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Reflections on Periodization: the case for late medieval French literature

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My colleagues focus on large issues of periodization in their contributions, some on global issues, some on European; in this piece I offer a very small case study to illustrate one of the problems of modern schemas for literary historians, which is that they obscure things that should be more widely appreciated. In this brief reflection, I focus on the mid to late fifteenth-century enthusiasm for representing conflicting, frequently gendered, viewpoints, often through the device of the framed narrative. This is not to claim that subjectivity, whatever that is, developed in late medieval France, or that the world suddenly became modern then. Still, during the late French Middle Ages, which tends to disappear between the so-called High Middle Ages and Renaissance, wonderfully complex emotional portraits begin to emerge from works that depict multiple perspectives, and the lack of attention accorded to the phenomenon seems like a loss, especially for historians interested in the emotions and/or the *Querelles des femmes*.

No academic today would characterize the late French Middle Ages as "a hole between the riches of the Middle Ages and the splendors of the Renaissance" or even as a period of transition rather than "an independent literary epoch."[1] And yet, French departments in English speaking universities continue to ignore the period to a large extent. The Middle Ages in general are hardly popular today, but the latter half of the French fifteenth century seems especially undervalued, and the rich body of scholarship countering the perception has done little to dislodge it. Space does not allow a discussion of the historical reasons for this invisibility except to note that there is nothing self-evident about a massively significant sixteenth-century French Renaissance overshadowing the decades leading up to it. Popular historian and politician François Guizot, among others, regarded the French Renaissance as a sorry lead-up to the seventeenth century. Similar, nineteenth-century school curricula offer few examples from the Middle Ages, but even fewer for the sixteenth-century. Montaigne alone often represented the Renaissance with attention focused instead on the *Grand siècle*.[2]

The modern emphasis on the Renaissance obscures the development that I would like to explore, creating the appearance that a work like Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptaméron*, with its beautifully ambivalent tales and the complicated and sometime confounding reactions they

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[1] Gustave Lanson and Paul Truffrau, *Manuel illustré d'histoire de la littérature française des origines à l'époque contemporaine*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1953; first published in 1923), 1: 71; Karl Voretzsch, *Introduction to the Study of Old French Literature* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1976; originally published 1931), 464-65.

[2] See the yearly *Bulletin administratif du Ministère de l'instruction publique*, which lays out lycée curricula and many of which are easily available on-line through various sources. For example, vol. 58 for 1895 shows that for the classe de seconde, the *Chanson de Roland*, the chroniclers Villehardouin, Joinville, Froissart, and Commynes, along with an anthology of medieval literature, were covered for the Middle Ages, followed by Montaigne alone for the Renaissance. *Bulletin administratif du Ministère de l'instruction publique* 58 (1895): 279-280.

produce in the work's diegetic audience, emerged out of nowhere. But the frame narrative, the well-developed tale within the well-developed tale, that is, a discrete imaginary world set within another discrete imaginary world, acquires a high level of sophistication already in the fifteenth century. In its earliest versions, the form offers rich opportunities for representing gendered social heteroglossia, that is, the contradictions that characterized popular attitudes about women.

All literature is in some sense framed because all stories include an author figure, even if only implied or paratextual. As for explicit frame stories, the device is ancient: *The Thousand and One Nights* and the *Odyssey* are just two of the best-known examples. The device can be perceived in various forms in "high" medieval France, as well. For example, a thirteenth-century miscellany, copied by a single hand, known today as manuscript français 19152 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, establishes in the manuscript's introductory collection, the "Le Chastoiement que li Peres ensaigne a son Filz" (The Father's Correction of his Son"), a strong narrative voice that acts as a framing device for the stories of that collection but also seems to carry over into the following stories. In other words, the manuscript as a whole seems guided by the father's voice even after it vanishes. The tendency to frame becomes stronger in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, as Jean-Claude Mühlenthaler and Delphine Burghgraeve recently discussed in their collection, *Un territoire à géographie variable: La communication littéraire au temps de Charles VI*. A relatively precise terminology for discussing authorship along with a growing consciousness of authorial individuality comes into its own during these years. In works like Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir Dit* (ca. 1362), Philippe de Mézières's *Songe du Vieil Pèlerin* (1389), or Christine de Pizan *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), all explicit frame stories, the author figure constructed in the first-level narrative is identical with a well-known character in the second-level narrative and participates in the action taking place within the world of that story.

But these author figures do not reflect on, conceal or problematize the motivations of their second-level narrative selves, nor do they challenge readers to critically reconsider the words of other characters in their second-level stories. In contrast, in stories like the French translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Christine de Pizan's *Book of the Duke of True Lovers*, or Antoine de la Sale's *Petit Jean de Saintré*, the multi-author *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, and many others, the author figure makes use of a framing device to offer psychological insights: to push the reader to tease out emotions or blind spots that remain implicit in the text, to create meaning out of the "non-dit." In these cases, an author figure relates a story in which the characters in the second-level narrative relate still another story-within-a-story, to create a third-level narrative, and, in each case, the interplay among the author figure and characters in the other narrative levels problematizes the motivations of certain characters, particularly where a diegetic audience of characters listens to a story and comments on it among themselves.

In Laurent de Premierfait's 1414 translation of the *Decameron*, which Premierfait translated into French from a Latin translation of the original Italian, the author figure Boccaccio explains that he has been told of seven young women and three young men gathered in a villa outside of Florence to escape the plague. To pass the time they decide to tell stories, which often arouse conflicting interpretations. The storytelling comes to an end on the tenth day with the tenth tale of patient Griselda, possibly the most confounding story of female virtue ever created. The tale is "blamed and praised diversely" by the listeners, according to Premierfait's translation (and Bocaccio's original). Griselda, paragon of obedience, represents the extreme case of one vision of feminine perfection iterated by some of the story

tellers, but the brutal treatment that she suffers at the hands of her husband, the Marquis, arouses mixed emotions, and the tale's placement among the others, which gives it the last word, suggests that the audience valued equivocation. Although the interaction among the storytellers is not as developed as that of the *Heptaméron*, the comments of the young people throughout indicate that meanings emerge from comparing the stories. Even the translation's subtitle, *Le Prince Galeot*, with its allusion to Lancelot and Guinivere's equivocal go-between and concomitant gesture to Dante's Francesca and Paolo, warns the reader of coming arguments over the meaning of the stories to follow.

To return to Christine de Pizan, we find her using a third-level narrative to represent a lady thrown into a moral crisis in the *Livre du Duc des vrais amans*. First, the narratorial strategy in this story of a failed love affair is complicated because Christine, the author figure, presents herself as the unwilling teller of a tale she has been asked to recount by the "Duc des vrays amoureux" and proceeds to recount a tale through a series of lyric poems and short prose works presumably authored by a duke and the lady whose love he wins. The pieces seem to glorify love, at least up until the very last distressed lyrics, where the lady and the duke describe their falling-out. Throughout the course of their amorous negotiations, we cannot tell which of the characters' voices should be read as authoritative. The complexity is all the greater because part way through the narrative, the lady's lady, Sebille de la Tour, intervenes with a prose letter setting up a third-level narrative in which she warns the lady against ruining her reputation. The juxtaposition of these two assessments of the lady's unbridled desire make for a complex picture. True, Sebille's warning motivates the lady to write to the duke to tell him that she has regained her reason and does not want to see him anymore. And yet, victim of her desire, she quickly summons him back. The story, which ends in disaster, reveals a nuanced vision of the psychology and physiology of desire.

An especially interesting example occurs in Antoine de la Sale's *Petit Jean de Saintré*, where the title character exposes the duplicity of his erstwhile lady love by recounting a tale of a false woman in front of a courtly audience including the lady in question. Antoine de la Sale introduces his work, setting up the first-level narrative. The story of Jean de Saintré forms the second level. The third is the story recounted by Jean, which, like Sebille's letter, complicates the lady's understanding of herself by confronting her with a set of motives that had not been present to her own experience of herself.

The enthusiasm for presenting multiple points of view correlates chronologically with the elaboration and reconciliation of fundamentally irreconcilable attitudes toward women in the unofficial office of female regency. Women were prohibited from acceding to the throne but, at the same time, asked to rule as regents. Although female regency would eventually be recognized as such—Marie de Médicis, for example is named "regent"—two prominent fifteenth-century women, queen Isabeau of Bavaria (ca. 1370-1435) and princess Anne of France (1461-1522), guardians of young kings, were called on to rule, unofficially, without the title of regent. In the network of documents related to these unofficial regencies—royal ordinances, chronicles, the journal of the Estates General held in Tours in 1484—stereotypical charges of the sort common in clerical literature, such as female weakness, vanity, fickleness, and incompetence, are countered by positive images of the mother (or in the case of Anne of France, sister) single-mindedly devoted to her children and of women as full partners with their husbands in administering estates and businesses. The paradoxical formulation of female regency, that is, of women ruling without officially ruling, substituting for a husband, father or brother, resolved some of the contradictions. To manage such a role a woman required self-knowledge and the ability to read other people. In a conduct book

written for her daughter, Susanne, Anne of France advises the young woman to be on the lookout for those who will try to destroy her, in particular, "dishonest and evil nobles" who come from "good families and have a large following." The company of such people may be pleasant, but Susanne must avoid them, because associating with them is too perilous. She needs to keep one step ahead of such people: "wise men say that you should have eyes to notice everything yet to see nothing, ears to hear everything yet to know nothing, and a tongue to answer everyone yet to say nothing prejudicial to anyone…"[3]

The period also sees the emergence of the *Querelle des femmes*. Returning to my opening point, that late medieval France is a period of particular interest for historians of the emotions and the *Querelle des femmes*, fifteenth-century French literature broadly speaking offers clues as to how women managed their reputation and emotional well-being among social actors who both denigrated them and demanded their skills. Writings associated with the *Querelle des femmes* are particularly interesting in this regard. Literary historians generally credit Christine de Pizan with opening the quarrel when she attacks Jean de Meun's misogyny in the debate over the *Roman de la rose*; the fight continues in works like Alain Chartier's *Querelle de la Belle Dame sans mercy* (1424), Martin le Franc's *Le Champion des dames* (1440–2) and Pierre Michault's *Le Procès d'honneur féminin* (after 1461). Each of these works offers lively, often allegorical, characters who defend women. Helen J. Swift, in *Gender, Writing, and Performance: Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France, 1440-1538,* has shown the intertextual communication of these popular texts.[4] In *Debate and Dialogue: Alain Chartier in his Cultural Context,* Emma Cayley has shown that such debates were poetic competitions, bringing prestige to their authors, as well as discussions of love and female reputation,[5] but, whatever the primary intention, the authors offer ways of thinking positively about women. True, the individual female figures that emerge from these works are often ambivalently or even contradictorily drawn, but the complex depictions signal a genuine change over earlier female characters.

This literature dramatizing conflict between the sexes and acknowledging that men and women possess complicated emotional lives, as well as senses of morality that differ depending on who they are, arose amidst a throng of exceptionally significant cultural developments. In addition to female regency, we see the emergence of printing, increased access to classical literature, the beginning of the great witch hunts, the reconciliation between the dauphin and Philip of Burgundy and subsequent final ejection of the English from France, a geographically expanded French kingdom, and new understandings of kingship.

Moreover, this is the period of the initial evolution of linear perspective. Developing during roughly the same years, linear perspective and stories eliciting multiple viewpoints presupposed an observer situated in a particular location, that is, a cognizant human being with a viewpoint. As Leon Battista Alberti noted, the human eye is the unifying logic behind an image constructed perspectivally, writing in a frequently-cited passage: "First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen."[6] The appearance

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[3] Anne of France, *Lessons for my Daughter*, trans. Sharon L. Jansen (Suffolk, England: DS Brewer, 2004), 34.
[4] Helen J. Swift, in *Gender, Writing, and Performance: Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France, 1440-1538* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[5] Emma Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue: Alain Chartier in his Cultural Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
[6] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of "De Pittura" and "De Statua*," trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), 54-55.

of things and their meanings become relative, productions of individual consciousness. Linear perspective is systematically laid out for the first time in France in 1505 in a printed book on architecture, Jean Pélerin's *De Artificiali perspectiva*, but it would have been known earlier to painters visiting Italy.

That fifteenth-century France is not better known—that it is not the best-known pre-modern period!—is an accident, the effect of periodization, of its being wedged between the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The effect persists, particularly in the English-speaking world, undoubtedly maintained at least partly by Johan Huizinga's perennially popular *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*. First published in 1919 and in print ever since, the beloved study recounts a downward trajectory in which the High Middle Ages, a time of new ideas and mutually adequate form and content, gives way to the Late Middle Ages, when forms became outdated and empty, stultifying the spirit of the time. Huizinga envisioned the late Middle Ages yielding to the Renaissance in just such a way. In *Autumntide*, for example, he elaborates his argument that the Van Eycks represented the final agony of an expiring period. By the late fifteenth century, he claims, form "threatens to overrun the content, and prevents it from rejuvenating." The content in the art of the Van Eycks, he continues, is entirely medieval; it is incapable of innovating.

> It does not express new thoughts. It is an extreme, an end point. The medieval system of concepts had been fully built up to heaven; all that could be added was some colour and embellishment.[7]

Medieval forms, he concludes, had extended as far as they could go. They were completely exhausted.

Scholars have worked to revise the impression, but the practical difficulty of obtaining texts of late-fifteenth-century works or concise and vibrant introductions in English to the period for teaching demonstrate the strength of periodization and show that this period has fared very badly under the schema in place.

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[7] Johan Huizinga, *Autumntide of the Middle Ages,* ed. Graeme Small and Anton van der Lem, trans. Diane Webb (Leiden: Leiden University Press in 2020), 398.