

Essays in Medieval Studies 7

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The French Woman Writer in the Middle Ages:

Staying Up Late Tilde Sankovitch

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According to her own testimony, Marie de France, the principal subject of this paper, frequently stayed up late in order to work on the composition of her *La is*; in the "Prologue" she writes that "soventes fiez en ai veillé" (1. 42). The fact that she did so has drawn some scholarly comments. Two different articles in the 1988 *Stanford French and Italian Studies* Volume on *Women in French Literature* comment specifically on line 42 of the "Prologue." Coincidence or not?

I believe that the attention drawn to this evocative little detail, to this vignette, carefully ferreted out of the text, expresses the desire felt by many literary scholars to "know," to "get to know" the writers of whom they speak. That desire for or impulse toward knowledge and familiarity has been belittled or ridiculed by other critics who least of all desire to become familiar with authors, dead or alive, or who obliterate the very notion of the author from their interpretative scheme, as an intrusive and in any case irrelevant notion. Of course for those who deal with "modern" (Renaissance or post-Renaissance) authors, this elimination is easier to accomplish, for, whether we believe in authors or not, at a certain time in literary history we start knowing a lot about them, either because they have insisted on telling us, or because zealous biographers have done it for them. That extensive knowledge is a comfortable epistemological cushion for the critics who at the same time pull the ontological rug out from under the authors.

The rug-pulling becomes something in the nature of a party trick, a not too consequential game, since the authors are clearly safely ensconced somewhere else, while seemingly being evaporated from their work. The critics who saw the text in half and cry out: "See, no author," know that there is a safe compartment in which, whole if not happy, the objects of the magic act are keeping their integrity intact from the teeth of the magicians saw. The critic-magician knows that Montaigne suffered from kidney stones, and loved silk hose and oysters; that Rousseau had a penchant for spankings; that

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Proust ended his days in a cork-lined room. These, and many others, are authors firmly established in a concreteness which may be ignored if we choose to ignore it. But for medievalists to do so, to play around with the vanishing author, is an unaffordable luxury, since the medieval authors have all too often vanished already in the proverbial mists of time, which have all but swallowed them. We try to grasp at the disappearing ectoplasm, hoarding the bits and pieces of substance which float down in arbitrary, often unexpected spots. This is doubly true when we speak of women writers, because, if nothing very concrete and particular is known about medieval writers in general, for male authors we may refer to a paradigm or paradigms which social-cultural history has allowed us to shape: the clerk, the troubadour. Definitions such as these imply many documented indications concerning milieu, intellectual formation, means of literary production and diffusion, which allow for a certain "felt," if generalized, reality in the case of the male authors. The same is true for the women who write as nuns, since their monastic context and certainly the dominantly religious matter of their writings are solidly known and placed. The same is not at all true for the non-religious women writers, with the exception of Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) who is today generally recognized as the first French female author to hold "modern" feminist views, the first to speak out in women's defense against a culture by which she felt oppressed, and about whose life and circumstances we possess quite a body of information.

Marie de France (middle twelfth to early thirteenth century), active two centuries before Christine, is of greater interest when we consider women as writers in the Middle Ages, since she formulated the problematics of the woman writer, not only as the first to do so, but also in a basic way which is useful in looking at women writers in general, and valid still today.

Marie de France's identity as invested in her name "Marie" is well known -- she herself repeats it insistently in the three works with which she is generally credited -- but beyond that all remains speculation. She was obviously well-educated, which probably indicates a high birth, since she knew Latin as well as French and English, and was well versed in ancient and contemporary literature, as numerous allusions and borrowings in her works demonstrate. She probably was active in an Anglo-Norman courtly milieu, possibly the court of Henry II. And, in order to do her literary work, she stayed up late many nights. No wonder that detail has been singled out both by Stephen Nichols and by Diana Faust in the abovementioned articles. Here we have the evocative prosaic detail, the concrete particular which lends life to the unusual tableau of the writing woman. The surrounding darkness, the open book on the

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little desk, the pen, the hand, the female face in the flickering light of a candle or oil lamp, all are part of the picture evoked by "often I have stayed up late."

That indication of "working late" gives extra dimensions to the image of the writer: physical ones of darkness and of quiet, of time and space hought at the price of discomfort; spiritual ones of loneliness, but also of private enjoyment in one's work. "Working late" is often connected with the labour of the writer as a demanding and absorbing enterprise. Stephen Nichols sees Marie de France as the creator in the Middle Ages of the topos (8), while Diana Faust comments on Marie's staying up late in the following way: "This nocturnal activity may indicate two things: first, that her writing was, to her, not merely a profession but rather that it was more similar to an obsession which preempted even sleep. Second, that she felt the need to create her written narratives in secret hidden away from the eyes of others" (18). To the tension of compulsive urgency connected with writing, felt by male as well as by female writers, may be added the burdensome obligation particular to women authors of not letting their writing intrude on their everyday occupations; of not allowing their creative work to impede the domestic and social relations they are expected to entertain with the world around them. This is how we may read, in the case of Marie de France, what Faust describes as a need for secrecy: not as a desire to hide her work (since, on the contrary, she expresses repeatedly her wish to be acknowledged as an author), but as the need to fit it into the exigencies of her life. She writes late, certainly out of creative compulsion; probably also because of the constraints of time and lack of privacy which mark female writing through the centuries. If Marie de France lived, as is likely, at court, she would have had to play the public, socializing, role which was that of the well-born and well-educated gentlewoman, and she would have had to write, as women have often had to do, in between the activities dictated by her function.. as Jane Austen supposedly wrote, as Virginia Woolf complained about women having to write, as Tillie Olsen and many others have denounced. The old saying has it that "a woman's work is never done," and, in order to do the creative work which is also theirs, women writers stay up late. But at least, and at last, Marie de France, sitting up late, sleepless in a dark corner of one of Henry II's castles, with her book, and her pen, and her small light, has been relieved from darkness and resurrected to our attention.

This resurrection is part of a great retrieval effort which has been directed at medieval womanhood in general. Much work has been done on all aspects of that vast subject with a remarkable research

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surge starting about twenty-five years ago. In 1975 Carolly Erickson and Kathleen Casey published in *Medieval Studies* what they called a "working bibliography" on the subject of medieval women. This bibliography does not intend to be exhaustive, yet lists about 325 titles of books and articles dealing with various categories of female experience. The earliest study listed dates from 1838, and from then until 1965, a 127-year span, there are 198 titles, or about 1.5 a year. From 1965 to 1975, 125 titles are listed, or 12.5 per year. Since 1975, the bibliographer would have to add many more titles. The interest in the subject is continuing and lively, and extends to all fields of study.

The impulse to know "whether they stayed up late" is particularly appropriate to studies about women, since so much of their lives consists in "prosaics," in the actions and events of ordinary, daily life, in the concreteness of a bodily lived experience, in the rich sense of "private" actions and interactions, and much of the historical work that has been

done is so successful because it coincides with a new interest on the part of historians in that particular perspective, not only as applied to women, but also as applied to communities and populations.

In a recent article in *Speculum* Howard Bloch remarks that to call something "new" is "a value-laden gesture which implies that something else is 'old' and therefore less worthy" (38). As far as women are concerned, however, many studies are genuinely new, in the sense that they supplement, in previously unknown ways, what knowledge already exists. Many earlier interpretations and studies tended to be subsidiary exhalations caught as they wafted up from the vast pool of research about the Middle Ages, and as offhandedly treated as such unintended catches frequently are. Therefore, to use the term "new" as applied to recent and ongoing scholarship about medieval women is more justified than it often is. "New" in the most general sense means then that recent scholarship has unearthed or re-interpreted materials which allow sometimes first-time access and often a different access to information about women. "New" also means that scholars with eyes newly opened by women's studies and by feminist theories of diverse inspiration (Marxist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytic, or new-historical, to name a few of the prevailing trends) have taken a fresh, gender-focused, look at literary and artistic canons, at social and political histories, and at interpretations. "New" finally means that hitherto little or not considered topics are studied: alternate and marginal ways of life, religious heresy, female sexuality (including lesbianism). "New" often also means: women writers considered as distinct from their male col-

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leagues: the *trobairitz* as distinct from the *troubadour*, for example. Studies of medieval women writers are coming out in increasing numbers, ranging from the archaeological to the critical-theoretical. A 1989 Volume of essays on the female *troubadours*, edited by William D. Paden, offers in that respect an interesting insight into the variety of approaches to medieval writing women. After an "Introduction," placing the *trobairitz* in the Southern French society and culture in which she was active, there are two contributions which intend to define the *trobairitz* corpus: the sort of nitty-gritty archaeology indispensable to further study, and not available until now; seven contributions which study the *trobairitz* in general or a particular author from perspectives including the philological, the Bakhtinian, the Derridean, and the feminist; one essay giving a feminist analysis of the miniatures depicting the *trobairitz* in a late-seventeenth century *chansonnier* and one looking into the biographies of three Italian women poets. There have appeared in the last five years two books which intend to deal with the general subject of female medieval writers. Peter Dronke's *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* is a one-author Volume on the subject, while Katharina M. Wilson's *Medieval Women Writers* gathers essays by various contributors. Dronke's seven chapters and Wilson's sixteen papers deal each with a particular woman author, or with a group of authors connected, for instance, by the genre they chose to practice. Dronke spans ten centuries, from the Carthaginese Vibia Perpetua, who died a Christian martyr's death in 203 a.d., to the French Marguerite Porete, publicly executed for her heretical beliefs in Paris in 1310. Wilson spans seven centuries from the ninth through the fifteenth, from Dhuoda to Christine de Pizan. Both Volumes cover a diversity of language regions and of nationalities; both have a majority of chapters on religious/visionary writers. In the long opening essay to her collection Wilson states that "the most fascinating question about women writers of the past concerns how they differed from their female successors and from their male contemporaries" (xix). Dronke defines the focus of his book as "women's awareness of themselves, their modes of expression and self-expression" (viii). Both thus indicate a theoretical base for the study of medieval women writers, a base located in the notion that "sexuality and textuality both depend on difference" (Abel, 1), a notion which, in different ways, is at the heart of all feminist literary criticism.

The basic task, especially when exploring the early writers, is to ask how they procured for themselves access to literary expression, that is, the expression which, transcending the private, brings it into the

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public sphere of *auctoritas*, the reality of being an author, of having "authority" in both senses of the word. To be an author, to exercise the practice and the authority of the word, this is the goal which makes Marie de France stay up late.

The attainment of authority is clearly difficult for women writers, although not for the women writers who are placed in a conventual context, in which authority is built into the structure of these writers' daily experience of participating in the very core of *auctoritas*. Even heretics, such as the mystic Marguerite Porete, align themselves with the supreme

author/authority, God, in whose all-embracing vision they find justification and voice for writing. Marie de France is very aware of the problem of authority, and her determination to appropriate it to herself is a strong motif in the "Prologue" to her *Lais*. By pinpointing that problem she defines the enduring central problem of the woman writer. She too refers to God as a sign of authority in the first lines of her "Prologue," but she appropriates the authority invested in the divine name to herself, detaching it from all religious/theological/mystic context, in order to situate it in the context of her unique creative project:

Ki deus ad duné esciënce [1]
 E de parler bone eloquence
 Ne s'en deit taisir ne celer
 Ainz se deit Voluntiers mustrer.
 Quant uns granz biens est mult oïz, [5]
 Dunc a primes est il fluriz,
 E quant loëz est de plusurs,
 Dunc ad expandues ses flurs.

She to whom God has given knowledge
 And good eloquence in speech,
 Should not be silent or secretive about these gifts,
 But should show them willingly.
 When a great good is much talked about,
 Then it may start to bloom,
 And when many people praise it,
 Then it has spread its flowers.

The naming of God--"Deus"--is preceded by the androgynous pronoun "ki" (he/she who; he/she to whom), alluding here to the female author, Marie, and implying the injustice of differentiation between herself and other--male--writers. "Ki" is both object, as recipient of God's gifts, tokens and promises of authority, and subject of the sentence. As subject, she remains the object of God, who

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issues the law she must enact: not to be a silent and secretive author, but to be an overt, fully realized author. "Deus" is how she names, metonymically, what she lucidly perceives as her intellectual and artistic endowment, and as the desire as well as the duty which compel her to use that endowment in writing. "Deus" makes possible and even mandatory the coincidence between desire and duty, and Marie's invention of that perfect coincidence resolves what is often a fundamental conflict for the woman writer. Her association with "Deus," the supreme author, authorizes her.

The legalistic formulation of the first four lines of the "Prologue" is worked out further through a reference to a Biblical text: the allusion to Matthew's (25: 14-30) parable of the talents which should be used and made to produce. The servants who have made good use of the talents entrusted to them are called "good" and are invited to "enter into the joy of the Lord." The bad servant, who hid his talents, is cast into darkness. If her talents are allowed to bring forth fruit, Marie, too, will enter into "joy": the joy of the creator/author. The second authority she names in order to establish her own authority is clearly located in the field of language:

Custume fus as anciens,
 Ceo testimoine Preciens, tiOl
 Es livres ke jadis feseient,
 Assez oscurement diseient
 Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
 E ki aprendre les devent,
 K'i peüssent gloser la lettre [15]
 E de lur sen le surplus mettre.

It was the custom among the

ancient writers,
 As Priscian testifies,
 That, in the books they composed,
 They spoke obscurely,
 So that those who came after them
 And who would study them
 Were able to explicate their words
 And to provide them with the complete meaning.

The authority figure invoked here is the sixth century grammarian, Priscian. His *Institutiones Grammaticae* were extremely popular in the twelfth century, and may have served as Marie's own textbook for the study of Latin, since it was the standard textbook (Haskins

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130), providing an education in language as well as literature. Nonetheless we may well ask why Marie chose to cite this particular author among many *auctoritates* equally acknowledged and respected by her age. There are three answers to this question: 1. Priscian did signify linguistic and literary authority and creativity for her, by the very nature of his own work and legacy. 2. There is a striking coincidence between the attributes Marie singles out as the basic writerly qualities in lines 1 and 2 of the "Prologue," namely "escience/E de parler bone eloquence," and Priscian's mention of these same staples in the first line of his *Institutiones*, namely "eloquentia" and "sapientia." 3. The idea of the continuation of knowledge which in successive generations enriches the reading and interpretation of a text is expressed by Priscian through the term *prolatio*, meaning enlargement, extension, growth, which Marie must have seen as a confirmation of her own strategy for establishing authority through the coincidence with the Matthew parable in which notions of prospering and growing--*prolatio*--are highly valued. By establishing the link between the scriptural parable and Priscian, Marie builds a bridge between the necessities of her endowment and her work as a writer. God bestows the gifts; Priscian exemplifies authorial activity and textual endurance.

There is a third authority figure at the end of the "Prologue:" the King (maybe Henry II) to whom she dedicates her book in a rather lengthy and elaborate passage:

En l'honor de vus, nobles reis,
 Ki tant estes pruz e curteis,
 A ki tute joie s'encline [45]
 E en ki quoer tuz biens racine,
 M'entremis des lais assembler,
 Par rime faire e reconter.
 En mun quoer pense e diseie,
 Sire, kes vos presentereie. [50]
 Si vos les plaist a recevoir,
 Mult me ferez grant joie aveir,
 A tuz jura mats en serrai hee.
 Ne me tenez en surquidiee
 Si vos os faire icest present. [55]
 Ore oëz le comencement!

In your honor, noble king,
 Who are so valiant and courteous,
 Whom all joy salutes,
 And in whose heart all good takes root,

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I undertook to assemble these *Lais*
 To provide them with rhyme and to retell them.
 In my heart I thought and decided,

Sire, that I would present them to you.
 If it pleases you to receive them
 You will cause me great joy,
 Forever shall I be gladdened
 Do not think me presumptuous
 If I dare give you this present.
 Now listen to the beginning.

The king has the worldly authority to bestow upon the *Lais* the seal of approval which will guarantee the success of the book, and, as first, and therefore symbolic, reader, he holds also the authority of all and any potential readers. What should we understand by that authority? Marie constructs for the reception of her book a framework of ritual festivity, and generosity. She does this through her use of formal address and gesture (ll. 43ff.); through the mention of her intimate deliberations (l. 49) which imply a solemn preparation for the event; through her twice-repeated description of the book as a gift; through the repeated mention of gladness and joy. All these components of the festive event transform the reader from an authority humbly approached to the object of Marie's authority, willing to participate in the rite of gift-giving which she stages, to receive her present, and thus to recognize her as the presenter. To give and to receive a book is to communicate and to accept the authority of the writer. To give what one has made is to insure the recognition of the making and of the maker. The final line of the "Prologue," with its authoritative use of the imperative "oëz," ends with "commencement"--again a biblical echo, this time of the first line of Genesis: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," and of the first line of the Gospel according to Saint John: "In the beginning was the Word."

Through the use of recognized authority figures Marie thus builds for herself a tri-partite structure of endowment (God), enactment (Priscian), and diffusion (the King/reader), but if she thus establishes and confirms her authority, she deals also with the problems facing her as a women writer, which she mentions in line 3 as "taisir" and "celer," silence and secret. These handicaps and possible instruments of suppression of her work are still named quite consistently today in feminist theory and criticism as denoting the constraints placed on woman's access to expression. "Women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution, writes Elaine Showalter

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(23). Adrienne Rich is particularly articulate on this subject in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, since she finds that "the entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over" (11). In her mythic fictions H el ene Cixous continually denounces the enforced muteness of women, their hidden-ness, their absence from expression. In her book, *Illa*, while alluding to the Ceres/Proserpina myth, she describes the abducted Proserpina, sign of stifled woman, with the pun "sous-taire" for one who is under the earth ("sous terre") and "under silence," an echo again of Matthew's bad servant who buried his talents under the ground. Marie transforms the socially imposed injunctions of "taisir" and "celer" into transgressions against a higher duty than that imposed by female conformity to accepted roles. "Escience" and "bone eloquence" imply the abolishment of "taisir" and "celer," and result in "Voluntiers mustrer" (1.4), their absolute opposite, what Stephen Nichols calls "volitional revelation" (11). In changing the constraints--be silent, be secret--into commands--speak, reveal--Marie gains creative energy from that very act of reversing and subverting accepted ideas. She defines for herself, and implicitly for all women writers, a poet-ics of obligatory revelation. Silence and secrecy are conditions which must not only be broken, but out of which frilly willed revelation must spring. This constitutes a process analogous to Priscian's *prelatio*, and to the climax of Matthew's parable when the servants are summoned, so that they may reveal and display their enlarged talents, and, by that revelation, gain salvation.

The intertwined topoi of silence, secret, and healing revelation are treated in most of Marie's *Lais*, which thus illustrate her model for female writing as a casting aside of muteness and the veil in favour of speaking and unveiling. Silence and secrecy may be fertile only if they prepare revelation; they may fester if they do not. "He who hides his sickness can hardly be brought back to health" writes Marie in "Guigemar" (ll. 481,482), thus stating a motif which may be found throughout the *Lais*.

The possibility of expanding revelation which Marie de France, citing Matthew and Priscian, and imagining her

future readership, places at the basis of her writing, has certainly proven to be a description of what has happened to her own work which, especially in recent years, has attracted numerous comments, interpretations, "glosses" to use her own expression. The "Prologue" to the *Lais* is again a good case in point. It has always received critical attention as the fascinating literary/historical document it is, and as such it has been the object of persistent scholarly investigation and con-

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sideration. In their 1981 "Reconsideration" of this text, Alfred Foulet and Karl D. Uitti offer an excellent synopsis of the relevant scholarship, from earlier critics (Leo Spitzer, D.W. Robertson Jr., M.J. Donovan) to more recent scholars (B.E. Fita, E.J. Mickel, K. Brightenback, R.T. Pickens), and then go on to consider the "Prologue" as a narration, by Marie, of her personal experience as a writer, *i.e.*, as an autobiographical text, noting that "she is narrating, so to speak, a chapter of her own life, in a text that abounds in first person verbs" (248). Michelle A. Freeman goes farther in that "biographical" direction by stating in her 1984 *PMLA* article that she intends to "deepen our understanding of the sort of writer-person . . . Marie must have been" (860) and by interpreting Marie's poetics--which she calls a "Poetics of Silence" and a "Feminine *Translatio*"--as existing in direct relation to the fact of Marie's femaleness.

In my thinking and writing on Marie de France, I follow that same direction of recuperating the woman writer, attributing to her a poetics of indispensable revelation and a strategy of planned *prolatio*. The meaning of her own experience and being as a woman writer, stored by Marie in her text, is emerging in an increasingly complete form, as--just as she predicted--her readers strive to capture the at first seemingly obscure, but then blindingly clear presence the text contains. For Leo Spitzer she was a "clerc, a *poeta philosophus et theologus* (102), and Stephen Nichols aptly comments that to call her a clerkly poet "constitutes an unconscious transsexing of Marie, making her de facto a clerk, and thus *like* the other writers of her age" (10). What is revealed, in fact, is how *unlike* she is, and how she has used that un-likeness, grounded in her sex, as the point of departure for the justification of her writerly activity and authority.

No wonder she had to stay up late! The project she undertook, as it is defined in the "Prologue" to the *Lais*, was nothing less than to procure prolonged literary survival for herself. Line 42--"soventes fiez en ai veillé"--captures the reader's imagination, because of the "authentic" savor it conveys, which is one of intense creative activity, ardently and stubbornly pursued, even into the far reaches of the dark casfie and the long night; but also because of the invigorating exemplary program implied in it, a program for all potential women writers, writing out of their difference, against silence and refusing secrecy; a program in which the author and her eventual readers join in a shared enterprise of alert wakefulness and enduring vigilance.

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