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* begins not with lofty claims, but with quiet distinction. This poetic work, unlike many literary relics from the same era, has endured across centuries without losing its charm or originality. Blending prose with verse, it introduces a narrative form called the *cante-fable*, which doesn’t merely tell a story but performs it. Where most medieval texts lean toward morality tales or courtly grandeur, this piece feels more personal, intimate, and occasionally ironic. It captures not only the romance between two unlikely lovers but also the emotional textures that surround them—grief, joy, confusion, and laughter. Each passage, whether sung or spoken, offers a rhythm that mirrors the unpredictable motion of love and fate. Readers are drawn in not by spectacle, but by the sincerity of tone and depth of feeling.

The structure itself breaks expectations of medieval literature. It uses alternating sections to shift tone and mood without disrupting the storyline, creating a dynamic pace. This stylistic decision may reflect the voice of a wandering minstrel or an author challenging traditional formats. Rather than glorify war or lineage, it centers on Nicolete and Aucassin’s love, treating it with both reverence and humor. Nicolete, who should be a passive damsel in traditional romance, becomes clever, active, and self-driven. Aucassin, though noble by birth, appears more flawed, passionate, and human

than heroic. This inversion adds complexity and invites readers to question societal ideals. Romance, here, is not a prize won but a bond tested and chosen again and again.

The author’s cultural awareness is evident in the subtle layering of religious and political contrasts. Nicolete, a Paynim captive, is not villainized, nor is her love for Aucassin depicted as unnatural or corrupt. Instead, their union defies conventional opposition, suggesting that affection transcends belief and background. Humor is used not to undermine love but to protect it from being too idealized. For instance, moments of conflict are sometimes resolved with wit rather than battle. This unexpected levity turns the tale into something more agile and enduring than a mere tragedy or fairy tale. Love becomes a game of persistence, imagination, and will.

Amid all its beauty, *Aucassin and Nicolete* does not shy away from commenting on social realities. It references the burdens of the poor and the constraints of feudal society. While these are not the story’s focus, their presence sharpens the contrast between the lovers' dreamlike episodes and the harshness of the world they navigate. Their escape is emotional as well as physical—love becomes their way of resisting conformity. This balance gives the story depth without turning it into a lecture. The emotional arcs feel truthful because they’re laced with social observation, not disconnected from them.

The vivid settings—the palace, the forest, the sea—function not just as backdrops but as emotional states. Each place reflects the lovers’ transitions: confusion in the forest, hope at sea, clarity in moments of reunion. The tale doesn’t promise everlasting stability, but it does affirm the importance of shared feeling and loyalty. The language, though repetitive by design, creates a melodic tone that enhances memory and emotion. Much like epic poetry, it ensures the listener does not just follow the story but feels its cadence. Love, in this narrative, is not static. It moves, adapts, retreats, and returns.

That movement is key to its lasting appeal. Unlike moralistic stories that seek to resolve with virtue or punishment, this one lingers in the in-between. Love isn't fully rational or rewarded for its purity—it's just chosen, again and again, in spite of obstacles. The couple's resilience becomes a gentle rebellion against rules that would keep them apart. It's not just the plot that charms, but the way it's told—with sincerity, occasional mischief, and unwavering empathy. The tale ultimately honors love as a lived experience, imperfect but radiant.

In a time where many literary works served religious or heroic ideals, *Aucassin and Nicolete* embraced a different vision: that of joy amidst difficulty, and meaning found in each other rather than in conquest. Its poetic form, narrative inversion, and playful tone created something rare and enduring. Not simply a relic of the past, this story stands as a bridge between medieval tradition and modern sentiment, where emotion and choice matter more than duty and destiny. In this way, the tale remains alive—not just remembered, but felt.

The Song-Story of Aucassin and Nicolete

The Song-Story of Aucassin and Nicolete ends not in tragedy but in fulfillment, with love triumphing after trials that tested its depth. Nicolete, having endured separation and hardship, takes it upon herself to prepare for a reunion not just with words but with grace and presence. She bathes, rests, and seeks out healers and herbalists, those wise in the secret arts of roots and oils. With their help, she creates a salve, one touched by tradition and healing lore, which makes her skin gleam with renewed beauty. Her transformation is not just physical but symbolic—she is reclaiming her identity and her strength. Dressed in noble garments that reflect her spirit, she walks not just as a woman in love, but as a figure of power and purpose. Her appearance is so radiant that even Aucassin cannot at first recognize her.

Standing before him, she speaks with gentle confidence, reminding him of their love, the promises once whispered, the moments once shared. At first, he stares in disbelief, caught between memory and the wonder of her return. But as she names the things only two hearts in love would know, truth rises within him like morning light. Aucassin’s astonishment fades into joy. The weight of lost time lifts as he realizes that everything he grieved is now restored. Her love had traveled across distances, across silence, across the unknown. For a love so strong, even oceans and kingdoms could not remain barriers. In that moment, all the sorrows of their separation become like shadows retreating before the dawn.

Their union follows with rightful celebration. Nicolete is baptized, a gesture that signifies not just a religious joining, but a cultural acceptance. Together, they are now part of one world. Their wedding is marked by a feast filled with laughter, music, and joy—a stark contrast to the tears that marked their past. It’s a public acknowledgment of a bond long earned in secret pain. The people rejoice, and the palace rings with light and song. There is no resistance now, no disguise, no hiding. Aucassin and Nicolete are

at last free to live as they had always dreamed.

What makes their tale enduring is not simply the reunion, but the transformation it brings. Nicolete, once a captive, reclaims her voice and destiny. Aucassin, once lost in grief, finds clarity through love. Their trials gave them wisdom, their reunion gives them peace. Now they live not just as lovers, but as equals who endured, who changed, and who chose one another again. Their days pass in harmony, their nights in comfort. Wealth comes, but it is their joy and their bond that truly enrich them. Time, once an enemy, now becomes a friend.

Their story reminds readers that love, when rooted in truth and tested through adversity, becomes more than passion—it becomes purpose. The tale doesn’t rest on fantasy alone. It rests on effort, choice, and belief. In a world often fractured by duty and fate, Nicolete and Aucassin show what can happen when hearts remain faithful and actions follow. Their union is not just an ending, but a celebration of what it means to love without surrendering to despair. Love, here, is not fragile—it is fierce, forgiving, and whole.

In retelling this moment, it becomes clear that their journey was never about escaping the world, but transforming it. They did not abandon their past—they carried it forward, reshaped it, and built something lasting. It is why their joy feels earned, why their peace feels deserved. And in the echo of their laughter, readers may find hope—that love, even when lost, can find its way home. Nicolete and Aucassin, once divided by distance, now walk side by side, their story sealed not just by fate, but by choice.

Notes

In this 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.