main characteristics of the courtly lover – his courtesy, humility, and religion of love – are expressed in speech. To be adept at 'luf talk' is therefore the first requirement of the courtly lover" (1984: 243).

happy and submissive married man. His former haunts knew him not" (Thackeray 1992: 219). Apparently, striving for improvement was characteristic of a courtly lover, as medieval romances indicate.¹²

George's vanity and unfaithfulness as well as Rawdon's stupidity would have precluded them from the ranks of courtly knights in a medieval romance. Dobbin, who is constructed as a man of sounder moral principles, and devoted to Amelia, would seem to be a much better candidate. However, although by far the most moral, he is not cut out for a hero or a courtly lover either. In the novel he occupies the position comparable to that of a vassal, who serves his liege lord and admires his wife. Like a romance hero he is loyal to George, and is ready to serve him. The fight that he picked up at school in defence of little George might be seen as a parody of the duels often featuring in romances. The narrator compares the combat to "the last charge of the Guard, ... Ney's column breasting the hill of La Haye Sainte, bristling with ten thousand bayonets, and crowned with twenty eagles ... the shout of the beef-eating British, as leaping down the hill they rushed to hug the enemy in the savage arms of battle" (Thackeray 1992: 55). In addition, Dobbin is hopelessly in love with Amelia but, like Tristan who brings Isolde to King Mark, he makes George marry her. Still, if he is a Tristan at all, than definitely on a less heroic level. Neither is he of noble origin, his father being only a grocer in the city, nor is he handsome and, as Becky indicates, "how could one love a man with feet of such size?" (Thackeray 1992: 384). In addition, even Amelia had to admit that she did not much care for him, as "[h]e lisped; he was very plain and homely-looking; and exceedingly awkward and ungainly" (Thackeray 1992: 315). Thus, Dobbin is an opposition of a perfect graceful courtier. He reminds rather of Sancho Pança than of a true idealised knight of romance.

Nevertheless, Dobbin's devotion to Amelia does carry traces of romantic passion, although on a more down-to-earth level. He fell in love with her at first sight, when she entered the room singing, and her "sweet fresh little voice went right into the Captain's heart, and nestled there" (Thackeray 1992: 60). He is ready to defend her honour, both before the laughing company of George's friends (Thackeray 1992: 150), and before his own sisters (Thackeray 1992: 230). He never betrays her and, in fact, is the only male character in the novel unaffected by Becky's charm: he was "so honest, that [Becky's] arts and cajoleries did not affect him, and he shrank from her with instinctive repulsion" (Thackeray 1992: 315). He serves Amelia, carrying her shawls when she goes to Vauxhall, or buying her a piano (a rather ridiculous love token); he idealises her

¹² Andreas Capellanus (1960) indicates that love should improve a lover; it "can endow a man even of the humblest birth with nobility of character" and teaches nobility. Love can also make a man chaste as he would never think about another woman (1960: 31-32).¹²

and suffers from all the symptoms of love-sickness. As Burnley (1998) indicates, "[b]oth love-longing and idealisation ... flow from the essential inaccessibility of the beloved" in courtly literature. Inaccessibility could be achieved "by placing the lady in a socially elevated position by comparison with the lover" or "by ensuring that she is married" (1998: 170). Indeed, Amelia is inaccessible to Dobbin for both those reasons; even when George is killed she claims that he is her husband "here and in heaven" (Thackeray 1992: 820). Therefore, Dobbin can only admire her and love her without hope that his desires would ever be fulfilled: "And so William was at liberty to look and long, as the poor boy at school who has no money may sigh after the contents of the tart-woman's tray" (Thackeray 1992: 821).

However, although Dobbin "bore his fate, knowing it, and content to bear it" (Thackeray 1992: 487), he grew tired after fifteen years; his patience wears out and he suddenly realises that the object of his most passionate desire does not deserve his attentions: "No, you are not worthy of the love which I have devoted to you. I knew all along that the prize I had set my life on was not worth the winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love" (Thackeray 1992: 925). With such words Dobbin decides to withdraw from Amelia's service, and thus he "broke the chain by which she held him, and declared independence and superiority. He had placed himself at her feet so long that the poor little woman had been accustomed to trample upon him" (Thackeray 1992: 925). Thus, William does not stand the trials of love, which might be a comment on futility of courtly love.

Becky plays the role of a temptress in *Vanity Fair*, like Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or the ladies that Sir Lancelot meets on his way to save Guinevere from the wicked Meleagant ("The Knight of the Cart", Chrétien de Troyes 1990). She learns the art of seduction early in life and when she puts it to practice at Miss Pinkerton's school, where the Reverend Mr. Crisp falls in love with her "being shot dead by a glance of her eyes which was fired all the way across Chiswick Church from the school-pew to the reading desk" (Thackeray 1992: 14). Later she managed to seduce George, daring to "separate those whom God joined" (Thackeray 1992: 412), and even Lord Steyne, who presented her with jewels and money. If she fails with Joseph Sedley, it is not because of his superior moral attributes, but because he gets drunk and thus is unable to pursue his courtship. Still, for a time it appeared that she would conquer him. The scene when Joseph helps her to wind the silk she used for knitting a green purse seems to allude to another scene of seduction, taking place in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where Lady Bertilak tempts Sir Gawain with the green girdle: "And before he had time to ask how, Mr. Joseph Sedley, of the East India's Company's service, was actually seated *tête-à-tête* with a young lady,

looking at her with the most killing expression; his arms stretched out before her in an imploring attitude, and his hands bound in a web of green silk, which she was unwinding" (Thackeray 1992: 47). She reminds of Lady Bartilak for yet another reason: she is a charmer leading men into temptation: her son, Rawdon, sees in her a fairy out of this world: "When she left the room, an odour of rose, or some other magical fragrance, lingered about the nursery. She was an unearthly being in his eyes, superior to his father – to all the world; to be worshipped, and admired at a distance" (Thackeray 1992: 516). In a carriage the boy can only sit silently lost in admiration for his mother: "he gazed with all his eyes at the beautifully dressed princess opposite him" (Thackeray 1992: 516).

The ending of the novel, if not a tragic one, brings with it a complete disillusionment. Both Dobbin and Amelia have finally realised the vanity of their ideals about love. Amelia's eyes are finally opened to George's unworthiness, and so is Dobbin disillusioned about his beloved. Although he seems to have won what he strove for, the reader is not left with the impression that he "has his desire" or "having it, is satisfied" (Thackeray 1992: 951). However, Dobbin's (or Amelia's, for that matter) desire is unfulfilled not because his lady is still inaccessible, but because she is incapable of being what his fancy made of her. In other words, the perfect lady that he constructed in his mind is not possible. Such a conclusion to the novel ultimately undermines the ideal of courtly love.

The example of *Vanity Fair* shows that the ideals of courtliness and courtly love have survived in the Victorian novel, although they are transformed and adapted to the requirements of realistic fiction. The tone of irony that the narrator adopts suggests a critical attitude to the medieval ideals of courtliness and courtly love. Not only does it imply that the courtly values are no longer valid in the 19th century, but also that they might not have worked outside the romance in the Middle Ages. *Vanity Fair* does not present idealised figures, and the ideals glorified in the medieval romance are here pushed down the pedestal to the level of the ordinary. Although the characters, in their vanity, see themselves in heroic terms and profess to believe in certain values inherited from the chivalric age, the narrator mockingly points to their mediocrity.

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