

f27. French language and literature in the Middle Ages

Sophie Marnette

27.1 The development and specificities of medieval French literature

Considered the first text in early Old French (OF), the *Strasbourg Oaths* (842) were inserted in Nithard's Latin chronicle of the feud between Charlemagne's grandsons and conserved in a tenth-century manuscript.¹ In his text, Nithard quoted the oaths of Louis the German and Charles the Bald against their brother Lothario, with the backing of their respective armies. Having decided to divide the empire in two, the brothers symbolically swore in the vernacular representing the territory of the other (Gallo-Romance for the Western part and Germanic for the Eastern one) while their followers made oaths in the vernacular linked to their own territories. As such the *Strasbourg Oaths* (842) constitute a political 'monument' not a literary text *per se* although they were inserted in an historiographical text.² The *Sequence of Saint Eulalia* (c. 880-2) is the first literary text conserved in Early Old French (EOF), a 29-line poem recounting the life and martyrdom of Saint Eulalia (Ayres-Bennett 1996: 31-9).³ It was composed at the Abbey of Saint-Amand when the relics of the saint were brought to the abbey, and is found in a manuscript with a Latin sequence on the same subject and a Germanic poem celebrating a contemporary military victory. Alongside these first two texts, a handful of other texts have survived, all connected to religion, including bilingual notes for a sermon on Jonah (between 937 and 952), the *Vie de Saint Léger* (c. 1000), and the earliest version of the *Vie de Saint Alexis* (c. 1050) in the Saint Albans Psalter.

It is only from the twelfth century onward that the production of literary texts in the vernacular increased, although earlier texts might have existed in an oral form.⁴ We are quite

¹ See Cerquiglini (1991); Ayres-Bennett (1996: 16-30); Duval (2009: 27-9). Scholars generally distinguish between EOF (mid ninth to eleventh centuries), OF (twelfth and thirteenth centuries), and Middle French ('MidF', fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). The latter is sometimes envisaged as including part of the sixteenth century (see Smith 2002 for an exhaustive discussion).

² The oaths are also heavily influenced by Latin judicial formulae. These and other Latinisms found in the text made its language closer to Gallo-Romance than to OF (see also Chapter 4, this volume). The recently-published *Grande grammaire historique du français (GGHF)* (Marchello-Nizia and Combettes 2020: 57) uses the term 'très ancien français' for the language of the text.

³ Again here, the presence of Latinisms in the text possibly due to its religious nature kept it close to Gallo-Romance, hence its inclusion under EOF rather than OF (see also Chapter 4, this volume).

⁴ Zumthor (1987: 18-19) coined the term 'semi-oralité' ('semi-orality') for the Middle Ages, i.e. a society where the written medium exists but where orality still dominates, an intermediary position between the orality of societies lacking literacy and that of societies where writing is socially essential. On orality in medieval French literature, see also Zumthor (1984); Vitz (1999); Gaunt (2001); Cazal et al. (2020: 501-2). On the paucity of texts before the twelfth century see amongst others Lusignan (2012: 49-52).

sure for example that early versions of *chansons de geste* (sung epic poems) like the *Chanson de Roland* existed well before they were written down in manuscripts.⁵

By way of brief description, medieval French literature may be divided into four broad categories: verse narratives, prose narratives, theatre, and lyric poetry.⁶ Verse and prose narratives ranged from outwardly serious texts, e.g. short courtly stories mainly known as *lais* (in octosyllabic lines) and longer narratives including *chansons de geste* (sung epic poetry in decasyllabic lines), hagiographies, and courtly verse romances (in octosyllabic lines) or prose ones, to more frivolous and/or anecdotal short texts such as *fabliaux* (short bawdy narratives in octosyllabic lines), or later prose *nouvelles*. Vernacular theatre is believed to have originated in paraliturgical celebrations associated with the church but while it developed into serious plays such as *miracles*, *mystères*, and *moralités*, these were composed alongside much less serious plays such as Jehan Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (c. 1200) and Adam de La Halle's *Jeu de la Feuillée* (c. 1262), as well as fourteenth-to-fifteenth-century *farces* and *soties*. Lyric poetry originated both from Latin poetry and from the poetry composed in Occitan by the troubadours in the southern part of France.⁷ While a large part of the lyric poetry celebrates love and/or religion,⁸ poems could also veer towards more mundane preoccupations as was the case with poets such as Rutebeuf (thirteenth century) and Villon (fifteenth century). Historical texts existed both in verse and prose forms and they varied from vast historical texts in the form of romances or *chansons de geste* to chronicles focused on more specific events or historical figures—e.g. versions of the *Prise de Constantinople* by Villehardouin and Robert de Clari composed early in the thirteenth century, Joinville's *Vie de Saint Louis* written early in the fourteenth century, Froissart's *Chroniques* (fourteenth century), or Commines' *Mémoires* (fifteenth century).

Some literary genres did not survive after the Middle Ages or substantially evolved throughout, especially as the use of prose overtook the narrative forms in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, e.g. *chansons de geste*, verse romances, *lais*, *fabliaux*, etc. Furthermore,

⁵ For example, between the actual battle of Roncesvals in 778 CE, which the *Chanson de Roland* draws on, and the oldest version conserved (composed at the end of the eleventh century and kept in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 23 dating from 1140-70), medievalists have uncovered earlier documents mentioning the story or its characters, while the names of Roland and his friend Olivier were found to be given consistently to pairs of brothers early in the eleventh century.

⁶ For introductions in English to medieval French literature, see Zink (1995); Gaunt (2001); Kay (2003); Gaunt and Kay (2008); Cerquiglini-Toulet (2011).

⁷ As explained in 27.2 and n.17, Occitan dialects developed in the southern part of France, separately from the Oïl dialects from which Modern French emerged. See also Chapter 15, this volume.

⁸ Poets did use religious language to talk about love and woo their ladies, while courtly language was used to celebrate the Virgin Mary. For example, poetry competitions called *puy*s organised by societies in northern towns of France required poets to use fixed poetic forms such as *ballades* and *rondeaux* to praise the Virgin Mary.

the distinction between genres and their motivations was not as clear cut as some modern medievalists think nor did they replicate the strict distinctions used for our modern period. It is for example not always easy to distinguish between so-called courtly *lais* and supposedly uncourtly *fabliaux*, even when the texts identified themselves as *lais* and *fabliaux*.⁹ Moreover, some texts were not only meant to entertain their audience but were also highly didactic, often significantly blurring the lines that we would now draw between literary fiction, religious beliefs, and historical facts.¹⁰ This is especially the case with long prose texts such as the *Histoire Ancienne jusqu'à César* (thirteenth century) or the *Fets des romains* (thirteenth century), which purported to offer vast encyclopaedic sums of knowledge that encompassed all the great periods of humanity from the Bible to Rome.¹¹

Medieval French literature exhibited specific features that distinguish it from later literature:

- *Scriptae*: most texts came to us written in a language containing a majority of interdialectal forms alongside specific dialectal features (see 27.2).
- Medium: most of the early texts were in verse as vernacular prose texts mostly appeared from the thirteenth century on.
- Complex link with orality: vernacular literature was originally fully or partially oral, i.e. orally composed and/or transmitted, and/or performed (see 27.4). Even when verse texts were written down, they could also be transmitted orally and be performed from memory (sung for epics and lyric poetry or recited for romances, *lais*, and *fabliaux*).¹² Prose texts were usually read aloud for an audience until the development of silent reading, from the fourteenth century.
- Issues of Authorship: many medieval texts were anonymous, especially the early texts and/or those transmitted orally. Even when authors were named, we know extremely little about them and the names might in some cases not refer to the people who originally composed the story but to those who composed a later 'updated' version of

⁹ Some *lais* did offer adultery plots that were fairly close to those found in *fabliaux* and some *fabliaux* did portray noble characters like the *lais* (Lacy 1993). The term *dit* designated a variety of short verse texts, ranging from the didactic and comic (including *fabliaux*) to more personal first-person narratives, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

¹⁰ On the difficulty of distinguishing between history and fiction in medieval French literature, see Fleischman (1983); Marnette (2005: 197-204); Gaunt (2015: 26, 43); Gilbert et al. (2020: 20).

¹¹ For a study of these historical texts, see Gilbert et al. (2020: 122) and the website for the project on *Values of French Language and Literature in the European Middle Ages* (<https://tvof.ac.uk> accessed 6 Aug. 2022). Other prose romances such as the prose *Tristan* or the *Roman de Perceforest* did present themselves as *estoire* (history) or *chronique* (chronicle).

¹² See Rey et al. (2013: 157-68); Guillot-Barbance et al. (2017: 54-5); Siouffi (2020: 122-4).

it, or transposed it from Latin into the French vernacular, or transposed it from verse to prose. As we will see, texts and manuscripts widely circulated both inside and outside of the Kingdom of France and there were often several versions of the same story written in different manuscripts by different scribes and at different times. Many texts originally composed in the twelfth century came to us in later manuscripts. There were therefore several authors along the chain of textual transmission from the original composer to the most recent scribe.

- ‘Mouvance’: The perambulatory nature of texts and manuscripts across medieval time and space explained their ‘mouvance’, i.e. their variation,¹³ as multiple versions of the same text showed the re-appropriation of the text from performance to performance and from copy to copy in a culture where the notion of author was very different from the modern Western one. These variations could be merely graphic and/or phonetic but sometimes also entailed deeper changes both in terms of linguistic form and/or the storyline (Marchello-Nizia et al. 2020: 504, 516).

The above characteristics impacted the language found in the literary texts and thus what we might know about medieval French. For example, the fact that most texts were in verse before the thirteenth century impacted their syntax. It is not absolutely clear to what extent the relatively free word order of these texts truly reflected the word order found across the language, spoken or written, or was a product of the verse form. We will see that the texts’ link to orality also influenced their syntax and morpho-syntax (27.4). Finally, as already mentioned, the relative lack of author specifications and the perambulatory nature of the manuscripts meant that the language of the texts could exhibit significant variation from manuscript to manuscript but also within the same text, depending on who composed it (where and when), who copied it (where and when), as well as whom it was written for. These diatopic, diastratic, and diamesic dimensions of variation will be explored in 27.2-27.4.

Of great importance is also the fact that vernacular literature existed alongside Latin literature and that the majority of literate men (and some women) first learned how to read and write in Latin.¹⁴ In fact, while *chansons de geste* are believed to have developed from vernacular oral stories about the heroic deeds (Latin *gesta*) of kings and knights (usually from the Carolingian period, and in later texts also from the Crusades), the first verse romances

¹³ The term ‘mouvance’ was originally coined by Zumthor (1972: 507). Also see Cazal et al. (2020: 516). Cerquiglini (1989) uses the term ‘variante’. Note that this ‘mouvance’ was not only geographical but also chronological since early texts were often conserved in later manuscripts (Duval 2009: 33-4).

¹⁴ See Picoche and Marchello-Nizia (1989: 26-8); Lusignan (1999: 138; 2012: 32-8); Gaunt (2001: 16); Gilbert et al. (2020: 10); Siouffi (2020: 76ff, 112).

were literally *the mise en roman*, the transposition into Romance vernacular, of stories that originally existed in Latin (and for some took their origins in Greek mythology), such as the stories of Thebes and Troy, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Their prologues highlighted the historical and philological competence that led their authors to choose the best source for the romances, to translate them, and thus to provide those who were ignorant of Latin with accurate information about the great events of the past. Arthurian romances, while they somewhat turned away from historical material (especially twelfth-century romances such as Chrétien de Troyes'), nonetheless originated from Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* (a history of the Kings of Britain, written around 1136), which introduced King Arthur and was translated by Wace in his *Roman de Brut* (1155).

From the thirteenth century onwards, an increasing number of Latin texts, many of them didactic and scientific, were translated into the vernacular, which had an important impact on the lexicon and the syntax of French in general, especially in the MidF period (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries).¹⁵ By that later period, the increased use of prose in vernacular texts, be they transpositions of earlier verse texts, translations of Latin texts, or new creations altogether by the likes of Alain Chartier or Christine de Pizan, tended to relegate the use of verse to more personal, dialogic, or lyric texts. In effect, MidF prose spanned across a multitude of textual genres including narrative fiction (short *nouvelles* and longer romances) and more argumentative texts which could also be non-fictional (chronicles, political treaties, didactic texts, etc.). Scholars have connected this evolution with a marked complexification of the prose syntax which acquired a more layered structure (Combettes 2020: 1739-44; Ayres-Bennett 1996: 99, 106-7; and see 27.4).

27.2 Diatopic Variation

Diatopic variation is perhaps the most obvious type of variation occurring in medieval literary texts as they circulated via handwritten manuscripts that contained a majority of interdialectal forms alongside specific dialectal features.¹⁶

The medieval period was characterised by a multitude of Romance vernaculars that had emerged from Latin, depending on the original pace of Romanization (i.e. the Southern half of Gaul had been Romanized earlier than the Northern half) as well as on the variety of substrate(s) and superstrate(s) since there had been several Celtic dialects and likewise

¹⁵ For a discussion of the periodisation of Medieval French and of the specificities of MidF vs OF, see Marchello-Nizia (1979:1-7); Ayres-Bennett (1996: 98-9); Price (1998: 7-13); Smith (2002).

¹⁶ See Picoche and Marchello-Nizia (1989: 19-20); Chaurand (1999: 38-9); Duval (2009: 39).

several Germanic ones in the various regions. The Romance vernaculars spoken in the Northern part, in territories now called France and Belgium, can be referred to as ‘Oil dialects’ and in the Southern part, below the Loire river, as ‘Oc dialects’, based on the words used to say ‘yes’ (i.e. *oïl* or *oui* in the North and *oc* in the South).¹⁷ Both groups of dialects were distinguished by specific linguistic features although it is generally acknowledged that the dialectal borders were rather fluid and that there was some level of continuum and intercomprehension both across the two groups and within them.¹⁸ Here, we will consider as ‘French literature’ all texts produced and transmitted in Oil dialects.

It is a matter of debate as to whether the fact that OF manuscripts contained a majority of common forms alongside regional ones reflected a largely artificial written language (i.e. a supra-regional *scripta*), whether it displayed common forms actually circulating across the spoken dialects in the Oil regions, or whether there existed regional *scriptae* linked to particular spoken dialects, some of which became more successful than others, such as the dialect from the area around modern-day Paris.¹⁹ What is certain is that while Paris only became an important economic and intellectual centre in the thirteenth century, Northern regions such as Normandy, Picardy, and Champagne were economically and politically important in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which might explain why most of the texts composed before 1300 were first transmitted in Champenois, Norman, and Picard *scriptae*.

It is also clear that – due to trade and aristocratic alliances – Oil dialects such as Picard and Norman were used not only within Northern France but also in Flanders and the Low

¹⁷ Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentiae* (1304) was the first to distinguish between dialects of Oil (Northern France), of Oc (Southern France), and of Si (Italy), based on their word for *yes*. The two Gallo-romance groups are also referred to as ‘Langue d’Oil area’ and ‘Langue d’Oc area’. There is a third dialectal area, called ‘Franco-provençal’, which mixes dialectal features from the Oil and Oc areas and is situated to the East, between Lyon, Geneva, Savoy, and the Alpine valleys of Northern Italy (Siouffi 2020: 96). However, Duval (2009: 51) notes that these dialects did not reach the same literary status as those of Oil and Oc.

¹⁸ See Picoche and Marchello-Nizia (1989: 18-25); Duval (2009: 39-53); Lusignan (2012: 20-4, 56); Siouffi (2020: 77, 86).

¹⁹ For helpful summaries of these different theories, see amongst others Picoche and Marchello-Nizia (1989: 19-25); Lodge (2004: 71ff); Duval (2009: 39-53); Lusignan (2012: 16-28); Glessgen (2017); Gilbert et al. (2020: 5-10); Siouffi (2020: 77-81, 97-9, 110-11). Research on medieval dialects and *scriptae* is based on the study of charters and other legal documents as well as literary texts (Dees 1985; Dees et al. 1980, 1987). The term ‘francien’ coined by Paris (1889: 475) on the model of Suchier’s term ‘Francisque’ (1888: 727) has been used rather indiscriminately by scholars to refer both to the language spoken in Paris and the Île-de-France area (which would have partly evolved from the merging of common features from the many different dialects spoken by people who had migrated to Paris) and to the *scripta* developed in this region, which like other regional *scriptae* could have been the result of what Glessgen (2017: 355) calls ‘dédialectalisation’ (i.e. the use of a majority of common forms alongside some regional ones). Glessgen (2017: 326-33) further distinguishes the Parisian *scripta* – which he sees as emerging from 1250 – from what has been called ‘central French’. For Glessgen (2017: 385), the latter is a “‘français neutralisé” qui se forme par les processus de copies multiples des textes médiévaux et qui est une variété strictement écrite sans ancrage oral”. Duval (2009: 46) uses the term ‘françois’ instead of ‘francien’, which is also little used in the recent *GGHF* (Marchello-Nizia et al. 2020).

Countries, and in the British Isles.²⁰ In the case of England, this was reinforced by the Norman Conquest in 1066, which embedded an aristocracy and clergy speaking Norman within the territories conquered by William of Normandy.²¹ Butterfield (2007: 200) points to the interconnectedness of English and continental intellectual society observing that Henry II's territorial possessions in the twelfth century far outweighed the possessions of the Capetian kingdom of France: he controlled most of what is now north-west France: Anjou itself, Maine, Normandy, and Brittany, and after marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 he gained great areas of south-west France: Aquitaine and Poitou. Eleanor, who was the granddaughter of Guilhem IX, the first troubadour, and had divorced the King of France Louis VII before marrying Henry II, brought to the English court the refinement of continental culture and literature. Even though the Norman aristocracy actually became anglophone within a few generations after the Norman Conquest, the use of Anglo-Norman in some fields such as literature and the law lasted all through the later Middle Ages. Many of the earliest versions of the texts conserved in manuscripts were written in *scriptae* featuring Anglo-Norman traits. Such is the case for the earliest versions of the *Vie de Saint Alexis* (mid-eleventh century) and the *Chanson de Roland* (early twelfth century), the versions of the *Tristan* romances by Bérout and by Thomas (twelfth century), the *Lais de Marie de France* (twelfth century), and *Eneas* (c. 1155) (Lusignan 2012: 52-3).²²

Italy was also an important centre of literary activity in the Oïl dialects and Gaunt (2015: 28) notes that manuscript production, initially in Genoa, Pisa, and the Veneto, then

²⁰ See amongst others the *Medieval Francophone Literary Culture Outside France* project led by Simon Gaunt (<http://www.medievalfrancophone.ac.uk> accessed 6 August 2022; Gaunt (2015); Morato and Schoenaers (2019); Gilbert et al. (2020)) and the *Values of French Language and Literature in the European Middle Ages* project co-led by Simon Gaunt and Simone Ventura (<https://tvof.ac.uk> accessed 6 Aug. 2022). Also see Siouffi (2020: 96). In the apt words of Gilbert et al. (2020: 11-4): 'The use of French in the Middle Ages was not coterminous with the borders of modern France'; 'Linguistic borders in the Middle Ages did not coincide with either modern or medieval political borders'; and 'French was deeply, though differently, embedded in parts of Europe where it was not an indigenous language'. For more specific studies, see Lusignan (2012) on Picard; Butterfield (2009); Trotter (2003, 2013); and Wogan-Brown (2013) on Anglo-Norman.

²¹ Previously, in 911, the King of France had given Viking invaders a piece of Northern French territory that came to be called 'Normandy'. The Vikings who settled there abandoned their language for the Romance vernacular spoken in the region, thereafter called Norman, which is the dialect that was exported to England and became Anglo-Norman (Siouffi 2020: 96).

²² While there might have been now-lost earlier or contemporary versions of these texts in 'continental' dialects (as it is supposed for the *Chanson de Roland*), Gaunt (2015) convincingly shows that some texts such as Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* (c. 1136-7) were actually produced in Anglo-Norman for an English public. In Gaimar's case, notes Gaunt (2015: 40), the focus was therefore 'less on the mobility of texts in French per se (since this text does not appear to have been particularly mobile) than on the importance for his readers of knowing French in order to partake in certain types of supralocal, pan-European cultural and political networks, networks from which monolingual English or Welsh readers would by definition have been excluded. The local "English" reader of French is thus situated in a broader and cosmopolitan cultural and political context simply by virtue of his or her knowledge of French, even if the text s/he is reading is primarily of local interest.' Also see Kleinhenz and Busby (2010: 1-14); Morato and Schoenaers (2019: 1-28); and Gilbert et al. (2020: 32-45).

End of Excerpt

This is the accepted manuscript version of the article. In keeping with the publisher's self-archiving policy¹, up to 25% of this version is permitted in an institutional repository. The final version is available online from Oxford University Press.

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/pages/authoring/books/author-reuse-and-self-archiving>