Aucassin and Nicolete
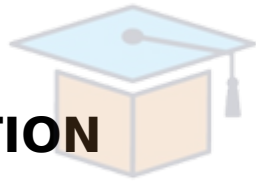
Aucassin and Nicolete is a medieval French romance that follows the adventures of the noble Aucassin and his love, Nicolete, as they overcome obstacles, including family conflict and captivity, to be reunited.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to "Aucassin and Nicolete": A Unique Artistic Poetic Work

"Aucassin and Nicolete" stands as a remarkable and rare artifact in the realm of artistic poetry. Its survival through the turbulent waves of time, which have erased much of ancient literary treasures like those of Menander and Sappho, presents a unique glimpse into a form of storytelling from the twelfth or thirteenth century that combines prose and verse in a singular manner—known as the cante-fable. Unlike the fabliaux and heroic poems of its era, this song-story weaves its narrative through alternating passages of prose and verse, presenting a form that either was an experimental venture by its anonymous author or a reflection of a tradition among wandering minstrels of the time.

The tale's author, speculated to be a contemporary of Louis VII (1130), exhibits a distinctive originality, notwithstanding his reliance on traditional narrative formulas found in both ancient epics and the folk songs of his age. This story-telling technique includes repetitive phrases for dialogues and descriptions, maintaining a consistent form in addressing characters and describing their physical attributes in a manner similar to the epic poetry of Homer, such as the recurrent epithets and stereotypical courtesies.

The plot of "Aucassin and Nicolete," revolving around the forbidden love between a Christian knight and a Paynim lady, adheres to the conventional narratives of star-crossed lovers from differing cultural and religious backgrounds. However, in this narrative, the roles are inverted, with Nicolete being a captive among Christians. Despite these conventional elements, the author's focus evidently lies in the exploration of love and passion, illustrated with a blend of sentiment, humor, and a touch of cynicism towards the trials and tribulations faced by the lovers.

Rather than dwelling on themes of conflict, religious conversion, or political intrigue, the tale primarily celebrates the love story amid adversities, emphasizing the emotional depth and the resilience of the lovers' bond. The narrative oscillates between moments of danger and serene beauty, from tense escapes to peaceful encounters in nature. In doing so, the author juxtaposes the harsh realities of feudal societies with the enduring power of love and the fleeting joys of youth and beauty that transcend the confines of societal expectations and constraints.

Through this story, the author achieves a balance between the depiction of a realistic social order marked by feudal obligations and constraints, and the realm of romance and personal fulfillment. The occasional digressions to describe the societal conditions, such as the mention of a villein's plight, insert a layer of socio-economic commentary into the narrative, hinting at a broader contemplation of human experiences beyond the central love story.

Ultimately, "Aucassin and Nicolete" emerges as a poetic testament to the enduring allure of romantic tales, enriched by its blend of conventional forms with innovative storytelling and thematic exploration, thereby marking its unique place in the annals of medieval literature.

THE SONG-STORY OF AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE

She was bathed and rested, then she sought out those herbals that know all manner of enchantments and properties of herbs. With them, she made an ointment and washed herself with it, and her flesh became whiter than it was ever before.

She dressed herself nobly in clothes that became her right well, so beautiful she was that she seemed rather an angel than a human being. She went to the palace where Aucassin was, and when he saw her, he recognized her not. "Fair sir," said she, "know ye not me? I am Nicolete that have so much loved ye, and ye me, and for the proving of ye, have I crossed sea and land, and have come to find you." Aucassin was so astonished, he could hardly believe it was she, but she recounted to him so many tokens of love that passed between them both, that he knew verily she spoke the truth. Then was his joy so great that it seemed to him he had nothing till now.

Aucassin married Nicolete, and she was baptized. They made a great feast and lived together long in joy and solace, in wealth and honor, as they desired. Thus Aucassin wedded Nicolete, who had been stolen away from him so long and so far, wherefore he had suffered many sorrows and much travail. But now all their past misfortune was turned to joy and happiness, and they lived henceforth in great delight and felicity, and in the love of each other, till the end of their days.

NOTES

"THE BLENDING"--of alternate prose and verse--"is not unknown in various countries." Thus in Dr. Steere's Swahili Tales (London, 1870), p. vii. we read: "It is a constant characteristic of popular native tales to have a sort of burden, which all join in singing. Frequently the skeleton of the story seems to be contained in these snatches of singing, which the story-teller connects by an extemporized account of the intervening history . . . Almost all these stories had sung parts, and of some of these, even those who sung them could scarcely explain the meaning . . . I have heard stories partly told, in which the verse parts were in the Yao and Nyamwezi languages." The examples given (Sultan Majnun) are only verses supposed to be chanted by the characters in the tale. It is improbable that the Yaos and Nyamwezis borrowed the custom of inserting verse into prose tales from Arab literature, where the intercalated verse is usually of a moral and reflective character.

Mr. Jamieson, in Illustrations of Northern Antiquities (p. 379), preserved a cante-fable called Rosmer Halfman, or The Merman Rosmer. Mr. Motherwell remarks (Minstrelsy, Glasgow, 1827, p. xv.): "Thus I have heard the ancient ballad of Young Beichan and Susy Pye dilated by a

story-teller into a tale of remarkable dimensions--a paragraph of prose and then a screed of rhyme alternately given." The example published by Mr. Motherwell gives us the very form of Aucassin and Nicolete, surviving in Scotch folk lore:- "Well ye must know that in the Moor's Castle, there was a mafsymore, which is a dark deep dungeon for keeping prisoners. It was twenty feet below the ground, and into this hole they closed poor Beichan. There he stood, night and day, up to his waist in puddle-water; but night or day it was all one to him, for no ae styme of light ever got in. So he lay there a lang and weary while, and thinking on his heavy weird, he made a murnfu' sang to pass the time--and this was the sang that he made, and grat when he sang it,

for he never thought of escaping from the mafsymore, or of

seeing his ain countrie again:

"My hounds they all run masterless, My hawks they flee from tree to tree; My youngest brother will heir my lands, And fair England again I'll never see. "O were I free as I hae been, And my ship swimming once more on sea, I'd turn my face to fair England, And sail no more to a strange countrie."

Now the cruel Moor had a beautiful daughter called Susy Pye, who was accustomed to take a walk every morning in her garden, and as she

was walking ae day she heard the sough o' Beichan's sang, coming as it were from

below the ground."

All this is clearly analogous in form no less than in matter to our cante-fable. Mr. Motherwell speaks of fabliaux, intended partly for

recitation, and partly for being sung; but does not refer by name to Aucassin and Nicolete. If we may judge by analogy, then, the form of

the cante-fable is probably an early artistic adaptation of a popular narrative method.

STOUR; an ungainly word enough, familiar in Scotch with the sense of wind-driven dust, it may be dust of battle. The French is Estor.

BIAUCAIRE, opposite Tarascon, also celebrated for its local hero, the deathless Tartarin. There is a great deal of learning about Biaucaire; probably the author of the cante-fable never saw the place, but he need not have thought it was on the sea-shore, as (p. 39) he seems to do. There he makes the people of Beaucaire set out to wreck a ship. Ships do not go up the Rhone, and get wrecked there, after escaping the perils of the deep.