



Nicole Galland

Revenge of the Rose
ISBN13: 9780060841799

Q: What first inspired you to write this book?

A: A thirteenth-century poem called "Romance of the Rose, or William of Dole, by Jean Renart. I thought it would make a great novel as soon as I read it, but I ended up writing something only partially inspired by it.

Q: What is the poem about?

A: The plot's too involved to explain quickly, but it's a sarcastically comic jewel that depicts the medieval lifestyles of the rich and famous—as well as people trying to *become* the rich and famous. (Too bad there's nothing like that in modern American culture. . . .)

Q: And what about it made you want to turn it into a novel?

A: It has a brilliant plot twist with a strong female character, Lienor, since Jouglet is just a supporting male character who disappears halfway through. Plus it's notable for other things, like it's an early form of musical comedy (the narrative has songs embedded in it, but the story works without the songs and the songs work without the story). And in researching it, I learned how much class-biased propaganda is in it, which piqued my interest.

Q: That's all very interesting but a little academic, don't you think? Anything else?

A: Yeah, what really grabbed me was that the narrator is not playing it straight with his audience, and I began to wonder why. He lies by omission, he hides things from us. At least four times, I found myself wondering, "Hey, what's *really* going on here?" To satisfy my own curiosity, I made up answers, and that became *Revenge of the Rose*.

Q: Can you say a little more about the "class-biased propaganda"?

A: There's a lot of political intrigue in the story, but it doesn't seem to be a "political novel" per se.

No, it's not—and neither is the poem. It was written for a certain class, that being the lower aristocracy, from whence we get the fairy-tale knights in shining armor, damsels in distress, etc. The bad guy in the poem is an unnamed steward—a commoner (in fact, technically a serf) who actually *has a job*; he *works* his way up the socioeconomic ladder. To the aristocracy, that makes him and his class gauche. The two classes were in competition for a certain level of power, and so naturally a story written for one group would make a villain of the other, just like during the Cold War the obvious villain in American action flicks was a Russian spy. Once I realized that the steward was the villain largely *because he worked for a living*, my Yankee sensibility got riled, and I immediately decided to make him more sympathetic.

Q: Your chapter titles are all literary references; did you learn anything unexpected about the literature of the time?

A: Yes—as I studied the medieval literary approach to "romantic love," the code of chivalry, and all of that, I realized how intensely class-conscious it all was. The stuff that's turned into our democratic, Hollywood-ized "once upon a times" and "happily ever afters" was originally a form of class control.

You've got to be kidding. Nope. The main point of chivalry was to encourage armed soldiers (knights) to believe that they were bettered through selfless devotion—in romantic literature it's devotion to a lady, but she's just an attractive stand-in for either the Church (if she's the Virgin Mary) or the local lord or king (if she's a devout subject, daughter, or wife).

Q: But what about all the romances and fairy-tales featuring girls and young women? Isn't the message there that anybody can be blessed with love and fortune?

A: Ah, but most damsels in distress know and accept their place. They usually have an aristocratic pedigree, but they don't complain that circumstances have led to their being disempowered and disenfranchised, and it's their continued undemanding good nature and selflessness that makes them worthy of being saved . . . by somebody more powerful than they are. They don't try to better their own lot; they are encouraged to be beautiful and passive and well-behaved, which is what Lienor, the damsel-indiress in "Roman de la Rose," seems to be until push comes to shove—and she shoves back!

Q: How did you balance the need for historical authenticity with the desire to take creative license?

A: Although I did a huge amount of research, I don't think of this story as historical fiction. That it happens to be set eight hundred years ago is, to me, a technicality; I think of it as literary fiction. It was inspired by a poem, not by history. The original poem was full of creative license, and I took creative license even with *that*. So, to answer the question, there was no *need* for balance. I was free to go after the creative license every time. This was especially true when it came to women's behavior; just as the heroine's behavior in the original poem turns out to be exceptional, probably *all* of my female characters are exceptional.

Q: What changed the most as you transformed the story into a novel?

A: First, I've made Jouglet the central character, which isn't the case in the poem. In the poem he (yes, he) just fades out of view after awhile. And as I said, the poet's villainous steward becomes a sympathetic character in my story; I invented new bad guys: a count and a cardinal. Also, I created two female characters and expanded minor characters from the poem—all to add texture to a theme in my story that is also not in the poem: the attempt to control sexuality in general.

Q: What do you mean by "sexuality in general"?

A: I have gay characters, prostitutes, a woman who unwisely gives away her politically significant virginity, a Catholic cardinal obsessed with using all such subversions to forward the church's interests. None of that is in the original poem. It's astounding how indifferent to

religion the poem is; Renart cheerfully belittles the Church a few times and then his characters *ignore* it for more than five thousand lines. I at least have the Church and its repressive doctrines (made even more repressive by the cardinal) hovering in the background.

Q: What do you think changed least about the story in its new incarnation?

A: I think the playful, teasing spirit of the thing. My aim is not so much to Depict Real Medieval Life as it is to Tell a Fun Tale. In that way I'm not changing the original at all; I am (I hope) honoring it. And the climactic plot twist I liked from the poem is still there, but it's now just one of several twists in the story.

Q: Your novel has a pretty modern voice. What's the point of setting it in the Middle Ages if you're not going to make it feel medieval?

A: What does "feel medieval" mean? I suspect a lot of people would read the original thirteenth-century poem and scoff that *it* doesn't feel medieval enough. We think of the Middle Ages as being embarrassingly *earnest*, and we also think of sarcasm as the humor of modern times. But Renart's humor is more sarcastic and cutting than *mine* is; his thirteenth-century poem almost feels *more modern* than my twenty-first-century novel does. I'm not saying the novel doesn't feel modern; I'm just saying that we have a pretty limited and stereotyped sense of what is a "medieval feeling."

Q: So you don't think Jean Renart is turning over in his grave?

A: No! It's certainly true that the story is embedded with elements that would have been inconceivable in the poem—*not* inconceivable in actual medieval life, mind you, just inconceivable in a medieval poem *depicting* medieval life. There's a perverse irony in there somewhere, of which I think Jean Renart would heartily approve.