

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06874-2 - Logical Fictions in Medieval Literature and Philosophy

Virginie Greene

Excerpt

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“It seems to me that I have done you full justice in the matter,” I remarked with some coldness, for I was repelled by the egotism which I had more than once observed to be a strong factor in my friend’s singular character.

“No, it is not selfishness or conceit,” said he, answering, as was his wont, my thoughts rather than my words. “If I claim full justice for my art, it is because it is an impersonal thing – a thing beyond myself. Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell. You have degraded what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches*

Sherlock Holmes solves crimes and detects criminals because he is enamored of logic – says he. The reason why Dr. Watson writes down reports of Holmes’s detecting is less obvious, but it is not because he is enamored of fiction. Watson claims to report the truth, nothing but the truth. However, for Holmes, Watson’s narratives are “a series of tales,” not because they are untrue, but because they are entertaining instead of instructive. Holmes associates lecture with logic, and tale with crime. He views logic as an “impersonal thing” whereas he would probably qualify crime as a personal matter of anecdotal relevance – a crime is just an opportunity for him to exercise and display his art. No doubt, he considers himself the thinker or the brain, Watson being the writer or the heart, but Watson has the last word and the upper hand, at the price of representing himself as an idiot, which he does cleverly.

Although it can be argued that Holmes’s method is clinical and empirical rather than strictly logical,¹ numerous modern logicians have chosen Sherlock Holmes as their favorite example of a fiction. Holmes first appeared as a substitute for Hamlet or Pickwick in John Woods’s 1969 article “Fictionality and the Logic of Relations.” The article begins with two questions: “It is true, is it not, that Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street,

and false or anyhow not true that he lived in Bleeker Street? And is it not the case that Hamlet slew Polonius, but that he did not kill Rosencrantz?”² After this initial bow to tradition, Hamlet disappears and Sherlock remains the exemplary fictional person that Woods uses to reopen the controversy over nonexistent objects initiated by Bertrand Russell in 1905.³

Literary scholars are generally not interested in what analytic philosophers have to say about fiction. Conversely, analytic philosophers do not include literary criticism in their discussion of fiction. This may be changing as our disciplines evolve.⁴ It still remains difficult to address the relation between logic and fiction from the perspective of a non-logician or a non-analytical philosopher. However, I believe it is important to try.

The controversy over the status of nonexistent objects mentioned above belongs to a tradition of intellectual quarrels going back at least to Plato. Whether they focus on the nature of things, predication, universals, the Trinity, or nonexistent objects, to outsiders such quarrels sound like “much ado about nothing” (“nothing” being one of their pet topics). This impression comes mostly from the use of an abstract, technical vocabulary and sophisticated modes of argumentation acquired through training and exercise. This said, dismissing the “Great Quarrels About Nothing” as futile games would be even worse than throwing the baby out with the bath water: it would be throwing out the bathtub and the bathroom with the baby and the bath water. This is because the quarrels question fundamental modes of thinking allowing us to delineate things, to assert and deny, to assess truth-value, and, ultimately, to structure and share our experience of the world. And they do so in a fashion that blends reasoning with emotion, abstraction with drama, and logic with affect. Otherwise, there would be no quarrel.

Before explaining the purpose of this book, I must clarify my use of the following terms: dialectic, logic, and philosophy. They are closely related and share a common origin in ancient Greek thought and vocabulary. In their Latin and modern English forms, they continue to speak “ancient Greek” and to signal a relation to this tradition, whether those who use them know ancient Greek or not. I will use “dialectic” in its ancient and medieval sense (not in its Hegelian sense), to designate a way of arguing based on analysis, deduction, and contradiction, the art of arguing in such a fashion, or, more specifically, the third art of the trivium, within the medieval classification of disciplines.⁵ I will use “logic” to refer to a way of reasoning (by which I mean to connect thoughts and ideas consciously), the study of such a way of reasoning, or a discipline founded by Aristotle. I will use “philosophy” to signify an aspiration to understand applied relentlessly

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to all things, an intellectual and ethical tradition rooted in ancient Greece, or a mode of writing related to this tradition.

The purpose of this book is to address problems traditionally ascribed to logic from a literary perspective. Since the study of literature is always rooted in places and times and entwined with languages, my literary perspective comes with a historical timeline (the Middle Ages, and, specifically, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), a geography (Northern France and the Anglo Norman territories), and specific languages (Latin and Old French). The revival of logic in the Middle Ages coincides with the emergence of Old French literature, in the same geographical area and at about the same time (the late eleventh century).⁶ These two trends were not just running on parallel courses within the greater context of the “twelfth-century Renaissance.”⁷ Literature and logic intersected in various ways, as many scholars have pointed out.⁸ I am convinced by the general thrust of their arguments and grateful for their pioneering work, which has brought to the fore a nexus of related problems treated in the literary as well as in the philosophical corpus: contradiction, reasoning, truth, human versus animal, contingency and necessity, reference, signification, knowledge. Not all Old French literary texts display a logical turn of mind, but a sufficient number of them do to justify scholarly interest in this direction. It also happens that some of the texts studied from this perspective, such as Chrétien de Troyes’s romances, Marie de France’s *lais* and fables, and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*, are amongst the best known in the Old French corpus.

Although inspired by this type of studies, my book will not aim primarily at providing a better understanding of Old French literature by relating it to a larger intellectual context. My main goal is to reflect on the nature of fiction through a small corpus of philosophical and literary texts. I have to confess this sounds rather philosophical (in the first meaning of “philosophy” I defined above), although I do not situate myself within philosophy as a tradition (in the second meaning of the term), and do not write philosophy (in the third meaning of the term). My main mode of thinking and writing derives mostly from the commentary and close reading techniques literary critics have practiced from the 1950s until today.

This book project began as a study of ambivalence in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Old French romances, but evolved in unexpected directions when I decided to read some of Aristotle’s logical and metaphysical texts in order to understand how the principle of non-contradiction came into existence. This move led me to consider the fictions operating in

philosophical texts related to the Aristotelian tradition. I believe this aspect of my work may be the most original, and, therefore, the most problematic and tentative. Reading logic into fiction may or may not interest scholars, but it does not touch any sensitive nerve; reading fiction into logic does. Sherlock Holmes would say that it degrades “what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales.” To which it could be replied that a tale results from an operation of the mind as complex and sophisticated as logical reasoning. I would even argue (if Holmes would agree to continue listening to me) that logic and fiction are sisters born from the habit of guessing what our senses cannot perceive.⁹ From pragmatic strategies, they may evolve into arts of creative thinking. We all speculate, induce, deduce, and fantasize. We are not all logicians, poets, or storytellers. Through my work on the most elaborate products of ancient traditions of thought, I hope to raise a number of questions and provoke investigations that I am myself unable to ask or undertake for they belong to anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers rather than to literary critics. Such questions or investigations would have as objects thought processes belonging to all, and not only to a small group of exceptional minds. I recognize that my own investigation is limited to such a small group. However, with all due respect and admiration for the authors I study, I allow myself to consider them as normal humans, not immune from the common twists and turns, limitations and blind spots of human minds.

The corpus of texts I study is small and eclectic. It includes philosophical works from classical Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, and the twentieth century. The literary corpus is limited to the Middle Ages. I tend to dwell on the texts or passages of texts that have caught my attention and imagination, and to stay with them for a long time. I wish though I could have included a few more texts, such as Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and his treatise *On the Trinity*, Thomas Aquinas’s comments on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* IV, Greek tragedies (in particular Euripides’s *Bacchae*), and further medieval literary works. But, at some point, I had to transform my “series of tales” into a book, and stop adding primary sources.

Outline

This book is divided into three main sections, organized thematically, not chronologically. A certain sense of history may emerge within the sections, for I have tried to follow threads of thoughts through time, but I have not attempted to construe a history of logic and fiction in ancient and medieval times.

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In Part I, titled “Logical fables,” I study twelfth- and thirteenth-century literary and philosophical texts by Abelard, Anselm of Canterbury, Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes and the anonymous authors of the *Roman de Renart*. I compare their ways of addressing our grasp of things, whether these authors use logic or fiction to do so. Thinking and talking about a particular thing is one of the most banal operations we accomplish every day, usually without thinking about it. However, our sense of reality as well as our imagination depends on our ways of identifying and sorting out particulars.¹⁰ My main point in the three chapters of this section is to show that the creation of fictional particulars plays a role as important as the creation of generic categories in our apprehension of the world and its content.

In Chapter 1, “Abelard’s donkey: the nonexistent particular,” I look at the way Abelard considers imagination and fiction as cognitive tools, essential to the life of the mind, albeit in a subaltern position with regard to higher modes of understanding.¹¹ Thus Abelard allows fiction to stand as a mental space of semiotic and ontological experimentation. In this chapter, I create a neologism: the noun *adstraction*. If we understand *abstraction* as pulling (*trahere*) general ideas from (*ab*) real or fictional particulars, then *adstraction* is the operation of pulling the general toward (*ad*) a fictional particular. An *adstraction* is also the result of such an operation, in the same way that fiction is both an operation and its result. I examine *adstractions* created in the late twelfth century, such as the knight and the lion in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain* and some animal characters in the *Roman de Renart*, suggesting a family resemblance between the theory and the practice of fiction in Northern France at this time.

In Chapter 2, “The literate animal: naming and reference,” I move from the cognitive aspect of fiction in Abelard to a semantic inquiry based on Anselm of Canterbury’s dialog *On the Grammarian*, and Marie de France’s fable, “The Lion and the Peasant.” Animals are again at the forefront, for they support logical and fictional reflection on categories, reference, and naming, while at the same time provoking questions on the “human” as a category, a predicate, a subject, or a substance. I refrain from creating any further neologisms in this chapter, but manage to picture Rudolf Carnap as a character in an animal fable, with all due respect.

Chapter 3, “The fox and the unicorn: naming and existence,” starts with the quarrel concerning nonexistent objects between Bertrand Russell and Alexius Meinong in the early 1900s. I comment on the use of the unicorn as an example in texts focusing on reference, meaning, and naming by Russell, Carnap, and Kripke. Then, using Kripke and Donnellan’s idea

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that fictions have “historical trails” leading to “blocks” demonstrating their nonexistence, I follow the historical trail of the unicorn, through ancient treatises on animals, early translations of the Jewish Bible (the Septuagint and the Vulgate), and medieval bestiaries. I want to say from the start that I have not uncovered new evidence proving that unicorns exist (or have existed, or could exist), except as fictions. But my historical inquiry shows that at no point did someone deliberately decide to invent an imaginary animal species. The unicorn is an offspring of science and exegesis, not of poesis and mimesis. I compare the history of the unicorn with the history of Renard the fox, the fictional hero of a large corpus of medieval tales, the Old French *Roman de Renart*. Although it is impossible to attribute the invention of Renard to a single author or group of authors, his stories bring to the fore the notion of fiction as human creation. I study closely a pseudo-Genesis of Renard present in a thirteenth-century rewriting of the *Roman*. This shrewd text distinguishes Belief from belief, Truth from truth, and Scripture from scripture, giving fiction its own house in the city of men. I end this chapter by returning to the debate on nonexistent objects in order to sketch a theory of fiction as a mode of thinking closely related to Western rationalism.

Part II, titled “Figures of contradiction,” examines the foundational fiction upon which Aristotle built his theory of negation. The texts studied include Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Book IV), Anselm of Canterbury’s *Proslogion*, and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*. The fiction in question is the figure of an opponent appearing in various debates, whether philosophical, theological, or ethical. The opponent is set up to prove that his negative or contradictory position is impossible. However, through his presence in texts that deny his existence, the opponent acquires a life of his own, installing ambivalence at the heart of the principle of non-contradiction.

Chapter 4, “The opponent,” focuses on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* IV and the demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction as the foundation of logic and rationality. What interests me most in this text is the staging of an opponent, named “*ho amphisbētōn*,” who does not say anything but is indispensable to demonstrating the principle through refutation. This staging results in the contradictory gesture of rejecting the contradictor while giving him shape and function. Besides being a logical and rhetorical accessory, Amphisbeton represents the opponents (sophists, poets, and madmen) Aristotle found in himself or his world and had to overcome in order to anchor his philosophy in rationality. It is not until the early twentieth century that Amphisbeton’s silent speech will find a name,

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Ambivalenz, coined by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler to describe one of the symptoms of schizophrenia.¹² This postponement did not prevent Amphisbeton from reappearing in various figures in Western philosophy. My next two chapters examine three of such figures in medieval texts.

“The fool who says no to God” (Chapter 5) refers to the biblical character who appears in three psalms, and is defined in Psalm 13:1 as “the fool” (Insipiens) who “said in his heart that there is no God.” In the Bible, saying that there is no God is closely (if quite illogically) related to saying “No” to God’s commands. In this chapter, I return to Anselm of Canterbury and focus on his *Proslogion*, often referred to as Anselm’s “ontological argument” establishing the logical necessity of God’s existence. Like Amphisbeton, Insipiens has a limited role to play in the argument. But, unlike Amphisbeton, he has something to say, if only to himself: “There is no God.” This does not contradict the principle of non-contradiction, but *does* contradict the Christian principle that God is both the warrant of and the exception to the principle of non-contradiction. God is the only thing that necessarily exists.¹³ Anselm, like Aristotle, struggles to demonstrate how something he views as unthinkable can nonetheless be thought of, or presented as a thought, if only for the sake of refutation. The inner sophist to be tamed has become an inner miscreant, whom Anselm attempts to trap in a position that I view as the logical space for fiction: that which cannot be thought to exist, but nonetheless can be thought.

“The man who says no to reason” (Chapter 6) refers actually to two characters in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*: an allegorical figure named False Seeming, and the Lover, hero and narrator of the quest for the rose. Through his speech False Seeming presents himself as the true heir of the Liar invented by Greek logicians, and a loquacious opponent to reason, Aristotle, and God. But, the most important avatar of the opponent in the *Rose* is the Lover, for, in his dispute with Reason, he reclaims for the rational animal the right to be a fool at certain times and in certain circumstances. Reason herself admits that following or loving her may involve paradoxes and emotions as well as reasoning and judgment. Since the Lover is a first person narrator, the logical tradition that created the opponent finds itself wedded to the tradition of courtly lyric poetry and its songs about loving, feeling, and singing in the first person singular. The opponent becomes at once a paradoxical “I” (attached to two persons, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun), a plausible self that is able to reason, argue, complain, hope, and despair, and a subject representing contingency in a fictional mode.¹⁴

In Part III, titled “Fathers, sons, and friends,” I examine some of the fictions and phantasms embedded in the philosophical tradition associated with the principle of non-contradiction. This tradition, which can be called rationalism, tends to repress or deny ambivalent affect. At the same time, like any other field of human interest and activity, rationalism fosters emotions and passions, creates circles of initiated, traces lines of exclusion, and composes its own romances. Current visions of friendship as an ideal are still influenced by the fear that the friend may turn into an opponent undermining rationality, a heretic threatening the authority of the institution holding the keys to salvation (or promotion), or a woman turning reasoning and friendship into childish games. See what Phyllis did to Aristotle?

In “Aristotle or the founding son” (Chapter 7), I present the first logician as the first philosopher to have viewed himself as part of a history. Our vision of Greek philosophy is still deeply influenced by Aristotle’s invention of this history. Socrates’ death gave it an ambivalent turn from the beginning, as a patricide that was impossible to forget or to acknowledge. The custom of using Socrates as an example of a man or every man starts with Aristotle. I understand this custom as the transformation of a threatening ghost into a tutelary spirit, which generation after generation of apprentice philosophers can gently tease out and tame. By setting himself within a temporal, generational frame instead of among a circle of immortal divine men, Aristotle accepted mortality as a price to pay for inscribing philosophy in human history.

In “Abelard or the fatherless son” (Chapter 8), I look at the period of Anselm of Canterbury and Abelard, when logic once again attracted minds and souls. Given what is known of Abelard’s life through his autobiographical writings and other documents, it is easy to view him as a real (not a fictional) Amphisbeton or Insipiens – an opponent in all respects, arrogant and irascible, and ambivalent toward his masters and peers. However, a different picture can be drawn from his logical and theological works. As a logician, Abelard was a conciliator who tried to find a third way in the quarrel between vocalists (or the first nominalists) and realists. As a philosopher, he attempted to reconcile Aristotle, Plato, and Christ. He failed on both fronts, perhaps because of the uncompromising “desire for authenticity” that led him to question authorities and view language as deeply flawed.¹⁵ His quest for truth *and* orthodoxy took place in a culture of heightened suspicion among the literate. Abelard inherited the quarrel between Anselm of Canterbury and Roscelin of Compiègne on the Trinity, and repeated the pattern of provocation, denunciation, betrayal,

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and insults that led Roscelin in 1093 and Abelard in 1121 to be tried in Soissons and recant their teachings or writings. This painful story of fatherless sons, enemy brothers, and rebellious disciples has positive aspects: it (painstakingly) rooted the philosophical tradition in a Christian ground and developed a culture of debate and criticism whose heirs are the scholars of today. Moreover, the notion of the self that was developed throughout the debates of this time (in particular the debate on the three persons of the Trinity) opened a path toward the first person experiments and the fictional subject of the *Rose*, a century later.

The ninth and last chapter, “The dialectics of friendship,” is a response to Jacques Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship*, as well as a way to bring together several of the threads of thought I followed in the preceding chapters. The constitution of philosophy as a patrilineal genealogy or a society of disputing brothers comes with two side effects: the erection of friendship as an ideal associated to philosophy and philosophers, and the exclusion of women from both philosophy and friendship. In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida recognizes the problem, which is to his credit, but does not do more than open the question of friendship in the feminine – in parentheses and footnotes. In this chapter I study the constitution of the philosophical discourse on friendship in relation to the principle of non-contradiction and ambivalence, in texts by Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. In these texts friendship tends to become a virtue practiced by great men, who are celebrated after their death by other great men – their friends. That type of friendship is immune to ambivalence and instability: the friend cannot be an enemy. In the twelfth century, the Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, rewriting Cicero’s treatise on friendship for the cloister, reintegrates ambivalence and instability within the scope of friendship between sinners seeking salvation. In all these texts, including Aelred’s treatise, friendship is gendered in the masculine. In *Yvain or the Knight with the Lion*, Chrétien de Troyes presents in a mock dialectical debate the self as ambivalent, not fully aware of its affects, able to love and hate the same object at the same time. The ideal male friends of the story (Yvain and Gauvain) get close enough to kill one another, while less than ideal friendships across genders and species still provide fictional models of friendship that work. The romance does not create a counter-discourse of friendship (something like a *Consolation of Literature* for women), but loosens things up a bit. That, after all, is what fiction is best at doing to philosophy.

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