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Edited by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay

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SIMON GAUNT AND SARAH KAY

Introduction

French was the most influential vernacular literature of the European Middle Ages. Early texts such as the *Chanson de Roland*, the Old French *Tristan* romances, the prose *Lancelot*, and the *Roman de la rose* were widely translated into other European languages and had an enormous impact on other vernacular traditions; later writers such as Guillaume de Machaut, Christine de Pizan, or Charles d'Orléans, had an international readership and saw themselves as working in an international context. The prestige and dissemination of French were such that writers whose mother tongue was not French wrote major texts in French (in Italy Brunetto Latini and Marco Polo, in England John Gower); even in instances where robust national traditions emerged in the wake of major authors such as Dante and Petrarch in Italy, or Chaucer in England, they did so in part at least by emulating French models.

The literary production to which this *Companion* is devoted dates c. 1100–1500, but there is evidence the tradition began earlier. The earliest surviving written French is found in the *Serments de Strasbourg* (842), a record of oaths supposedly taken by two of Charlemagne's grandsons one of whom swears in French, the other in German. The equally brief *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie* (c.878), the fragmentary *chanson de geste Gormont et Isembart* and the *Vie de St Léger* (both eleventh century), suggest French was already being used sporadically for written texts before 1100, and that the *Serments de Strasbourg* were not therefore a flash-in-the-pan. The general lack of surviving evidence and the undoubted loss of many texts, especially from the early Middle Ages, mean that it is not always possible to delineate this production precisely. What we know is that, after uncertain beginnings before 1100, there is more sustained literary activity in French in the first half of the twelfth century, that this increases markedly after c.1150, and that texts in French (and books containing them) start to be produced in far greater numbers from the early thirteenth century onwards. We have indicated the probable dates of all the texts that are the subject of substantive discussion in this volume in the

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Chronology, but before 1200 especially these reflect informed guesswork rather than secure knowledge.

The language in which this literature was composed comprises various forms of medieval French. Like all romance languages, French emerged from the linguistic and cultural melting-pot that followed the disintegration of the Roman empire, initially from contact between Latin and the languages of the inhabitants of the territories that had been occupied, then from contact with invaders from the north and east in the fifth and sixth centuries.¹ In the northern part of the Roman province of Gaul Latin underwent the influence of a Celtic ‘substrate’ (largely lexical), then a Germanic ‘superstrate’ brought by invading tribes, notably the Franks, who had a major impact on pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax, and who gave France its name (‘Frankia’). In Brittany the Celtic substrate survived more or less intact, while south of the Loire, where Latin was more entrenched and the Germanic invasions less aggressive, there developed instead a distinct group of dialects nowadays classed as ‘Occitan’. Medieval and modern linguists alike use the terms *langue d’oil* and *langue d’oc* to refer to French and Occitan, *oil* being the medieval Northern French word for ‘yes’ and *oc* its Occitan counterpart. It is hard to tell at what point exactly the Latin spoken in Northern France became the *langue d’oil*, but in 813 the Council of Tours decreed sermons should be preached in the vernacular rather than Latin, suggesting a retrospective recognition that the language of the people was so distant from Latin as to be a separate language.

Histories of the French language usually divide medieval French into three periods: early Old French (before 1100), Old French (c.1100–c.1300), and Middle French (c.1300–c.1500 and beyond). Initially, French was less a language than a collection of dialects. They relied heavily on what linguists call ‘inflections’: tense and person endings for verbs, and case endings for nouns and adjectives which distinguished the subject forms of most masculine nouns and adjectives (and a few feminine ones too) from forms other than the subject. As a result of these two features, early Old French used fewer grammatical markers (such as subject pronouns with verbs and articles with nouns) than more recent forms of French, and its syntax was more flexible than the now standard subject-verb-object word order. Early Old French also had a wide range of consonants and vowel combinations (called ‘diphthongs’ or ‘triphthongs’, depending on how many vowels are combined), but these began to reduce in the Old French period. By the twelfth century a number of mutually comprehensible dialects had gained prominence, notably *picard*, *champanois*, Norman, Anglo-Norman (the French spoken by much of the ruling classes in England after the Norman conquest in 1066), and *francien* (a term used to designate both the dialect spoken in

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the region around Paris and then the written *koinè* based upon it that was promoted for use in certain types of official document); *francien* progressively became the norm from about 1300. Old French continued to use case endings with nouns and adjectives, albeit not consistently, together with the complex verb endings of the earlier period. Its literary style was characterized by a greater use of tense switching than is the norm in modern written French,² and by the accumulation of discrete clauses without any markers of grammatical connection (a style known as ‘parataxis’, in contrast to the marking of grammatical relations in ‘hypotaxis’). The case system gradually fell into disuse in the Old French period, and its loss inaugurates the language known as Middle French. Middle French also saw a major overhaul of verbal morphology, as a result of which the language starts to look more like Modern French. Syntax became more fixed and ‘determiners’ such as subject pronouns started to be used more frequently. Major changes in pronunciation also took place in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; whereas Old French spelling coincided to a large extent with pronunciation, the Middle French period witnessed the divergence between the two that still characterizes Modern French. Some Middle French texts are, in addition, marked by Latinisms, as humanist writers consciously imitated classical models. A guide to reference works on various aspects of medieval French language is included as an Appendix.

As mention of the Norman conquest indicates, the geographical range of medieval French literature was not coterminous with present-day France. Not only was a significant part of what we now call France not French-speaking in the Middle Ages, but a large number of texts in French were composed outside the territories directly controlled by the French king: in England, for instance, in the often extensive continental domains of the English crown, or in the various border regions which moved in and out of the French or English spheres of power throughout the Middle Ages (for example, Flanders, Burgundy, Lorraine).³ As a result of French or English military or dynastic interests, French was also spoken in the Near East (Jerusalem, Syria), in Sicily, and parts of central Europe (Bohemia). The major historical figures and events that mark the period are set out in the Chronology above.

Medieval French literature first attracted interest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (under the influence of the Romantic movement then prevalent in Europe) and became an object of intensive study in the last third of the nineteenth century. Initially enormous effort was needed to identify, catalogue, and edit texts. Critical evaluations, at first overshadowed by methods prevailing in the study of classical literature were, in the twentieth century, increasingly influenced by the development of critical study

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of modern European literatures. Different national cultures have evolved distinctive approaches. In the French-speaking world, where medieval French texts are the earliest form of the national literature of most scholars concerned, the approach has been largely literary-historical; British attention has been predominantly devoted to the extensive Anglo-Norman tradition; the strong philological and historical tradition in Germany is now, sadly, continued by only a handful of scholars; Italian scholarship continues to be focused on philology and textual transmission. In North America a wide range of philological and critical methods have been pioneered, and it is from here that the most adventurous works of synthesis have come.

To some extent the canon of medieval French works studied in university curricula has been fluid, depending on the historical moment and the national tradition, but the canonical status of some texts is constant: the *Chanson de Roland*, for example, because of its monumental importance to the conception of French literature *as French*; Chrétien de Troyes's five Arthurian romances because of their seminal contribution to courtly romance and thereby to the prehistory of the novel; the *Roman de la rose* because of its extensive pan-European dissemination; François Villon's *Testament* because of its play with poetic voice, often vaunted for its modernity, but in fact characteristically medieval. We have endeavoured, in this *Companion*, to strike a balance between works of undoubted canonical status, texts that are now widely taught (for example Marie de France's *Lais* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*), and texts or figures to which recent innovatory research has been devoted (for instance, Christine de Pizan, the *Perceforest*, hagiography). We could not include everything, and to our regret there is no discussion of medieval historiography, and much less than we would have liked of some other major works like the *Roman de Renart*. In order to structure and guide the reader towards future as much as existing work in medieval French studies, we have divided the volume into four sections that address the following four questions: what is a medieval French text? What do we mean when we talk about an author in the medieval French literary tradition? How useful is it to think in terms of literary genres when reading medieval French literature? And how can we read medieval French texts historically? The next four sections of this Introduction outline the problematic encapsulated by each of these questions, and indicate how it is developed in the chapters that follow.

What is a medieval French text?

Modern conceptions of a text are conditioned by a culture in which authors are directly answerable for what they write, in which printing fixes the wording and presentation of texts, in which copyright and censorship laws

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regulate who has the right to reproduce and read them, and in which high levels of literacy encourage a strong disassociation of the written from the spoken word. Our emerging digital culture marks a revolution in practices of textual production, transmission, and reception that may well prove as far-reaching as the invention of printing, and this will perhaps help us in some ways to understand better a world in which texts were manipulated and changed by those who transmitted and read them. In other crucial respects, however, digital culture distances us yet further from a world in which texts had to be copied laboriously by hand, using quill pens on parchment that was harder to work with and far more expensive than modern paper. These differences separating medieval from modern forms of text are not simply a matter of external material conditions: they profoundly influence the character of medieval French literature.

In the Middle Ages the recording of any French text in writing meant aligning it, to some degree, with Latin culture since literacy was almost always taught through the medium of Latin, more was written in Latin than the vernacular, and the main business of *scriptoria* (workshops of scribes devoted to producing manuscripts), at least before the fourteenth century, was to copy Latin texts.⁴ It is not uncommon for early French and Latin texts to be found together in manuscripts and, in the Old French period particularly, French works often claim to be translations or adaptations of Latin models.

The profession of copyist tended to be regarded as menial and technical, and far more people knew how to read than write. Consequently, most Old and Middle French texts were composed to be recited to an audience (for a variety of reasons the norm – even in Latin – was to read aloud) or indeed to be sung, possibly with accompanying instruments (*trouvère* lyrics, the *chansons de geste*), or to be performed or mimed by a group (like drama). ‘Reading’ medieval literature was thus a social, public activity, sometimes committed to professional performers, either travelling troupes of *jongleurs* or else minstrels attached to a particular court. In the case of narratives recited from a book, the figure of the narrator would have been physically embodied by the reader, and thereby distinguished from the author, who tends to be referred to in the third person as the absent authority behind the text. But early French literature was composed exclusively in verse, which continued to be widely used even after the emergence of prose in the very late twelfth century,⁵ and some of these verse texts (such as *chansons de geste*, *lais*, and lyrics) may have been performed without the presence of any written text.

There has been much debate – some acrimonious – among medievalists about the origins of early verse genres in oral culture, but by definition the

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texts that have survived were written down, and were consequently, at this stage at least, part of a written tradition.⁶ Rather than opposing writing and orality in this period, we should seek to understand how the rhythms and practices of the spoken language inflected the written word. Most Old and Middle French works, for example, are scripted for oral delivery, featuring a first-person voice who addresses an audience of listeners in the second person, and uses spatial and temporal deictic markers to locate delivery ‘here’ (*ci*, as in ‘at this place in the book’) or ‘now’ (*or*, as in ‘at this stage in my narration’).⁷

Only in the late Middle Ages, and then only rarely, do we have copies of texts that were made by their authors, or overseen by them. The poet Charles d’Orléans has left us an autograph copy of his poems (see Chapter 10); the efforts made by Machaut and Christine de Pizan to control the circulation of their works are described in Chapters 7 and 8. But the temporal gap between the composition of most medieval works and the written sources by which we know them exposes texts to the vagaries of transmission: for example, almost our entire canon of twelfth-century French literature is known only from manuscripts produced in the thirteenth century or later. Variations from one copy of a text to another – sometimes termed *mouvance* – pose problems for editors and by the beginning of the twentieth century two distinct editorial methodologies had emerged.⁸ The method named as Lachmannian after Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) seeks to reconstruct what an author originally wrote; the so-called Bédieriste or ‘best manuscript’ method, named after its formidable proponent Joseph Bédier (1864–1938), opts instead to edit a single manuscript on the grounds that the resulting text will be more authentically medieval. But whichever method is followed, modern critical editions of medieval texts necessarily occlude the mobility to which they were subject in transmission.⁹ For throughout the Middle Ages texts were frequently adapted in far-reaching ways (rewritten, abridged, expanded) to suit the tastes of a new group or generation of readers, and/or to foreground certain interpretations according to the tastes of a scribe, audience, or patron. This process (known as *remaniement*, ‘rehandling’) can lead to the circulation of a number of versions that are so divergent that they may in effect be viewed as constituting separate works, even where they clearly derive from a common source.

Remaniement is well illustrated by the *Chanson de Roland*, the subject of Chapter 1. The version with which most readers are familiar – the late eleventh- or early twelfth-century Oxford *Roland* – has iconic status in literary histories as the founding monument of French literature and as the archetypal *chanson de geste*, but it was not widely disseminated in the Middle Ages, and subsequent *remaniements* can be seen as quasi-independent poems that are more typical of the genre. And yet as these multiple versions of the

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Roland suggest, *remaniements* move a textual tradition forward while remaining melancholically attached to the spectre of an earlier textual core. Chapters 2–4 go on to demonstrate, in different ways, that the aesthetics of writing in the Middle Ages entail some form of rewriting. This phenomenon, a specifically medieval form of what modern critics call ‘intertextuality’,¹⁰ is as much in evidence in Villon’s *Testament* (c.1461–2), discussed in Chapter 4, as in the *Chanson de Roland*. Though not a close reworking of Villon’s earlier *Lais*, the *Testament* explicitly supersedes it, while also containing a series of lyrics (some of which may have been initially composed independently) and frequent covert references to other texts. All these features unsettle the status of the text we are reading, the more so given the *Testament* explicitly acknowledges its own susceptibility to reworking at the hands of others, positioning itself thereby in a dynamic, constantly evolving process of textual transformation. Villon was acutely aware that texts could change over a period of time, either independently of their first author or in some cases as part of an author’s own developing writing project, and Villon builds an awareness of this instability into the aesthetics of his *Testament*.

Another source of intertextuality that is specific to the Middle Ages arises as a result of another aspect of manuscript culture. Although there are some manuscripts that contain only one work, most are compilations. In the later Middle Ages the principle of compilation can be to assemble the works of a single author (see Chapters 4, 7, and 8), but in the earlier period a compilation is typically one of *texts* not authors. Sometimes these collections seem random, the result of idiosyncratic choices on the part of the scribe or the person commissioning the manuscript, but sometimes they have thematic, generic, or narrative unity:¹¹ consider the St Albans Psalter discussed in Chapter 14, the *trouvère chansonniers* discussed in Chapter 6, or the manuscripts of the early thirteenth-century Vulgate *Lancelot* cycle discussed in Chapter 2.

In this last instance, a story (inspired by earlier verse romances) provides the impetus for the composition of a series of related texts by different writers that then circulate as a cycle. The great cycles of medieval French literature – the Vulgate cycle, the *cycle de Guillaume d’Orange*, and the *Roman de Renart* – illustrate the extent to which some texts are subordinate to and generated by a story that exceeds the boundaries of just one text.¹² Whereas the prequels and sequels of the Vulgate cycle usually present themselves in manuscripts as separate entities within a *sequence* of texts, Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la rose* (see Chapter 3) is so skilfully grafted onto Guillaume de Lorris’s apparently unfinished poem that the two are often presented as a single text. But whereas multiple authorship in the Vulgate *Lancelot* cycle produces a sequence whose various parts seem

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by and large (albeit problematically) subordinate to a relatively unified ideological agenda, multiple authorship in the *Rose* produces a work which opens up a space for dialectic, play, and uncertainty. The ‘text’ in both cases is inherently multiple, incorporating – like Villon’s *Testament* – the play of material circumstances into its literary nature.

What is a medieval French author?

The study of literature is often organized round the study of authors. But in many instances the instability of medieval texts makes it impossible to ascertain what an author wrote (all we can be sure of is what a text becomes in transmission), while what it means to be an author is problematic when a text results from the interventions of multiple authors (including anonymous performers), or has undergone a series of *remaniements*. Furthermore, authors have no proprietorial control over their texts, as Villon acknowledges in his *Testament*, and appropriately enough many texts, particularly before 1300, are anonymous. When authors are named, they are generally shadowy figures, known only by a name that does not allow us to identify the writer (this is the case with Guillaume de Lorris, for example), sometimes by a name that is not a real one but a *nom de plume* adopted by the writer himself (Rutebeuf, perhaps also Chrétien de Troyes), or a name confectioned by modern scholarship (Marie de France). An author’s name – whether used in a text or by a critic – often seems primarily to *authorize* a text, that is, to explain its provenance and/or guarantee its authenticity. The example of Chrétien de Troyes (see Chapter 5), the most influential figure in the emerging genre of courtly romance, illustrates that a writer can develop his own authorial style, seek to delineate his corpus for his readership, and thereby generate an awareness of his work as a distinct entity. But in the twelfth century this is the exception rather than the rule and as the *Conte du graal*’s continuations show, an author’s work may elude his control and always remains susceptible to appropriation and reorientation by others. Even in a case such as Chrétien’s, where author-centred criticism is practised by French medievalists, the vagaries of manuscript transmission and uncertainties of attribution mean that it is impossible to demarcate the corpus definitively, as Chapter 5 also shows.

Another illustration of the uncertainties surrounding authorship is the implausible (sometimes impossible) attribution of texts to a well-known figure, usually a bid for the authority conferred by a well-known name. A celebrated instance is the attribution of *La Mort le roi Artu*, the last segment of the *Lancelot* cycle, to Walter Map, Henry II of England’s secretary and courtier (see Chapter 2), who died several decades before the *Mort* was

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written. Chapter 6 examines the case of the Châtelain de Couci, one of the best-known lyric poets (*trouvères*) of the late twelfth century. His life and work seem to have captured the imagination of several generations of readers and writers in the thirteenth century, leading to the ascription to him of lyrics that were probably by other poets. That he also becomes the hero of a romance narrative loosely based on his life, but citing his lyrics, shows how the reception of lyrics is grounded in the perceived presence of an author-figure, but the move into fiction also suggests the extent to which the figure of the author is an effect as well as a cause of the text.

In the later Middle Ages, some authors emerge from the shadows and, while continuing the play with conventions and formal experimentation typical of the earlier period, they start consciously to inject autobiographical elements into their work, also seeking to take control of how it is transmitted. Thus Guillaume de Machaut (c.1300–77) – the subject of Chapter 7 – foregrounds the processes and circumstances of the writing of his texts, and towards the end of his career seems to have played a key role in the compilation and circulation of manuscripts of his complete works, some clearly for specific patrons. Although his influence on the transmission of his corpus fades after his death, he is, as Deborah McGrady felicitously puts it, both ‘the last troubadour and a prototype for the modern author’ (p. 121).

Authorial presence in a corpus goes a stage further in the work of Christine de Pizan – the subject of Chapter 8. As her writing evolves, she uses it increasingly to negotiate her position as an author in the public sphere, commenting on her own circumstances, on her development as a writer, and on events in the world around her. She also does so, of course, as a woman, and an awareness of gender is a constant in her life-long engagement with the question of authorship. Does one have to be a man in order to have the authority of an author? Clearly not, but the authority implicit in the very notion of authorship is nonetheless tacitly gendered masculine, so whereas a male writer may assume his right to it automatically by dint of his gender, a woman must constantly negotiate and renegotiate it.

Christine de Pizan’s professionalism as a writer and publisher reminds us that, as in all periods, writing in the Middle Ages had an economic basis. Manuscript books were labour-intensive and costly to produce, requiring a team of skilled craftsman. Only in centres with a sufficiently large administrative machinery to require the production of texts or with relatively high-level educational establishments – initially just secular courts and large religious foundations, but by the early thirteenth century also some towns – were the conditions right to sustain and create the demand for the composition of long texts and book production. For this demand to be realized there also needed to be sufficient surplus wealth to pay for non-essential luxury

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cultural and recreational activities such as the production of texts. Some writers may have earned a living from performing their own works at fairs or in other popular gatherings. Others may have had sufficient wealth and leisure to write. But most relied on support to do so. In the Middle Ages, more often than not, this came in the form of a patron.

In the earlier Middle Ages, writers seem to have been integrated into their patron's household and rewarded with items (such as horses, furs, or goblets) that marked their inclusion in a courtly lifestyle. Such arrangements were not permanent, permitting authors to move from one court to another; but they seem to have been pretty exclusive while they lasted, and indeed 'professional' poets were probably often professional as a result of being employed in some capacity *other* than poet, such as clerk or chaplain. However, from at least the time of Machaut in the fourteenth century, patterns of patronage changed.¹³ It became more common for authors to solicit the attentions of several patrons concurrently, and to be rewarded with an income or cash payments. Thus Machaut held office in the church (see Chapter 7), as did Froissart. The reason why Christine de Pizan felt her position to be especially precarious was because, as a woman, she was denied the possibility of holding a church benefice and relied on monetary payments. Such payments could be enjoyed by male authors in addition to their stipend. For instance, at the beginning of his *Joli Buisson de Jonece* Froissart runs through his account book, noting with satisfaction how much money he has received from his various protectors. Nonetheless, the impoverishment claimed by other writers (such as Villon, see Chapter 4, or Rutebeuf) suggests that not all writers were so fortunate: as today writing was not necessarily the best path to either fame or fortune.

What is the value of genre for medieval French literature?

Unlike comparable literatures, French is not dominated by a small number of major authors (like Chaucer or Dante), nor by a fixed canon of texts, but by distinctive forms, each with their own lifespan. Many works are regularly studied *as* a group: for example, lyric poems, *fabliaux*, or farces. Even longer works like *chansons de geste* or mystery plays are often studied together with other texts of the same kind. The most obvious term for these forms or groups is 'genre'. If not as a concept, at least as a practice, genre has played an unusually large part in the study of medieval French literature. But there is by no means consensus as to its meaning.

To what extent was genre perceived to exist in the Middle Ages? Probably it was more palpable for some types of text than others. From early on a vocabulary existed to refer to different kinds of lyric; medieval