THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

MEDIEVAL FRENCH LITERATURE

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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

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'oïl* and *langue d'oc* to refer to French and Occitan, *oïl* 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'oïl*, 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*, *champenois*, 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

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

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

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

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

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 *re*writing. 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

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 confected 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

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 adminis-trative 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 composi-tion 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

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

terms like *grand chant courtois* (a formally elaborate love song), *aube* (dawn song), or *ballade* (a form marked by the repetition of a refrain) are still used by poets and critics today. Lyrics were usually transmitted in anthology collections (see Chapter 6), which reinforce the sense that they belong together, and within these collections a generic organization is not uncommon. The terminology of medieval drama evolved from the blanket term *jeu* ('play') used in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, so as eventually to discriminate a wealth of different religious and secular dramatic categories (see Chapter 12). Medieval generic terms for narrative existed, but were more fluid (see Chapter 9). The word *chanson de geste* is used to refer to epic or heroic poems, but sometimes manuscript rubrics refer to them as *romans*, a term which can in fact designate almost any kind of vernacular narrative text, including chronicles, saints' lives and beast epic (*Le Roman de Renart*). Similarly some *fabliaux* are hard to distinguish from fables or short courtly narratives,[14] and the term *dit* can refer to texts of varying form on a wide range of topics, but most commonly a first-person reflection on personal, amorous, or political themes based on octosyllabic rhyming couplets. Although there are manuscripts exclusively devoted to one genre, compilations of a variety of different sorts of texts are just as or more common, especially for the literature of the earlier period (Chapter 9).

Lacking unambiguous evidence from the Middle Ages, medievalists have long debated the meaning and value of the concept of genre. Given the broad spectrum of literature in verse, criteria based on verse form are widely used, and they can be useful to distinguish *chansons de geste* from lyrics or verse romance. But formal definitions work well for some genres, badly for others. If the *rondeau* is entirely defined by its form, saints' lives can be written in a wide range of verse forms, or in prose; they can even be turned into plays. Accordingly, different types of hagiographic text are usually categorized not by form but by content, according to whether they narrate the saint's whole life, martyrdom, or miracles.[15] Perhaps saints' lives, like medieval vernacular history-writing, should be defined by their formal variety; historiography, however, was formally innovative whereas saints' lives adopt forms pioneered by other narratives.

Invoking the model of linguistics, Fredric Jameson proposed that as well as assigning significance to form one could give a formal account of content. Using the example of medieval verse romance, he argues that form is ideologically overdetermined.[16] An influential essay by Hans Robert Jauss brilliantly sidesteps the 'form'/'content' dichotomy altogether to define genre as a 'horizon of expectation'.[17] Most literary production falls within the expected horizon; but the cultural horizon, like the terrestrial one, moves

when we do and is therefore constantly challenged and displaced. Jauss's great strengths are his recognition of dynamism and change, and the value he accords to 'limit' texts that stretch existing paradigms. The most radical contribution to the debate over genre was made by Paul Zumthor, who dismissed the concept as unproductive for the French Middle Ages and instead substituted the term 'register'.[18] Register is a discourse that combines lexical and semantic features as much as purely formal ones (such as rhyme); different registers constitute different kinds of texts, much as classical and medieval rhetoricians distinguished between the high, middle, and low styles. Zumthor finds an ally in Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom what characterizes medieval literature is not the purity or fixity of forms, but their hybridity. For Bakhtin, medieval texts characteristically consist of fragments of competing discourses cited from earlier texts.[19] They are thus precursors of the novel as Bakhtin envisages it.

Each of the four chapters in this section of the *Companion* adopts a distinctive approach to genre. Chapter 9 confirms the fluidity of generic boundaries in the Old French period, pointing to the hybridity of texts such as *Ami et Amile* and *Huon de Bordeaux*, and suggesting how readers' perceptions of genre could have been shaped by the organization and selection of individual manuscript compilations. Later medieval self-consciousness about lyric is examined in Chapter 10, which shows how fixed-form lyrics such as the *ballade* and *rondeau* developed from the thirteenth century onwards, involving adherence to predetermined patterns of repetition that are discussed in quasi-scientific terms. Chapters 11 and 12 experiment with ways of conceiving genre that do not involve form or language, Chapter 11 by taking theatricality as a model for considering the role of spectatorship in various short comic tales together with the texts' own potential as spectacle, Chapter 12 by focusing on the social and political interaction implicit in medieval theatre.

What is certain is that any account of genre in medieval French literature needs to be able to explain not just the persistence of recognizable codes or forms, but also the constant emergence of the new. Innovation, whether it took the form of shifting the horizon (in Jauss's terms), or contriving some new hybrid (Bakhtin), was the key to success with patrons and audiences (see Chapter 9). Medieval French writers were constantly inventing new literary forms: from verse romance to prose romance, from the *dit* to the *dit amoureux*, from the *grand chant courtois* to the *formes fixes*, whether we call them 'genres' or not. What was the relation between such changes and historical conditions? Interdependence between literary and social activity forms the main thrust of the study of theatre in Chapter 12, paving the way for the next section.

How can we read medieval French literature historically?

The success of French literary culture over such a long period owes much to the historical context in which it was produced, and which inevitably inflected its course. The increase in textual production in French from *c.*1150 was undoubtedly linked to a marked increase in literacy. The initial impetus for this was pragmatic: as the English monarchy (initially under Henry II), then the French (under Philippe Auguste) sought to centralize power, writing was increasingly used to keep accounts and records.[20] Other determining factors include the prosperity of regional courts; the concomitant growth of courtly and chivalric culture; the monarchy's rivalry with regional magnates as it progressively asserted its control; a high level of intellectual activity, initially in church schools and later in universities, particularly Paris which was a European beacon from the thirteenth century onwards; the rapid growth of urban communities avid both for entertainment of their own and for a share in the glamorous culture of the courts; travel, including crusade and pilgrimage, both of which led as much to cultural exchanges as religious development, often enriching their participants materially as much as spiritually. Such factors not only fostered the production of literary texts but also made up much of their content.

To what extent, then, do texts reflect historical circumstance? The chapters in this section of the *Companion* directly address four crucial fields in which this question is posed: the domains of government (Chapter 13), religion and the church (Chapter 14), sex and marriage (Chapter 15), and relations with other cultures (Chapter 16). But the traces of historical issues are legible in other chapters: Holy War and relations with Islam in the *Chanson de Roland* (Chapter 1); love and chivalry in different ways in the Vulgate cycle (Chapter 2) and the romances of Chrétien (Chapter 5); pilgrimage and crusade in the texts associated with the Châtelain de Couci (Chapter 6); sexual and class difference in short comic tales (Chapter 11); clerical and lay experience in the *Roman de la rose* (Chapter 3); and, as already noted, in medieval theatre (Chapter 12).

Although occasionally practical matters can be documented in literature (such as knighting ceremonial or methods of combat), overwhelmingly literary texts reflect not so much material events as people's ideas, desires, or anxieties; as a result they influence their historical environment as much as they mirror it. This is especially true of the mutual interference between courtly milieus and the ideology of courtly literature. The emergence of a refined literary model of love (*fine amour*, from the Occitan *fin'amor*, often termed 'courtly love') first in the courts of Occitania and later in France, where it fused with ideas of chivalry, is widely regarded as one of the great

paradigm shifts in western European sensibility. Treated with a bizarre combination of fervour and irony by medieval writers, the themes of love and chivalry have excited controversy over the extent to which they are literary fictions or social practices, debates that have often been paralyzed by naive assumptions about literature merely reflecting a 'reality' which in fact it helps to shape, and of which it is therefore part. Chapter 15 indicates a way of avoiding these pitfalls by looking for evidence of fissures between marriage as represented in medieval texts, the desires it appears to serve, and the desires that may find expression outside the institution of wedlock.

Among medieval historians, those of the French Annales school have been the most successful at exploiting literary texts as sources, thanks to their recourse to the concept of the 'imaginary': the recognition that literary texts map a world of mental images (and not directly a set of material conditions) subscribed to by their authors and audiences.[21] The most important of these medievalists, Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby, have fruitfully explored the domains of feudalism, knighthood, love and marriage, religious belief, and many other topics, using literary texts in ways that are often of immediate value to literary scholars.[22]

Another successful, though contrasting, approach is the Marxist methodology developed by the German scholar Erich Köhler. Köhler used contradictions in medieval texts as a means of progressing beyond their depiction of conscious ('imaginary' or 'ideological') thoughts to the political and economic conflicts that they masked, most notably in his book on Chrétien de Troyes.[23] If Marxist-inspired criticism has most commonly been addressed to romance, Peter Haidu's iconoclastic study of the *Chanson de Roland* is an important exception,[24] while reading medieval French texts as 'political fictions' is an approach that has been fruitfully applied more broadly.[25] Chapter 13 draws on this tradition to show how economic realities are partially concealed, partially revealed in literary representations of government. This chapter also demonstrates how, in addition, individuals' desires are often in contradiction with the institutions within which they ostensibly operate. A similar conclusion is reached in Chapter 15 which, like Chapter 11, shows the continuing influence of the feminist criticism that flowered in the 1980s and 1990s in the English-speaking world. Like the Marxist-oriented criticism on which they drew, feminist readings influentially revised the received, male-dominated, perception of most medieval texts, using literary analysis as a means of 'demystifying' representations, though in this instance so as to discern the power relations of sex and gender that underlie them.[26] As a result of the rearticulation of Lacanian theory by Slavoj Žižek, a Marxist slant also informs much recent psychoanalytic criticism, thereby making

it far more historically engaged than previous writings by the likes of Jean-Charles Huchet and Charles Méla.[27]

The rise in the anglophone world in the 1970s of New Historicism was responsible for theorizing the relation between history and literature in a new way. R. Howard Bloch produced a series of ground-breaking studies all premised on the illuminating potential of homology (the analogy between structures), an intellectual strategy repudiated by traditional Marxists.[28] In his first book, medieval literature and law are shown to be reciprocally related, forensic procedures (for example) favouring deposition over combat just as narrative became more circumstantial and less focused on action.[29] This strategy of seeking out a dialogue between social or political discourses and literary ones has been pursued by Bloch himself and also, with *éclat*, by other North American scholars.[30]

Currently, perhaps, some of the most forward-looking work relating French medieval literature to the social and political circumstances of its production has been done under the aegis of post-colonial or queer theory.[31] Although there are many kinds of theoretical assumption at work in these approaches, they are united by their interest in recuperating the marginal and the occluded from the hegemonic. Chapters 15 and 16 explore how medieval French literature represents (and thereby includes) desires and figures that the period's dominant cultural forces apparently seek to repress. As we see in Chapter 15, literary texts seem open to a range of sexual desires, identities, and practices that do not sit easily with the somewhat restricted and restrictive models of medieval sexuality and marriage propagated by the church; similarly, we learn in Chapter 16 that medieval French texts are often more open to otherness than they might at first seem, blurring the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' as characters cross over confusingly and freely between the supernatural and natural worlds (sometimes grounding the latter troublingly in the former), or between the Christian and Saracen faiths, thereby unsettling what is often taken to be one of the most rigid oppositions of medieval culture.

We should note one further way of seeing a connection between vernacular literary production and its historical context, namely through intellectual history. What is at stake here is not the relation between a literary representation and a political or social 'reality', but the continuity (or discontinuity) between literary discourse and other forms of thought, such as rhetoric, philosophy, or theology. A pioneering, if now discredited, version of this approach was the criticism of D. W. Robertson, a giant of English studies who also wrote extensively about French, and who maintained (for example) that the literature of courtly love was so incompatible with orthodox Christian belief that it could not be taken at face value.[32] But the study

of medieval thinking remains an extremely fertile way of seeing how literary texts – which were after all often written by educated men, by clerks and sometimes even by priests – continue in an imaginative arena the intellectual problems and debates of their age. Thus the pervasiveness in the Middle Ages of philosophical traditions deriving from Plato, Aristotle, or the Stoics illumines many important studies of medieval French texts, though such studies often diverge in how receptive they are to modern theory as well as medieval thought.[33] By exploring the relationship between lay and clerical interests, Chapter 14 illumines the ideological intentions of medieval saints' lives and conjectures on their appeal especially to women readers, given women's exclusion from the clergy. That the life of one particular woman reader, Christina of Markyate, was so deeply influenced by the *Vie de Saint Alexis* graphically illustrates how medieval French literature has impacted on history, as well as the other way round.

These, then, are the problems and issues explored in this *Companion*. It is not a literary history, and although within individual sections most chapters are ordered chronologically there is no overall chronological trajectory. What we seek to offer, rather, is an agenda for students and teachers of medieval French literature, and hopefully too for further research. This agenda is not grounded in a single approach; indeed the approaches adopted in some chapters contrast noticeably to those adopted in others. We wish to foster, not finesse, such differences. We have also taken a conscious decision not to make extensive use of 'theory' in this volume, even though our own publications, and those of many of our contributors, are at the theoretical end of the spectrum of medieval French studies, and even though theoretical assumptions (for instance about intertextuality, authorship, gender, genre, class, race, and so on) are implicit in *all* the chapters. What we want to show, by foregrounding above all the rich and varied textual traditions in medieval French, is that they elicit and encourage a variety of approaches in and of themselves.

Notes

1. See W. D. Elcock, *The Romance Languages*, 2nd edn (London, Faber, 1975).
2. See S. Fleischman, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* (London, Routledge, 1990).
3. For an account of the emergence of France and its fluid borders in the earlier period, see J. Dunbabin, *France in the Making 843–1180* (Oxford University Press, 1985).
4. On the relation between Latinate culture and medieval romance vernacular traditions, see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

5. On the emergence of prose in French, see particularly G. M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: the Rise of Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Oxford, California University Press, 1993).

6. For a summary, see S. Gaunt, *Retelling the Tale: an Introduction to Medieval French Literature* (London, Duckworth, 2001).

7. See S. Fleischman, 'Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse of the Medieval Text', *Speculum*, 64 (1990), 19–37; S. Marnette, *Narrateur et points de vue dans la littérature française médiévale* (Bern, Peter Lang, 1998).

8. See A. Foulet and M. B. Speer, *On Editing Old French Texts* (Lawrence, KS, The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), pp. 1–39.

9. B. Cerquiglini, *L'Eloge de la variante: histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris, Seuil, 1989).

10. See J. Still and M. Worton (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1990).

11. On compilations, see in particular S. Huot, *From Song to Book: the Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative* Poetry (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987) and K. Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscripts*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2002).

12. On the general phenomenon of cyclicity, see S. Sturm-Maddox and D. Maddox (eds.), *Transtextualities: of Cycles and Cyclicity in Medieval French Literature* Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Binghamton, NY, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1996).

13. See D. McGrady, 'What Is a Patron? Benefactors and Authorship in Harley 4431, Christine de Pizan's Collected Works', in M. Desmond (ed.), *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference* (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1998), pp. 195–214.

14. See W. Spiewok, 'La division en genres à l'intérieur du récit bref. Pour une typologie du récit bref au Moyen âge', in *Le récit bref au Moyen âge. Actes du colloque des 8 et 9 mai 1988* (Amiens, Centre d'études médiévales, Université de Picardie, 1989), pp. 151–67.

15. Charles F. Altman, 'Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Medieval Saints' Lives', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 6 (1975), 1–11.

16. F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York, Methuen, 1981).

17. H. R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1982).

18. P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), pp. 239–43.

19. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austen, University of Texas Press, 1981).

20. M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edition (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993); see also H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: an Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge, W. H. Heffer, 1945).

21. As enshrined in Georges Duby's title, *Les Trois Ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978).

22. For example, J. Le Goff, *Les Intellectuels au moyen âge* (Paris, Seuil, 1976); G. Duby, *Le Chevalier, la femme et le prêtre* (Paris, Hachette, 1981).

23. E. Köhler, *L'Aventure chevaleresque: Idéal et réalité dans le roman courtois*, trans. Eliane Kaufholz (Paris, Gallimard, 1974).

24. P. Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: the Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993).

25. S. Kay, *The Chansons de geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

26. E.g. E. J. Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press); S. Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); R. L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); H. Solterer, *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in Medieval French Culture* (Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1995).

27. See, for example, J.-Ch. Huchet, *Le Roman médiéval* (Paris, PUF, 1984) and *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse: pour une clinique littéraire* (Paris, PUF, 1990), and C. Méla, *La Reine et le graal: la conjointure dans les romans du Graal de Chrétien de Troyes au livre de Lancelot* (Paris, Seuil, 1984). Post-Žižekian psychoanalytic criticism includes S. Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford University Press, 2003); S. Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford University Press, 2006); S. Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: the Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford University Press, 2001).

28. See the attack on analogy by Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, pp. 1–101.

29. R. H. Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley, California University Press, 1977).

30. Especially R. H. Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: a Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1983); but also K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), and P. McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

31. See for example W. Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and S. Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

32. D. W. Robertson, *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1980).

33. See, for example, D. Heller-Roazen, *Fortune's Faces: the* Romance of the Rose *and the Poetics of Contingency* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); T. Hunt, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain* (London, Grant and Cutler, 1986); Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*; S. Nichols, *Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983); E. Vance, *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1987).