

I

The Middle Ages

Introduction

The Middle Ages lasted a thousand years, from the break-up of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the end of the fifteenth, when there was an awareness that a 'dark time' (Rabelais dismissively called it 'gothic') separated the present from the classical world. During this *medium aevum* or 'Middle Age', situated between classical antiquity and modern times, the centre of the world moved north as the civilization of the Mediterranean joined forces with the vigorous culture of temperate Europe.

Rather than an Age, however, it is more appropriate to speak of Ages, for surges of decay and renewal over ten centuries redrew the political, social and cultural map of Europe, by war, marriage and treaty. By the sixth century, Christianity was replacing older gods and the organized fabric of the Roman Empire had been eroded and trading patterns disrupted. Although the Church kept administrative structures and learning alive, barbarian encroachments from the north and Saracen invasions from the south posed a continuing threat. The work of undoing the fragmentation of Rome's imperial domain was undertaken by Charlemagne (742–814), who created a Holy Roman Empire, and subsequently by his successors over many centuries who, in bursts of military and administrative activity, bought, earned or coerced the loyalty of the rulers of the many duchies and *comtés* which formed the patchwork of feudal territories that was France. This process of centralization proceeded at variable speeds. After the break-up of Charlemagne's empire at the end of the tenth century, 'France' was a kingdom which occupied the region now known as

the Île de France. Under the Capetian monarchs (987–1328) and the Valois kings (1329–1589), the power and influence of the crown grew, as did the authority of the French language.

Language

If the geographical boundaries of 'France' fluctuated, its language too evolved and changed shape. From the time of Constantine onwards, devotional literature was produced in Latin in Roman Gaul. Until the eleventh century it was unchallenged as the language of learned discourse and thereafter Latin remained the vehicle of intellectual expression, retaining its prestige into the eighteenth century. France had no equivalent of Old High German or Old English language and culture. Rome's legionaries and traders had not spoken the classical Latin of Caesar or Cicero but a 'vulgar' tongue which, remaining in use over a long span of time and incorporating local influences, served as the basis of all the Romance vernaculars. In France, the progress of Gallo-Roman (fifth to ninth centuries) is first attested by the instruction given to clerics in 813, at the Council of Tours, to preach their sermons not in the Latin of the Vulgate, judged incomprehensible to congregations, but in the 'rusticam romanam linguam'. An oath, sworn at Strasbourg in 842 by one of the two sons of Charlemagne, is the first written trace of this modified Latin. Thereafter, the development of the language is broadly classified as Early Old French (about 950–1100), Old French (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and Middle French (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries).

Progress was, however, far from uniform. Languages related, sometimes very distantly, to 'French' were established in provinces surrounding the royal domain but also served as the *lingua franca* of the south, from Catalonia to Northern Italy, and in the Holy Land. Distinctive varieties were spoken in England after the Conquest (Norman French) and in Languedoc, home of the first lyric poets. Change was gradual. After the Albigensian crusade against the Cathar heretics (1209–44), the *langue d'oc* lost ground to the tongues of the more powerful north, specifically to *francien*, which was spoken in Paris and the Île de France, geographically the heart of the *langue d'oïl* area.

Literature

Throughout the period, literature was shaped by specific historical traditions and a firmly circumscribed code of priorities, ecclesiastical

and secular. The dominance of the Church ensured that literary expression was informed by a strong didactic spirit, while feudalism provided a common, if loose, framework of values until it was challenged in the thirteenth century by the growth of towns and a less courtly and more bourgeois public.

Just as the modern labels 'France' and 'French' are unhelpful when applied to the Middle Ages, so the word 'literature' needs considerable qualification. The earliest vernacular texts were clearly marked by a strong oral tradition. But by the twelfth century most works were intended to be read and by the thirteenth century literacy rates had risen further with the emergence of a new middle class of merchants, lawyers and civil servants. Though the existence of a tripartite social hierarchy (clergy, aristocracy and the rest) might suggest separate literary constituencies, the notion of a 'public' for literature is difficult to define. About 40 per cent of *chansons de geste* begin with variants of 'Oiez, signor', which seems to imply a noble audience, yet they often proceed to explain basic chivalric rules as for the benefit and instruction of less exalted listeners. After 1200, romances in verse and prose were read rather than heard and the *fabliaux* appealed not only to the bourgeois and popular milieus in which they were set, but also to higher social ranks. Lyric poetry, at first associated with the aristocratic courts of Languedoc, acquired a more bourgeois following when it was taken up in the thirteenth century by northern *confréries* and towns which organized poetry competitions and staged plays. Theatre outgrew its liturgical beginnings and, in addition to the miracle and passion plays performed by the Confrérie de la Passion, offered secular morality plays, farces and *soties* to a wide social mix.

Its diffusion

In the pre-book age, the written word was preserved by scribes and *clercs* inside and outside the monastic establishments where most had trained. Manuscript production and distribution grew into an organized trade which for a time competed successfully with the printed books which began appearing after 1470. Some manuscripts, richly ornamented, were specially commissioned. Regarded as valuable objects, they were owned by men and women of the aristocratic courts, by the bourgeoisie and the clergy, and many found homes in ecclesiastical libraries. Most surviving manuscripts are less ornate. Some

are short (perhaps performers' texts, sometimes with musical notation) while others contain a single work or constitute miscellaneous or themed anthologies. The survival of multiple copies of a work is a useful indicator of its popularity. The identical copy is rare, however, for performers and scribes routinely altered the texts for a variety of reasons – simple errors of transcription, a wish to update or generally 'improve' the material – and not until the fourteenth century is there evidence that authors supervised copyists in any systematic way.

Authors

Not that it is appropriate to speak of 'authors' until late in the period when the term still meant scholars writing in Latin. 'Ecrire' defined the role of the copyist, while narrators used 'faire', 'imaginer', 'trouver' to indicate a measure of creative input now difficult to assess. Though *La Chanson de Roland* ends: 'Ci falt la geste que Tuoldus declinet', the meaning of 'declinet' is unclear and might indicate that Tuoldus was author, translator, adapter, copyist or reciter. The works performed by the itinerant *jongleurs* were not normally their own creations but revisions of old materials drawn from sources as different as the Bible, Greek and Roman authors and oral traditions which were constantly reworked. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, author and performer could be the same person – most troubadours wrote the poems they performed – though no text was sacrosanct, a finished creation, but an exploitable resource. Any work could be continued, augmented and even buried beneath the weight of new accretions. *Le Roman de la Rose* was begun by Guillaume Lorris, but became the work of Jean de Meun, who expanded it beyond recognition.

By projecting the vision of the rose garden as his own dream, Lorris set an early example of how a narrator might be identified with an author. In the same way, the first person *dits* which emerged in the late thirteenth century helped launch the idea of an individual personality and individual experience. Yet writings were not routinely associated with an author. Compilations were based not on the output of a named writer but on genre, and the first extant collected works (of Adam de la Halle and Rutebeuf) did not appear until the thirteenth century. Even in the single-author codex of the fourteenth, an 'author' was less a person than a persona: the expression of a general point of view rather than of an individual mind or sensibility. Though some creators were by this time identified by

name, they remain shadowy figures for the most part. Relatively little is known even about the greatest of them, François Villon.

Nevertheless, the production, reception and diffusion of literary texts indicate that authors were a significant link in a cultural and economic system. Between 1100 and 1300 many troubadours of Languedoc (which covered Poitou and Aquitaine, the Limousin and the Auvergne) had names and some were celebrated in *vidas*, brief, formulaic and unreliable biographies (the first surviving manuscripts date from the thirteenth century) which were used to introduce performances of their lyrics. Occitan poets included kings and nobles, but some, less well-born, were employed in royal and aristocratic households where they had the status of servants. Few were women (the *trobairitz*). The northern *trouvères* who followed them show a similar mix of social origins. For the high-born, poetry was a social accomplishment. *Clercs* who wrote did so with the security of a settled livelihood in the Church. Those less fortunate, the *jongleurs*, earned a living not so much from writing as by performing, always in the hope of finding patronage. Normally this meant being hired as *ménéstrels*: money payments were rare until late in the period. The rewards of writing were therefore dependent on ecclesiastical, royal or aristocratic patrons. By the fifteenth century, the court of Burgundy financed the production of manuscripts, commissioned histories and encouraged lyric poetry. By this time, Paris too had long been a centre for writers of all types.

Medieval literature embraced writing of many kinds and on a wide range of subjects. At a time when there were no critics to steer its growth (the learned commentary was the nearest approximation to literary theory), it drew eclectically on multiple sources: antiquity, ecclesiastical writing and a range of oral traditions. The concept of imaginative literature was fluid and non-compartmentalized and the taste of the age was capable of accommodating both the crude and the highly sophisticated. Contemporary sensibilities were accustomed to coping with rapid changes from tragic to comic, noble to ignoble, and even exponents of courtly love mixed high idealism with frank obscenity.

The Middle Ages spanned ten centuries. Medieval literature, however, covers a much shorter period: the 400 years which run from *La Vie de Saint Alexis* (c.1020), the first significant literary text to survive, to the age of Villon, about the same time in fact that Modern French

literature has taken to advance from Montaigne to Postmodernism. From its beginnings, it was sophisticated in its forms, which proved sufficiently flexible to lend themselves to new imperatives and changing social attitudes.

Hagiography

Though few vernacular texts are extant before about 1100, earlier developments are discernible in works of piety aimed at the unlettered faithful. That the *clercs* who originated them worked within the twin traditions of ecclesiastical and contemporary Latin culture is demonstrated by a homily, in Latin and northern French, based on the book of Jonah (c.950). By then, the vernacular had a modest role in the liturgy. The 29-line *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie* (c.881–2) was inserted into the church service on the saint's day and was sung, as were, in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the *Vie de Saint Léger* and a version of Christ's Passion. One of the earliest surviving Provençal texts, the *Chanson de Sainte-Foy*, composed later in the eleventh century, was sung not in church but outside it, during the saint's procession.

From these liturgical and para-liturgical beginnings grew 200 or so lives of saints, the first of which were composed and sung by *clerici vagrantes* (wandering scholars) who had trained in the Church but could obtain no settled employment. They found their subjects in the Bible and Latin *vitae* of early martyrs of Eastern and Western Christendom and in time developed a formal narrative model: they tell of the birth and education of their subject who, when confronted by an obstacle to piety, rejects worldly success, faces the consequences (exile or death) and converts many by example. Some texts were written for the use and edification of pilgrims while others were commissioned by churches or abbeys to honour and publicize their patron. Some saints had strong regional followings (Saint Nicholas was popular in the north) or appealed to specific groups who believed in their powers of intercession: Saint Margaret, patron saint of pregnant women, Saint Gilles, healer of the sick, or Saint Marie l'Égyptienne, the penitent prostitute who lived out her days as a hermit. While most surviving texts revived martyrs long dead (Alexis died in the fifth century and Gilles in the seventh), the corpus includes

biographies of contemporary holy men, notably the 6,000-line *Vie de Saint Thomas*, written by Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence within five years of the murder of Thomas à Beckett in 1170. While accounts of Biblical saints remained close to Holy Writ and others claimed factual accuracy (Guernes spoke to eye-witnesses), legend became part of the tradition from an early date. The *Vie de Saint Brendan* (c.1106) recounts not the life of the sixth-century abbot of Clonfert but his fantastic voyage, which has both elements of Celtic myth and echoes of the Arabian Nights. But if Brendan at least has roots in history, later hagiographers borrowed from epic and romance to glorify, as in the case of Godefroi de Bouillon, King of Jerusalem, purely fictitious martyrs. Yet in a sense, such developments grew out of the limitations of the genre. Stories about good people are usually duller than tales of the wicked and authors had always generated excitement by stressing miracles and the trials of martyrs: Saint Laurent toasted on his griddle or Saint Margaret emerging unscathed from the belly of the dragon.

The earliest surviving example, the *Vie de Saint Alexis* teaches renunciation of the world and shows a life dedicated to God. If the message is predictable, it is conveyed with unexpected pathos. More intriguing still is the sophistication of its 625 assonanced lines, where rhythm derives not from the feet of Latin verse but from an entirely different principle: the syllable, which would remain the building-block of French prosody. Is the life of Saint Alexis, then, merely the first surviving vernacular link in a much older Latin tradition which has left few traces? Or is it the work of an individual who, in artistic terms, invented the wheel?

The chanson de geste

The truth lies somewhere between the 'traditionalist' and 'individualist' sides of the argument, whether it applies to saints' lives or the *chansons de geste*. Three centuries separate the battle of Roncevalles (15 August 778) from the *Chanson de Roland* (c.1080) which tells how Roland, commanding the rearguard of Charlemagne's army, and his companion Olivier died as the result of the treachery of Ganelon. Though early Latin and Arab texts record the event, there is no written trace of a vernacular tradition of oral transmission before the

1060s when, according to William of Malmesbury, a *jongleur* named Taillefer sang the heroic exploits of Roland to Norman soldiers before the battle of Hastings. On the other hand, the times were favourable to a great leap forward and there is good reason to speak of a 'twelfth-century renaissance'. By 1200, both language and poetic form were capable of sustaining sophisticated expression, while the conflicts within feudalism posed problems which could be personalized in the warrior, a figure of greater literary potential than the passive saint. If feudalism fragmented France, the Capetian kings extended their rule through the allegiance of their barons; if it fragmented the West, the papacy sought to unify Christendom by launching the first (1095) of the eight main crusades (to 1270) which were intended to retake Jerusalem from the Saracens. The *chanson de geste* fused secular and ecclesiastical concerns. It showed the chain of feudal obligation reaching up to the throne; by upgrading local wars between feudal overlords into an international, holy war, it championed the true faith. Harnessed by loyalty to a lord and the office he represented, and pressed into the defence of Christendom, chivalry, a code of honour and military valour, was redefined in terms of the Christian ethic. The feudal, crusader epic expressed an alliance of politics and religion and promoted a new collective ideal of service.

About a hundred *chansons de geste* (from Latin *gesta*, feats, exploits) survive from the end of the eleventh century to the fourteenth. They are grouped (by content, not date) into the *Cycle du Roi* (which centres on Charlemagne), the cycle of Doon de Mayence, ancestor of the rebel barons of the Narbonne clan (who include Raoul de Cambrai, Ogier le Danois and Girart de Roussillon), and the cycle of Garin de Monglane, also known as the cycle of Guillaume d'Orange, its recurring hero. The earliest examples are decasyllabic, use assonanced strophes (called *laisses*) of unequal length and were designed to be sung to an accompaniment of viols.

La Chanson de Roland, which belongs to the first group, is one of the finest examples of the genre. The style is plain, images are rare, and if the slaughter is conveyed in repetitive, conventional terms, a third of the text is made up of dialogue which, in performance, added to the drama. If the manner is unadorned, the values are as stern as in any saint's life. Chivalry here is not courtly dalliance but the defence of the faith by epic heroes who are sharply individualized.

They behave according to the logic of their character and, while the victory of Christianity over Islam is never in doubt, the drama is presented in human terms. Although Olivier begs him to blow the oliphant to summon Charlemagne, Roland refuses out of pride and many – including his friend – are killed through his fault. Olivier is judged to be wise but Roland, though he dies in Christ, is judged to be impetuous and lacking in *mesure*: he already expresses something of the taste for *gloire* and *grandeur* which would remain a part of the French tradition of heroism.

Although the *chanson de geste* was born of a commitment to show the contest between Christians and Saracens, the genre soon turned its attention to other conflicts: quarrels between emperor and subject, lord and liegeman, one family and another. *Raoul de Cambrai*, the blackest and most brutal of all these epics, pursues a vendetta begun by the injustice of Charlemagne to his vassal. *Le Couronnement de Louis* (c.1131–50) sets Charlemagne against Louis, his son and appointed successor, while in *Le Charroi de Nîmes* (c.1150–70) Guillaume's adventures grow out of his quarrel with Louis. The genre mutated as it proliferated. In formal terms, assonance was replaced by rhyme, verse gave way to prose, and later examples were intended more to be read than sung. But there was also a degree of cross-referencing between cycles. Once a hero was established, new *chansons* gave him a genealogy and a future: they looked back to his father and grandfather and forward to his old age and, occasionally, to his glorious descendants.

The 24 *chansons* of the Guillaume cycle, the most unified of the three, run through a variety of tones. If the first part of *La Chanson de Guillaume* has been admired almost as much as *Roland*, the second introduced Rainouart, a giant, whose buffoonery contrasts violently with its noble, other-worldly idealism. *La Prise d'Orange*, a continuation of Guillaume's adventures, introduces melodrama and even more robust comic elements to which the initial sense of mission is made subservient. By the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Christian purpose had already been overlaid by elements of folk tale and legend. The *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* to Jerusalem is strong not on the Christian marvellous but on oriental fantasy, while *Huon de Bordeaux* features Auberon, son of Julius Caesar and Morgan le Fay, who went on to be developed in other contexts, not least as Shakespeare's Oberon.

The epic hero in his purest form was an ascetic figure close to the saints of the hagiographers. Beginning as the servant of a greater good, he came in time to reflect the popular view of the Baron and Knight, a rebel and a warrior who, like Raoul de Cambrai or Renaut de Montauban, rejected the ideal of subordination to higher authority and looked instead to pride and prickly personal honour. The *chanson de geste* began as an effective literature of propaganda but, via legend and romance, became a literature of adventure, fantasy and individualism. It was also, from the start, a warrior literature in which priests, peasants and town-dwellers have walk-on parts and women rarely occupy a central role. Its values were those of militant Christianity and it accorded no place to a new development which began in Languedoc in the early twelfth century: *fin'amor*.

Lyric poetry to Rutebeuf

From their first recorded beginnings in the mid-twelfth century, Occitan lyric poets used an astonishing variety of fixed forms which were defined by stanza length, rhythm, rhyme scheme and the presence or absence of a refrain. The *alba* (in which two lovers separate at dawn), the *pastorela* (where a knight converses with a shepherdess), the *sirvente* (which raised topical matters), the didactic *ensenhamen*, the *reverdîe*, or spring song, and others besides, would evolve when lyrical poetry passed to the *trouvères* after the middle of the thirteenth century.

The poetry of the troubadours (from *trobar*, to find or invent) was largely written by men and from a male point of view, though a handful of female *trobairitz* reacted against misogyny and the imprisoning tenets of courtly love. They were musicians as well as poets (a tenth of extant lyrics survive with musical notation) and though they were based at the courts of Languedoc, they came from a variety of social backgrounds. The first, Guillaume IX (1071–1126), Comte de Poitiers and Duke of Aquitaine, was both poet and patron. Among his Occitan successors were Jaufré Raudel, Prince de Blaye, and nobles like Arnaut Daniel, *seigneur* de Riberac, but also commoners like Marcabru, a Gascon *jongleur*, Cercamon, and Bernart de Ventadorn (said to be the son of servants).

About half of the 2,500 works attributed to some 350 poets dealt with love, sometimes in the crudest terms. They elaborated a concept

of *fin'amor* (the metaphor was taken from the refining of metals) which was less a doctrine than a form of sensibility that projected a social and ethical code which existed only in the poetry which expressed it. The image of the lover implied a nobility of heart which was not the preserve of the well-born, though real-life lovers were bound by the strict social hierarchy. The code, more clearly defined in the casuistic *jeu parti* than in the *cansos* which illustrated it, required selflessness from the lover. Though skilled in social and military arts, he deferred to his Lady who, though not inaccessible, was difficult of access, generally the wife of another, sometimes a *belle dame sans merci*, whose heart and mind were won by proofs of courtly conduct and the avoidance of what was *vilain*. The condition of the languishing poet is *joi*, a mix of anguish and fierce jubilation, and is expressed in verse whose intricacy – virtuoso variations of metre and rhyme – was itself the measure of his devotion.

After the Albigensian crusade, when the Languedoc was effectively annexed to the kingdom of France and its court structure slowly dismantled, the tone of Occitan poets grew nostalgic and, with Peire Cardenal (c.1170–c.1278), acquired a political and satirical edge. But by then, their lyricism had migrated north. In 1137, Aliénor d'Aquitaine (1122–1204) married Louis VII of France and she attracted poets like Bernart de Ventadorn (*fl.* 1147–70) to the royal court. Later, as queen of Henry II of England, whom she married in 1152, she continued to promote Languedoc culture as did her children, Richard Coeur-de-Lion, a noted poet, and her daughter, Marie de Champagne, who gave patronage to Chrétien de Troyes and Andréas Capellanus, author of *De Amore* (c.1185). Capellanus analysed 'pure' (or platonic) love and 'mixed' (sensual) love before rounding on carnal love in Christian and misogynistic terms.

By the 1170s a new generation of northern poets, the *trouvères*, had adopted the code and manner of the southern tradition, though they were less flamboyant and sensual and their style less inventive and intricate. Among the 275 known *trouvères* who flourished between the mid-twelfth and fourteenth centuries were nobles like Conon de Béthune (d. 1220) and Gace Brulé, a leavening of churchmen and larger numbers of professional and semi-professional poets who frequented the courts of Lorraine and Champagne. Yet by 1200 or so, poetic activity was increasingly part of the literary life of the growing towns of northern France which challenged the monopoly

of the courts and helped diversify the lyric tradition. About half the lyric poetry of the thirteenth century originated from Arras where, from about 1200 onwards, the *confréries* organized competitions (*puys*) which attracted poets who were less well-born and continued the courtly vein before adding comic vulgarity and more substantial narratives to the *trouvère* repertoire. The *dit* emerged from various strains of Christian, moral and satirical denunciation of human vices. Recited not sung, it used a first-person voice to express individual experience and a wider range of emotion.

One of the last lyric poets, the versatile Adam de la Halle (d. c.1285–9), added a note of psychological realism to his presentation of love. Jean Bodel (d. 1210), who contributed to a *chanson de geste*, wrote *fabliaux* and left the earliest surviving miracle play, was the author of the first non-courtly *congé* in which he reviews his life as death approaches. A newer spirit of irony and *joie de vivre* is visible in the lyrics of Colin Muset (b. c.1210) but the Paris-based Rutebeuf (fl. c.1249–1277) used the *dit* to speak directly of his poverty, his companions in debauchery, and his physical decline. It may be that he drew on the Latin poetry of the Goliards (*clercs* who failed to find employment at court or in the Church) who complained of the wretchedness of their life and were concerned less with love than with the relationship of man to man, rich to poor, noble to bourgeois. Yet in Rutebeuf's 'personal' poetry is the first expression of a poetic *moi* which goes beyond a literary persona and expresses not collective values but a distinctive individual consciousness. Rutebeuf already prefigures a new autobiographical strain which would be developed by Machaut and emerge triumphantly in Villon in the fifteenth century.

Romance

Just as hagiography had been diverted into the crusader *chanson de geste*, so the epic was modified after the middle of the twelfth century by the mutation of *fin'amor* into *amour courtois* and by the rise of feudal ideals and customs. By 1100, heraldic devices and the code of chivalry were established in tournaments which grew more numerous after 1170. The first steps in the new direction were signalled by the appearance of a number of verse adaptations (called *romans*

because they were written in 'romance' vernacular) rooted in Greek history and mythology, not taken directly from Homer but from the Latin of Virgil and particularly Ovid. There were three romances devoted to Alexander the Great (1130–90) while other *romans d'antiquité* told the stories of Thebes (1150), Aeneas (1160) and Troy (1165). This *matière de Rome* was the work of *clercs* who demoted Greek myth in favour of modern forms of magic and appealed to courtly taste by giving a new role to the dawning and ruses of love.

But they also purported to be history. The *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* (c.1175) of Benoît de Saint-Maure, author of the *Roman de Troie*, was a vast fresco which connected the world of antiquity to the Anglo-Norman kings: if Charlemagne is a descendant of Francus of Troy, so the Plantagenet family tree is traced to Aeneas. A much more significant dynasty was established by Wace who, in the *Roman de Brut* (1155), tells how Aeneas fled from Troy to Latium and how Brut, his great grandson, left Latium and came to Britain. Wace's major source was the *Historia regum britanniae* (1135) by Geoffrey of Monmouth who, after establishing Brut as the first king of the Britons, devoted a fifth of his History to Arthur's resistance to the Saxons in the sixth century. If Geoffroy mentions Uther Pendragon and Merlin, it was Wace who first spoke of the Round Table and in so doing provided a mythical counterpart to the *matière de France* which had centred on Charlemagne, also a ruler of a court and first among twelve peers.

This new *matière de Bretagne* was exploited through other traditions. The twelve *Lais* (1160–78), or miniature verse romances, of Marie de France are distinctive. These pointed, psychologically subtle and richly symbolic tales deal less with Love as a code than with the human experience of lovers who confront social convention or encounter marvels and magic. Instead of following custom and translating Latin texts, she drew on an oral tradition: the tales of love and adventure sung by Bretons which originated in ancient Celtic sources. Some of Marie's lays, like 'Lanval', are related to the Arthur story while 'Chèvrefoil' is part of the legend of Tristan and Iseut which evolved out of earlier Irish and Welsh tales. A story of tragic love which transgresses social and moral conventions, it was first told in non-courtly terms by Bérout (c.1160–70?) and then in a subtler version by an Anglo-Norman poet, Thomas, in the 1170s.

By this time, the new romance was in vogue, though not all romances derived from the *matière de Bretagne*. A tradition of Anglo-Norman adventure romances, some set in the Orient, grew up largely free of Celtic influence. In France, *Floire et Blanchefleur* (mid-twelfth century) unfolds in the East, *Partonopeu de Blois* (c.1182–5) places the ethic of chivalry in a Byzantine setting and the early thirteenth-century *Aucassin et Nicolette*, a lighter-toned and lastingly popular tale of young love, ranges through the Midi, Spain and North Africa. Unlike the decasyllabic, assonanced epic, the romance was intended to be read aloud, not sung, and its standard form reflects this change. The strophe is abandoned and with it tune-based structures, like the refrain, and the octosyllabic couplet is combined with a less declamatory style more suited to story-telling.

But it was Chrétien de Troyes who, between 1170 and 1190, divested Arthurian legend of its role as history and made it the vehicle for chivalric values and courtly love. Unlike Wace, who had dealt with generations and reigns, Chrétien's five romances each deal with the trials of a hero or a couple. *Erec et Énide* (c.1170), *Cligès* (c.1176), *Le Chevalier de la charrette*, *Yvain* (both 1171–81?) and *Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal* (c.1180–92?) reflect knightly ideals (social graces, valour, prowess) and a generally more positive view of conjugal love than the Tristan legend, which made love and marriage incompatible. Chrétien's sharper focus allows closer exploration of psychology and motive and he mixes well-observed reality with Celtic enchantments. Arthur is never a protagonist but a figure of authority who presides over the settled world of his court which is located not in real time but in a time of myth. When Erec or Yvain leave Arthur's court at Logres and enter the mysterious forest, they seek their destiny by facing dangers and, by overcoming them, achieve self-knowledge and find love. Here the narrative is structured around a dramatic crisis – a clash of personalities, a heroic adventure – which is resolved and marks a return to order.

Chrétien's unfinished *Conte du Graal* was continued in verse by other hands. But the most significant continuation was made by Robert de Boron who, in the first years of the thirteenth century, invested the grail with a new religious significance. In his prose *Roman de l'estoire dou Graal*, the grail becomes a Christian relic and is entrusted to Bron, the Fisher King of Celtic legend. Between about 1200 and 1210, monks at Glastonbury produced a courtly, chivalric

version, also in prose, entitled *Le Haut Livre du Graal* (or *Perleवास*) which follows the successive quests of Chrétien's heroes, Gauvain, Lancelot and Perceval after the death of the Fisher King. Perceval joins Arthur's Round Table and eventually becomes Keeper of the Grail. Between 1215 and 1235, a vast Arthurian sequence in prose, the Vulgate Cycle, built a bridge between the time of Christ and the accession of Arthur, and dealt in a variety of registers with the exploits of the knights of the Round Table. In the long *Lancelot-Graal*, Perceval is demoted in favour of Lancelot and his adulterous love for Queen Guinevere. *La Queste du Saint Graal*, written by a Cistercian cleric, deals with the more spiritual and less dramatic adventures of Perceval, Bohort and Galahad, son of Lancelot and the daughter of the Fisher King. But it is Lancelot's illicit love for Guinevere which is central to *La Mort le Roi Artu*, for it is the reef on which the Christian ethos of the Round Table finally founders. The first branch of the saga, *Lancelot del Lac*, is courtly in tone, the *Queste* ascetic and mystic (with Galahad presented as a Christ-figure) and *La Mort Artu* dominated by a doomed conflict of human loyalties. But the death of Arthur did not end the legend, which continued to proliferate. The *Prose Tristan* (begun after 1230 and attributed to Hélié de Boron) fused two traditions: Tristan joins Arthur's court before meeting his inevitable fate with Iseut. Its mixture of adventure, love and human salvation proved lastingly popular.

Yet the mysticism was not to every taste, nor was the image of a settled world projected by Arthur's court convincing at a time when the fall of Constantinople (1204) revealed deep rifts in the unity of both Europe and Christendom. A new generation of non-Arthurian romances explored realistic themes in contemporary settings. Like the grail stories, they reflected the decline of court influence and the rise of urban values. Their subject was love which encountered obstacles closer to human experience: parents, social class and separation. The *Chastelain de Vergi* (written some time between 1203 and 1288) told a tale of tragic passion which had no roots in legend. Jean Renart (c.1180–c.1250) found his material in his own times and his *Roman de Guillaume de Dole* established a realistic approach to both psychology and manners. Two romances (c.1240–c.1270) by Philippe de Rémi also show young love tested by adversity, while the late thirteenth-century *Chastelain de Couci* is a solidly plotted tragedy of deception.

But the most enduring and influential of non-Arthurian romances, and the cause of the first of France's literary *querelles*, was *Le Roman de la Rose*, of which 300 manuscripts have survived. Begun between 1225 and 1230 by Guillaume de Lorris, it was expanded (1269–78) by Jean de Meun. Presented as a dream, it tells of the narrator's conquest of the rose which represents the woman he adores. Lorris traced the stages of the growth of love in what was intended as a platonic, idealized *ars amandi*. Jean de Meun's continuation is a digressive, encyclopaedic compendium of many points of view which subvert courtly love: his rose is not the symbol of the ideal woman but of sexual desire. The allegorical figure of Nature shows the artificiality of *amour courtois* and Reason sets friendship above love.

Meun's provocative views, and especially his perceived misogyny, were challenged before and after 1400 by a number of writers, including Christine de Pizan and the chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson. The quarrel stirred elements of a permanent debate. But the *Roman de la Rose* also popularized the dream as a major vehicle for both personal and didactic poetry. More important still, it established secular allegory as a method of explaining man's relationship to the world. Allegory was more literal than simile or symbol or an expression of causality. It was a direct correspondence between the structures of the concrete universe and states of mind and soul, between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Although the *chanson de geste* had been eclipsed by the rise of Arthur, both traditions survived in rewritten, updated versions which turned the epic champion into a more human hero. In time, as new enemies of France appeared, fundamental changes were made in the eternal war between good and evil: in the late fifteenth century, Saladin, once the Saracen scourge of Western Christendom, becomes a model of chivalry and conquers England. Written (or rather rewritten) in prose, these new versions mark a movement in taste away from myth and the Christian marvellous towards love and its casuistry, magical perils, monsters and fairies and a more direct representation of the palpable world. The *roman d'aventure* drew on narrative traditions of all kinds. In the thirteenth century, *Joufroi de Poitiers* revisits the court of Guillaume IX, while *Adenet le Roi* (d. c.1300) returned to Charlemagne's mother and the gestes of his knights. The vast *Perceforest* (1314–40) took up the story of Alexander, linked it to the grail and thence to Merlin and the birth of Arthur. A patchwork

of different tones – from farce to tragedy – it, too, minimized the importance of religion and placed its emphasis on love and adventure. The last Arthurian romance was Froissart's *Meliador* (1383–8), though in different forms the heroes associated with both Charlemagne and Arthur survived into the Renaissance and would continue as part of the stock-in-trade of the *Bibliothèque bleue*.

Comic realism

The taste for moral reflection was not the exclusive preserve of the Church. Ancient writers (like Cato) were respected as interpreters of human experience, and classical fables were familiar to the eleventh-century weavers of the Bayeux Tapestry who incorporated the tale of the crow robbed of its cheese by the flattering fox. Though Aesop gave his name to collections of fables – the *Isopet* – he was not read but survived through his disciple, Phaedrus. Marie de France drew on a Latin compilation, the *Romulus anglo-latin*, for her 103 lively, pointed fables (c.1170). *Exempla* which used animals to illustrate human truths remained popular, and Reynard the Fox acquired a unique following. The sprawling *Roman de Renard* was as popular and enduring as the *Roman de Tristan* or the *Roman de la Rose*, and his fame was such that the standard word for fox (*goupil*) was ousted by *renard*.

Le Roman de Renard

Reynard first appeared about 1175 in a verse tale by Pierre de Saint-Cloud based on a Latin source, *Isengrinus* (1149). His adventures proliferated rapidly and reached their peak in 1200. By then, 15 of the surviving 26 'branches' of the fragmented Reynard epic had been completed by multiple authors, and the remainder were composed before 1250. Occasional additions were made thereafter but they never recaptured the lightness and humour of the originals.

Once dismissed as 'popular' or 'bourgeois' literature, the *Roman de Renard* is now seen as the reverse image of the chivalric epic. The saga sets Reynard against King Noble, the lion, and their struggle, enacted in field, farm and village, is an extended satire of feudal values. In this sense, Reynard is a rebel baron who encapsulates aristocratic corruption. But the satire is also directed elsewhere – specifically at churchmen whose gluttony, lechery and opportunism

are regularly lampooned, and more generally at the follies and frailty of human nature. For although Reynard encounters a range of non-aristocratic types (occasionally bourgeois, but mainly peasants, clerics and pilgrims), the animals express a consistently unflattering view of sly, selfish, arrogant humans who are either too stupid or too clever for their own good. Reynard fools the foolish, dupes the dupers and bites would-be biters. The humour is savage and the cruelty is relieved only by the grossness of the comedy. Reynard is cunning, and predatory, but also quick-witted, resourceful and, when on his best behaviour, an engaging rogue.

His disrespect for authority made him a popular hero who voiced widespread criticism not so much of principles and institutions as of those invested with authority. He was exploited by later writers for more serious ends. In *Le Couronnement de Renard* (c.1251–88) he becomes king and inaugurates a reign of vice. Rutebeuf in his *Renard le bestorné* (*Reynard the Hypocrite*, c.1260) uses him to attack the mendicant orders. The allegorical *Renard le Nouvel* (c.1289) makes him a personification of the devil and through him denounces evils of contemporary society, a task repeated at greater length in *Renard le contrefait* (c.1320–40), a comprehensive attack on universal corruption.

The *fabliau*

If the Reynard saga is the burlesque obverse of the chivalric epic, the verse *fabliau* ('little fable') is the antidote to romance which, as it grew more fantastic, invited criticism and mockery. Charlemagne and Arthur might represent authority, but their actions at times fell well short of the ideals they enshrined. Moreover, the obsession of their knights and ladies with delicate feelings sat ill with the adultery and violence which, paradoxically, were the narrative face of courtly love, chivalric prowess and the perfection of womanhood. The courtly ethos and aesthetic were challenged by growing urban values which preferred satirical humour to sentiment, the real world to fantasy and action to psychology. The *fabliau* reflected the new, urban outlook. About 150 from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries have survived. Some are attributable to writers like Bodel and Rutebeuf but most were written by anonymous *clercs*.

The *fabliau* was short (rarely exceeding 1,000 lines), tightly plotted, used non-aristocratic characters and settings, and worked in a farcical register which extended from the suggestive to the bawdy

and the obscene. An obsession with the functions of the lower body replaces the courtly interest in the emotions of the heart. Like the fable, they often concluded with a truth ('son tens pert qui felon sert': 'he wastes his time who helps a villain') but though most express a moral of sorts, they are more ironic than edifying. They include a great deal of cruelty but few sympathetic characters or situations. Wives routinely deceive their husbands with a priest, monk or student, though not all these tales centre on adultery. A range of non-aristocratic types – churchmen, lawyers, doctors, merchants, students and peasants – trick and are tricked. The settings are urban and much of what is known of town life in the thirteenth century derives from their clearly described streets, costumes and customs. But their main purpose was to entertain (they appealed to the same audience as the romances they undermined) and they gave no quarter, least of all to women who, duplicitous and lustful, are first in the line of satirical fire. It is as though the wars of epic and romance had been replaced by a battle of the sexes and social conflict, with participants exchanging lance and mace for quick wits.

The literature of devotion, moral reflection and information

From its liturgical beginnings to the age of Villon, literature maintained its central moralizing mission to guide souls and correct manners. Latin remained the language of theology, but pious tracts aimed at a wide audience were among the first vernacular texts to appear in the twelfth century. *Le Livre de manières* by Étienne de Fougères (d. 1178) and verse sermons such as *Li Vers des Juïse* (Judgement) warned that salvation lay in rejecting worldly temptation, while the themes of the brevity of life, the vanity of human affairs and the need to repent (*Le Poëme moral*, c.1200) were repeated endlessly, with lurid pictures of heaven and hell serving as carrot and stick. In time, authors added further graphic scenarios to Biblical, hagiographic and other Christian traditions, dramatizing the story of Eden, the Flood and the early life of Christ in narrative and, later, staged Passions. The same imaginative input colours the cult of the Virgin – intercessor and inspiration – which was expressed in verse compilations like Gautier de Coinci's *Les Miracles de Notre Dame* (1214–27).

But devotional literature was not only evangelical, it was admonitory. *La Bible de Guiot de Provins* (c.1206) denounced hypocrisy and materialism just as, a century later, Gervais de Bus's acronymic *Le Roman de Fauvel* (written 1301–14) attacked Flatterie, Avarice, U/Vilenie, Variété, Envie and Lâcheté. More positively, *Des quatre tenz d'âge d'ome* (c.1260) by Philippe de Novare described the moral conduct appropriate to each of the 'four ages of man'. Symbolic representations of human behaviour gravitated towards allegory, which was well established as a central device of Christian and moral writing by the time Guillaume de Digulleville wrote his three *Pèlerinages* (1330–58).

But the emphasis on man in his relations not only with God but with other men also gave a new urgency to his place in the world. New genres sprang up to accommodate a new spirit of curiosity: the 'bestiary' (in which animals conveyed Christian truths and moral lessons), the *miroir*, which gave advice to princes, women and soldiers, didactic *songes*, moralistic *chastiments*, collections of sententious *proverbes au vilain* and compilations on all manner of subjects. There were collections of canon and civil law and encyclopaedias, the most famous early example being the *Speculum maius* of Vincent de Beauvais (1194–1264), which summarized what was known of the natural world, history, art and doctrine. In the thirteenth century, to devotional texts, manuals of penance, instructions in charity and virtue and moral treatises, were added manuals of education, cookery, chivalry and hunting, and commentaries on profane subjects. Drawing at first on classical sources and later on the reports of travellers (real, like Marco Polo, and imaginary from the *Vie de Saint Brendan* onwards), writers described the cosmos, mapped the three known continents, defined the four elements, explored mathematics, ascribed influences to the planets, and tackled practical issues, from medicine to education. By the fourteenth century, political matters were being raised. An anonymous *Songe du verger* (1376) examined the relationship between ecclesiastical and secular power. In *De Moneta*, Nicole Oresme (1320/5–82) reflected on the dangers of the money economy while Philippe de Mézières's *Le Songe du vieux pèlerin* (1389) reviewed French institutions and proposed reforms. The most significant, Alain Chartier's *Quadrilogue invectif* (1422), took France to task for failing to resist the conquering Henry V, and allowed *Peuple* to speak of its poverty, the Nobility to lament its decline and the Clergy to outline a plan for national revival.

These developments reflect a change in the concept of history. Knowledge of the past was derived initially from Latin sources and the first histories were written by monks, like Raoul Glaber (c.950–1046), who compiled chronicles of military, political and ecclesiastical events: the ‘universal’ history told the story of the world since Adam. For the first vernacular chroniclers of the twelfth century, history was inseparable from myth, legend and fiction, as the legendary nature of Charlemagne and Arthur makes clear. Like Geoffroy de Monmouth, Wace was less of a historian than a story-teller, as were most Anglo-Norman authors of biographical romances. The same element of invention makes the *cycle des croisades*, begun in the twelfth century and alleged to retrace the life of Godefroi de Bouillon (d. 1100), a variant of hagiographic fiction. Although Latin sources were used in the thirteenth century for less fanciful portraits of classical figures like Alexander, Hector and Julius Caesar, both chronicle and historical biography were committed to the general apocryphal and hortatory approach to all kinds of writing. The *Histoire de Saint Louis* (1309) of Jean de Joinville (b. 1225) was still locked into the hagiographic mode, though it conveys a view of Louis as a man and reflects in its vivid detail its author’s experience of the seventh crusade (1248–75).

Geoffroi de Villehardouin (c.1150–c.1216) also wrote from personal observation. *La Conquête de Constantinople* (c.1207), one of the first prose works extant, tells how the fourth crusade (1202–4) was diverted from its objective of freeing the Holy Land and instead besieged Constantinople. Sparsely written and deferential to the mighty, it gives ‘treachery’ and ‘covetousness’, not political differences, as explanations of the loss of purpose. Not all history dealt with the Orient, however. Robert de Clari’s Anglo-Norman *Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal* (1219–26) used eye-witness evidence to cover British history between 1186 and 1219. *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*, a vast sequence originating in the thirteenth century and continuing into the sixteenth, began by recycling old myths but later used documents and written testimony to tell the nation’s history. Jean Froissart (1337–1404?) also relied on personal knowledge and eye-witnesses in his *Chroniques* which continued the account of the first years (1326–56) of the Hundred Years War, composed by Jean le Bel (c.1290–1370), to the end of the century. Froissart has a good eye for feats of arms, is dismissive of commoners, and adopts French or English points of view according to patron. He is no

analyst of the events he describes and yet he does project an attitude to wars which are seen as an effect of dynastic rivalry, personal ambition and money, the only *patrie* of the mercenary soldiers who fight them.

Though Froissart's *Chroniques* were continued more reliably but less interestingly by Enguerran de Monstrelet in the first half of the fifteenth century, the focus had by then begun to shift from the events of war to its social and economic consequences. Knightly heroes like Du Guesclin (d. 1380), even Joan of Arc, lost their glamour in the anonymous *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris* (1405–49) which expressed a much more intimate style of history already in evidence in *Le Ménagier de Paris* (c.1394). Written by a wealthy Parisian *bourgeois* as a manual for his young wife, it is a detailed record of daily life which reflects the impact of civil war on ordinary people. The *Chronique scandaleuse* of Jean de Roye also painted social reality – plague, crime, generalized immorality – ‘from below’. Great events, however, continued to be recorded in the *Mémoires* of Philippe de Commynes (c.1447–1511) who covered the period 1464–98. Commynes wrote of what he knew in fluid, non-Latinate French and did not limit himself to reporting: he casts a gloomy, ironic eye on war as politics by another means and is a shrewd observer of the men who make history.

Learning and ideas

The learning of the ancient world survived in French Gaul in monastic institutions. Familiarity with antiquity continued to be identified with a learned class after Charlemagne gathered scholars at his court in the ninth century. Knowledge was transmitted through compilations, paraphrases and commentaries produced in monasteries and cathedral schools which also studied sacred and patristic texts and refined theological doctrine. By the death of the theologian and philosopher Pierre Abelard (1079–c.1142), Paris was already a great centre of learning. Teachers of grammar, logic, and theology opened schools from which the first universities emerged at the start of the thirteenth century. They were run like religious communities, with teachers privately paid by their pupils, and learning was separated into Faculties: Arts, Law, Medicine and Theology. Arts students were

required to master core texts by Aristotle, who was read in Latin translations influenced by ancient and Arab commentaries, notably those of Avicenna and Averrhoes. It was accepted that, outside the truths revealed by Holy Writ, Aristotle's logical texts (but not his writings on natural science, ethics and metaphysics, all judged 'pagan') contained the best of what human reason, uninspired by Christianity, could produce. Both teaching and study were conditioned by respect for the authority of ancient writers and the church fathers. Even so, thinking was a rigorous process, and the scholastic method, proceeding by question and answer, created a large corpus of philosophical, scientific, legal and theological knowledge based on what human reason could infer from self-evident premises.

But the uses to which reason could be put were often controversial. From Carolingian times, thinkers were divided about the status of objects. Do they have a real, objective existence, or are they merely inventions of the mind? If things are no more than the names we give them (the Nominalist view), then the Trinity, the Incarnation, the existence of angels were abstractions and the truth of revealed religion was in doubt. Nominalism smacked of heresy and in the twelfth century the Church gave its approval to the Realists, though Nominalism eventually triumphed with William of Ockham (c.1270–1349). The history of scholasticism is inseparable from the conflict between the two opposing parties which would last four centuries. The scholastic method remained as a central teaching tool into the seventeenth century and, though scholasticism was derided from the time of the Renaissance, the arguments of the schoolmen laid the basis for rational enquiry based on experiment and induction, an approach which would be generalized by 1750.

Theatre

A similar development towards secularism is observable in the growth of theatre which, without losing its celebratory function, began inside the Church and ended as a realistic reflection of the changing world of men. Though the earliest literary forms were closely associated with performance, there appears to have been no unbroken theatrical tradition from Roman times. Theatre had been denounced as sinful by some of the early church fathers, yet the earliest extant

forms of theatre (as of hagiography) were vernacular extensions of the liturgy which first appeared in the ninth century and developed around the same time as the *Chanson de Roland* and the first poems of Guillaume IX. *Le Mystère d'Adam* (mid-twelfth century) was still closely associated with the Church, though specifically Biblical subjects (such as *Le Courtois d'Arras*, c.1230, the story of the prodigal son) were rare into the thirteenth century. It was rather around the Virgin and the saints that the first theatrical forms took root. Bodel's *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (1200–1) is the earliest surviving example of the miracle play.

Vernacular theatre, which had left the orbit of the Church by the end of the thirteenth century, was a product of urban development and had no links with either the *chanson de geste* or romance. The first surviving secular play is a short farce, *Le Garçon et l'aveugle*, written between 1266 and 1282, which shows, in the manner of the *fabliau*, how a smart youth meets his match. In the 1270s, at Arras, Adam de la Halle broke new ground with *Le Jeu de la feuillée* (which adds fairies to social realism in an extended *congé*) and *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion*, an elaborate *pastourelle* which allows Marion to reject the Knight and return to Robin.

Secular theatre made little headway, though Rutebeuf's *Le Miracle de Théophile* (1260) included elements of social realism. The major dramatic form remained the miracle. The cult of the Virgin provided material for the succession of Marian miracle plays staged annually between 1339 and 1382. Much more elaborate was the mystery play of which 200 were performed between the late fourteenth century and 1548, when the genre fell foul of religious and political pressures and was banned. The mystery was designed to present the passion of Christ in visual, human terms. A few examples on profane subjects have survived, like *Le Mystère de la destruction de Troie la Grant* (1452), the first theatrical representation in French of the ancient world. But the mystery proper showed the whole life of a saint or a Biblical story or, more frequently, as in Arnoul Gréban's *Le Mystère de la Passion* (c.1450), the life and death of Christ. Performed, often over several days, to commemorate saints' days and mark religious festivals, they had huge casts, complex staging and special effects (fireworks, trapdoors, machinery). They included apocryphal material, scenes of daily life and comic episodes involving devils, and were financed by civic authorities or, in Paris, by the Confrérie de la Passion, first licensed in 1401.

Other forms of fifteenth-century theatre, broadly classed as 'comic', were performed by regular but non-professional companies which survived into the Renaissance. The Basoche was made up of students and lawyer's clerks, while the bourgeois laity formed the Enfants Sans Souci, though the two often overlapped. Between them, they were responsible for devising and staging a kind of play more appealing to urban audiences: the morality. The morality personified the battle fought between virtues and vices for the soul of Everyman, the World or the 'Povre People'. But some of the 80 extant moralities also reflect current social and even political concerns and on occasion come close to the comic *sotie* which used a cast of fools whose costume (asses' ears, cap and bells) grants them the licence of their folly to launch outspoken attacks on establishment values. Farce dealt more generally with human failings and used plots and characters from the *fabliau* tradition: deceitful wives and biters bit. The most sophisticated of them, *La Farce de Maistre Pierre Pathelin* (1461–69?) has solid characterization, a consistent if patchwork narrative structure and a level of psychological observation which points to later developments.

Later lyric poetry

If theatre remained attached to its Christian mission and history clung to the glamour of chivalry, lyric poetry after Rutebeuf kept faith with courtly love and built on its semi-fixed forms. The lover's *congé* became at Arras a more general farewell lyric; the *tenso*, a dialogue about love, turned into the more tightly organized *jeu parti*; the *ballade*, originally a dance lyric, found a place beside the more relaxed *rondeau* and the formal *chant royal* before being annexed permanently for French prosody by Machaut and Villon. By the middle of the thirteenth century, others had been added: the *chanson de toile* (which expressed a female point of view), the farcical *fatrasie*, the *virelai* (another dance song) and the versatile *dit* which, until the fifteenth century, expressed love, satire and spirituality through a first-person narrator.

Poets still wrote of love in allegorical visions and argued points of courtly casuistry. But the fourteenth century saw formal developments, mainly in the versatile *dit* and the *ballade*, which allowed

poetry to become more personal and poets to be more than names. Froissart wrote a quantity of courtly verse which recycled myth, moral digression and love debate, though his allegorical *Espinette amoureuse* (1369) is cast in an autobiographical mode. But a new level of pathos was reached in *Le Voir dit* (1364) by the prolific poet and musician, Guillaume de Machaut (c.1300–77), which projects the image of an ageing poet clinging desperately to love. Machaut's ornate *dit* counts his lady's virtues, pronounces on amorous doctrine and rehearses old love debates. Yet he also projects a clear poetic persona which confirmed the authority of vernacular lyricism. In historical terms, his major achievement was to establish a hierarchy of fixed verse forms which connect him with the vigorous poetic activity of the fifteenth century.

Machaut was much admired by Eustache Deschamps (1346–1407) who called him a *poète*, a term hitherto reserved exclusively for Latin versifiers. Deschamps wrote not only of love but of more mundane matters (he left a *ballade* on baldness) which comment on daily life and satirize courtiers and social groups. Although an unexciting versifier, he too left a significant legacy. His *Art de dictier et de faire chansons* (1392), the first treatise of versification in the vernacular, distinguished between 'natural' and 'artificial' music, that is, between poetry and music proper. The future development of French verse would depend on efforts to distance words from music. Machaut's example was also followed by Christine de Pizan (1364–c.1431) whose first writings included *ballades*, *rondeaux* and *virelais*. She wrote of adulterous love, as courtly tradition required, but showed how easily it led to unhappiness. Yet she also wrote of herself and particularly of her reaction to the death of her husband. She generates an authentic sense of loss and she handles both her verse and her feelings with considerable delicacy.

Fifteenth-century 'modernism'

Though poets continued to rehearse courtly themes and styles, courtly love was in decline. As growing economic activity changed the social landscape from feudal to urban, literature turned away from exalted modes and addressed more immediate subjects. The reaction against courtly values is clear in the polemic surrounding *Le Roman de la Rose*

launched by Christine de Pizan in her *Epistre au Dieu d'amours* (1399) and the *querelle des femmes* which followed. Christine was a 'modern' woman, a widow who made her living as a 'vray homme' and an early exponent of the new literature of information. Between 1400 and 1410, she wrote commissioned works on a variety of subjects – government and law, peace, history, war and faith – which drew on her considerable erudition. But she stoutly defended the moral character of women in *La Cité des dames* (1404–5) where, advised by Reason, Rectitude and Justice, she selects women to inhabit her ideal city. Although her choice here falls on the Virgin and well-born figures from classical antiquity and French history, *Le Livre des trois vertus* (1405) is a compendium of duties offered to women of all classes. She also diagnosed the moral decline of France in *L'Avison Christine* (1405) and after 1410 commented more directly on the state of the nation, ending her career with a *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc* (1429) who brought 'honneur au feminin sexe'.

Chartier

Christine's apology for women must be set against a larger quantity of misogynistic verse of which Deschamps's long poem, *Le Miroir de mariage*, written around the turn of the century, is an example. But the issue remained on the literary agenda. Alain Chartier (c.1385–c.1430) wrote courtly and pastoral lyrics but soon reached the limits of the now fading courtly love. His *Livre des quatre dames* (1416) sensitively conveys the feelings of four ladies left desolate by the battle of Agincourt. He is mainly remembered, however, for his controversial *Belle dame sans merci* (1424) which showed an *amant martyr* spurned by a Lady so fiercely independent that Chartier was accused of defaming women. A new phase of the *querelle des femmes* ensued in which he argued that courtly love had degenerated into an insincere game.

Charles d'Orléans

Chartier's injection of psychological realism into the conventions of ideal love found a subtler reflection in the work of Charles d'Orléans (1394–1465). Captured at Agincourt, he spent 25 years a prisoner of the English and, after his release in 1440, lived quietly at Blois, far from court and politics. In England, he wrote not of his captivity or the state of France but of his feelings. He began in courtly mode, but

courtly abstractions are personalized in *ballades* which project a new awareness of the passage of time as a source of regret and sadness. At Blois, he preferred the *rondeau* and wrote wistfully and simply of his uneventful life: hunting, festivities, the seasons. But if he reflects the sunset of a tradition, he renewed the tired metaphors of courtly love and showed allegory interacting with a distinctive personality dominated by nostalgia and melancholy. Although he said little that was new, his more intimate manner, plainer vocabulary, subtler shifts in register and silky rhythms ('Le vent a laissé son manteau . . .') raised interest in poetic form and related poetry to a wider range of human experience.

But courtly modes also came under attack from less well-born quarters. By 1400, theatre, prose and verse, less idealistic now and more keenly conscious of death and the horrors of life, turned increasingly to the state of society, the human condition and itself. If romance remained popular, it was rooted in the past, unlike theatre which reacted to change. All prose narratives became more personal, and history and didactic writing of all kinds were increasingly drawn to the present. The new spirit is most clearly reflected in the *nouvelle*. The impetus was given by Boccaccio's *Decameron* (trans. 1400) though the mood is older and traceable to the *fabliau*, farce, and hostile attitudes to love and women generally.

The anti-courtly reaction

Around 1400, the anonymous *Quinze joies du mariage*, an ironically titled collection of prose tales, showed cunning women as the cause of marital misery. Against such conciliatory texts as *Le Champion des dames* (1440–2) by Martin le Franc (1410–61), the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles* (1464–7), a collection of bawdy anecdotes, showed men invariably outwitted and tricked by sly females. More measured were the *Arrêts d'amour* (1460–6) of Martial d'Auvergne (c.1435–1508), 51 'cases' heard before a Court of Love, most of which set an *amant martyr* against a *belle dame sans merci*. Short work is made of courtly values in the more substantial and psychologically credible *Petit Jehan de Saintré* (1456) by Antoine de la Sale (c.1385–c.1460), which has been called the first French novel. Jehan, a page, is favoured by his Lady who, after toying with his affections, abandons him for a priest. But instead of pining in the approved manner, Jehan takes his revenge by exposing her duplicity. The values of courtly love are shown

to be empty and the vulgarity of modern lovers is intended as a criticism of the perfection expected by *amour courtois*. The message is clear: the *nouvelle* is truer and more moral than the vanishing rituals of the courtly creed.

'Rhétoriqueurs'

Even so, poetry remained connected with noble courts where, between 1450 and 1530, the 'art de seconde rhétorique' (as poetry was defined) gave rise to new formal experiment. Charles d'Orléans at Blois resisted the trend which flourished over several generations at the Courts of Bourbon, Brittany (Jean Meschinot, 1420–91) and Burgundy (Georges Chastellain, 1415–75; Jean Molinet, 1435–1507). This first generation of 'rhétoriqueurs' born between about 1420 and 1440 occupied court positions and their duties are reflected in their verse which was not always lyrical or concerned with love but ceremonial and designed to reflect the prestige of their patron. Though they never consciously formed a school, they claimed to follow Chartier who had raised political issues and opposed courtly love. But the common denominator was their interest in literary expression which they codified in treatises of versification (as in Molinet's *Art de rhétorique*) and practised in poems long and short. Unconstrained by fixed forms, they experimented with fuller stanzas and intricate rhyme schemes and displayed a technical virtuosity which pushed verbal dexterity to extremes where feeling seems stifled and clarity suffers. Though they were mocked by the Pléiade, their example was to have a crucial impact on the poetry of the Renaissance.

Villon

Such formal experiments are an essential part of the 'modernity' of the fifteenth century. But the age was modern especially in the steady decline of aristocratic and courtly values and the rise of a literature more in tune with the contemporary urban world. It was the city which produced François Villon. Born François de Moncorbier in about 1431 in modest circumstances, he was raised by an uncle who gave him a name and enabled him to obtain his MA in 1452. He killed a priest in a brawl in 1455, escaped punishment and spent some time at Blois, where he participated in the *puy*s organized by Charles d'Orléans. He spent the next eight years in and out of jail for theft and other crimes before being condemned to death. The

sentence was commuted to exile and after January 1463 there is no trace of him.

Villon's output was small. *Le Legs* (1456), *Le Grand Testament* (1461?) and a handful of *ballades* and *rondeaux* (1461–2) amount to some 3,300 lines. Yet no other medieval poet communicates a sense of shared humanity with such immediacy. *Le Legs* is a superior *cong e*, a list of burlesque legacies left to friends, enemies and public officials. The tone is ironic (Villon is not the owner of what he bequeaths, except his heart which goes to the woman who broke it), self-mocking, but resilient. The *Testament* is darker, reaching beyond pathos to despair. The first part reviews his misspent youth, his poverty, failing health and the awareness of death. The second is a further catalogue of bequests interspersed with *ballades*, some satirical, others intended as homages to legatees, like his mother, to whom he dedicates a prayer to the Virgin. Villon's poetry has roots in the thirteenth-century *dit* and his themes (nostalgia, regret, death) were commonplaces of the well-established 'testament' genre. But the emotion is genuine (for his mother, for his uncle, his 'plus que p re') and has a wider range: Villon moves from the courtly to the *sotte chanson*, from the 'Belle dame sans merci' to Grosse Margot, from the language of piety to thieves' cant. He was remembered, as he predicted, as a clown. But his real legacy was to express, within a Christian world view, the common ties which make all mankind – the saints and sinners, the long-dead, the still living and the yet-to-be-born – 'fr res humains' deserving of God's (and our) mercy.

Conclusion

By 1500, solid foundations had been laid. France recovered from the Hundred Years War which had threatened its very survival, and acquired a solid political, administrative and legal framework. The principle of centralization was an accepted fact and the concept of absolutist royal authority was under consideration. France had a language which, if still fluid, was fixed in its basic structures and the French had a clear sense of their identity both as members of a nation and as individuals capable of moral and social choices. Though it is too early to speak of 'public opinion', the emergence of the urban economy created the beginnings of a cultured public.

The Middle Ages did not stop: the evolutionary process which had begun simply continued. Though hagiography, the epic and romance survived into the print age, they had run their creative course. Lyric poetry was firmly established. Prose was identified as the vehicle of serious discourse, and a notion of prose style had emerged. Prosody, based on the syllable, formal rhyme schemes and the alexandrine, provided a flexible framework for poetic expression of all kinds, and a long experience of theatre paved the way for later developments. And just as the author had been born, so the concept of genres became clearer. The *lai*, *fabliau* and *nouvelle* pointed to the later growth of the novel. Epic and romance, which were perpetuated in stilted forms, contained the seeds of the popular literature hawked by the *colporteurs*. Lives of saints, kings and heroes, abetted by chronicles and memoirs, were the forerunners of history, biography and autobiography. In terms of mentalities, chivalric values would survive in the *courtoisie* of the sixteenth century and the ideal of *honnêteté* of the seventeenth. *Fin'amor* began the habit of psychological *analyse* which has remained a major French preoccupation, while the dawning of individual consciousness – the *moi* – is detectable in the lyric poets and the chroniclers. Though satire was not a literary form, it was a spirit which would thrive and prosper and, because it looked outwards at the world, nurtured the growth of literary realism. In philosophy, conceptual thinking outside the theological tradition had been established. But above all, the literature of the Middle Ages linked France, on the verge of a Renaissance, to its Latin past.