

A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN FRANCE

EDITED BY
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Contents

	<i>Notes on contributors</i>	<i>page vii</i>
	Introduction <i>Sonya Stephens</i>	i
1	Female voices in convents, courts and households: the French Middle Ages <i>Roberta L. Krueger</i>	10
2	To choose ink and pen: French Renaissance women's writing <i>Cathleen M. Bauschatz</i>	41
3	Altering the fabric of history: women's participation in the classical age <i>Faith E. Beasley</i>	64
4	The eighteenth century: women writing, women learning <i>Jean Bloch</i>	84
5	Eighteenth-century women novelists: genre and gender <i>Martin Hall</i>	102
6	The nineteenth century: shaping women <i>Rosemary Lloyd</i>	120
7	1900–1969: writing the void <i>Alex Hughes</i>	147
8	From order to adventure: women's fiction since 1970 <i>Leslie Hill</i>	168
9	Changing the script: women writers and the rise of autobiography <i>Michael Sheringham</i>	185

10	Women poets of the twentieth century <i>Michael Bishop</i>	204
11	Voicing the feminine: French women playwrights of the twentieth century <i>Mary Noonan</i>	220
12	Feminist literary theory <i>Judith Still</i>	236
<i>Bibliographies</i>		
1	<i>General and reference works</i>	251
2	<i>Studies and histories of French women and their writing and of feminism</i>	252
3	<i>Women writers and their works</i>	256
	<i>Index</i>	312

CHAPTER ONE

*Female voices in convents, courts and households: the
French Middle Ages*

Roberta L. Krueger

Women writers and readers have shaped the course of French literature from its inception, although their history is a fragmented one that includes silence and engagement, marginalization and empowerment, convention and originality, fragmentation and continuity. It is, moreover, a history that requires us to re-examine and expand the concepts of language, genre, national identity and authorship often implied in the terms 'French literature' in order to appreciate fully the contribution of literate women who lived in the territory of contemporary France or who wrote in French during the long period extending from the Merovingian dynasty (sixth century) to the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453).

The first Frankish women writers wrote in Latin. The earliest female-authored works in the French vernacular were composed not only in France but also in England, where Anglo-Norman was the language of the elite from the Norman Conquest (1066) until the fourteenth century. Women's writings include not only lyric poetry and courtly narratives, genres recognized as having a strong aesthetic component, but also letters, devotional writing, saints' lives and didactic treatises. Female authorship is not always easily recognizable, given the conditions of manuscript culture. Many texts written in female voices are anonymous.

Other texts name a woman author whose historical identity remains shrouded in mystery. Even when a name can be linked to a historical woman, in certain cases scholars have argued that male clerics have shaped or wholly fabricated women's words. Yet, if scribal intervention is always possible, we should not discount the idea that at least a few of the many manuscripts that have survived as 'anonymous' or with named male authors might well have been written by a woman. Finally, as befits a culture so strongly invested in oral traditions, many more women shaped culture through story-telling, song, performance and speech than through writing. Representations of women as singers, performers and teachers abound in medieval French literature.

During the nine hundred years surveyed within this chapter, Western Europe underwent a series of violent political upheavals as well as more gradual social changes that shaped the conditions for female literacy and women's writing. From the tumultuous internecine strife among the first Frankish kings, there emerged a feudal society organized around a network of familial and interpersonal bonds and, eventually, a more centralized kingship, bolstered by a burgeoning clerical administration. Despite the ravages of the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War in the fourteenth century, by the end of our period urban centres witnessed the growth of an important class of artisans and merchants. During this time, women's literacy expanded in ever-widening spheres, beginning with the protected haven of convents during the Merovingian period, when women read, and sometimes, wrote devotional texts and letters in Latin. Women's Latin learning flourished in royal courts and aristocratic households in the Carolingian era (700s–900s) and, after a tumultuous interlude, resurfaced forcefully in French and English courts and convents of the eleventh and early twelfth century. Beginning in the mid-twelfth century, as French vernacular works became increasingly popular, courtly literature captivated male and female readers, emerging first under the patronage of powerful women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne, and then expanding to courts of the lower aristocracy.

Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the appeal of vernacular fictions as well as hagiography, devotional works and didactic treatises extended from aristocratic circles to bourgeois households. Religious women wrote not only inside convent walls, but also independently, without Church sanction. Indeed, medieval women participated in the emergence of French literature and culture as readers and as writers to such an extent that it is impossible to imagine the course of French literature as we know it without their activity. In every period, women's voices have recounted the efforts of women and men to preserve their families, to seek and offer spiritual guidance, and to shape their communities.

Yet, if elite women throughout the Middle Ages made an indelible mark on literary history, they did so in spite of, rather than because of, the gender roles ascribed to them, in theory, by medieval society. The status of women varied throughout the medieval period according to rank and to region, which makes it impossible to generalize about their relative power and privilege. But women of all classes faced social restrictions and pervasive antifeminism. Although Christian doctrine preached

spiritual equality for both sexes, religious women were denied access to the priesthood and to the highest administrative functions from the early days of the Church. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century canon and customary law defined women as the dependents of fathers and husbands, denied them legal autonomy or the right to bear arms, and restricted their ability to dispose of their own property or to rule. The University of Paris, founded in the thirteenth century, formally excluded women from study. Cultural prejudices against lay women *writing*, fed by clerical anti-feminist notions of female inferiority and by fears of women's autonomy beyond the domestic sphere, prevailed well into the Renaissance.

In practice, however, elite women throughout the Middle Ages were often able to expand or transform traditional gender roles and to achieve a degree of agency, if not autonomy, in their roles as queens, regents and counsellors, as managers of estates in their husbands' absence, as patrons of the arts or benefactors of monasteries, convents or schools. Religious women founded and maintained religious orders, which functioned as centres of education. When the Church abolished double monasteries and attempted to limit the establishment of new convents, especially after the Lateran Council of 1215, determined, spiritual women continued to join religious communities or lived as solitary *mulieres religiosae* (religious women), or *béguines*. Noblewomen's role in educating their children was widely sanctioned throughout the Middle Ages, and most moralists stressed the role of reading appropriate materials as a means of acquiring virtue. Women with a taste for literature or thirst for learning could evidently not be restrained from their active cultural participation, as Christine de Pizan attested when she described how her 'natural' inclination for learning rebelled against the limited, domestic role advocated by her mother (*Le Livre de la Cité des dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*), Book II, chap. 36). As female literacy extended its domain from the twelfth to the thirteenth century, centres of lay and religious culture in France and England provided contexts where privileged women with literary accomplishments and inspiration could display their knowledge and eloquence. Although the social climate for women's writing in medieval France can hardly be described as favourable, the landscape was far from barren.

The extant works of medieval French female writers may be few in comparison to works to which male authorship is attributed, but they are among the most important works of their respective genres. Until recently, medieval literary history has tended to marginalize or discount the work of women writers, either by questioning female authorship or

by focusing attention only on selected works, such as Marie de France's *Lais*, and by neglecting genres such as correspondence or devotional literature where women wrote more extensively. Yet if we consider the totality of medieval French women's literary writings, their extent and their originality become more apparent, as does the commonality of their themes and approaches. Each medieval French woman writer, in her own way, takes a bold stand by writing against the grain of masculine literary traditions. As she establishes her feminine authority through strategies that differ from those of men writing in similar genres, each woman author creates a different voice, provides a new perspective, or, in many cases, participates in a form of social or political engagement.

Writing in the Middle Ages was a public act. Even letters and love poems were read aloud or sung, and copied and read in new surroundings. Viewed chiefly as an art of persuasion, rhetoric was a means by which moral thinking could be influenced and communities could be shaped. The writings of Radegund, Baudonivia, Heloise, Clemence of Barking, Marie de France, the *trobairitz* and female *trouvères*, Marguerite d'Oingt, Marguerite Porete and Christine de Pizan constitute a remarkable body of reflections on women's authority, desire and faith and attest to women's power in forming families and communities. Although it is unlikely, for the most part, that these historical writers had direct knowledge of each other's writings, the recurrence of particular concerns, the strength of authorship in the face of misogyny or calumny, the spirited defence and illustration of women's learning that we read in their texts, all suggest that, as a countercurrent to the 'silences of the Middle Ages' surrounding women's lives, there were lively traditions of female performances and literacies that involved both oral and written practice.

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The Latin letters, epistolary verses and hagiography that surround the celebrated figure Radegund (*ca* 525–87), wife of the Merovingian King Clothar, show how literate women deployed their writing to consolidate bonds of friendship and kin, to seek consolation, to offer spiritual guidance and instruction, and to shape their communities during turbulent times. Taken as a child and forced into marriage as a result of war negotiations, the Thuringian princess, Radegund, finally fled from her husband Clothar after he murdered her brother.¹ She resisted her husband's subsequent attempt to reclaim her and eventually established herself in a monastery endowed by Clothar at Poitiers, the abbey of

Sainte-Croix, probably around 561. The letter that Caesaria of Arles sent to Radegund at her request, which encloses the *Rules* for nuns that her brother, Caesarius of Arles, had written earlier, stresses the importance of study and reading within the convent.² Radegund and her sister nun, Agnes, exchanged letters with the poet and hagiographer, Venantius Fortunatus. Although Radegund's replies to Fortunatus are lost, three of her epistolary poems to others survive; two of these – 'The Fall of Thuringia' and 'Letter to Atarchis' – recount the horrors of war and her sorrow at the loss of family members.³ The author skilfully blends together elements drawn from classical epic, Latin lament, Ovidian elegiac epistles, as well as German lament to produce moving accounts of her struggles that were calculated to elicit sympathy – and perhaps strategic support – from her kin.⁴

Baudonivia's *Life of Saint Radegund*, addressed to Abbess Dedima and to the nuns of Radegund's convent about twenty years after the saint's death, was written as a supplement to a previous *vita*, which Fortunatus had composed. Adopting a humble tone that she describes as more 'rustic' than that of her learned male predecessor, Baudonivia, a nun from Radegund's convent, recounts her mentor's courageous resistance to her husband's plots, her charity, and her sometimes extreme asceticism within the convent, as well as the miracles performed by the saint after her death. Radegund's piety entailed intense literary activity, according to Baudonivia. The saint never ceased meditating upon the Scriptures, day and night; when she momentarily stopped reading, an appointed nun would continue to read to her.⁵ Baudonivia also reports that as Queen, writing from her convent, Radegund attempted to persuade kings to refrain from war 'whenever she heard of bitterness arising among them'.⁶ Mixing fact and legend in the *Life of Saint Radegund*, Baudonivia seeks to move and improve her audience of nuns by the holy woman's example. Taken together, the early writings of Caesaria, Radegund and Baudonivia reveal how some women in the tumultuous world of sixth century Gaul used their rhetorical skills to consolidate female communities, to strengthen family and political ties, to foster spirituality through literacy, and to attempt to calm the political storms of the day.

Charlemagne's court attached great importance to learning and included women in its programme of lay education. A noblewoman's association with books, through patronage, reading and teaching, might enhance her moral authority within her family. A woman who wrote might try to extend that authority to the next generation and to strengthen her family against future adversity and loss, as the one

female-authored work extant from this period makes poignantly clear. In 843, the Frankish noblewoman Dhuoda, wife of Count Bernard of Septimania, completed a book of moral instruction, the *Liber manualis* ('handbook'), for her fifteen-year-old son, William. Dhuoda's situation at the time she composed the book was solitary and precarious. She had been placed at Uzès to safeguard Bernard's southern territories while he navigated troubled political waters in the North following the death of Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's son, in 840. She was bereft of both her sons: William had been taken from his mother and offered as a hostage guaranteeing his father's loyalty to the new king, Charles the Bald; her younger son had been removed from her (probably as a potential hostage) before she had even learned his name.

In the midst of such turmoil, Dhuoda's desire to educate her elder son by means of her book takes on a special urgency. She borrows heavily from biblical and patristic sources, as do all medieval moralists, but tailors her style for a young reader and infuses her advice with maternal concern.⁷ Dhuoda offers her book as a 'mirror' so that her son may contemplate her soul from afar and absorb the principles of Christian love, family loyalty and paternal authority that she holds so dear. Her instruction is offered not only for William's moral improvement, but more immediately for his survival since, as she puts it, animals who link together in mutual support and love may hold each other up in safety to struggle against the current (Neel, *Handbook for William*, p. 36). She expects William to convey her precepts to his younger brother and to his entire entourage. Her book is a moving testimony to a Carolingian noblewoman's faith in the benefits of education and piety, and to a Frankish mother's authority within her family. Dhuoda's *Liber manualis* reveals an author who espouses patriarchal values yet is fully cognizant of a mother's primordial influence on her children's moral development. Paradoxically, as it places loyalty to the father even above loyalty to the King, her work attests to the power and the limitations of Frankish women's role within the family (Neel, *Handbook for William*, p. xix). After Dhuoda's time, a widespread eclipse of learning, enduring for several generations, resulted from the collapse of the Carolingian empire and subsequent barbarian invasions.

THE TWELFTH-CENTURY 'RENAISSANCE'

The rebirth of intellectual and cultural activity in Europe during the twelfth century was evidenced or fostered by demographic growth, the

cessation of invasions, the rise of court culture, the institution of knight-hood, the reform and expansion of monastic orders and the growth of urban centres, which became sites of learning. Most medieval people remained illiterate, unable to read or write Latin. They encountered Scripture, the liturgy and popular songs, stories or saints' lives through their oral transmission in Church, the manor hall, the household, or the marketplace. But for elite twelfth-century women, the opportunities for learning at court appear to have been at least as good as they were for men and evidence of women as readers and patrons during this period abounds.

Literacy did not necessarily imply writing, which was considered a separate, more specialized skill. Advanced writing was practised chiefly by male clerks, monks and nuns. Most of the female-authored works that survive during this period come from women living in religious orders or with probable religious connections. Nonetheless, the precious female-authored works that have come down to us attest to the vitality of female literary practices and to the originality of their authors' responses.

The three Latin letters that Heloise, abbess of the Paraclete (*ca* 1100 – *ca* 1163/4), wrote to her estranged husband, the controversial theologian and teacher, Peter Abelard (1079–1142), brilliantly display their author's learning. They also reveal an independent thinker who used writings as a means of expressing difference. Set against the backdrop of traditional medieval marriage, of church doctrine or of soon-to-be-born 'courtly love,' Heloise's writings describe a love that dramatically opposes theological teachings or conventional morality. Her so-called 'Personal Letters' were written in response to Abelard's harrowing account, in his *Historia calamitatum* (1132), of how he seduced and impregnated his brilliant pupil; how their unpublicized marriage did not suffice to calm the wrath of Heloise's guardian and uncle, Fulbert; and how Fulbert had Abelard castrated after Heloise entered the convent at Argenteuil. Although Abelard views his brutally enforced celibacy and monastic solitude as God's fitting punishment for his sins of pride and lust, Heloise's letters tell a different story. She has taken the veil to please Abelard, not God, she insists, and she has never ceased loving and carnally desiring her husband. Staunchly unrepentant for her actions or desires, Heloise confesses that the title of 'whore' is sweeter to her than that of 'wife', and that, despite the high position in which Abelard has placed her as abbess of the Paraclete, she cannot suppress sexual longings as she celebrates Mass.⁸ In her third epistle, Heloise agrees to

remain silent about her suffering, but begs Abelard to suggest how the Benedictine Rule might be adapted to women's lives in a convent. Abelard replies in a lengthy discourse on daily life in a well-ordered nunnery, and later sends, at her request, hymns, sermons and answers to forty-three Scriptural questions (the 'Problemata'). Heloise thereby succeeded, some argue, in redirecting his attentions toward her and her female community.

Partly because of the nature of Heloise's confessions, partly because of preconceptions about the style or content a woman 'should' have chosen, various scholars since the nineteenth century have questioned the authenticity of the letters, especially those of Heloise, which some claim to be written by Abelard. Scholars today are more likely to point out that Heloise was perfectly capable of holding her own rhetorically; they are more willing to grant her full credit for her subtle arguments, her emotional range and the calculated control of her prose. The female epistolary tradition was well established in Europe, as were correspondences such as that between Radegund and Fortunatus and, in the eleventh-century, between a nun called Constance and Baudri de Borgueil.⁹ Readers may disagree, however, about how to evaluate the degree of self-effacement or empowerment, sincerity or performance, in Heloise's 'Personal Letters'. However one reads the correspondence, it is Heloise's voice that transforms Abelard's straightforward exemplum of male lust repented into a vexed account of negotiated gender differences. Heloise's letters established the notoriety of the lovers' legend, which was retold by many translators and adaptors, among them Jean de Meun (thirteenth century) and Rousseau in his popular novel, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).

An equally passionate but different expression of female authority, desire, and community is conveyed by the *Life of Saint Catherine* (late twelfth century), a saints' life composed by Clemence of Barking, who writes from an abbey east of London that was one of the most important centres of female learning in Britain. Clemence's *Saint Catherine* is one of three female-authored Anglo-Norman saints' lives to come down to us; the others are an anonymous *Life of Edward the Confessor* (which some scholars have suggested was written by Clemence) and an anonymous *Life of Saint Audrey*, written by an unknown Marie (whom some have speculated might be Marie de France). Saints' lives were not only written for monks and nuns; they were also compiled along with courtly works in secular manuscripts, which reached audiences of lay men and women in courts and wealthy households.

Catherine's story doubtless held particular attraction for literate nuns and for noblewomen who prized learning. Its heroine, the legendary Saint Catherine of Alexandria, uses her skill as a rhetorician not for personal glory but for God. As a bold attempt to reveal the true faith to the cruel emperor Maxentius, Catherine confronts and brilliantly outwits fifty pagan philosophers in public disputation and inspires them, through her eloquence, to convert and undergo martyrdom. She also converts the Emperor's wife, his most trusted advisor, and two hundred vassals. Empowered by a passionate love of Christ, she resists the amorous advances of Maxentius and submits courageously to his torments. When the tyrant devises a terrible wheel of torture upon which to break the saint, Catherine's prayers bring God's vengeful thunderbolt, which splinters the wheel and kills four thousand pagans. When the saint is finally beheaded, milk flows from her body instead of blood. Although Clemence translates faithfully from her Latin source, her personal engagement manifests itself in many authorial interventions and telling details, such as her use of courtly language and her description of Catherine's effect on the empress and her female attendants.¹⁰

For a community of nuns, and for the world outside the convent, Clemence's *Life of Saint Catherine* exemplifies the power of a woman's faith, love and eloquence to transform the spiritual values of those around her. The popularity of Saint Catherine's legend throughout the Middle Ages is evidenced by other versions in French and Middle English, as well as pictorial images in wall paintings and manuscript illuminations. Christine de Pizan, for example, features the saint prominently in book III of the *Cité des dames* [*City of Ladies*].

In some respects, Clemence's history of Saint Catherine and Heloise's letters to Abelard seem diametrically opposed. One text extols a woman who has eschewed worldly passions and endures bodily martyrdom as a bride of Christ; in the other text, the subject laments her loss of physical love and professes to serve God only reluctantly. Clemence's subject is a saint; Heloise's an avowedly unrepentant sinner. But both texts inscribe female erudition as defiant and transformative and portray love as embodied suffering. Directly or indirectly, both writers show how female rhetoric can persuade male 'authorities', be they philosophers, husbands or Emperors; both writers describe an uncompromising passion, physically embodied, whether for an unattainable man or for a God with whom union occurs only after death. Heloise's *Letters* and Clemence's *Life of Saint Catherine* might be seen as complementary attempts by women writers to create a discursive space where faith, intel-

lect, and embodied passion can coexist. They serve to remind us of the diversity and the intensity of religious women's writings in Anglo-Norman and French twelfth-century culture.

Perhaps the greatest monument to such diversity of expression in twelfth-century French and Anglo-Norman culture is the work of Marie de France. Sometime around 1160, twelve *Lais*, short narrative poems, were assembled by one 'Marie' and dedicated to 'le noble rei' (probably Henry II Plantagenet, King of England); one manuscript contains all the *lais* and four others preserve selections. Between 1160 and 1190, 102 moral *Fables* were presented by a 'Marie' who says she is 'de France' to 'Count William' (whose identity is uncertain); there are twenty-three manuscripts. Finally, probably sometime after 1190, one 'Marie' translated Henry of Saltrey's Latin account of a knight's spiritual voyage to the underworld in *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* [*Saint Patrick's Purgatory*], extant in a single manuscript. The historical identity of these three 'Maries' has not been fixed with certainty, and a few scholars have doubted that the same author wrote all three works, or even that 'Marie' was necessarily a woman. But the more common critical consensus is that Marie de France was a French-born female author who lived in England, probably in religious orders, and that she wrote the *Lais*, the *Fables* and the *Espurgatoire*, all in octosyllabic verse. Many also believe that Marie's direct yet sophisticated style; her artful compilation of stories that examine in diverse yet related ways the vexing problems of love, sexuality, maturation, marriage, family, communities, death; and her depiction of magical, moral and spiritual transformations place her works among the most remarkable vernacular productions in medieval literature. Of all the authors in this chapter, Marie de France has been most widely acclaimed by twentieth-century scholars. The *Lais* have been prized as a gem within the French literary canon and their sources, symbolism and treatment of love have been the object of numerous critical studies. Recent scholarship has drawn particular attention to Marie's bold stance as a female clerkly narrator in the *Lais* and to the many ways her poetic and moral vision diverges from 'courtly' literature by her male contemporaries.

In her Prologue to the *Lais*, Marie's narrator announces her poetic originality: she will *not* do what her contemporaries are doing by translating from Latin but will instead translate Breton *lais* (the *lai* may refer to a popular song and to the traditional story that explained its origins). She further states that a goal of ancient writers was to write 'obscurly' so that others who came after them might add the increment – 'le surplus'

– of their own wisdom ('Prologue', lines 9–16). The ensuing stories skilfully adapt and blend Celtic, classical and courtly literary materials with poetic brevity and thematic complexity in a way that invites Marie's readers to use their own '*sens*' to interpret them.

All the *lais* are about women and men in love, yet the characters, settings, ethical crises and social or magical solutions are diversely presented. The *Lais* foreground the speech and actions of female protagonists who include unhappy *mal mariées*, a devoted wife, a courageous maiden, a maiden pregnant out of wedlock, sympathetic and detestable adulteresses. Marie's tales do not spare the wicked, but they offer the weak a chance of redemption.

Several *lais* allow female characters to voice their desires, to make mistakes and yet to retain, rediscover or redefine a sense of female honour in spite of their errors. (One thinks, inevitably, of Heloise.) Marie does not advocate sexual transgression, but her narrator displays sympathy towards women who are trapped in loveless marriages or who are swayed by youthful passion, like the young maiden who finds herself pregnant in *Milun*. The stories' marvellous otherworlds and magic interventions sometimes allow their characters to achieve a happy resolution to their problems that is not possible in the 'real' life of a court or household. At the end of *Lanval* the knight and his lady escape on horseback to fairyland, leaving the unjust Arthurian court forever. In *Eliduc*, a betrayed wife who has discovered the comatose body of her husband's young beloved reacts not with jealousy but with compassion for the girl's beauty and brings her back to life with a magical flower that a weasel has used to revive its companion. Not only does Eliduc's wife retire to a convent so that her former husband may marry his mistress, eventually, the new wife joins the former wife in religious order and Eliduc, too, devotes his life to God.

The *Lais* present a multiplicity of perspectives on problems of love and death, desire and transgression, birth and rediscovery in stories that are at once similar and different. Throughout the collection, a crisscrossing of motifs – birds, flowers, beasts, textiles, marvellous objects, fathers, mothers, abandoned children, twins and doubles – invites readers to compare the protagonists' ethical crises and solutions. Poetic regeneration and moral transformation are at the heart of Marie's endeavour; these processes include the readers in Marie's courtly audience.

Marie's feminocentric *lais* contrast sharply with the dominant current of later twelfth- and thirteenth-century romance, which recount stories about chivalry and the Arthurian court. But an important sub-genre of

later romance, the so-called '*roman réaliste*', drew inspiration directly or indirectly from Marie's tales of virtuous or resourceful heroines as their authors spun tales of maidens who set forth on their own to vindicate their honour or to arrange the marriage of their choice (as, for example, does the author of *Galeran de Bretagne* in his rewriting of *Fresne*).¹¹ By telling the stories of *mal mariées* and single-women from their own perspective, Marie used courtly literature as a means to redefine female *honour* on her own terms, as would the *trobairitz* and Christine de Pizan after her (although there is no evidence that they had direct knowledge of Marie's works).

Possibly even more widely read in the Middle Ages than the *Lais* were Marie's *Fables*, which have survived in twenty-three manuscripts and include forty of the earliest Old French fables of the Aesopic tradition, as well as over sixty fables derived from other sources. Although Marie claims to be translating her fables from an English translation done by a 'King Alfred', neither the text nor Alfred's precise identity have been determined, and it has been suggested that Marie herself may have compiled 'the earliest extant collection of fables in the vernacular of Western Europe'.¹² Comparison with Marie's Latin source, the *Romulus* collection, shows the extent to which she has made the French translation her own book, as evidenced not only by a particular concern for the plight of female animals and characters but also by a sensitivity to injustice and a keen concern with social realities that recall the *Lais*.¹³ That such a book may well have served as a 'mirror for princes' intended to instruct the count to whom it was dedicated as well as other courtiers (whose common human foibles would have been amply exemplified in the collection) attests to the active role of counsellor and educator that a learned woman such as Marie may have played in her day.¹⁴ As astutely critical as Marie has been in telling the *Fables*, she by no means disavows moral responsibility for their composition. Indeed, in the Epilogue when she names herself – 'Marie ai num, si sui de France' [My name is Marie and I am from France] – she specifically claims the collection as her own and warns against clerks who may assert authorship ('Epilogue,' *Fables*, lines 1–8).

If the *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* is by the same Marie, then her last extant work might seem to be her least original, by modern standards. The author translates from a single Latin source rather than from diverse fables or oral and literary tales. But no translation is neutral, and the choice of text is key. Possibly near the end of her life, Marie elects to tell her most harrowing tale of spiritual perdition and salvation, that of the

knight Owen's *aventure* to Purgatory, not so that her own reputation may be enhanced but so that the souls of those 'laie gent' [lay people] who hear her translation may be saved. And the *Espurgatoire's* last *exemplum* seems to return us, full circle, to the enigmatic, sexually troubled world of the *Lais*. It tells how a priest, overwhelmed with desire for a foundling child whom he has raised, castrates himself to avoid temptation and places the girl in religious orders. It is perhaps fitting that in the last extant narrative couplet attributed to Marie de France, an educated young woman finds a haven in God's service from a man who has plotted against her. Marie's last translation recalls the vexed intersection of male and female desires, learning, and faith that we have glimpsed, with different emphases, in the textual accounts of Radegund, Clemence of Barking and Heloise.

WOMEN AT COURT: PATRONS, READERS, PERFORMERS,
COMPOSERS

Although Marie de France may well have been a member of a religious order, her audience in the *Lais* and the *Fables* is a specifically courtly one that would have included young noblewomen and married ladies as well as feudal lords, knights and clerics. Women formed an important part of the audience in courts and noble households in England and France and the names of many noblewomen have come down to us as patrons of literary or sacred works from this period – Eleanor of Aquitaine, granddaughter of William IX, the first troubadour; Marie de Champagne, Eleanor's daughter by her first husband, King Louis VII; Marie de Ponthieu; Eleanor of Castille, among others.

After Marie de France, no female signature is attached to another *lai* or full-length romance, although we must not entirely discount the intriguing possibility that one of the more than two hundred extant French romances might be female-authored. Most romances ultimately affirm the conservative values of the aristocratic court and confirm traditional gender roles, but some remarkable romances explore, at least temporarily, a space where gender roles may be critiqued, playfully expanded or even subverted. Male-authored French romances represent women in a great variety of roles – not only as damsels in distress, adulterous queens, seductive temptresses, but also as virtuous maidens, enchanting fairies, resourceful entrepreneurs and – most pertinent for our study – as readers, writers and singers and musical performers. Indeed, romance heroines who sing or perform at court are often those who successfully

escape from social confinement and bring events about to a happy resolution – as does Nicolette in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the heroine Silence in *Le Roman de Silence*, the clever maiden Lienor in *Le Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*, or Marie's textual heir, Fresne, in *Galeran de Bretagne*.

The literary motif of resourceful women who sing in romance resonates with a chorus of female voices that are extant in troubadour and *trouvère* lyric poetry. A modest but significant corpus of lyric poems in female voices survives in medieval *chansonniers*, or collections of songs, both in the *langue d'oc*, or Old Provençal, from southern France and in the *langue d'oïl* of northern France. Southern French women poets are known as *trobairitz*, which is the feminine form of *troubadour*, a term that designates one who 'invents' (*trobar*) or composes verse. Northern French poets are *trouvères*, and the women may be called *troveresses*.

When considering medieval women's songs, critics have distinguished between 'textualité féminine,' female-voiced texts that were not necessarily composed by a female author and 'féminité génétique,' the expression of a woman author.¹⁵ But given the paucity or unreliability of information that survives about the circumstances of the songs' composition and about authorial identity, the distinction is not always an easy one to make. Controversy about the gender of authorship haunts the *trobairitz* corpus. Female authorship of certain poems has been disputed and, in an extreme case, it has been argued that all the 'women's poems' are written by men who take up the position of *dame*.¹⁶ Consequently, the number of poems attributed to *trobairitz*, female composers, in different popular and scholarly editions ranges from twenty-three to over twice that many. In the most recent edition of *trobairitz*, which gives thoughtful consideration to questions of authorship, the editors ascribe female authorship to eleven *cansos* (the most refined form of love song); sixteen *tensos*, or debate poems; three *sirventes*, or political satires; one *planh*, or lament; are *alba*, or dawn song; and two fragments.¹⁷ Of the twenty named *trobairitz* who have come down to us, only two, the Comtessa de Dia and Na Castelloza, have more than one song attributed to them, and only one song, La Comtessa de Dia's 'A chantar m'er de so q'ieu no volria,' survives with melody, in a fragment containing one *strophe*, or stanza.

Although the number of surviving *trobairitz* songs may seem small compared to the 2,500 troubadour lyrics that survive from 400 named poets, the poems' generic diversity, the authors' *franchise* [directness] and artistry, and their intriguing mix of convention and originality make the *trobairitz*'s songs a highly distinctive and important body of work. The

voices of the *trobairitz* reveal how some women responded in public performances to a tradition created chiefly by male poets who idealized female beauty, decried women's inaccessibility, lusted for 'her' physical presence and, while lamenting the *domna's* imposing haughtiness, rendered her often a silent object of desire.

Ever since Gaston Paris in 1883 coined the term 'amour courtois', or courtly love, to refer to the stylized manner in which a submissive male lover adores a distant, powerful lady,¹⁸ critics and historians have offered many different explanations of how the gender relations of literary lovers depicted in hundreds of lyric poems and romances reflected the social realities of elite men's and women's lives in Occitan and Northern French society. Early assessments tended to see courtly love as a system that reflected and fostered noblewomen's real or imagined power. More recently, many critics have doubted that the idealized lady promoted or reflected the social advancement of noblewomen and have stressed instead the masculinist bias of so called 'courtly' love. However one assesses these literary representations, it is clear that sexually charged, ambiguous, and often conflicted gender relations are a hallmark of the courtly tradition. Ongoing historical studies about the social status, marriage practices and inheritance rights of elite men and women in different regions of Northern and Southern France demonstrate how difficult it has become to generalize about whether twelfth-century Southern French women had more political and economic power than their Northern French counterparts, as has been argued, or whether the twelfth and thirteenth century in the North and the South marked the beginning of a significant change in marriage and inheritance practices. Whatever complex emerging data might tell us about noblewomen's historical powers, the literary evidence shows that questions of gender and power were a source of continual fascination for courtly audiences and that literary texts often created a discursive space where gender relations could be analysed, contested and sometimes subverted. This is nowhere more evident than in poems of the *trobairitz* who sing with remarkable directness and presence, yet often reveal the limitations of their feminine voices within a misogynist culture.

Critics have been fascinated by the ways in which the *trobairitz* adapt, transform and sometimes subvert the conventions that drive the troubadour lyric and by how the 'women's songs' differ stylistically and thematically from the men's. A frequently asked question is whether the women's songs display power and agency or whether the women's voices are ultimately 'contained' by conventions that reflect patriarchal hierar-

chy. Some songs seem to tease self-consciously at this gender tension. For example, in seeming defiance of 'rules' that make the lady remote and inaccessible, the Comtessa de Dia declares in 'Estat ai en greu cossirier' [I have been sorely troubled] that she would like to hold her 'cavallier' . . . 'un ser en mos bratz nut,' [naked in my arms one night] (pp. 10–11, line 10). But when she says that she would like to be his pillow 'cosseillier', she playfully dramatizes physical submission. At the song's end, she reveals her desire to maintain control of the situation even as she voices passionate longings: she boldly declares that she desires to have her 'cavallier' in her husband's place – 'provided you had promised me / to do everything I wished' ['ab so que m'aguessetz plevit / de far tot so qu'eu volria'] (pp. 10–11, lines 24–5).

Acutely aware of issues of status and power, yet seemingly undaunted by gender inequality, Na Castelloza openly argues her case before her knight, using conspicuously legalistic language, even though she knows that others say that it is improper for a lady to plead before a knight in 'Amics, s'ie.us trobes avinen' (pp. 18–21, lines 17–24). Both the Comtessa and Na Castelloza dramatize a variety of subject positions in their poem. Castelloza in particular has elicited a range of responses from her readers. If some would agree with the description of her as a 'dark lady in song' because of her frequent negativity and expressions of hopelessness,¹⁹ other readers find power precisely in her refusal to remain silent about her suffering.²⁰

Compared to their male counterparts, the *trobairitz* in the *cansos* eschew complicated rhyme schemes and elaborate metaphors or extended conceits, but their more 'direct' expression is by no means devoid of art. As these few examples have shown, the emotional range of the *trobairitz* is complex and deep in the *cansos*. In the *tensos* and *sirventes*, women's voices take up with firm rhetorical control a variety of issues ranging from the proper duties of a knight in love to the evils of sumptuary legislation. Taken together, the extant songs in a female voice from Southern France provide a fascinating glimpse of the way women's voices intermingled with male lyricism in courtly culture and how those complex voices – forceful, defiant, dramatic, playful, sorrowful, proud and, above all, resourceful – might have contributed to the shaping of gender relations at court.

Northern French lyric poetry also preserves a number of songs composed in female voices, although it is less common to speak of female *trouvères* or ascribe female authorship to these works. This may derive partly from the greater anonymity and the great number of 'popular'

women's songs in Northern France, and partly from the bias of modern critics. In contrast to the *trobairitz*, there are fewer named female composers in the North, and there are more songs that spring from a non-courtly (and hence less individuated) setting rather than an aristocratic one. But if we bring together the thirteen female-voiced love songs and the twelve debate poems (*jeux-partis*) that present at least one female speaker, then the Northern French corpus of female *trouvères* compares favourably to the work of the *trobairitz*.²¹

Aside from those songs where 'je' is female, Northern French *chansonniers* and courtly narratives have preserved an intriguing group of poems where a narrator (sometimes identified as male, sometimes anonymous) overhears and recounts the words of women. Such is the case for the *chansons de toile*, or women's sewing songs, a corpus of twenty-one lyric-narrative compositions that describe the love pangs of maidens or *mal mariées* and that often portray a woman (sometimes accompanied by her mother) engaged in needlework as she laments a crisis in love.²² Five of these songs have been attributed to a male author, Audefroi le Batard; seven songs are known only from their inclusion in male-authored narratives; a single manuscript, the *chansonnier* of Saint Germain des Prés, contains the anonymous songs. Although there is no evidence that any of these songs were written by women, all the songs evoke a strong tradition of female vocality as they set women's voices into play. Furthermore, unlike the troubadour and *trouvère* aristocratic love songs, where gender relations are often frozen in emotional impasse, a number of the *chansons de toile* portray female characters who find or help to bring about a happy solution to their predicaments. In 'Bele Yolanz en ses chambres seoit' [Beautiful Yolanda was seated in her chambers], Yolande's lover materializes to ease her pain with his kisses just as she is about to send him an embroidered shift (I, pp. 77–9). In 'Bele Amelot soule an chanbre feloit' [Beautiful Amelot was spinning alone in her room], the initially disconsolate heroine ultimately marries her lover, Garin, with her mother's blessing and assistance (IX, pp. 102–6). Whether or not these poems reflect some vestige of popular songs that women sang while they worked, the *chansons de toile* convey the voices of women who openly express their desires and who, in many cases, work to find erotic fulfilment without sacrificing social honour.

The *Lais* of Marie de France, the songs of *trobairitz* and women *trouvères*, and the *chansons de toile* provide compelling examples of women's contributions to courtly culture. These works portray female voices or female characters who respond with conviction, eloquence and imagi-

nation to cultural restrictions, clerical misogyny or courtly idealizations. Their female speakers or characters often transform literary or social conventions in a way that redefines female identity or defends woman's honour. Another intriguing example of a female 'author' who responds to a clerical 'courtly' voice by cleverly dismantling his rhetoric is found in the *Response* to Richard de Fournival's *Bestiaire d'Amour* [*Master Richard's Bestiary of Love*], from the mid-thirteenth century. Once again, we cannot know for certain whether or not the *Response* was composed by a historical woman. Whoever the author may be, the *Reponse au bestiaire d'amour*, reveals a female speaker who stands on her own by refusing to fall prey to the clerk's rhetorical games.²³ She cleverly defends her honour by turning against him the animal metaphors he deploys to court her and, in so doing, she provides an example for other women who might be misled by such artful verbal assault and warns readers to be wary of the animal natures and deceptive discourse of men.

THIRTEENTH-CENTURY AND FOURTEENTH-CENTURY RELIGIOUS
WOMEN'S WRITING: MARGUERITE D'OINGT AND MARGUERITE
PORETE

Religious writings constitute the majority of texts by medieval European women writers, and French women wrote important devotional works. The thirteenth and fourteenth century witnessed a proliferation of new forms of female spirituality, as evidenced by the number of women who lived in established or new orders; a rise in the number of female saints; and the rapid increase of quasi-religious women, called *béguines*, who lived outside convents, either alone, in small households, or in larger communities known as *béguinages*.

Women embraced conventual or religious life for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a true spiritual calling, but which also included inability or lack of desire to marry, distaste for the traditional female roles of wife and mother, the desire or necessity of their families, the search for a measure of economic security. Although convent life offered women a broader sphere for pious and intellectual pursuits than did most marriages, female religious were more restricted than their male counterparts, upon whom they depended for key functions of spiritual and administrative life. Women were forbidden to preach, to officiate at Mass or administer the sacraments, or to absolve the penitent; writing commentary upon the Scriptures was not permitted. Convent life was structured around prayers for the consecrated nuns and manual labour

for those who served them. Although nuns were expected to read devotional texts and many knew how to write (principally for the purposes of copying manuscripts), opportunities for autonomous self-expression were exceptional. Yet, despite or because of such restrictions, some women sought greater freedom of thought and expression through spiritual visions and mystical meditations, which they recorded themselves or recounted to male clerics. A remarkable body of women's devotional literature throughout Europe confirms the vitality of female spirituality and literary practices in a variety of conventual and quasi-religious settings.²⁴

Two religious women from late thirteenth-century France have left moving accounts of their visions and teachings in important devotional texts. The distinct character of their work reflects the very different circumstances of their writing. Both Marguerite d'Oingt and Marguerite Porete died in 1310. At the time of their deaths, the former was the respected and beloved prioress of a religious house near Lyons where she had presided for more than twenty years and where she wrote with the approval of Church authorities. The latter was burned at the stake in Paris as a heretic who refused to recant the allegedly heretical beliefs in her book, the *Mirouer des simples ames* (*The Mirror of Simple Souls*).

Marguerite d'Oingt (1240–1310), prioress at the Carthusian charterhouse of Poleteins, in Southern France, received official sanction for her writings from the Carthusian Chapter General in 1294. Marguerite's three major texts, written in Latin, French and Francoprovençal, attest to their author's high degree of literacy, to the intensity of her devotion and asceticism (encouraged by the strict enclosure of the Carthusian order) and, not least, to her role as a spiritual leader who urged others to lead more perfect lives. Her first work, *Pagina meditationum* (*Page of Meditations*), is an extended meditation on a verse of Scripture that recounts Marguerite's spiritual conversion and healing, following her physical and emotional collapse in despair in 1286. As Christ appears to her, and she meditates on His love for her and His suffering, Marguerite effects her own healing, through conversion, confession and contrition. In the second half of the work, she castigates religious men and women who profess religion but act basely, and she urges them to be transformed by Christ's love. Throughout this and all her works, Marguerite describes her relationship with Christ in strongly sensual language typical of the 'bridal mysticism' found in other female mystics.²⁵ At various moments, she describes Him as lover, father and even as a mother who has suffered the pains of childbirth, although unlike her mother, 'you, my sweet and

lovely Lord, were in pain for me not just one day, but you were in labour for me for more than thirty years'.²⁶

Her second work, called simply *Speculum* [Mirror], written in Francoprovençal, develops the metaphor of the book as a mirror that displays Christ's body which, mirror-like itself, reflects both her soul and celestial angels. Marguerite's book becomes a space through which souls can commune with a vision of God as they seek to transform darkness into light and their sins into salvation. In *Li Via Seiti Biatrix Virginia de Ornaciu* (*La Vie de Sainte Béatrix d'Ornacieux Vierge*), a vernacular saint's life, she recounts the story of her contemporary, Beatrice of Ornacieux (died 1303), a Carthusian nun from Parmenie. Beatrice struggled against inner torments and she learned to moderate her self-mortification so that she might better perform God's work. Marguerite's *Life of Saint Beatrice* contains vivid descriptions of Eucharistic visions and experiences, including a moment where the saint chokes on the Host, which has become an enlarged mass of flesh in her mouth (*Writings*, p. 56). Several letters penned by Marguerite d'Oingt and other short texts written to or about her attest to the prioress's role as a spiritual leader. In one of these, Marguerite writes in the third person to explain how writing down God's revelation has saved her from madness: 'I firmly believe that if she had not put all this down in writing, she would have died or gone mad . . .' (*Writings*, p. 65). But Marguerite d'Oingt's work transcends personal therapy as it provides examples of piety and salvation for a larger Christian community.

Unlike the Carthusian prioress, who lived and wrote in a close spiritual community that revered her and her work, Marguerite Porete appears to have been something of an outcast whose hermetic writing was controversial. Although Marguerite Porete claims to have received approval from three Church authorities,²⁷ her book was burned in her presence in 1306 and again condemned in 1309 and 1310. Contemporaries describe Marguerite Porete as a *béguine*, a term which could refer either to a religious woman living in a *béguinage* or living independently. Tacit approval for the extra-mural association of such female religious had been secured from the Pope in the early thirteenth century by Jacques of Vitry, author of *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*, the biography of a courageous *béguine*.²⁸ In 1264, Louis IX founded a large Parisian *béguinage* that was governed by principles of moderate enclosure, and this community benefited from statutes offering royal protection in 1327 and in 1341.²⁹ Marguerite, however, may have been a wandering, autonomous *béguine*, for at one point she portrays herself in opposition to