

Poetry and Music in
Medieval France

From Jean Renart to Guillaume de Machaut

ARDIS BUTTERFIELD



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Song and written record in the early thirteenth century

Medieval works present acute problems of interpretation by their intimate associations with the circumstances of public performance. These circumstances, full of the contingency, risk and social tension of human exchange, and brought about by the physical presence of the people engaged in the act of communication, seem to be inherently irreproducible. Yet our knowledge of the predominantly oral culture of the medieval period derives largely from literate sources, that is, from sources that are all forms of reproduction of works experienced in irreproducible conditions. We are faced, then, with the difficulty – even the impossibility – of trying to bring to life the social and material context of a work from the resistant medium of a manuscript copy.

Manuscripts bear a relation to the works they reproduce that is different from the modern book. Whereas the modern novel, for example, *is* to a major extent the book itself, in that the conditions of its writing and of its reception share the same medium, the medieval work is represented by the medieval manuscript only in a distorted and incomplete form. There is a lack of consistent relation between the scribes and the works they are reproducing: each manuscript has its own contingency of production that adds to that of the conditions of performance of the work. This situation is complicated by the absence of any hard distinction between the oral and the written. In theory, the scribe may be transcribing an oral event directly ‘from life’, but in practice, most kinds of composition in the Middle Ages are produced, performed, received and reproduced in conditions which pass through various intermediary stages not just between the oral and the written, but between public and private, individual and communal, and active and passive involvement on the part of authors, performers, audiences and scribes.

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Disentangling these stages proves to be a familiar crux in the interpretation of musical manuscripts: few types of source show more clearly the problems of interpreting a newly formulated means of representing in writing an essentially oral event. If we consider the nature of this oral event more closely, we could say that song occupies a place between the temporal or ephemeral, and the iterable. Every song is a unique, singular performance, and an inherently repeatable event. A stanzaic song combines both elements by being constructed from a repeated form that produces a temporal but also recurrent pattern of sound. At an early stage in the thirteenth century, vernacular song is, for the first time, consistently committed to writing. This introduces a new kind of tension between the temporal event and the text. It would be more accurate to say that not one kind but many kinds of tension are produced. For instance, there is the question of how closely, or rather, how loosely, the written notation corresponds to the various characteristics of musical sound. Modern scholars have still found no means of determining the rhythm of medieval song from pre-mensural notation: there is little consensus over whether this indicates that rhythm (in our sense) is lacking in medieval song, or whether it is an element that existed but that scribes did not think it necessary to record in writing, or again, whether our uncertainty is merely a result of our failure to understand the precise parameters of flexibility in the notational symbols. Such features as duration and tempo are notoriously difficult to render in written form, and indeed remain so in modern notational practice in the gap between performance and modern performing editions (of all periods of music).¹

A further question concerns the discrepancies between the date of composition of a piece and the date of its surviving transcription. Troubadour song was first written down often at least a century after it was composed, and we have little way of knowing whether the surviving pieces of writing represent an attempt to preserve a historically 'authentic' image of troubadour song or a free thirteenth-century reinterpretation, even re-creation of that repertory. In addition, the surviving forms of transcription may be relying at least as much on written as on oral traditions. The difficulty of connecting the written form to the oral event in medieval music is exacerbated again by the complexities of relation between the writing down of the words and the writing down

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of the melodies. Often these two types of writing (as now) were carried out by different scribes who did not always coordinate their work, so we may have one view of a song from the words, and another from the music, yet both occurring on the same manuscript page.² The tensions between text and event in medieval song are not those of a straightforward dichotomy: as soon as a song becomes a text, its nature as an oral event is altered.

Many complex and fluctuating forms of reaction to developing literacy existed in the medieval period, and as M. T. Clanchy, for example, has emphasised, sharply differing perceptions existed of the relative trustworthiness of oral or written media. Clanchy dwells on the extraordinary co-existence in the twelfth century of new claims for the authenticity of writing with a rise in forgeries. Such a situation bears eloquent witness to the power of written over oral testimony, not in terms of access to truth (for this is granted to orality, especially in legal contexts), but in the potential of writing for exploitation.³

For medieval readers, then, as well as for modern, trying to interpret a written text thus involves taking account of the slipperiness and imprecision of the relation of writing to action. But are we to conclude that the conditions of performance are simply irretrievable? Paul Zumthor implies this when he describes a medieval text as 'une forme vide' rather than 'parole pleine'.⁴ Since the texts lack all those features of sound, gesture, timing and occasion which constitute 'l'aspect corporel des textes médiévaux', he argues, they are inherently fragmentary (p. 12). This is because the performance context is not a merely contingent adjunct to the text but a complex of circumstances that are directly constitutive of its form. If he is right, however, that performance is an intrinsic aspect of a medieval work, then perhaps we should think again about the nature of the surviving text. Rather than decide too quickly that it is 'fragmentary', we might ask whether the text does not in fact contain some sense of the work's character in performance, whether performance is not in some way inscribed within the text rather than irrecoverably absent from it?

One way of reading the text as a performance is to understand it generically. Such an argument is taken up by Jameson, for instance, for whom genre is an attempt to 'specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact' by acting as a substitute for the 'indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deictics and pragmatics)

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which ensure [the] appropriate reception [of the speech acts of daily life]'.⁵ If we learn to interpret the genre of a work we will find ourselves uncovering just those corporeal features that Zumthor describes as inherent but absent. This is part of Jameson's belief that in an oral context recognition of genre is relatively straightforward. For him, 'as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation' generic rules become correspondingly difficult to enforce.

Jameson's attempt to bring genre and performance together is nonetheless confused. It is strangely simplistic of Jameson to regard the speech acts of everyday life as easy to receive appropriately – an issue to which Bakhtin's work on speech genres gives more full and subtle account.⁶ Medieval compositions strongly suggest that the socio-linguistics of the oral are not *ipso facto* transparently open to interpretation, still less opaquely closed to misinterpretation. The physical presence of a poet-performer in the public transmission of a medieval work sets up barriers rather than open routes to interpretation (for instance, by making an audience question the relation between the 'I' of the work, and the 'I' of the performer). Furthermore, the suggestion that genre acts as a *substitute* for performance signals, while evidently partially true, leaves little room for understanding how, in that case, genre operates in an oral context. One reason why speech acts are not always easy to interpret is precisely because of the complicating factors of genre in an oral exchange. Genre is not merely a substitute for performance signals but a kind of performance signal.

Jameson's point is obscured because, like Zumthor, he creates a polarity between the oral and written, by saying that oral contexts simplify problems of interpretation whereas written contexts ambiguate them. Yet as Clanchy and others have made clear, throughout most of the medieval period literate factors are already at work in many oral contexts. While it is right to point out that works were orally performed, this does not mean that they were orally composed, but that oral performance is in some way itself shaped by texts. Although Zumthor is at pains elsewhere to distinguish between different degrees of orality, his description of a medieval text as 'une forme vide' as opposed to 'parole pleine' appears to forget this. Rather than appeal, however implicitly, to a notion of the Middle Ages as an Edenic pre-literate world of pure speech acts

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we need to take more direct cognizance of the intricate interrelations in the period between oral and literate processes of composition. Here I will be rejecting the polarity which results from seeing performance as a 'real presence' in a lifeless text, in favour of understanding medieval culture as already and (certainly by the early thirteenth century) as always functioning in a borderline area in which constant negotiations take place between public and private, vocal and aural, physical and abstract concepts of communication. This, rather than Jameson's, is the context in which I see genre operating, as a means whereby such distinctions are examined, articulated and represented.

Nowhere are the negotiations between genre, performance and writing more delicate than in the *romans* which contain songs, to which I propose to give the French term *romans à chansons*. As works of mixed genre, they keep passing across the boundaries of the oral and the literate. By setting songs into a narrative they enclose already existent social forms within a fictional narrative frame and in so doing treat these oral forms in a literate way, that is, as texts. This leads them in a variety of novel and far-reaching directions. In this opening section, I explore two broad areas. The first is the difficulty of interpreting questions of performance through the actual manuscripts that have survived. I take account not only of the fact that the manuscripts of the *romans à chansons* (like all manuscripts) are textual not oral witnesses, but also of their particular character as mixed forms of transmission, since they incorporate the medium of song as well as of speech. I argue that the problems of transmission in these works turn out to involve a particularly intriguing version of the balance between the oral and the literate in the period, and not just to be arcana of literality.

Examples are drawn from works throughout the thirteenth century, with special reference to the earlier *romans*. I consider them within two fundamental, and widely used categories: the 'courtly' (or 'aristocratisant', in Bec's terms) and the 'popular' (or 'popularisant').⁷ These are useful, if imprecise terms, and indicate, albeit crudely, a central social division in the perception of song production evident from Renart on. During the course of the next chapters, both terms will come under increasing scrutiny. This social dimension is my second main area of discussion. Here I begin by comparing the ways in which 'courtly' and 'popular' song come to be transmitted in writing. I consider how

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the writing down of 'courtly' song in the *romans* compares with other thirteenth-century song anthologies, taking into account that writing may include the copying of music as well as of words. The writing down of 'popular' song raises further issues. By containing many unique examples of 'popular' song in the form of refrains and *rondets de carole*, the *romans* act as a primary source. The demands of interpreting this source have not always been acknowledged. I reopen questions surrounding the nature of dance-song, the formation and articulation of refrains, and the relation between refrains and *rondets*; all the while with an eye to the determining importance of the romance context as a perspective for understanding the written form of these songs.

The final chapter in this section continues this second main area of discussion. Here I consider more directly how performance is a social action, with its own set of social constraints derived from the relation between performer and audience. Concentrating on Renart's *Le Roman de la rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*, I show how his work, by enclosing a wide range of lyric genres, internalises a correspondingly diverse set of social practices, and that this provides him in turn with a subtle means of commentary upon competing forms of communication in the period.

First of all, as a necessary introduction to these issues of performance, transmission and audience, I begin with the Prologues to the earliest *romans à chansons*. Conceived precisely as an introduction to this new genre by their medieval authors, they illuminate for us in terms that are worth careful re-examination the assumptions and expectations that these poets both held and sought to cultivate.

PROLOGUES

Jean Renart's Prologue to his *Le Roman de la rose ou de Guillaume de Dole* (composed probably *c.* 1210) has received much critical attention.⁸ Here I want to stress that the establishment of this new kind of work – the combining of songs and romance – goes hand in hand with a new self-consciousness about the significance of writing songs. His first words explain that his new work not only mixes two genres (*conte* and *chans*) but that the function of mixing them is to preserve the songs as

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written forms:

Cil qui mist cest conte en romans,
ou il a fet noter biaux chans
por ramenbrance des chançons. . .
(1–3)

He who has turned this story into a romance, and who has caused fine songs to be notated in it for the sake of recording songs in memory. . .⁹

Some uncertainty exists over the meaning of ‘il a fet noter biaux chans’. Against the received opinion of most of the work’s editors,¹⁰ that it means ‘where he had fine melodies copied’, Michel Zink has argued that Renart is referring to singing rather than copying, and hence translates the line as ‘where he had beautiful melodies sung by the characters’.¹¹ But he does not take this to mean that the romance was performed with music. Zink believes that the key word in these opening lines is ‘ramenbrance’. Renart’s interest in music is literate rather than oral: ‘These are melodies that reverberate only within the fiction of the romance but that call to mind the memory of actual songs’ (p. 109).

Zink’s argument is subtle, yet one might have several reasons for demurring from his reasoning. He questions the meaning of ‘copied’ by saying that ‘for an author of a romance to allude to a copyist working on his directions would be unique, in this context’ (p. 107). But, as everyone who has written on Renart in recent years has agreed, including Zink himself, this romance is indeed a unique work, with unique aims. Uniqueness is precisely what Renart claims, and indeed his Prologue is a highly idiosyncratic piece of writing compared to the usual introductory remarks to a *roman d’aventure*. Some kind of flattering reference towards a patron is common, as in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Li Contes del Graal* or *Chevalier de la charrette*.¹² Renart sets his work apart from the rest by insisting on the crucial transforming effect of the songs upon the work’s style and performance. He promotes his poetic method and medium rather than the story to follow.¹³ It would not be surprising if this novel decision involved him in some novel attempts to enable the form of the work to exist.

Zink goes on to say that Renart cannot be ‘thinking of a copyist who specialises in musical scores’ because ‘the unique manuscript of the romance has no scores’ (p. 107), an argument that is reiterated

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by Regina Psaki.¹⁴ This is specious reasoning. Renart's *Rose* survives in a late thirteenth-century manuscript, in which it is copied alongside two romances by Chrétien and another by the mid-thirteenth-century author, Raoul de Houdenc. We have no way of knowing what stage in the transmission of Renart's work this manuscript represents; when we also recognise the patchy nature of music copying it is impossible to rely on its absence here as evidence that music was not transmitted in writing in an earlier version, or, even more speculatively, that music was never intended to be part of the performance experience of the romance.

Zink's evidence that 'noter' means 'perform' is obscure.¹⁵ He rather admits, with disarming candour, that it is the meaning that he prefers to find: 'one could prefer to see in the "noter" of v. 2 not the verb derived from *notare* but the one derived from the noun *nota* – that is, *noter*, meaning "to sing, to interpret musically"' (p. 108). But perhaps the problem here is the implicit need to find a preference. It is more significant that *noter* has a double reference. In a pun that survives in modern French and English, a 'note' is both a sound and a sign. To notate is at once to add music to a text and to set music into writing. In a period in which vernacular song is only just beginning to be more widely copied, the shifting reference of 'noter' between 'to interpret musically' and 'to record in writing' indicates the wider truth that the distinction between these two activities is not yet clear cut. 'To record in writing' *is* 'to interpret musically'. The writing down of song involves turning something oral into something written, but also something written (the romance) into something that encounters the oral (the songs). It weakens the radical nature of Renart's work to see it as a purely literary game. It is a much more difficult balancing act between the oral and the performed, and the written and the read, in all their different permutations.

We can see this from the complex prevarications of Renart's rhetoric in his prologue. Zink talks of the impression we gain 'of vague stammerings with awkward repetitions'. I see it rather as a delight in apposition and paradox, as a careful and brilliantly incremental series of contrasting pairings, 'conte et chans', 'los et pris', 'chans et sons', 'chante et lit', 'chanter et lire', 'conte et chante', 'd'armes et d'amors', designed to

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intensify the work's main claim to novelty, that it can be both sung *and* read:

Ja nuls n'iert de l'oïr lassez,
car, s'en vieult, l'en i chante et lit,
et s'est fez par si grant delit
que tuit cil s'en esjoïront
qui chanter et lire l'orront,
qu'il lor sera nouviaus toz jors.
Il conte d'armes et d'amors
et chante d'ambedeus ensamble. . .
(18–25)

No one will ever leave off from hearing it, because if one wishes to, one can both sing and read it, and it is composed so delightfully, that all those who hear the work being sung and read will have pleasure in it; it will always be novel to them. It tells of arms and of love and sings of both at the same time. . .

The division between 'conte et chans' is neither simple nor single: Renart's headlong couplings join together as much as they distinguish the activities of hearing, singing, reading, narrating and composing. Zink makes the same hard-line distinction between the oral and the written as Zumthor and Jameson, but written music is no more or less evanescent than written words. The word 'nota', for a musical note, already testifies to its literateness: conversely, a written romance, like music, vanishes in performance. The earliest versions of Renart's *Rose* have already vanished, and the single surviving script only approximates to them. The musical note is a sign, a *signifié* contradictorily denoting a *signifiant*. For musical notation to be present in the manuscript would, in that sense, be a literate event, not an oral one.

Renart's finely calibrated movements between making appeals to the songs as forms of oral musical performance and as a written verbal record illustrate the complex position held by the *roman à chansons* amongst the competing claims of orality and literacy. These earliest *romans à chansons* give us a glimpse of genre in the making, that is, genre in the process of being composed, constructed and given a physical shape. Renart defines the terms of this process with care and ingenuity: his *Roman de la rose*, as

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a work which newly combines *chans* and *conte*, creates new parameters for its reception, since it gives the genre of *chanson* a new mode of musical transmission, at once oral and written. But this mediating role of the work between oral and literate modes is further complicated by the influence of the two genres upon each other: the romance acts as a kind of stage for the production of the songs, but a stage which subtly alters and contains the songs, just as the songs, in turn, modify the nature of their narrative frame. Urged by Renart to notice how well the words of the songs fit those of the narrative ('toz les moz des chans, / si aferent a ceuls del conte' [all the words of the songs belong so well to those of the story] (28–29)), we are being asked to observe how far (and how successfully) he has bent the two genres towards each other. The modes of transmission of each genre are each altered by their juxtaposition: by re-producing the genre of the *chanson*, the romance enables the songs to gain a literate context and itself a new means of oral performance.

Nancy Durling writes of the paucity of surviving thirteenth-century reaction to Renart's *Rose* (p. 3). Apart from the frustratingly uncommunicative manuscript copy, only one work, *Le Roman de la violette* (c. 1228–30) by Gerbert de Montreuil, seems to imitate Renart's directly. It contains a comparable number and range of pieces (Renart's *Rose* has forty-eight, the *Violette* has forty), and some of the lyrics are identical. Both romances also have a similar plot (the flower in the title of each work plays the same role in each story). Moreover, Gerbert models his Prologue on Renart's: he puts forward the same reasons for the novelty and value of his *roman*, using similar rhetoric:

Et s'est li contes biaux et gens,
Que je vous voel dire et conter,
Car on i puet lire et chanter
(36–38)¹⁶

And this story which I want to recite and tell to you, is fine and noble because it can be both sung and read.

I want to bring two further works into the discussion. Gautier de Coinci's *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* (c. 1218–36), at first sight, is a work which belongs in a quite different context from the *Rose* and the *Violette*.¹⁷ It is a vast collection of Marian legends in which, in the

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second and third redactions of the work (composed from c. 1219), groups of songs are set between the two books. Yet though the songs' texts are religious, musically they are *contrafacta*, modelled structurally upon and set to the melodies of a large range of trouvère chansons, *pastourelles* and refrains.¹⁸ In generic range then, the songs are closely analogous to those in Renart's *Rose* and *Le Roman de la violette*.

This provides some evidence to suggest (as Chailley argues) that Gautier (like Gerbert de Montreuil) is also directly imitating Renart, and although the dates of both works are insufficiently established to make this certain, much in Gautier's manner in his Prologues (which introduce each book) suggests that he has a work such as Renart's *Rose* in his sights. In common with Renart and Gerbert, Gautier gives considerable emphasis to the performance of the songs, particularly as he claims he is performing them himself to the accompaniment of a 'viele' (I, Pr 2, p. 22, lines 56–58).¹⁹ His words match theirs in his reference to the contrast the songs will provide to the reading out of the legends: 'Un petitet, s'il ne vos grieve, / Ainz que plus lise, veil chanter' [For a little, if it does not trouble you, before I read more, I wish to sing] (I, Pr 2, p. 20, lines 16–17). Moreover, a substantial proportion of the numerous manuscript copies of the *Miracles* does contain musical notation.²⁰ This shows that music for vernacular song was transmitted around the date of Renart's *Rose*; it also raises the possibility that Gautier himself may have used a (now-lost) copy of Renart's work which had music written into it, as Renart asserts.²¹ (The situation is less clear for the *Roman de la violette*, as I will go on to discuss.)

The third thirteenth-century work that recalls Renart's Prologue is *Aucassin et Nicolette*. The (anonymous) singer begins by announcing the names of his two main characters, but then immediately turns to the sung/spoken feature of the narrative:

dox est li cans, biax li dis
et cortois et bien asis.
(8–9)²²

Sweet is the melody, fine the words, courtly and well arranged.

Again, he draws the audience's attention to the work's impending generic contrasts ('dox est li cans, biax li dis'). *Aucassin* also survives in a single

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copy, but this time with music for each *laisse*. Although there is no consensus over its date, this use of a shared rhetorical trope suggests that the author is writing within the same generic horizon as Jean Renart, Gerbert de Montreuil and Gautier de Coinci.²³ It shows that Renart's work fits into a tradition in which music was more than a merely metaphorical presence in a text.

Renart's *Rose* is unique, but not isolated. It belongs with a larger thirteenth-century ambition to incorporate song within the medium of writing. The history of this ambition shows it to have been full of fits and starts, shaped partly by practical exigencies, and by the specialist nature of music copying. In the next two chapters, the precise nature of this fluctuating semi-oral, semi-literate relation between songs and narrative will be examined more closely by means of our only surviving evidence: the writings themselves.