

The Sea in the Courtly Romance

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In many medieval poems the sea plays an important role as a space in the story, a space of contingency, of uncertainty, of curiosity and of trial; in the courtly romance, however, the sea hardly ever achieves such importance. The different mises-en-scène of space mainly follow a logic which, at first glance, is binary: an order represented by the societal design of the 'court' is confronted by the 'uncultured world' (with a particular affinity with the world of *âventiure*). There are, however, exceptions. For example, in the Lancelot and Tristan material; the semiotics of the sea in the Tristan material is in turn mirrored in a more subtle way in Chrétien de Troyes' *Cligès*. This paper will look in an exemplary way at the peculiarities which characterize the semiotics of the sea in the courtly romance. Does the sea highlight a frontier which cannot be crossed or, on the contrary, one which should or indeed must be crossed? Is the sea imagined as a place of transformation which has an unlimiting effect? What shifts take place through the semantics of the sea for the societal design of the 'court'?