

Introduction

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If you mention the name of Minnette Gaudet to scholars of Old French, their first reaction—both rightly and wrongly—will usually be to think of the 1980 Special Issue of *French Forum* entitled *The Nature of Medieval Narrative*. Rightly, because the volume, which Minnette co-edited and which grew out of a conference held at the University of Western Ontario in 1977, proved to be a watershed for the encounter between narrative theory or narratology and medieval literature. Most students of medieval literature have in their personal library a dog-eared, much-perused copy of that collection of essays (in my case and, I suspect, in that of many others who were students when the volume came out, this consists of a copyright-violating xerox). But at the same time medievalists wrongly think so quickly of the *Medieval Narrative* volume for the simple reason that twenty-five years later too many scholars associate Minnette's name more readily with that volume than with her volume(s) of more recent work. Like the artist or actor who is too successful in a particular mode (Braque's cubist period or Bogey in his heyday), Minnette has occasionally had to wriggle out from under the success of her own work.

At the University of Western Ontario, where Minnette has been since 1974, we have been able to track more easily the evolution of her academic interests. As a scholar working on fourteenth-century texts, I, like so many others interested in late-medieval trends, have known another Minnette, the one of the *Dit de l'Alerion* edition, for example: this Minnette is an expert on the greatest French poet and composer of the century, Guillaume de Machaut; she also turns out to be quite up-to-date on the antiquated subject of medieval falconry. Then, there is a third Minnette who has been quietly publishing on questions of desire, women and the body in a variety of medieval texts.

If we at Minnette's university have followed more closely the peripeties of Minnette's work, we have been helped in part by the wonderful *va et vient* between Minnette's research projects and her classroom teaching. For there is a fourth Minnette, one who is deeply involved in the other three: Minnette the teacher and educator. Colleagues at Western will know that I am not exaggerating if I say that Minnette's reputation among students for exciting classes is almost legendary. A glance at her teaching evaluations (easy to do nowadays via the internet) makes for intoxicating reading; I do not believe I am mistaken in saying that she has consistently had the highest evaluations of any professor in her department. Formal evaluations tell only part of the story, however, and the rest can be heard in the form of offhand student comments in the corridors and cafés of the university: quite simply, students consistently speak in glowing terms of Minnette's classes. Medievalists know that, in general, students initially approach early literature courses with a combination of dread and resentment: they see it as the academic equivalent of being told they have to clean up their room before they can go out for the evening. After a few weeks in virtually any course taught by Minnette Gaudet, the students are inevitably fired up with a passion for the course material and for their professor. Minnette is famous as one of those rare professors whom students follow from class to class; I have had students tell me point-blank that they would take any course she was teaching. Upon Minnette's retirement in July 2000, the university very wisely requested that she continue to offer a half-course per year in medieval French literature. And, fortunately for us all, Minnette said yes.

Finally, what not even the students have been aware of, but which Minnette's colleagues know very well, has been the equally extraordinary energy she has brought to university affairs. She has been Associate Dean in the Faculty of Arts; she has been tireless in her supervision and encouragement of graduate students; and she has served on so many crucial committees at the university, in the province and in the academic community at large, that it would probably be easier to list the ones she has not been a part of than the ones she has.

It was therefore a great pleasure when, in honour of Minnette's retirement, various academic friends, fellow medievalists, former students, and colleagues present and past gathered together at University College on the University of Western Ontario campus to celebrate her many contributions by means of a conference on 6 April 2000. The conference, entitled "*Cherchez la dame*: Women, Sex and Gender in Medieval French Writing," allowed for the consideration of convergences between

matters of language and writing, on the one hand, and those of gender, sexuality and the body on the other. In doing so, it of course brought together the two aspects of Minnette's critical interest over a quarter-century of research. The topic also had the virtue of being central to any understanding of the Middle Ages. During the course of Minnette's career, medievalists have become aware that perhaps no period of Western culture before our own has so deeply pondered the relationships between sexuality and writing, linguistic skill and garments, the body of a person and a body of writing. The participants ranged from the keynote speaker, William Calin, with whom Minnette had taught at Stanford early on in her career, to her successor as medievalist in French at Western, Francis Gingras, passing by way of longtime academic associates (Brian Merrilees, Nadia Margolis) and former students (Christine McWebb, Sharon Collingwood). The result of that day's exchanges is the current collection of essays. This forum is a source of particular delight in that it affords the possibility of creating a collection that, in its humble way, might serve to balance the one Minnette herself edited back in 1980. In the following pages, Minnette's friends and colleagues explore a cluster of interrelated topics of great interest to both Minnette and other scholars. With wit, erudition and perception they each approach the vast subjects of women, sexuality and the body in medieval French writing. While the participants have done some rewriting of their essays, and have added full *apparati critici*, something of the jauntiness of the day's conference can nonetheless be felt.

Nowhere is this spirit better exemplified than in the opening essay by Minnette's longtime friend and colleague, William Calin. With humor and zest, but also with philological rigour and great precision, Calin analyses the obscenity-laced, multi-leveled discourse of the beast-fable personage Renart when, disguised as an English *jongleur*, he meets and bests Isengrin in Branch Ib of the *Roman de Renart*. In theoretical terms, one could say that Auerbach meets Bakhtin here, and old philology meets new in this intriguing and entertaining critical romp. Along with demonstrating that medieval writers and their audiences had great linguistic sensitivity and a keen ear for regional differences, Calin shows as well that they also had a deep perception of the relationship between speech and social class. It is that relationship that makes for excellent satire, although, as Calin argues, the question of who is satirising whom is a complex and delicious one in this episode.

Equally philological in its concerns is Brian Merrilees' offering. As a counterbalance to a publication of his own early in his career that considered "words against women," Merrilees now proffers "words in favour of women." By means of both a

plea for the necessity of careful manuscript study and a luxuriating in the serendipity of that process, Merrilees treats his readers to a discussion of a poem in praise of women which he discovered by chance in the pages of the manuscript of an early French-Latin dictionary. In addition to the purely philological matters of lexicography and textual study, this *trouvaille* is highly suggestive regarding the different modes of reading and reception in the late Middle Ages, as well as for literary depictions of women. Who were the readers/writers of a poem so favourable to women, and were they the same as those who produced and/or had need of a French-Latin dictionary? Implicit in Merrilees' essay is a delicate balancing of Latin vs vernacular, learned vs popular, and perhaps masculine vs feminine that characterises the insertion of this proto-feminist poem into an extraliterary reference work.

In his “prehistory” of the *sorcière*, Francis Gingras leads us into the world of the marvelous. Gingras cuts a swath through classical texts (Virgil and Ovid) and medieval clerical writing (Thomas Aquinas and John of Salisbury) with both wit and erudition, the better to contextualise the emergence of the sorceress figure in medieval French literature of the High Middle Ages. Gingras discovers that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries sorceresses—or at least the authors who created them—did not think of them(selves) as evil, hideous witches. In this period they were either marvelous women who helped heroes or superb illusionists, quite unambiguously marked as “good.” Only with the Inquisition, Gingras argues, and the Church's crusades on all fronts against non-Christian “heretics”—in France and in Spain, as well as in the East—did sorceresses become a problem. This shift in perception can, he demonstrates, be detected in literary treatments of the sorceress as she gradually evolves into a diabolical figure.

Sharon Collingwood also studies the treatment of nonconformist women, this time in the French *fabliaux*. Taking on the difficult task of disentangling the content or *récit* of one of the most famous of the *fabliaux*, commonly known as *La dame escoillee* “The Castrated Woman”, from the rhetorical mould or *discours* in which it is cast is daunting, to say the least. Attempting to recover a sense of the “original” *fabliau* text, devoid of a misogynist prologue that has become standard in modern editions but may have been added onto a pre-existing version of the work, Collingwood proposes a feminist rereading of the work. As she shows, the tussel regarding what the work is *about* is a highly political one for its deep relationship to questions of gender and power; the *quid* of the *récit*, in other words, returns as a power struggle over how to interpret the content of the *fabliau*. Collingwood points to alternate

readings of the tale, readings that resist the interpretation the narrative voice might seek to impose on the events—and on the reader.

Another sort of unusual woman is treated by Madeleine Jeay in her essay on the nuances of the *Manekine* tradition. What she detects in her reading is that the opposition of the incestuous father and innocent daughter, while important for structuring the narratives, is by no means a pat polarity. Rather, as she shows, the father is often less than totally culpable; at times, for example, he only undertakes to marry his daughter because his barons pressure him. The daughters, on the other hand, are often less than totally innocent. The presentation, for example, of a daughter engaged in the sensual and seductive activity of brushing her long hair at a mirror when first approached by her father is a clear sign of her nascent sexuality, as is also the fact that she almost immediately blushes in the presence of her father. Jeay also discovers two other sets of contrastive relationships that subtend the tales and speak in powerful ways to questions of gender. The young woman-victims are persecuted, above all, by mother figures (sometimes an actual mother, occasionally the aunt) who are, unlike the fathers, incarnations of pure evil. On the masculine side of the gender divide, however, Jeay argues for a more graded shading: the father-figures and the husbands that inhabit these narratives are “grey” figures, neither wholly good nor wholly bad—and surprisingly similar to each other.

Christine McWebb investigates one of the greatest women writers of medieval French and certainly the most important in terms of a conscious meditation on women’s roles: Christine de Pizan. In a micro-study of the Beinecke manuscript of Pizan’s works, McWebb considers how the iconographical program can guide us in our understanding of the Pizanist text—or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, in our understanding of how the Pizanist text was interpreted in a particular manuscript performance of the work. In particular, McWebb considers the ways in which major works by Christine de Pizan—above all, the *Cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*—implicitly continue the polemic of the famous *Debate* about the Jean de Meun portion of the *Roman de la Rose*.

Rounding out the collection, Nadia Margolis returns to Christine de Pizan from a very different stance as she examines the reappraisal and influence of Christine on three subsequent male writers of different periods and places. The first is not terribly far removed: Margolis analyses the redeployment during the author’s own lifetime of one of Christine’s *ballades* following the murder of Louis of Orléans. The second instance leaps across time in order to study the return to the *Chemin de long estude* in

the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the third instance, Margolis leaps both geographically and temporally in order to consider how the Japanese writer Ishikawa exploits Christine's *Ditié de Jeanne d'Arc* in a novella written shortly before the Second World War. Arising from the landscape of intertextuality that Margolis sketches is an image of the enduring power and pertinence of Christine's writing, in particular because of its subtle political edge.

If Christine de Pizan's writing has had such pertinence and endurance, this is in part because the questions she overtly raised at the beginning of the fifteenth century have proven almost infinitely rich in their ramifications. During the course of the last quarter century—which is also to say during the course of Minnette Gaudet's academic career—the study of women, sexuality, the body, and gender relations has shifted from being virtually ignored by the scholarly community or simply treated as marginal to finding itself established as central to academic study. As we begin a new century and a new millennium nothing is more common (and more careless) than to declare certain features of our intellectual landscape to be set in place *per saecula saeculorum*. Nevertheless, questions regarding gender, women and sexuality now pervade in some fashion virtually all aspects of critical research, whether they are part of the stated objects of study or not. Still, we should be modest in our claims. The questions addressed in this volume have proven themselves to be crucial critical concerns for late-twentieth-century scholars, and, what is more important, from the millennial threshold where we currently find ourselves it appears that they will continue to occupy scholars for many decades to come. Let us therefore hope that this collection will speak to scholars a generation from now with something of the same force and urgency that Minnette Gaudet's writings and teachings have done for the last twenty-five years.