

Introduction

- GENDER [OFR. *gendre* ... see GENUS] †1. Kind, sort
 (SOED, I, 840)
- GENRE [FR., = KIND; SEE GENDER] 1. Kind; sort; style
 (SOED, I, 842)
- GENUS [L. *genus* birth, race, stock] 1. A class of things
 (SOED, I, 844)

My working hypothesis in this book is that in medieval French and Occitan literature gender and genre are inextricably linked. My intention in seeking to combine the study of gender and genre is not simply to map a trendy critical term onto one with a more venerable pedigree. I shall argue that genres in medieval French and Occitan literature inscribe competing ideologies, that the construction of gender is a crucial element in any ideology, and that the distinct ideologies of medieval genres are predicated in part at least upon distinct constructions of gender. This hypothesis regarding gender and genre is based upon two premises: firstly, that every genre is an ideological formation; secondly, that a crucial component of every ideology is its engagement with the sex/gender system of the society in which it is produced. By ideology I mean a discourse which is used (not necessarily consciously) by a society, culture or section of a society or culture to naturalize or undermine, for itself and/or others, power structures and inequalities within it; by sex/gender system I mean the way in which power and authority are distributed according to 'generic' criteria in any given historical context.¹ The first premise rests upon Marxist genre theory, the second upon feminist theory which suggests that of

2 *Gender and genre in medieval French literature*

all the hierarchies that operate within hierarchical cultures, gender is the most fundamental and affects not only relations between men and women, but relations between men and between women.

I shall seek in this introduction to defend and elaborate the hypothesis I have just outlined. As my work is theoretically eclectic, and as I write for an undergraduate as well as a more specialized readership, some of the theoretical writing upon which I draw will inevitably be unfamiliar to some readers. I will consequently begin with fairly basic formulations of what I mean by terms like ‘genre’ and ‘gender’ before I go on to explore how I think they interact.

The impetus for this study comes largely from the vibrant body of feminist scholarship on medieval French literature, of which there are perhaps a number of main trends. One strand seeks either to discern (and condemn) misogyny and patriarchal structures within medieval texts or to detect (and congratulate) writers who were critical of the oppression of women.² Secondly, various critics have written what they themselves call ‘images of women’ criticism, which describes how women are portrayed (usually by men) in medieval texts, seeks to explain the different images and to evaluate the disparity between such images and what we know of the experience of medieval women.³ Thirdly, medieval women writers have attracted a good deal of attention.⁴ Finally, and perhaps most excitingly, counter-readings of texts have been offered by positing the response of women readers – medieval and modern – to male-authored texts.⁵ These different trends all focus on the experience of women and strive to counteract traditional criticism, which has been largely concerned with the experience of men (as characters, writers and as readers).⁶

My approach in this book differs from the feminist criticism of medieval literature just outlined. I shall not focus exclusively on the experience of women, but on gender as a construct. Although feminist critics have written about femininity as a construct in male-authored medieval texts, attention has only recently been devoted explicitly to masculinity as a construct: innumerable studies of, for example, ‘the hero’, ‘the indi-

vidual', 'the knight', or 'kingship' in medieval texts, have treated these as universal and obvious entities rather than as gendered categories, produced by and in a specific discourse.⁷ Nor has the relationship between genders been adequately scrutinized. My purpose is not to shift attention away from women to men, but rather to show how masculinity and femininity in texts, or even different varieties of masculinity and femininity, must be seen in relation to each other, as discursively produced constructs, if they are to be properly understood.

My position as a male critic with a feminist agenda requires comment. I cannot read 'as a woman' and I do not attempt to read 'like a woman'.⁸ But gender is as much a concern of men as of women. Men have different (and in most cases, including my own, altogether more comfortable) experiences of sex/gender systems, but their sexualities, their private and professional lives, their relations with other people, their subjectivities are as much shaped by gender as are those of women. My commitment to feminism is political, using political in its broadest sense to describe power relations and hierarchies of all kinds; I believe that gender is a powerful tool with which to analyse political structures and the way in which literary texts mediate and/or promote political structures. If this study dwells sometimes on masculinity, this is partly a reflection of my material: the vast majority of medieval texts were written by men and therefore partake of a 'masculinist' discourse of gender. My attention to constructions of masculinity is also, however, a consequence of my own gender. If at this stage of the feminist project, male academics working with feminist theory should be wary of appropriating authority, and speaking for women, they can perhaps turn their attention critically to men and to masculinity.

GENRE, GENDER, IDEOLOGY

Genre is one of the principal critical tools of medieval French literary studies. Though genre was rarely addressed as a theoretical issue, nineteenth-century critics implicitly used formal and thematic criteria to group medieval texts into

4 *Gender and genre in medieval French literature*

categories that would make them easier to interpret: it seemed, and still seems, obvious that the *Chevalier de la Charrete* should be read in one way because it is a romance, and the *Chanson de Roland* in another because it is a *chanson de geste*. That genre received little explicit theoretical attention during the early days of the discipline is not a sign that it was not deemed a useful tool, but rather that it was considered so obvious it needed no discussion. Criticism was in practice generically orientated: witness monuments of turn-of-the-century scholarship like Gaston Paris's literary history, Alfred Jeanroy's work on the troubadours or Joseph Bédier's study of the *chansons de geste*.⁹ Like most critics, Paris, Jeanroy and Bédier were using genre to classify texts, to facilitate their own and their readers' responses to them, and to distinguish one type of text from another. It is assumed in their work that medieval writers and readers had an equally keen sense of genre.

With the advent of structuralism some medievalists did question the usefulness of genre as a critical tool. Notably Paul Zumthor and Pierre Bec argued that medieval writers had no notion of genre as we would understand it. What modern critics think of as generic terms in early medieval texts, they suggest, are too vague, or used too confusingly, to merit being thought of as genres.¹⁰ To the medieval mind the principal categorization of literature would have been a division between Latin and vernacular texts. Zumthor and Bec are interested not in genres, but in a 'typology' of texts, and this they elaborate using methodologies derived from structuralist linguistics. Their aim, in other words, was to classify texts according to objectifiable linguistic structures.

Such an approach begs a number of questions. Are generic terms necessary for genres to exist, or can generic filiations be signalled simply by formal and thematic similarities between texts? How do we account for the fact that most vernacular literary manuscripts appear to be organized according to generic criteria?¹¹ What of classical and medieval genre theory in Latin?¹² Surely this indicates that the medieval mind did have a concept of genre. Does the fact that a text is written in the vernacular mean that it should be denied the basic form of

Introduction

5

critical appreciation implicit in generic designations in Latin, designations which were presumably available to most literate people in the Middle Ages? Should we expect frequent use of generic terms or precision in the use of such terms from writers who were not professional critics? Are generic terms used frequently or precisely in literary texts of any period? Above all Zumthor and Bec's work begs questions in relation to genre theory because their resulting 'typologies', in Zumthor's case of twelfth-century French literature as a whole and in Bec's of the Old French and Occitan lyric, resemble traditional generic classification: witness Zumthor's categories – *le grand chant courtois, le roman, l'épopée* – or Bec's – *l'aube, la pastourelle, la chanson* and so on. Moreover, though both critics stress formal structure, both resort to content in their classification, even though this is often masked by other terms such as *registre*; they thus stray from their own theoretical frameworks – grounded in linguistic structure – into the realm of more traditional genre criticism, which involves consideration of content as well as form.

Subsequent criticism of medieval texts, though greatly enriched by many of their insights, has largely ignored Zumthor's and Bec's views on genre and Zumthor himself would appear to have abandoned his earlier position on genre.¹³ Major contributions to French medieval literary studies over the last twenty years have been unable to do without an idea of genre and there seems to be an implicit consensus that it is an essential critical tool. Genre is still, as it always has been, one of the mainstays of criticism of French medieval literature. So what is meant by genre? Why is it important to make a distinction between genres and to classify literary texts in this way?

Traditionally Plato and Aristotle are seen as the first theorists of genre in western culture, introducing broad categories for literary texts such as comedy, tragedy and epic.¹⁴ Writers signal an affiliation to a group of earlier and contemporary texts through adopting or adapting generic conventions, but it is also the first basic tool every reader uses to interpret a text. Should the text be taken seriously or not? Is it tragic? Is it heroic? It is through the assignation of a text to a genre that a reader decides

6 *Gender and genre in medieval French literature*

how to approach it, even when the text escapes straightforward generic classification.

From the outset there seem to have been two criteria for defining genre: form and content. The interplay between them is discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Tzvetan Todorov,¹⁵ but it is Fredric Jameson who has treated their relation in greatest detail. In his essay 'Magical narratives' Jameson defines two strands of genre criticism, which he calls the syntactic and semantic, depending on whether genres are defined according to form or content. He sees Northrop Frye as the chief modern proponent of the semantic approach, and Vladimir Propp as the chief proponent of the syntactic approach.¹⁶ In some senses Jameson's account is fair to neither critic, for neither defines genre exclusively in terms of form or content; it would be truer to say that each foregrounds one or the other, the other criterion being secondary, sometimes irrelevant. Jameson, on the other hand, suggests that both syntactic and semantic features serve to constitute a genre: genre is therefore 'that literary discourse which may be examined either in terms of a fixed form or in terms of mode, but which *must* be susceptible of study from both of these perspectives optionally'.¹⁷

Obviously classifying texts into genres helps critics to deal with, or in Jonathon Culler's words to naturalize,¹⁸ large bodies of texts that have semantic and syntactic similarities, but for Jameson the idea of genre is more purposeful than this. He draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories on the symbolic significance of cultural artefacts to elucidate his own view that texts embody ideology. In Jameson's Marxist critique of Lévi-Strauss art represents a symbolic act wherein contradictions, inequalities and injustices within societies are resolved and justified. Art does not 'represent' social reality by providing a 'realistic' image of it; on the contrary, it distorts it to explain and justify it through symbolic representations. Thus for Jameson 'the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of an aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions' (*Political Unconscious*, p. 79). A genre represents one

way of offering imaginary resolutions to problematic contradictions and tensions. At different moments in history different genres will arise in response to different tensions; synchronically, different genres may operate at the same historical moment to offer different solutions to the same set of tensions or to address different contradictions that are problematic in a society at a given moment. If these contradictions are resolved in real life, the genre will evolve in response to new tensions or disappear. Genres are not stable constructs, but mutate and evolve according to the historical moment. Thus for Todorov a genre is 'not only an intersection of social and formal properties, but also a fragment of collective memory'.¹⁹ In other words, since through genre every text is connected to a body of texts, the point of interest is less the view of the individual writer (though this is not without interest), but a text's participation in a larger discursive formation at a specific point in history.

History, according to this view, has to be seen as what Jameson, following Louis Althusser, calls 'an absent cause'. Since all writing (including 'non-literary' writing) is informed by ideology and cannot therefore offer an unmediated representation of reality, history 'is inaccessible to us except in textual form' (*Political Unconscious*, p. 35), always behind a text, never in it. This does not mean that history is just 'another text', but rather that we can only reconstruct it by placing texts in their dialogical relationship with the Real, which is only knowable mediated in textual form. The principal interest of literary texts from the historical viewpoint would thus not be their mimetic qualities, but their status as fragments of collective memory or, to push Todorov's formulation a little further, as fragments of collective fantasy. The question 'was the world really like that?' which medievalists, both historians and literary critics, have frequently asked of the texts they work on is largely redundant, and all too often non-literary evidence suggests that medieval literature does not accurately reflect contemporary social structures or practices. But rather than discard literature as having no historical value, we could perhaps ask more pertinent historicizing questions of texts. Why did writers choose to represent the world in this way? What was

8 *Gender and genre in medieval French literature*

the symbolic value of these representations and fantasies to contemporary readers?

Putting the syntactic and semantic on an equal footing has important consequences for genre theory, for it shows that all genres inscribe an ideology and therefore that the adoption of a form in itself implies an engagement with ideology. In genre, therefore, content is given form, but more importantly there is a 'content of form', given that form signals an ideological *parti pris* (*Political Unconscious*, p. 99). It is the notion of 'content of form' which distinguishes Marxist genre theory from general discourse theory, whereas the notion of 'content given form' allows us to distinguish genres which use the same form, for instance in the French Middle Ages romance and much hagiography, *chansons de geste* and some early hagiography, or *fabliaux* and other short narratives like *lais*.

Jameson's is an uncompromisingly historical view of genre which exceeds both the formal view of genre as an aesthetic category and the notion that there are universal, ahistorical 'modes' in literary production. However, texts do not simply dialogue with history; they also dialogue with each other and intertextuality is thus crucial to the functioning of genres. The notion of intertextuality rests on the assumption that no writer writes in a vacuum; rather texts imitate, dialogue with, surpass and subsume other texts, which will have informed the writer's choice of form and subject matter, consciously and unconsciously.²⁰ The implicit intertext for any text is therefore other texts of the same genre, since the writer signals a specific relationship to these other texts by adopting the form and engaging with the ideology of the genre, even if this is done parodically or with a view to transforming the genre in some way. A genre will evolve not just in response to historical circumstance, but as writers (albeit themselves conditioned by their historical moment) imitate and transform it syntactically and semantically. Generic boundaries are not defined in influential, but unwritten rule-books; they are constructed and transformed through textual production.

The intertext may function across genres as well as within a genre. A writer may use the form of one genre, yet deploy

themes and motifs which are 'marked' as belonging to another and this may signal the establishment of a conscious or unconscious dialectic between different ideologies.²¹ It is axiomatic in an historical view of genre, a view which contends that genres are not ahistorical, universal modes, but rather that they mutate and evolve according to historical circumstance, that genres are not discrete and that there are no easily defined, impenetrable boundaries between them. Old genres give birth to new genres; synchronically as different genres respond to the same historical tensions, it is inevitable that they will dialogue with each other and that texts which appear to be generically hybrid are produced. Yet if intertextuality functions across genres, this does not mean that generic boundaries are thereby destroyed, for any implied dialogue between different generic positions – different ideologies – can only be inferred with reference to 'pure' generic paradigms, which writers expect their readers to recognize.

If the creative act is determined by genre, so is the reader's or listener's response. As Hans Robert Jauss argues, a reader approaches every text with a 'horizon of expectations... familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced'.²² For Jauss variation and correction determine both the boundaries of generic structure and the audience's aesthetic response to any one text. As the author will be influenced both by his or her audience's actual response and by the response he or she expects, the evolution of genres is determined by reception as well as by the writer's conscious and unconscious engagement with genre. An audience uses its sense of genre to situate a text and therefore to judge it. Because of the dialogue he perceives between a text and its public, Jauss too highlights the ideological content of genre, seeing 'the work of art... as a sign and carrier of meaning for a social reality' and suggesting that 'the aesthetic is defined as a principal mediation and a mode of organization for extra-aesthetic meanings' (*Toward an Aesthetic*, p. 108).

A sense of genre then is essential both to literary creation and to the reception of literary texts. Genres are neither stable nor

discrete constructs: they evolve in response to historical events, situations, individual writers' texts and to audience reception. Theorists as diverse as Northrop Frye, Hans Robert Jauss, Fredric Jameson, Mikhail Bakhtin and Tzvetan Todorov all agree that genres are inherently ideological literary constructs.

Since all but one of these theorists are writing from a perspective that is informed by Marxism, it is not surprising that they see the ideological basis of genres as grounded in class antagonism. Only Jameson mentions gender in his discussion of ideology, and then only to reiterate the tired Marxist truism that sexual oppression in western societies is a relic of a now defunct mode of production and that with the elimination of class, what he calls the 'false problem' of gender will disappear (*Political Unconscious*, pp. 99–100). But to subsume gender to class in this way is not only profoundly androcentric, it also grossly oversimplifies and misrepresents the problem, as feminist theory demonstrates. For instance, it is well known that men and women have a different relationship to class: whereas a man's class is usually determined by his relationship to an economic means of production, a woman's is usually determined by her relationship to a man, most often her father, husband or brother.²³ This implies that for gender inequalities to disappear, it is not class that needs to be dismantled, but male-dominated kinship structures which, although undoubtedly affected by class, operate at all levels of class hierarchies and within most, if not all, known cultures, whether or not they have class structures. Moreover, if gender hierarchies are a relic of a mode of production that preceded capitalism, it is not clear why they should disappear from subsequent modes of production when they have proved so tenacious within capitalism, nor why they are so common – universal according to some anthropologists – in all cultures, capitalist and non-capitalist.

I use gender here in a specifically feminist sense: that is I make the distinction between sex, which designates the differences between men and women which are anatomically or biologically determined, and gender which designates the meanings given these differences in culture.²⁴ Some theorists – women working at the interface of feminist and gay theory –