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Chante(Fable): Romance, Parody, and the Medieval

in *Aucassin et Nicolette* and Lionhead Studios' *Fable*

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Chante(Fable): Romance, Parody, and the Medieval

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by

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Dedication

In an act of unabashed cliché, I dedicate this report to my family, without whose tireless love and support I would surely be the antihero of my own romance. I also dedicate my report to my dear friend and mentor, Dr. April Harper, who is constant reminder of why I do what I do, and who has never once doubted my abilities.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Chante(Fable): Romance, Parody, and the Medieval
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The romance was one of the most popular genres of medieval literature during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While it is difficult to enumerate the universal characteristics shared by all romances, there are similar elements present in many. *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the unique thirteenth-century *chantefable*, has intentionally adopted these elements and manipulated them in such a way that parodies the romances put forth by Chrétien de Troyes. The video game *Fable* comprises a unique structural form that echoes that of *Aucassin et Nicolette* and, despite its creation nearly eight hundred years later, belongs to the medieval tradition of parody. This report will explore how the various motifs, such as the hero quest, the battle sequence, and the fantastic world, are imitated and manipulated by *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* in their self-conscious attempts to parody medieval romance conventions. In the era of *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*, popular culture is be obsessed with medievalism. *Fable*,

however, is categorically medieval rather than post-medieval because of the structure it shares with *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Together, these works self-consciously employ techniques that deride the romance conventions, and intentionally resist conforming to medieval public expectations.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

(Media)eval Text

In February 2014, Lionhead Studios released a new version of their hugely

popular video game, *Fable*, and its expansion *Fable: The Lost Chapters*. The tenth

anniversary edition of the game marked more than just remastered visuals, enhanced

lighting, and improved player interface: this redesign signified a hearkening back to the

medieval past. *Fable* belongs to a tradition of contemporary video games that depict

medieval worlds—fictional or historically accurate—through the utilization of medieval

historical and literary tropes, archetypes, and conventions. Other games belonging to this

category include *The Legend of Zelda*, *World of Warcraft*, *Age of Empires: Age of Kings*,

and *The Elder Scrolls*, each of which re-imagines and re-interprets the Middle Ages in

idiosyncratic ways, bridging the gap between the medieval and the modern. Unlike the

other video games in its category, however, *Fable* is more medieval than post-medieval.[1]

Despite its cartoonish animation and fairy-tale style depiction of the Middle Ages, *Fable*

utilizes medieval narrative forms and genre in a way that is different from any other

game. The player is presented with an exaggerated chivalric protagonist, elaborate battle

sequences, and countless life-threatening quests, which appear comic to the player. *Fable*

intentionally mocks several principal conventions of medieval romance. Similarly,

although eight hundred years prior to *Fable*'s creation, the thirteenth-century French text,

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[1] For clarification on the terms "medievalsim," "neomedieval," and the "post-medieval," see *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline, New York: Routledge, 2014. See also *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*, ed. Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, Lewiston: Mellen, 2012.

Aucassin et Nicolette, presents its reader with a reluctant hero, a gender-bent king and queen, and several comic battle scenes which stand in stark contrast to more serious romance motifs typified by Chrétien de Troyes.

Additionally, *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*'s derision of medieval romance tropes is a result of their hybrid forms: both works blend performance, interaction, and narrative in ways that separate them from the medieval texts on which they are based. The distancing of *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* from their literary ancestors allows for an effective adoption and subsequent manipulation of romance conventions. Despite the trans-media comparison of *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*, both works self-consciously modify various thematic and formal elements of medieval romance, which equally complicate the aspects of the quest romance upon which they are based. By demonstrating how a video game and thirteenth-century text offer explicitly comic modifications of romance, it is possible to see how the medieval tropes function across media, resulting in two very different works similarly caricaturing the medieval world. Indeed, if *Fable* provides for the modern gamer what *Aucassin et Nicolette* provided the medieval audience, an investigation of their shared parodic traits provides further insight into the genealogical connection between a video game about the Middle Ages and a thirteenth century text. Thus, through their intentional reproduction and manipulation of romance tropes, *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* are self-conscious texts.

If *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* intentionally and self-consciously manipulate the conventions of medieval romance for comedic effect, they ultimately serve as parodies of the texts they mock. According to Martha Bayless, parody is defined as

> an intentionally humorous literary (written) text that achieves its effect by (1) imitating and distorting the distinguishing characteristics of literary genres, styles, authors, or specific texts (*textual parody*); or (2) imitating, with or without distortion, literary genres, styles, authors, or texts while in addition satirizing or focusing on nonliterary customs, events, or persons (*social parody*). (3 emphasis in original)

Bayless's definition of textual parody, while initially a reference to parody in medieval Latin texts, applies to both *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Indeed, both works manipulate the defining characteristics of the romance genre by seemingly distorting specific texts by Chrétien de Troyes, namely *Erec et Enide*, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette,* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*. While Bayless's definition lists several possible characteristics —genre, author, style, or text—that a work may parody, *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* combine multiple elements in order to successfully function as parodies. The multifarious, parodic nature of the two works strengthens the argument for their intended humor. If certain elements of *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* "imitate and distort" specific scenes in Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Chevalier de la Charette,* the two works

perform as more focused and deliberate parody: the more elements at play within a

parody emphasizes the forethought required in imitation.

If the key aspect of parody is imitation, however, it is possible for a parody of

medieval romance to be mis-categorized as romance. Indeed, critics have difficulty

assigning *Aucassin et Nicolette* to any singular genre, calling it idyllic romance

(*pastourelle*), pastiche, bursleque, satire, a theatre piece, and even travel narrative.[2]

Logically and categorically, a text that imitates the conventions of romance through

parody is also a romance. When discussing the issues that arise in parody, Sarah Kay

writes, "One can thus say of parody that it is both founding and anti-foundational, that it

both relies on a model and fictionalizes it . . ." (174). According to Kay, therefore, if

Aucassin et Nicolette serves as a parody of romance, it must adhere to the conventions of

romance and then break them, thereby producing and reaffirming the comedic aspect

inherent to parody. Both Bayless and Kay agree, therefore, that parody must at first fit the

mold of whatever text it is modifying, and then wittingly break that mold, deviating from

convention.

The difficulty in defining medieval romance, however, problematizes any

discussion of generic parody. As a genre, the romance developed in the twelfth and

thirteenth centuries and resulted from a rise in vernacular literature in contraposition to

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[2] For a more thorough discussion of the nuanced use of pastiche, parody, satire, and burlesque as applied to *Aucassin et Nicolette*, see Rudy S. Spraycar, "Genre and Convention in *Aucassin et Nicolette*," *Romanic Review* 76.1 (1985): 94-115. In his new translation of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Robert S. Sturges argues that the work can be categorized as travel narrative (xiii).

Latin as the popular language of writing. Etymologically, "romance" derives from the Old French, "romanz," which was the name of the French vernacular. Apart from its nomenclature, there is no absolute way of defining romance as a genre, although scholars have attempted to delineate the main components of romance. Derek Pearsall, for example, asserts that "repetition of motifs, a common stock of language and metaphor and incident, fast pace, predictable outcome, are what is to be enjoyed in medieval popular romance . . ." (11). Less specifically than Pearsall, Douglas Kelly acknowledges that "The seminal achievements on the great twelfth-century writers established romance as a recognizable genre. In the thirteenth century and after, romancers consolidated, built on, and adapted the achievement of their predecessors" (xiii). Romance, therefore, is easily identifiable but not necessarily easily definable.

Repetition of motifs, as mentioned by Pearsall, is crucial in identifying romance. For *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the battle motif, the questing hero, and the fantastic world that clearly gesture toward romance. Of the motifs contained within *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Roger Loomis details a few: "The rambling plot uses motifs already well worn in romances: the love of a Christian knight for a foreign slave, cruel parents, Saracens who steal children and separate lovers, dire perils on sea and land; but it is all given unity and cohesion by the young lovers . . ." (244). Both Pearsall and Loomis have attempted to demarcate several motifs that are common within romance, but exhaustive lists only gesture toward the myriad and varying motifs that appear in medieval romances.

5

Fable and *Aucassin et Nicolette* contain innumerable motifs that are shared with other romances, but the battle, questing hero, and fantastic world are the most compelling in terms of their parodic and comedic imitation of those found in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. A brief summary of the storyline of both *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* will situate each work in such a way so at to more easily identify the types of motifs Pearsall references. *Fable* begins in the small village of Oakvale on Hero's sister's birthday. Unfortunately, Oakvale is sacked by bandits and Hero's family, including his sister, is killed. Hero is rescued by an old hero of Albion, who brings the protagonist to the Heroes' Guild. It is there that Hero grows up and becomes practiced in the art of swordsmanship, archery, and will (magical arts) and prepares to protect Albion. Hero then leaves the guild and embarks upon quests, defeating hobbes and balverines—goblin-like and werewolf-like creatures respectively—as well as bandits in the Greatwood and Darkwood until he returns to Oakvale where he learns of a sibylline character—who secretly turns out to be his believed-to-be-dead sister—who will help him carry out his ultimate quest, which is to defeat Jack of Blades. Traveling through regions of Albion such as Witchwood, Knothole Glade, Hook Coast, Hero continues defeating enemies, engaging in side quests to earn renown and money, and fulfilling heroic deeds throughout Albion until he enters into a final battle with Jack of Blades in the Chamber of Fate. In a surprise ending, however, it turns out that Jack of Blades takes the form of a dragon in the final combat since his human form is only possible through the use of his mask. After

Hero defeats dragon Jack, he can either destroy the mask, and Albion will live happily ever after. Hero can, however, decide to wear Jack's mask and become an antihero.

In this overview of *Fable*, there is a clear sense of the hero quest, battle sequences, and fantastic worlds. The alternate ending provided in this description demonstrates how Hero can become an antihero based on the choices he makes—or does not make—throughout the game. Already, *Fable* breaks the mold of the always-victorious hero with the option for an antiheroic climax. The antihero is also present in *Aucassin et Nicolette*: In the county of Beaucaire lived a young knight, the hero, named Aucassin who has fallen in love with a Saracen lady Nicolette. Aucassin shirks his chivalric duties because he cannot stop thinking of Nicolette, who, despite her pagan origins, is a baptized christian. Seeing his son fail at being a proper knight, Aucassin's father, Count Garin, strikes a deal with his son, promising that if he defeats his rival, Count Borgart, he will allow Aucassin and Nicolette to marry. After a fairly comic battle scene, Aucassin defeats his father's foe and brings him back to Beaucaire. Garin, however, goes back on his word and forbids his son from ever seeing Nicolette again, and convinces the lady's father to lock her up in a tower. Nicolette escapes to the forest, and it is there she builds a cottage made out of flowers and natural materials. Aucassin sets off on his quest to find her, and after running into several interesting characters, he finds his love and they flee. The lovers arrive in the topsy-turvy world of Torelore where they are well received, and shortly thereafter the two are separated at sea by a storm, with Aucassin being returned to

Beaucaire and Nicolette ending up in Carthagena. Eventually, Aucassin becomes the

count of Beaucaire and Nicolette returns, in the black-faced guise of a jongleur, and after

wooing him with her song, Nicolette is married to Aucassin and they live, of course,

happily ever after.

Similarly to *Fable*, *Aucassin et Nicolette* embodies the tropes of the hero quest,

the exaggerated battles, and the fantasy worlds exemplified by the medieval romance.

The similar, overall narrative arc in both works further exemplifies their comparability

and compatibility: the narrative mode at work within *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*

shows how these works functions across media, thus reconciling their structural

differences. The quest narrative, while not categorically unique to romance, is one of the

most important tropes of the genre. Indeed, *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* illustrate, to

some extent, W. A. Senior's process of the quest:

> Quest fantasies conventionally start in a place of security and stability, and
>
> then a disruption from the outside world occurs. The protagonist, generally
>
> an average person with hidden abilities, receives a call to action and
>
> reluctantly embarks on the first adventure. Choice is crucial in quest
>
> fantasy, so protagonists face several cruxes where their choices determine
>
> the fate of many. (190)

For Hero in *Fable*, the call to adventure occurs after the death of his sister. Hero,

however, does not initially embark upon his journey willingly. He is taken under the

8

guardianship of Maze, one of the champions belonging to the Hero's Guild in Albion, and told that if he does not train to be a hero, he will—like the rest of his family—be killed by the bandits. Thus, Hero is reluctant to begin his quest.

For Aucassin, despite the beginning of the story coming about *in medias res*, the call to action is the result of his father prohibiting him to see Nicolette. Aucassin is pushed into battle by his father in order to be united with his love. He is indeed reluctant at first, as the narrator assures the audience: ". . . ne quidiés vous qu'il pensat n'a bués n'a vaces n'a civres prendre, ne qu'il ferist cevalier ne autres lui" (X. 7-8). [Do not believe that he was thinking of capturing neither bulls, nor cows, nor goats, nor of engaging with the other knights].[3] The narrator's list of nonsensical, and comic war acts—the capturing of livestock before fighting the enemy soldiers—indicates how oblivious Aucassin is in battle. Indeed, the repetition of the negative "ne" echoes Aucassin's apathetic view on war, reinforcing his resistance to his father's desire to defeat Count Bougars.

The heros in *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* exemplify the reluctant hero as laid out by W. A. Senior, but neither Senior's definition nor the works' heroes align with the willingness of the heros in Chrétien's romances. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, for example, when the challenger-knight arrives at the court of Arthur and demands that one knight come and bring Queen Guinevere to the forest and bring back the prisoners the

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[3] All Old French translations are my own.

challenger-knight had captured from Arthur's realm. Kay, the seneschal tells the king he

is leaving his service and immediately volunteers to embark upon the quest[4]:

> Roi, servi t'ai molt longuement
> Par boene foit et lëument,
> Or praing congié, si m'an irai
> Que ja mes ne te servirai (l. 87-90).
> [King, I have served you for a long time
> In good faith and in loyalty,
> Now I am taking my leave and going away
> And I will serve you never again]

Kay emphasizes his "faith" and "loyalty" which underline the chivalric ideal around

which the Arthurian romances are conceptualized. While Kay indeed ended with the

negative "ja mes ne te servirai" [I will serve you never again] in the future tense, insisting

upon a finality, he eventually escorts Guinevere to the forest. In this passage, the

repetition of the verb "servir," "to serve," is significant because it brings to the forefront

the idea of serving a king and upholding chivalric duties. Remarkable, however, is Kay's

immediate assertion of loyalty and faith which quell any reluctance he might have in

embarking on a quest. Hero from *Fable* and Aucassin have different motives for

overcoming their initial reluctance: Hero for revenge of his family and Aucassin for love

of Nicolette. The adoption of the hero quest in *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*

demonstrates the imitation of the motif found in romance, but deviation from Chrétien's

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[4] While this scene can be read as Kay sincerely desiring to leave Arthur's court, it is more likely
that such a declaration is what allows Kay to eventually escort, with Guinevere's persuasion, the
queen to the forest. Such immediate desire to embark upon a quest is also exemplified in *Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight*, but that text is not explored in this essay.

heroes' enthusiasm illustrates how these works have taken a romance convention and manipulated it.

While the adaptation of the hero's call to action in *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* indicates a gesture toward a parodic mode, more compelling is the formal structure of each work. *Aucassin et Nicolette* comprises forty-one sections: twenty sections are sung verse, twenty sections are prose, and one section is identified neither as prose or verse, although it is in the same form as verse.[5] Each strophe comprises heptasyllabic lines, with a varying number of lines in each section, and ends with a tetrasyllabic line known as the *orphelin*. This form differs greatly from the standard octosyllabic verse normally used in twelfth and thirteenth-century verse (Ch'en 255). This one syllabic difference removes *Aucassin et Nicolette* from other romances and is, in effect, a rather bizarre structure considering the proliferation of the octosyllabic mode. Keith Busby discusses the idiosyncratic structure of the text by stating that it is "formed by a confluence of elements scholars have deemed characteristic of various types of narrative and lyric literature" (146). Busby continues on to argue that the main difference between *Aucassin et Nicolette* and other medieval texts is that its "dominant mode is parodic and

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[5] In Roques' and Dufornet's editions, the verses have indicators beneath the section numbers reading, "*or se cante*" [now it is sung]. The prose sections are indicated by the words "*or dient et content et fablent*" [now they speak and say and tell]. Some of the prose sections omit the "fablent," and there are spelling variations of the verb (e.g. *fabloient, faboient, flaboient, flabent,* and *flablent*) which could possibly indicate an error in copying. More likely however, these varied spellings are the result of a lack of standardized spelling in Old French.

burlesque" (147).[6] Despite his failure to give examples of how *Aucassin et Nicolette* is a parody, Busby discusses the form of the work, which may shed light on its parodic qualities: "Its unique alternation of verse and prose raises issues of the use to which the two forms cans be put, and its accompanying music can foster discussion of the relation between text and melody in lyric poetry" (147). Indeed, the relationship between text and melody is critical: the prose sections of the text allow for moments of narrative progression and completion within *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and the musical, sung verses indicate moments of performativity.

The alternation between prose and verse in *Aucassin et Nicolette* also mirrors an important structural characteristic of *Fable*. The game incorporates segments of play in which the player controls Hero on the screen, and narrative, film-like scenes knows as "cut-scenes" in which no player interaction is required. A cut-scene is "a short animated scene which appears between levels of a video game, often involving character and events related to the game or as part of the background story in which the game takes place" (*The Video Game Explosion* 307). Additionally, a cut-scene may be the game's narrator setting the scene or it may depict the main character engaging in dialogue with other non-player characters from the game without the player's control.

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[6] For a more thorough discussion of the nuanced use of pastiche, parody, satire, and burlesque as applied to *Aucassin et Nicolette*, see Rudy S. Spraycar. "Genre and Convention in *Aucassin et Nicolette*," *Romanic Review* 76.1 (1985): 94-115.

Games, unlike traditional texts, are often defined by their level of interactivity. Indeed, this interactivity becomes crucial in determining games' generic categories:

> it is clear that the meaning of genre in digital games means something fundamentally different than it does in literature or even film. Genre in these latter cases often becomes aligned with narrative structures, central themes, and overarching styles (whether textual or visual) as, for instance, in the western, the mystery, or the romantic comedy. Genre in games, on the other hand, is often defined by core mechanics and available modes of play or, in broad terms, the nature of the game's interactivity. (Jagoda 139)

Video game genres include types such as first-person shooter, simulation, strategy, adventure, and so on, which are determined by the player's relationship with the game. *Fable*, for instance, is categorized as an "action role-playing game" because the role the player fills is represented on the screen by a single character avatar. This type of game, also known as "RPG" is defined as "a game in which the players take on the roles of fictional characters in a game world, and collaboratively undertake adventures there. In many cases, aspects of the characters' identities can be determined by the players controlling them, and characters can change the game process" (Wolf 310). Indeed, *Fable*'s "action" categorization is governed by the hero's quest framework around which the game is designed, and the role-playing is carried out successfully by the player who "embodies" the hero. While the alternation between player interaction and cut-scene is

not unique to *Fable*, this structural characteristic echoes that of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, thereby illustrating the medieval structure of *Fable*.

If there is a certain level of performativity that is connected with game genre, much in the same way that *Aucassin et Nicolette* requires performance for narrative completion, this performance calls into question the works's other generic possibilities. Firstly, and foremost, *Aucassin et Nicolette* self-identifies as a *chantefable*. In the final section of the work, the author writes, "no cantefable prent fin,/ n'en sai plus dire" (XLI. 24-5) [our chantefable comes to an end,/ I have nothing more to say]. The word "*chantefable*" derives from the Picard dialect of Old French, and translates to "sung-story." This generic appellation embodies and exemplifies the nature of the works structure: the alternation between prose and verse. The important word to identify in *chantefable* is "chante," which once again calls into question the performative aspect of the work.

Certain critics have focused on the performative aspect of *Aucassin et Nicolette,* labeling it as a theatrical piece. Mario Roques argues that

> Aucassin et Nicolette apparaît aisni comme un spécimen, le plus ancien
>
> que nous possédions, et aussi le plus précieux, d'une forme de théatre que
>
> l'on rencontre à toutes les époques de notre littérature, où s'essayent tour à

tour les plus grands artistes et les plus humbles bateleurs, et qui mériterait

d'être étudiée dans son ensemble.[7] (vi)

[*Aucassin et Nicolette* appears therefore as an example, the oldest and

most precious one we possess, of a type of theatre encountered in all

periods of our literature, at which the biggest artists and most humble

acrobats try their hand, and which ought to be studied in its entirety].

Roques claims that while one actor may suffice in executing the performance of the

chantefable, it is likely that two or three actors were involved in the performance (vi).

Further evidence Roques provides for the dramatic necessity of *Aucassin et Nicolette* is

that out of the forty-one sections of verse and prose, thirty-three contain dialogue, which

is more dialogue than the romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (iii-iv). Indeed

it is this emphasis on excessive dialogue that places the structural idiosyncrasies of

Aucassin et Nicolette into the parodic realm. Once again, the text is self-consciously

adapting conventions of romance and exaggerating them.

Similar to Roques' notion that *Aucassin et Nicolette* is theatrical, Sarah Kay

claims that the story is indeed a spectacle (168). Kay cites Roques as a critic who

categorized the story as drama, but she goes on to say that "the theme of looking is itself

very insistent in [*Aucassin et Nicolette*], which in turn solicits an imaginary gaze from the

audience. The culminating episode of Nicolette as jongleur epitomizes this

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[7] All modern French translation are my own

tendency" (168). For Kay, it is the performance of music, singing, and direct speech that

pushes *Aucassin et Nicolette* toward spectacle as being the defining characteristic of the

chantefable. Since *Aucassin et Nicolette* is the only work that is categorized as

chantefable, and since no other medieval work exists of the same genre, it is logical to

compare it to video game that utilizes equally the same structure and parody of romance

motifs.[8] Indeed, since *chantefable* is only applicable to *Aucassin et Nicolette*, it should be

used to describe only the structure of the work—the unique alternation between verse and

prose—and not the genre: *Aucassin et Nicolette*, like *Fable*, is a romance parody that uses

the *chantefable* form.

    While the structure of *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* contributes significantly

the works' parodic mode, the three motifs of fantastic worlds, the questing hero, and

battle sequence are borrowed directly from Chrétien's romance tradition. Fantastic

worlds, for example, exist in both *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*. The setting for *Fable*

is Albion (Illustration 1), which, of course, is a reference to an early medieval Britain.

Albion is used to depict England "often with reference to past times, or to be a

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[8] In reference to its singularity, Jean Dufornet, the introduction to his edition of *Aucassin et Nicolette* asks, "*s'agit-il d'une œuvre unique dans tous les sens du mot, ou bien les autres se sont-elles perdues sans laisser de trace* ?" [is it a question of a unique work, in every sense of the word, or rather were the other works lost without a trace?] (8). *Aucassin et Nicolette* is extant in only one manuscript, Paris, BnF, Fr. 2168. For more on the details of the manuscript, including what other materiel travels with *Aucassin et Nicolette*, see James Simpson, "Aucassin, Guavin, and (Re)ordering Paris, BnF, Fr. 2168, in *French Studies*, 451-466. In a fabulous coincidence, fr. 2168 is grouped with Marie de France's *Fables* and several *fabliaux*. This connection between *Aucassin et Nicolette* and fables is compelling given the comparison to *Fable* the game. That *Aucassin et Nicolette* is grouped with *fabliaux* may indicate further comedic intention or reception by the medieval audience.

romanticized concept of the nation" (*OED*). In *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia,* Norris

Lacy explains that Albion "in Geoffrey of Monmouth, [is] an early name for Britain.

Geoffrey explains that, colonized by a group of Trojans, Albion was then renamed Britain

in honor of their leader Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas" (4). Such a reference to the

founding of Britain reinforces the Arthurian tradition upheld in Chrétien's romances.

While Albion is a real, historical name, the places within the kingdom of Albion—

Knothole Glade, Hook Coast, Snowspire, Greatwood, and Darkwood—are fictional. This

combination of real and fantastic also appears in *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Within Albion live

Illustration 1: Detailed map of Albion from *Fable Anniversary*. *Fable Wiki*. Wikia, 2014. Web.

many creatures such as trolls, the goblin-like hobbes, and the werewolf-like balverines.

These fantastic beasts create a sense of fantasy that is unlike the romances.

The worlds found in Chrétien's romances, similarly to Albion, display fantastic

elements. Dwarves, for example, are capable of magic and there are supernatural

elements with which heroes must contend:

> Sans arrester et sans seoir
> Versa seur le perron de plain
> De l'yaue le bachin tout plain.
> De maintenant venta et plut,
> Et fist tel temps que faire dut:
> Et quant Dix redonna le bel,
> Sor le pin vinrent li oysel,
> Et firent joie merveillouse
> Seur la fontaine perillouse. (*Chevalier au Lion* l. 800-8)
> [Without stopping and without sitting
> He poured, as he could, on the steps
> The water that filled the basin.
> Suddenly, it blew and it rained,
> And he waited the required time:
> And when God made the weather beautiful again,
> The birds alighted on the pine,
> And brought marvelous joy
> Onto the perilous fountain.]

This excerpt from *Le Chevalier au Lion* demonstrates a fantastic element that appears

in the forest. When Yvain pours the contents of the basin onto the steps of the fountain,

some inexplicable magic occurs that affects the natural elements around him: "De

maintenant venta et plut." Indeed, the word "merveilleuse" in Old French elicits a

strong connotation of the inexplicable and the fantastic at work in this passage. More

compelling, however, is that after the wind and rain stop, the defender of the fountain

appears and he and Yvain fight in a scene of intense one-on-one combat. Indeed, while this scene certainly pertains to the fantastic realm, it ostensibly occurs in a real setting.

Similarly, *Aucassin et Nicolette* is set in Beaucaire, which was a real French city. Although the poet does not give an accurate geographical description in accordance with Beaucaire's historical placement (Urwin 404), the Beaucaire in *Aucassin et Nicolette* is like the Albion of *Fable*: both place names reference real geographic locations and yet are fictionalized through their fantastic elements and their created geographic place. For *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the created space appears in the form of Torelore. Torelore, the topsy-turvy world, differs from Beaucaire and from Albion of *Fable* because it is completely fabricated. Even the name is created by the author. Indeed, Dufournet writes of Torelore:

> sans doute une onomatopée du même genre que *tirelire*, *turelure*, etc. Ces formes ne sont-elles pas à rapprocher des refrains des pastourelle . . . ? Ce n'est pas un nom mais un refrain de chanson dérisoire : il implique tout ce qu'on ne croit pas, qu'on ne prend pas au sérieux : ce nom très fantaisiste est en réalité for raisonablement choisi (185 emphasis in original). [Without a doubt, an onomatopoeia of the same genre as *teeraleera*, *tooraloora*. Are these forms unlike the refrains of the *pastourelle*? It is not a name, but refrain of a derisible song: it indicates all that one does not

20

believe, what one does not take seriously: this fantastic name is, in reality,

extremely well chosen].

Dufournet underlines the dexterity of the *Aucassin*-author, highlighting how the choice to

name the fantasy world after a song's refrain also reinforces the work's parodic

characteristics, once again raising the question of *Aucassin et Nicolette*'s performative

characteristic. This deployment of an upside-down world may suggest that happens in

Torelore cannot be as serious, therefore, as what happens in Beaucaire or Carthagena.

The topsy-turvy world underscores the antiheroic qualities of Aucassin. The

young knight's reluctance to fight and inability to uphold his chivalric duty in Beaucaire

is reversed in Torelore where he is finally able to fulfill his knightly obligations. Robert

S. Sturges argues that it is the harmless warfare that occurs in Torelore that "incites

Aucassin to engage in precisely the normative chivalric behavior that he eschews in his

native land" (102). Unlike Lancelot, Yvain, and Erec of the Chrétien romances, Aucassin

demonstrates his heroic abilities in a topsy-turvy world, thereby emphasizing his failure

as a knight. Such a nonfulfillment places Aucassin in a position of derision, thumbing his

nose at his romantic predecessors. Aucassin, however, does succeed in battle in

Beaucaire, but in a very antiheroic and exaggerated fashion:

Et il mist le main a l'espee, si commence a destre et a senestre et caupe

hiaumes et naseus et puins et bras et fait un caple entor lui, autresi con li

senglers quant li cien l'asalent en le forest, et qu'il lor abar dis cevaliers et

21

navre set et qu'il se jete tot estroseement de le prese et qu'il s'en revient

les galopiax ariere, s'espee en sa main. (X. 26-32)

[And firmly gripping his sword, he started to the right and the left,

slashing helmets and nasals, crushing fists and arms, wreaking havoc

around him like a boar when hounds attack him in the forest. He soundly

beat ten knights, wounded seven, and set off straight away, galloping as

fast as he could away from the fray with his sword in his hand]

Aucassin thrashing about blindly attacking to his left and his right adds a sense of chaos

and frenzy to the combat scene. His comparison to a boar is particularly striking because

such a simile paints an image of how severely the young knight is outnumbered.[9] In

addition to demonstrating numbers, Aucassin is placed in a subordinate position in

comparison to the enemy knights. Of course, the boar is deadly when cornered, but such

imagery indicated how Aucassin is the hunted; he is the lesser-skilled knight in this

battle. The excessive number of enemies in the battle emphasizes the comedic aspect. It is

indeed humorous to envision a young knight, unprepared for and unwilling to enter into

battle, who soundly defeats seventeen foes. Adding to the sense of failure in this scene is

Aucassin's hasty retreat away from the battle. The phrase "se jete tot estroseement de la

prese" lends a sense of immediate retreat: he hurled himself away from his enemies.

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[9] For more on the psychological and social implications of Aucassin-cum-boar, see Roger
Pensom, *Aucassin et Nicolette: The Poetry of Gender and Growing Up in the French Middle
Ages*, 40.

Aucassin's battle scene is similar to several battle scenes in *Fable* in which our protagonist, Hero of Oakvale has to fight dozens of opponents by himself. In the game, Hero must combat creatures such as trolls, balverines, and hobbes, as well as human opponents including bandits, who are constantly raiding villages throughout Albion. In each of these battle sequences, Hero is overwhelmed by enemies and constantly outnumbered.[10] Despite the vast number of enemies, Hero prevails. While Hero in *Fable* is not necessarily an antihero, he has the ability to gain a bad reputation by farting, making lewd gestures, stealing food and goods from citizens, and various other deeds that render him less heroic. Both Hero and Aucassin fluctuate, like the genres they embody, in their chivalrousness and heroism.

Hero and Aucassin's apparent lack of surety and skill in battle is anathema to the combat depicted in Chrétien's romance. In *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, Lancelot engages in hand-to-hand combat with Méléagant in a demonstration of prowess and chivalry:

> Et li uns l'autre a terre porte,
> Mes ne font mie chiere morte,
> Que tot maintenant se relievent
> Et tant com il pueent se grievent
> Aus tranchanz des espees nues. (4997-5001)
> [And each one through the other to the ground
> But they were nowhere near dead,
> Because they immediately got back up
> And did all they could to wound the other

---

[10] While it is possible for Hero to die in *Fable*, he always respawns in order to be able to fight again. This seeming invincibility complements the invulnerable, chivalric heroes of romance.

By slicing with their bare swords]

Immediately within this scene, the two knights fight one another with equal footing,

emphasizing their individual prowess lacking from the description of Aucassin during his

battle. This passage also underscores the persistence and indefatigability of the knights

with "ne font mie chiere morte" and "maintenant se relievent," constantly demonstrating

their enthusiasm that does not appeal to the sometimes-reluctant Aucassin and Hero. The

tireless fighting and determination continues on through the fight:

> Les estanceles vers les nues
> Totes ardanz des hiaumes saillent,
> Par si grant ire s'antrasaillent
> As espees que nue tienent
> Que si com eles vont et vienent
> S'antrancontrent et s'antrefierent,
> Ne tant reposer ne se quierent
> Qu'aleinne reprandre lor loise. (l. 5003-9)
> [Their helmets jutted toward the sky
> In hardy and lively sparkles,
> They attacked each other with great anger
> With their bare swords in hand
> And in a continual back and forth
> They exchanged blows, one against the other,
> Without so much as a pause or a truce,
> Stopping only to catch their breath]

The words "s'antrasaillent," "s'antrancontrent," and "s'antrefierent" are synonymous for

"assault," and such anaphora within this passage emphasizes the incessant aggression

between the two knights. Since these verbs are in the reflexive form, it limits the action to

Lancelot and Méléagant, thereby reinforcing the equal footing on which the combatants

find themselves, engaging in a constant volley of blows. The erotic motivation for Aucassin and the desire for revenge that Hero possesses are not present in this battle scene. Lancelot and Méléagant are driven by "great ire," and a sense of chivalry. The knights are so invested in this fight that they do not stop fighting until they are physically required to: "Qu'aleinne reprandre lor loise." This stands in direct contraposition to Aucassin and Hero who, in their respective scenes, are grossly outnumbered and, in some cases, retreat. This outnumbering, however, is in fact what makes the two works comical. They have adopted the battle motif and created exaggerated sequences in which such hyperbolic displays parody Chrétien's romances.

  Aucassin et Nicolette further parodies medieval romance conventions by combing the fantastic world and battle motifs. One such example occurs right after Aucassin's arrival in Torelore, when he comes upon the king of the country who is in bed and learns that it is the queen who is out on the battlefield:

> En le canbre entre Aucassins,
> li cortois et li gentis.
> Il est venus dusque au lit,
> alec u li roi se gist ;
> par devant lui s'arestit,
> si parla ; oés que dist :
> « Di va ! fau, que fais tu ci ? »
> Dist li rois : « Je gis d'un fil . . . » (XXIX. 1-8)
> [Into the room entered Aucassin
> the courtly and the noble.
> He came upon a bed,
> where the king was presently lying;
> he walked in front of the king,

he spoke; listen to what he said :
"Hey, go! Fool, what are you doing?'
The king said, "I just had a son"]

Aucassin enters the king's room and immediately asserts himself as the more dominant

character. He employs the imparative "*Di va !*," "Hey, go!" which is a verbal indication

of his assumed superiority. Additionally, the young knight calls the king a fool, which

creates a further separation in degree from the king. Indeed, this scene calls into question

the treatment of gender and of the Other in *Aucassin et Nicolette*.[11] In Torelore, it is the

king who is giving birth and the queen who is out performing chivalric duties on the

battle field. Sturges notes that "These details mark Torelore as a site of carnivalesque

gender inversion (102)." Indeed, this gender inversion contrasts with the convention and

expectation of medieval roles of king and queenship. By inverting the roles, *Aucassin et*

Nicolette mocks royal roles—unlike Arthur and Guinevere in Chrétien—and allows

Aucassin to become more heroic in the topsy-turvy world.

Both Aucassin and Hero are viewed as more heroic through scenes of gender

reversal which differ greatly from romance conventions. In *Fable*, Hero employs cross-

dressing and gender bending that results in his success. In the side quest "Darkwood

Bordello," Hero must free the prostitutes who work in the bordello by tricking its

proprietor, Mr. Grope. One way to achieve this goal is by changing outfits to a dress—

which can be done in the in-game menu—and sporting a red wig. Hero must then seduce

_____

[11] For more on gender in medieval French romances, see Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in*
Medieval French Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

26

Grope, who ultimately gives the player information regarding the whereabouts of the

"Darkwood Rights," which show how Grope is breaking the law. As a result, Hero gains

more renown points and becomes more heroic in the eyes of the citizens of Albion.[12]

While this instance differs from the one presented in Torelore because it is the hero who

cross-dresses, the result is still the same.

Aucassin's time in the fantastic world of Torelore is also coupled with a battle

scene. This battle scene, however, is very different from those presented in the romances

of Chrétien: "Il avoient aportés/ des fromage[s] fres assés/ et puns de bos waumoné/ et

grans canpegneus canpés" (XXXI. 5-8). [They were all armed with plenty of fresh

cheese, overripe apples, and great field mushrooms]. The armies of Torelore are engaging

in a giant food fight. This battle stands in stark contrast to the battle scenes in the

romances and even in the battle where Aucassin defeats Count Borgart. Indeed, this

gastronomic warfare further demonstrates Aucassin's fluctuation between hero and

antihero. He draws his sword and enters into combat, but is scolded by the king who says

"il n'est mie costume que nos entrocions li uns l'autre" (XXXII, 14); [it is not our custom

here to kill one another]. Even though Aucassin is demonstrating chivalric prowess in

relation to the customs in Beaucaire, he appears to be an antihero in Torelore because he

is breaking their traditions. Aucassin's misstep places him, yet again, in a comic light. A

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[12] Renown points allow Hero to be more recognized for his good deeds throughout Albion. The more renown Hero has, the more "heroic" he is. Renown can also be a bad thing, however. If hero does bad deeds such as stealing from houses, vandalizing towns, and harassing innocent villagers, he gains evil renown points.

similar battle of absurdity occurs in *Fable*. For example, in the side quest, "Hobbes

Killing Contest," where Hero must defeat several dozen hobbes by himself. Some of the

axe-wielding creatures tumble over backwards, fart, and run away screaming into the

distance. Similarly, Hero can taunt the hobbes—as well as other enemies in the game—

by farting and verbally harassing his opponents.[13] By incorporating comedic elements

into the battle sequence, *Fable* resembles *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and both works continue

to mock essential elements of romance

Throughout their stories, *Fable* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* manipulate the romance

motifs of fantastic worlds, battle sequences, and the hero quest, but another compelling

parodic element of each are their conclusions. The conclusion of *Fable* is a wonderful

happily-ever-after ending that finishes in a similar fashion to several romances, and

shares many characteristics with *Aucassin et Nicolette*:

> It was the battle that would be talked about for centuries to come. The day
>
> the Hero of Oakvale slew the dragon Jack of Blades. The day the strange
>
> creature behind the mask was finally banished from this world. And this is
>
> where our tale must end, though even the most hopeful of hearts knew the
>
> struggle between good and evil would never be truly over. As far as what
>
> became of the Guild and its heroes . . . That is a story for another time . . .
>
> (Fable)

---

[13] The player can command Hero do carry out these taunt by pressing various buttons on the controller.

28

The final battle provides the player with closure and reveals that the enemy has been defeated. The narrator's indication of a temporal and a textual locality is critical in concluding the game. When he says, "this is where our tale must end," he is referring to the event of the death of Jack of Blades, the location of the Chamber of Fate in Albion, the location of Albion in the material manuscript presented to the player, and the temporal situation of the player in real life and in game time. By bringing the player's attention to the material finality, *Fable* definitively ends its narrative. There is, however, a possibility of another tale. The use of ellipses following "that is a story for another time" creates a possible extension to the story.

Like the conclusion of *Fable*, the end of *Aucassin et Nicolette* wraps up the narrative with a happy ending:

> *La nuit le laissent ensi,*
> *tresqu'au demain par matin*
> *que l'epousa Aucaassins :*
> *dame de Beaucaire en fist.*
> *Puis vesquirent il main dis*
> *et menerent lor delis.*
> *Or sa joie Aucassins*
> *et Nicholete autresi :*
> *no cantefable prent fin,*
> *n'en sai plus dire* (XLI l. 16-25)
> [At night, they left her thus
> until morning the following day
> when Aucassin married her:
> He made her Lady of Beaucaire.
> Then they finished out their days
> and lived happily ever after.
> Now that Aucassin

And Nicolette have found their joy:
Our story ends here,
There is nothing more to say]

Similarly to *Fable*, the narrator indicates a local finality with "Our story ends here,/ There is nothing more to say." This is a common trope in romance. Of course, there is a material tradition to consider here with the *incipit* and *explicit* found in manuscripts, but such an ending also aligns with several generic conventions of Chrétien's writing: "Del chevalier al lion fine/ Crestïens son romant issi" (*Chevalier au Lion* l.6804-5) [Christain here finishes his romance of the Knight of the Lion]; "Ci faut li romans de Lancelot de la charrette" (*Chevalier de la Charrette* l. 7113-4) [Here end the romance of Lancelot of the cart]. *Aucassin et Nicolette* and *Fable* directly imitate the final lines of Chrétien's romances, thereby reinforcing their parodic roles through structural and elemental manipulation.

Romance, as a genre, while difficult to define—although attempted by Loomis and Pearsall—is easy to identify for the modern reader. Douglas Kelly writes,

Although the characteristics of *roman* as romance were neither constant nor imposed, the word did identify and determine a class of writings recognized by romancers, their publics, and their detractors. There characteristics influences what would be known as and designated *roman*, and fashioned public taste and expectations. (318)

The medieval audience was therefore accustomed to certain tropes and motifs that arose in the literature they read and heard. These tropes were neither regulated nor required in every romance, but many romances share the same elements which allow them to be recognized as such. Because *Aucassin et Nicolette* modifies these tropes in a humorous way, it is a work of parody, defying and deriding the expectations of the medieval audience. *Fable*, while a video game, utilizes the same structure as *Aucassin et Nicolette* and imitates many of the same motifs as *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Therefore, if *Aucassin et Nicolette* and *Fable* are analogs, they are both self-consciously parodying medieval romance in a medieval style. *Fable* is set apart from other modern video games through its verisimilitude to a thirteenth-century text, and *Aucassin et Nicolette* is set apart from its contemporary texts because of its unique categorization as a *chantefable* and because of its content. Parodies of the Middle Ages exist, of course, that aim to mock the romance, such as Monty Python's film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, but no modern parody is so entrenched in emulating an extant medieval tradition. Thus the conventions of romance self-consciously mocked by a video game demonstrate a continuity of medieval practice well into the twenty-first century and serve to illustrate a literary, trans-media genealogy that spans eight-hundred years.

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