



Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances

Susan Wittig

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This volume provides a generic description, based on a formal analysis of narrative structures, of the Middle English noncyclic verse romances. As a group, these poems have long resisted generic definition and are traditionally considered to be a conglomerate of unrelated tales held together in a historical matrix of similar themes and characters. As single narratives, they are thought of as random collections of events loosely structured in chronological succession. Susan Wittig, however, offers evidence that the romances are carefully ordered (although not always consciously so) according to a series of formulaic patterns and that their structures serve as vehicles for certain essential cultural patterns and are important to the preservation of some community-held beliefs.

The analysis begins on a stylistic level, and the same theoretical principles applied to the linguistic formulas of the poems also serve as a model for the study of narrative structures. The author finds that there are laws that govern the creation, selection, and arrangement of narrative materials in the romance genre and that act to restrict innovation and control the narrative form.

The reasons for this strict control are to be found in the functional relationship of the genre to the culture that produced it. The deep structure of the romance is viewed as a problem-solving pattern that enables the community to mediate important contradictions within its social, economic, and mythic structures. Wittig speculates that these contradictions may lie in the social structures of kinship and marriage and that they have been restructured in the narratives in a “practical” myth: the concept of power gained through the marriage alliance, and the reconciliation of the contradictory notions of marriage for power’s sake and marriage for love’s sake.

This advanced, thorough, and completely original study will be valuable to medieval specialists, classicists, linguists, folklorists, and Biblical scholars working in oral-formulaic narrative structure.

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