

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 123

Pseudo-Autobiography and the Role of the Poet in Jean Froissart's *Joli Buisson de Jonece*

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The criticism to fourteenth-century first-person narrative poetry has had two, seemingly mutually exclusive, approaches. There are those, frequently the poems' editors, who view the events narrated as true in a literal, historical sense, at least enough so that a careful reading of the poem can provide biographical information about the poet. In contrast, much recent criticism, influenced by theoretical approaches that minimize the role of the author in determining the meaning in his or her text, has treated these poems as though they were wholly fictional. In this essay I have used an approach which makes sense of both these ways of reading the poems and accounts for the fact that the poems "work" in either treatment. This reading strategy, which Laurence de Looze has called "pseudo-autobiography," accounts for both our contemporary critical heritage and an aspect of the poems as yet untreated: not only can they be read in two mutually exclusive ways at the same time, but this doubleness seems to be a key feature of the way the poems work.¹

While this approach offers an effective means of exploring some of the fourteenth-century narrative poems in which I have been interested, for me it is also the significance of the approach with respect to our own critical heritage that I find engaging. Part of what I find exciting about reading literature, especially literature from a distant period, is that it is a means of contact with an other. Writing is, among other things, a means of communication, often very personal, specific communication. Recent developments in literary theory have minimized the role of the author in interpreting a text, especially the author's intention, and rightly so. Unfortunately, in the effort to more carefully consider the reader's role in creating a text's meaning these treatments have also minimized the sense of contact with another time period, geographical place, or person.

I have used de Looze's approach to autobiography because it is based in the attitude and reception of the reader, but not in such a way that it disregards the author as creator of the text. In fact, by focusing on the autobiographical tone of

page 124

this poetry, pseudo-autobiography as a reading strategy necessitates the consideration of the author of the text. For me, this seems a possible way out of a great dilemma: how to capture the sense of contact with another while remaining aware of the perspective that the reader brings to the text. In terms of our shared critical heritage, it is also a way of approaching these works while considering the author, but without using a theory that disregards developments in literary theory since the New Criticism and without working against these ideas in a hostile or reactionary manner.

Thus this paper, while very different in approach from the other efforts in autobiographical criticism presented here, is nonetheless personal. The other papers in this group are explicitly about the sense of personal contact that we have with the texts we read, about making the point of that contact explicit. While this essay takes a much different approach, it is still the sense of contact that has motivated me to write it at all.

In the fourteenth century, the poet takes on a more intimate and active role in the production, copying, and presentation of his poetry. It is with poets like Guillaume de Machaut that something closer to our own idea of the individual poet and his body of work develops. During this period also poetry begins to present itself explicitly as autobiography. These long, narrative poems, composed in the first person, use various devices to create the illusion that the events depicted are both true and from the author's own life and direct experience. For example, works like Machaut's *Voir dit* and Froissart's *Prison amoureuse* use the epistolary form coupled with a prologue or other prose frame explaining how the letters came to be bound together and copied; the dream vision form is exploited as a means of presenting remembered events from the poet's past; the narrators for these "autobiographical" poems, when they are named, share their Christian names with the author. Moreover, the poetic persona remains much the same from poem

to poem in an author's *oeuvre*, so much so that some critics have come to use these poems as a source for information about the lives of the poets who wrote them.

Jean Froissart, though known chiefly as a chronicler, was a master of the first-person narrative *dit* and of its autobiographical tone. In addition to the *Prison amoureuse*, he wrote two poems treating the childhood, youth, and middle age of his poetic persona: the *Espinette amoureuse* and the *Joli buisson de Jonece*. Though the link between author and narrator is strong, in this latter poem Froissart also includes a number of devices which separate and multiply the first-person voice into author, narrator, dreamer, and the personification of Youth. Moreover, since all of these figures are also poets, this fragmentation of the protagonist allows Froissart to include in the poem a simultaneous discourse on the role and purpose of the poet and of poetry itself.

De Looze has used the term *pseudo-autobiography* to describe the contradictory possibilities in fourteenth-century poetry generally: much poetry from this period can be read equally convincingly both as a true and autobiographical account of the poet's life and as a work of wholesale fiction.² The idea of pseudo-

page 125

autobiography as a reading strategy is to embrace both of these possibilities simultaneously, along with the on-going tension between them. That is, a pseudo-autobiographical reading would recognize both those places where the poem makes a claim to be true and those where it foregrounds its own status as a fiction or a made thing. I want to use this same strategy to read one particular section of the *Joli buisson de Jonece*, and briefly suggest some implications of this play between potential meanings. This passage is the concealed signature, where Froissart includes his own name mid-poem as a textual pun or game. The signature, as the locus of first-person identity and of the relation between author and narrator, is key for an examination of the work as auto- or pseudo-autobiography.

I will describe just enough of the poem's events, key themes, and major structural features to make the signature comprehensible. The *Joli buisson de Jonece* has a special place in Froissart's *oeuvre*. The narrator, who is thirty-five years old,³ has a discussion with Philosophy about the poetry and patrons from his past. He falls asleep and has a dream in which he has the same discussion with Venus. The narrator gives the date for the dream as 30 November 1373, thus setting up the claim that he is a writer faithfully and truthfully recording after the fact events that happened to him in the same temporal and logical order in which they happened. He also establishes that the poem is set in the middle of winter. The dream section opens instead in the springtime with a wonderful scene in which Venus asks the narrator why he is still in bed on such a beautiful day when the sun is shining and the birds are singing, the typical scene for a love poem. These are traditional generic markers both for a love poem and for a dream poem. It is as if Venus says, what are you doing asleep, don't you know you are in a poem, and should, as the heroes of poems are wont to do, go out and have delightful and amorous adventures? So now the narrator is simultaneously both a creator of poetry and a protagonist in a particular poem.

He gets up, and Venus takes him to meet Jonece (Youth) who looks just like him, since he is now no longer an aged thirty-five but a youth again. Jonece takes him into his home, which is a giant *buisson* or bush. Here he experiences, or rather re-experiences, the events of a love affair from his past, involving the same woman he then loved, who is also still young. These events are similar to those detailed in Froissart's earlier pseudo-autobiographical poem, the *Espinette amoureuse*.⁴ The addition of this allusion, together with the generic markings of bird song and springtime, creates a rich intertext. Just as the narrator is both a protagonist in a particular poem and a creator of poetry, this poem is both a particular poem and an opportunity to comment on poetry in general. The narrator courts this woman and, not incidentally, writes love poetry for her. The characters in the dream play some courtly games, which also involve the composition of poetry, the narrator wakes, and then he writes a poem, but a poem appropriate for a man of thirty-five, a lay for the Virgin Mary: a poem for *Notre Dame* rather than *ma dame*.

In many ways, then, the central question of the *Joli buisson de Jonece* may be glossed as follows: given that love is for the young, and that poetry is for the young, and that poetry is almost necessarily love poetry, how can a thirty-five-year-old man write poetry and what should it be about? The articulation of this question is accomplished through a series of thematically linked opposites. Youth, poetry, love, springtime, warmth, and the fire or burning of passion are all linked to each other and opposed to their opposites: old age, the cessation of writing, the state of not being in love or having forgotten love, winter, cold, and the absence therefore of the burning of passion. It is a question, therefore,

which may be relevant for the author Froissart as well as for the narrator. First, this is because Froissart has accomplished a linking of the *personae*, or author, narrator, dreamer, and, possibly, the character *Jonece*, who is his physical double. Second, the *Joli buisson de Jonece* is the last narrative *dit* that Froissart will write; after this he turns to the *Chroniques* and his role as a historical writer.⁵ Third, this poem is the second of two autobiographical poems, the other being the *Espinette amoureuse*; the events from the dream frame are therefore events both from the narrator's past and from a poem that the author has previously written: thus the text exists simultaneously on two different levels. And finally, if we accept the dating of the poem to 1373, Froissart is himself thirty-five when he writes the poem, and he wrote it in the same year that the narrator had his dream.⁶

This link between author, narrator, and dreamer, the fragmentation of the protagonist into multiple *personae*, as well as the on-going doubling of narrative accomplished through the rich intertext, are all further concentrated in the signature passage:

Lors me respondi Venus en haste
 Et dist: "Amis, se je me haste
 De parler par ire et sans sens,
 Tu m'i esmoes, car je te sens
 En peril de toi fourvoier;
 Dont pour toi un peu ravoier,
 Je me voel retraire al *ahan*.
 Frois a esté li *ars* maint an
 De mon chier fil, dont moult le charge;
 Mes bien voi que, se plus atarge,
 Tu en ies en peril de perdre,
 Car en folour te voels aherdre."⁷

In lines 931-32, Venus, speaking to the dreamer-narrator, says: "Frois a esté li *ars* maint an / de mon chier fil" Froissart's name is made out of the two words *frois* and *ars*, words which denote the thematic links which help to articulate the central concerns of the poem. In addition to this thematic aspect of the signature, however, and its place right at the dream frame, after the narrator has fallen asleep but before we discover that he is young again, the sentence also evokes the way that the poem is constructed. This sentence can denote three separate persons, each of whom is linked to one of the three *personae*, author-narrator-dreamer, and also to one of the fictional levels of the story. *Mon chier fil* can be the person Venus is here addressing, the *narrator*, and his art is therefore poetry. Since she is Venus, however, her *chier fil* can also be Cupid, the *dieu d'amours*, whom the e

page 127

dreamer, as a young man in love, serves. His art, then, is love. Finally, by means of the signature, the extra-textual person Froissart is denoted, the *author*. Author also evokes the extra-textual realm, narrator the text proper, and dreamer the inner frame.

All this is deftly done, and it not only concerns the thematic content of the poem but draws attention also to the means and fact of its making. These two levels of the poem are in harmony with the simultaneous possibilities of autobiography and fiction—created by the simultaneous linking and separation of author and narrator. These two levels allow Froissart to consider, on a more general, thematic level, the question not only of how *this* poet should write poetry as a man of thirty-five, but of how *any* poet should write poetry at thirty-five, and even the purpose and nature of poetry in general. Thus, a pseudo-autobiographical reading allows us not only to make sense of the poem as an individual work, but also to reveal how it provides its own gloss, a clue to its workings, both plot and structure, and perhaps even the beginnings of a fourteenth-century literary theory.

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Notes

1. Laurence de Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography in the Fourteenth Century: Jean Ruiz, Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Geoffrey Chaucer* (Gainesville, Fla., 1997).
2. This is, of course, an over-simplification of de Looze's argument, which seeks to use contemporary autobiographical theory in conjunction with the history of practical criticism of fourteenth-century literature to account, quite successfully, for the two possible but seemingly mutually exclusive readings of these poems
3. This age, for the purposes of the poem, is that of an old man, or at least one who is too old for poetry and for love; see lines 1613 ff., which are a digression on the seven ages of man. Thirty-five is also undoubtedly an age of transition, a *mezzo del cammin* kind of age. The narrator's age is given at line 794, the claim that love is for the young at line 837, and the claim that poetry is for lovers at lines 1320-24. Citations of the poem are from Jean Froissart, *Le joli buisson de Jonece*, ed. Anthime Fourrier (Geneva, 1975).
4. Jean Froissart, *L'e spinette amoureuse*, ed. Anthime Fourrier (Paris, 1963).
5. On this issue, and also for a nice reading of the seven ages of man as it applies to Froissart's own life, see Michelle A. Freeman, "Froissart's *Li Joli Buisson de Jonece*: A Farewell to Poetry?," in *Machaut's World: Science and Art in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Madeleine Perner Cosman and Bruce Chandler (New York, 1978), pp. 235-47.
6. Because the primary evidence for dating the poem to 1373 comes from the *narrator's* statement that he had the dream in that year, rather than from outside evidence, we are faced with a problem of circular reasoning. If the narrator can be associated with the author through an autobiographical link,

then we can use his statement about the dream's date to date the poem. On the other hand, if the date for the poem and the dream are the same, we can legitimately construct a link between author and narrator using an autobiographical model. The date for the poem provides a model in miniature of the kind of problem inherent in fourteenth-century first-person literature in general.

7. Froissart, *Le joli buisson de Jonece*, lines 924-35; my italics.