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Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination

Britain’s pre-Conquest past and its culture continue to fascinate modern writers and artists. From Henry Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader* to Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf*, and from high modernism to the musclebound heroes of comic book and Hollywood, Anglo-Saxon England has been a powerful and often unexpected source of inspiration, antagonism, and reflection. The essays here engage with the ways in which the Anglo-Saxons and their literature have been received, confronted, and re-envisioned in the modern imagination. They offer fresh insights on established figures such as W. H. Auden, J. R. R. Tolkien, and David Jones, and on contemporary writers such as Geoffrey Hill, Peter Reading, P. D. James, and Seamus Heaney. They explore the interaction between text, image, and landscape in medieval and modern books, the recasting of mythic figures such as Wayland Smith, and the metamorphosis of *Beowulf* into *Grendel*—as a novel and as grand opera. The early medieval emerges not simply as a site of nostalgia or anxiety in modern revisions, but instead provides a vital arena for creativity, pleasure, and artistic experiment.
Medievalism aims to provide a forum for monographs and collections devoted to the burgeoning and highly dynamic multi-disciplinary field of medievalism studies: that is, work investigating the influence and appearance of ‘the medieval’ in the society and culture of later ages. Titles within the series will investigate the post-medieval construction and manifestations of the Middle Ages – attitudes towards, and uses and meanings of, ‘the medieval’ – in all fields of culture, from politics and international relations, literature, history, architecture, and ceremonial ritual to film and the visual arts. It welcomes a wide range of topics, from historiographical subjects to revivalism, with the emphasis always firmly on what the idea of ‘the medieval’ has variously meant and continues to mean; it is founded on the belief that scholars interested in the Middle Ages can and should communicate their research both beyond and within the academic community of medievalists, and on the continuing relevance and presence of ‘the medieval’ in the contemporary world.

New proposals are welcomed. They may be sent directly to the editors or the publishers at the addresses given below.

Professor Karl Fugelso
Art Department
Towson University
3103 Center for the Arts
8000 York Road
Towson, MD 21252–0001
USA

Dr Chris Jones
School of English
University of St Andrews
St Andrews
Fife KY16 9AL
UK

Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9
Woodbridge
Suffolk IP12 3DF
UK

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## Contents

*Acknowledgements* vii  
*Introduction* 1  

### I Conceptualizing the Medieval

1. A Sense of the Past: Ancients, Moderns, and the Medieval 17  
2. The Medievalist Rhetorics of Enlightenment 43  

### II Reimagining the Medieval

3. Survivals: Reading the Medieval *Roman* at the Dawn of the Enlightenment 71  
4. Continuities: The Medieval as Performance 107  
5. Reconfigurations: Medievalism and Desire, Between *Eros* and *Agape* 145  

### III Studying the Medieval

6. The Invention of Medieval Studies 185  
   Conclusion: Medievalism as an Alternative Modernity 221  

*Bibliography* 225  
*Index* 241
Samuel and Nathaniel,
this one is for you
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Introduction

Perceptions of medieval literature, far from being a simple matter of philological interest, have historically been fraught with ideological implications. Thus, for example, when, announcing the advent of romanticism, Madame de Staël famously proposed that “romantic or chivalric literature is indigenous to us,” she was not only celebrating the birth of a literary movement. She was also saying something about the literature that was, according to her, most appropriate for the French national–political context of her day. Opposing Napoleon’s neo-classicist ideal, the Middle Ages stood in her writings for an alternative, freer model of art and power. Likewise, when, following France’s 1870 defeat in the Franco–Prussian war, scholars and writers such as Gaston Paris self-consciously set out to professionalize the study of medieval literature, it was often with explicitly nationalistic intentions. And at yet another crucial historical junction, during the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the medieval past, as exemplified by its literary traditions, again became prominent in some writings, where it was made to embody the ideals of different parties. The Middle Ages are a site of ideologically laden critical debate par excellence for, when speaking of them, very often it is of ourselves that we are really speaking. Thus, reflecting this intrinsic ideological aspect, I prefer to use the adjectival “medieval” rather than the more absolute “Middle Ages” in order to convey this sense that the medieval is as much a quality ascribed to certain artefacts or phenomena as it is a historical marker.

Against the background of the various, ideologically coloured definitions of the term “medieval”, this book examines another moment in French history during which

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1 For France and Germany, see Gumbrecht, “Un souffle d’Allemagne”. For England, see Patterson, Negotiating the Past.
2 “La littérature romantique ou chevaleresque est chez nous [i.e. in France] indigène.” Staël, De l’Allemagne, I, 213.
3 Gumbrecht, “Un souffle d’Allemagne”.
4 Hervier, “Un mythe politique”; Nichols, “Modernism and the Politics of Medieval Studies”.

1
portions of the secular, vernacular literature of the Middle Ages – the romances, troubadour lyric and other narrative works we consider today as the age’s literary classics – came to the fore: the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, or the period spanning late classicism through to the early Enlightenment. Although the survival of medieval literature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has previously been noted, the decades from the 1680s through to the 1750s have almost invariably been overlooked or addressed only in passing. Of the two outstanding studies of early modern French medievalism, Nathan Edelman’s still unsurpassed *Attitudes of Seventeenth-Century France toward the Middle Ages*, and Lionel Gossman’s *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment*, the first stops around 1690, while the second takes up the topic again in the mid-eighteenth century. Likewise, of the seventeen essays in Peter Damian-Grint’s recent edited volume *Medievalism and Manière Gothique in Enlightenment France*, only six deal primarily with the first half of the century. And Jürgen Voss’s somewhat earlier *Das Mittelalter im Historischen Denken Frankreichs*, while providing a treasure trove of historiographic data relevant to this period, does not focus primarily on secular, vernacular literary texts, which are the main topic of the present book. Indeed, this book does not treat all aspects of medieval literature, but focuses primarily on narrative and lyrical texts, i.e. those genres that particularly fascinated readers and writers during the early Enlightenment and came to signify the “medieval” for them. I do not discuss other kinds of texts, such as chronicles, religious texts and especially medieval theatre, on whose reception there is a growing body of work, except in a tangential manner.

This is, then, the first book-length study addressing the literary medievalism of the decades from the 1680s to the 1750s, filling in the chronological gap left between Edelman’s study and Gossman’s volume. I argue that, contrary to Edelman’s claim that before 1700 “there was no fiery school, no sensational movement of medievalism”, there did arise a distinct fashion for the literature of the siècles gothiques in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. This fashion, I claim, extended into the eighteenth century and influenced later movements leading up the romantic “discovery” of the Middle Ages. I contend that medievalist and medieval literature played a vital role in shaping the new genres that flourished in the eighteenth century. Thus, there is an undeniable though often overlooked influence – and perhaps, I will argue, even continuity – between late medieval romance, as exemplified by Ludovico Ariosto’s and Torquato Tasso’s pseudo-chivalric epics or the perennial bestseller *Amadis de Gaule*,

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5 See for example Arden and Workman, *Medievalism in France 1500–1750* and *Medievalism in France*; Autrand, *L’image du moyen âge*; Grimm, *Mittelalter-Rezeption*; Jacoubet, *Le comte de Tressan*; Keller, *The Middle Ages Reconsidered*; Pauphilet, “Le mythe du moyen âge”. Other studies, dealing respectively with art history and music, also present material useful to the study of literary medievalism during this period: Pupil, *Le style troubadour* and Haines, *Eight Centuries of Troubadours*. Two recent dissertations, which unfortunately appeared too late for me to integrate their findings into the present book, do address the 1680s through 1750s, focusing respectively on book history, and on aristocratic and royalist mondain representations of the medieval: Blom, “‘Vieux romans’ et ‘Grand Siècle’” and Roussillon, “Plaisir et Pouvoir”.

6 See for a recent example Dominguez, Koopmans and Bouhaïk-Gironès, *Les pères du théâtre médiéval*.

Introduction

and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novel and opera. Likewise, the popularization of Abélard and Héloïse's correspondence, starting in 1675 with Jacques Alluis's *Amours d'Abailard et d'Héloïse*, influenced the development of the epistolary novel, culminating in Rousseau's epoch-making *Nouvelle Héloïse*. The fairy tale was another new narrative genre that claimed medieval ancestry and that, in a few instances, was really based on identifiable medieval sources. In a polemical context, finally, the Middle Ages functioned for some authors as an alternative site – even as an explicit utopia – that allowed them to rethink the ideology and poetics inherited from classicism. The idealization of the medieval past as expressed, for example, in the banal operatic topos “Lovers no longer love as in olden days” (on n' aime plus comme on aimait jadis), rhyming in French with “the time of the knight Amadis” (siècle d’Amadis), could in some cases serve as a means to criticize the present.

On the level of the history of ideas (histoire des mentalités), it therefore appears that from the re-evaluation of the Middle Ages emerged the seeds of a new, “modern” poetics. Significantly, the decades I study here coincided in part with the period that the cultural historian Paul Hazard famously labelled “the crisis of European consciousness”. During these decades, Hazard demonstrated, the beginnings of what we today call modernity took shape, as the aesthetic and moral ideals of classicism, marked according to him by hierarchy and stability, gave way to those of the Enlightenment. In the opening paragraphs of his *Crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715*, Hazard pithily summed up the nature of this modernity by listing its defining characteristics:

Never was there a greater contrast, never a more sudden transition than this! A hierarchical system ensured by authority; life firmly based on dogmatic principle – such were the things held dear by the people of the seventeenth century; but these – controls, authority, dogmas, and the like – were the very things that their immediate successors of the eighteenth held in cordial detestation. The former were upholders of Christianity; the latter were its foes. The former believed in the laws of God; the latter in the laws of Nature; the former lived contentedly enough in a world composed of unequal social grades; of the latter the one absorbing dream was Equality … One day, the French people, almost to a man, were thinking like Bossuet. The day after, they were thinking like Voltaire.

Hazard’s argument was subsequently taken up by many historians, whose accounts did not – and do not – differ substantially from his. Most recently, Jonathan Israel, while reproducing the same general narrative, has proposed to expand Hazard's dating, arguing that the major debates of the European Enlightenment were formulated between 1670 (or alternatively, 1650) and the 1740s. By 1750, he writes, “all major intellectual innovations and accomplishments of the European Enlightenment were well advanced if not largely complete.”

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intellectual transformations. By contrast, one of the originalities of Hazard’s approach
had been to suggest that there might be a link between the literary and the philosophi-
cal. Thus, the fourth and final part of Hazard’s book focused on “The Feelings and the
Imagination”. In it, even while describing this as “a period without poetry”, he did
single out two sources of literary innovation. These were the new literary genres of
fairy tales and opera.

Both of the new genres mentioned by Hazard, significantly, also happened to draw
heavily not on classical sources, as would be expected during the closing decades of
French classicism, but on medieval or medievalist ones. One of the operas that marked
a turning-point in French literary history was Philippe Quinault and Jean-Baptiste
Lully’s Amadis, first staged in January 1684 at the theatre of the Palais-Royal in Paris
at the instigation of Louis XIV himself, and based on a perennially popular fifteenth-
century chivalric romance. The fairy tale, a new literary genre that first appeared in
its modern form around 1690, likewise drew many of its themes and specific narra-
tive elements from medieval literary tradition. The first fairy tale published in France,
Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “Island of Happiness” (L’Ile de la félicité), was a retelling
of the medieval Irish tale of Oisin, known also through many other versions. Marie-
Jeanne L’Héritier, who, with her uncle Charles Perrault, was the genre’s principal
theoretician, explicitly drew a link between the medieval traditions of the troubadours
and the modern genre of the fairy tale. And in the genre’s formative years, roughly
1690–1700, fully half of the published fairy tales went back to folkloric and / or medi-
eval sources.

The case of the two new literary genres that emerged at the turn of the century,
medievalist opera and fairy tales, suggests that medievalism and the transition from
classicism to Enlightenment were not unrelated phenomena. The present book will,
in fact, make the argument that modernity arose in part out of literary medievalism.
The medievalism it explores shared many attributes with the modernity described by
Hazard, but also differed from it on some points. Perhaps the most important differ-
ence was that, given the basically secular orientation of the medieval literary texts
most enjoyed by Enlightenment readers, medievalist texts only rarely engaged in the
debate on divine authority. The lack of overt religious polemic was also due to the fact
that medievalist texts often presented themselves not as a break with tradition, but as
a continuation or revival of age-old practices. But the similarities, finally, outweighed
the differences, making of literary medievalism in some sense a “light” version of the
intellectual modernity described by Hazard and Israel. Literary modernity, like its
counterpart philosophical modernity, was characterized by an original emphasis on the
marginal and by a new equalizing impulse. This equalizing tendency was linked, espe-
cially, to the portrayal of courtly love as a potentially levelling social factor. “Marginal”
culture and sub-cultures replaced elite culture as a model, particularism replaced
classicist universalism, and the detail came to be valued in its own right – presag-
ing the later breakthrough of realism in the nineteenth century, one of the defining
characteristics of which, it has been argued, was precisely its “detailistic” emphasis

on the particular. Love was at the centre of many representations of the medieval, which drew on the memory of chivalric romances. Subsequently, instant, emotional responsiveness – the language of the heart, underlying the eighteenth-century cult of sensibilité – replaced familiarity with convention as the ideal stance required of reading audiences. Finally, the nostalgia inherent to medievalism’s specific form of historism imbued it with powerful political undertones. Thus, it functioned both as a means to co-opt new groups into the absolutist state by creating for it a new collective memory, and as a site of contestation from which, initially, the disenfranchised aristocracy – the Boulainvilliers and the Montesquieus, whose political philosophy would profoundly mark the later Enlightenment – could formulate new societal models. Of course, many of these stances were contradictory and could threaten to cancel each other out, but this polysemic nature and malleability is precisely what made medievalism such a powerful instrument of change.

Medievalism, New Medievalism
Yet if, as I contend, medievalism was such a powerful force in early eighteenth-century French culture, then why has this phenomenon not been noted before? There are a number of reasons, both theoretical and empirical, that explain this omission. First of all, only relatively recently has a critical vocabulary begun to be elaborated in which to talk about the cultural phenomena under discussion here. During the past few decades, a new concept, that of (literary) medievalism, has been developed, giving rise to a new subfield within literary and cultural studies. Leslie Workman, whose creation in 1979 of the journal Studies in Medievalism played a central role in the institutionalization of the field, was also one of the first to attempt to define the concept. On the most basic level, medievalism, he wrote, is “the study of the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the use of the Middle Ages in everything from fantasy to social reform on the other”. A somewhat narrower definition of medievalism was adopted by the so-called New Medievalists of the 1990s, whose work focused primarily on the academic genesis and institutionalization of medieval studies. Both schools of medievalism did, however, agree in singling out two other –isms closely related to medievalism: nationalism and romanticism. In many of these early accounts, medievalism was described primarily as a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon. Only in recent years has the insight grown that there were important precursors, if not altogether different forms of (proto-)medievalism before the advent of romanticism.

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12 Although the terms “historism” and “historicism” are often used interchangeably in English-language scholarship, I use the former to refer to the ideas specifically associated with historians such as Leopold von Ranke, Friedrich Meinecke, and Robin George Collingwood. See chapter 1 for a fuller definition of the concept.


14 Biddick, The Shock of Medievalism; Bloch and Nichols, Medievalism and the Modernist Temper; Brownlee, Brownlee and Nichols, The New Medievalism.

15 Eisenbichler, Renaissance Medievalisms; Montoya, van Romburgh and van Anrooij, Early Modern Medievalisms.
Taken in its broadest sense, then, as both the study and the creative use of the Middle Ages, medievalism in France embraces forms and periods as varied as the humanist historiography of Claude Fauchet or Etienne Pasquier; the late baroque sensibility of Honoré d'Urfé's bestseller *Astrée*; the aristocratic ethos of Pierre Corneille's proto-classicist *Le Cid*; Voltaire's Enlightenment tragedy *Tancrède* or his more satirical *Pucelle d'Orléans*; and romanticism's recreation of the medieval in the historical novels of Victor Hugo or the gargoyles of Notre Dame as reimagined by Viollet-le-Duc. As these examples demonstrate, medievalism can imply various critical stances, ranging from the celebratory or nostalgic (Viollet-le Duc and Hugo) to Gallican or patriotic scholarship (Fauchet and Pasquier) to the ideologically dismissive (Voltaire). It also includes different degrees of reflexivity in the use made of the medieval. While an author like Pierre Corneille used medieval material without attaching to it any specific connotations of historical alterity or specificity – this is, then, what we could term the degré zéro of medievalism – others reflected more profoundly on the medieval, even leading, in the case of scholars like Pasquier and Fauchet, to the adoption of a specifically historist stance towards the past, well before the development of nineteenth-century German historism. This is, therefore, an inclusive definition of medievalism, that consciously seeks to broaden the term's meaning by considering also outwardly critical or hostile responses to the medieval – such as, for example, Voltaire's. Contrary to the emphasis in modern medievalist scholarship on cultural revival or rehabilitations of the medieval, I explore, too, various forms of what one might term, rather than medievalism proper, anti-medievalism. I do so, as will become clear in the course of this book, because in the period I am studying – the beginnings of the Enlightenment, whose very name implies an adversarial relation to medieval “darkness” – medievalism acted, as often as not, as a powerful anti-ideology. As such, medievalism was defined by its focus not on the medieval per se, but on its representation, and subsequent appropriation, by competing societal groups.

Crucially therefore, medievalism as an academic discipline does not concern itself primarily with the authenticity of the phenomena examined. Medievalist cultural artefacts, practices and texts can loosely recall the medieval without referring to precise historical events or artistic products from that period. Whether or not Voltaire's knights in *Tancrède* or the gargoyles of Notre Dame were faithful to their “real” medieval models is, to some extent, irrelevant, for what is of interest to medievalist scholarship today is the way they functioned within the cultural field of their own period. Medievalism thus moves well beyond scholarly interest in the medieval towards recreations of the medieval, whether these are historically accurate (or whether they even aim to be so) or purely a product of the modern imagination.

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16 This central insight of medievalist scholarship emerged especially clearly, in the 1990s and first decades of the twenty-first century, in studies focusing on the resurgence of medievalist elements in media as varied as video games, highly successful fantasy books and movies, and role-playing games, that in many cases no longer have any identifiable link to the historical Middle Ages. In such cases, it has been proposed, we could perhaps better use the term "neo-medievalism". For a discussion of the phenomenon, see Fugelso, *Defining Neo-Medievalism(s)*.
Medievalist studies, in other words, see the Middle Ages as a historical construct that needs to be understood with reference to the culturally and historically determined interests of those engaged in studying or imaginatively recreating them. In this sense, medievalist studies are closely related to notions of collective memory (Halbwachs) or cultural memory (Assmann), as opposed to the positivism of “history” or “historiography”. Studies of cultural memory seek to explain not only how we perceive the past, but also how our view of the past underlies more or less decisive cultural transformations in the present. This dynamic view of medievalism means that eighteenth-century literary antiquarianism can actually be considered as an expression of modernity. My aim is to demonstrate how, in order to understand the aesthetic and cultural transformations that took place during the “crisis of European consciousness” and beyond, it is essential to interrogate how this period conceived of the past – not only classical Antiquity, whose attraction for Enlightenment thinkers has been well documented, but also the more recent past embodied by the medieval period. As Jan Assmann has written:

Memory ... proceeds reconstructively. The past as such cannot be contained within it. It will constantly be reorganized by the changing frames of reference of a progressing present. Even the New will forever emerge in the guise of a reconstructed past. Society does not receive new ideas by replacing its own past for them, but by taking possession of the past of groups other than those which hitherto determined it. … Collective memory, therefore, operates in both directions: backwards and forwards. It reconstructs not only the past, but organizes the experience of the present as well as the future.\textsuperscript{17}

Medievalism, it emerges, speaks essentially of the modern. Not only is the medieval a creation of the modern historical consciousness, but the way it is coloured by each successive generation says as much about that generation’s capacity for change as it does about the past it purportedly refers to. The concept of memory evoked by Assmann and others, while pointing to the links between past and present, suggests also a new subjectification of the past that is, in fact, one of the defining characteristics of medievalism. Significantly referred to no longer as objective “History”, the medieval becomes the object of a new engagement with the past that privileges non-linear, non-analytic forms of understanding, and subjective rather than objective approaches. The relation to the medieval, as I will argue below, is also, very often, an intensely personal one.

The Structure of this Book
The chapter sequence and choice of case studies presented in this book collectively seek to suggest something of this non-linear, non-analytic quality of early Enlightenment medievalism. Indeed, one of the problems facing any modern scholar wanting to write critically about medievalism is her own imbededness in a discourse that is inescapably modern. As Jesse Swan has evocatively written:

\textsuperscript{17} Assmann, “Cultural Memory: Script, Recollection, and Political Memory”, 69.
Speaking medievally, perhaps especially in writing, vexes modern literacy. Such vexation either closes the mind, by producing responses of avoidance, or opens the mind, by producing responses of engagement. … Clear, objective delineations, unlike some of Workman’s most lyrical illuminations, are articulated in the positivistic and empirical manner of a rational culture that, historically speaking, generated itself, at least in good measure, from its commitment to making itself markedly different from all of pre-modernity, but particularly the medieval. This current or dominant sense of exposition and clarity is important to foreground, since it is impossible to speak medievally or to follow Leslie Workman, if we do not circumscribe the modern form of clarity by highlighting its historicity, its artificiality.¹⁸

In other words, how does one write “medievally” about medievalism in our modern era? Are there indeed, as Swan suggests, “alternative forms of clarity” possible, that thrive on confusion and mixing rather than on analytic dissection, on impressionism rather than rigorous delineation? This is one of the questions that traverse the present book, and which I have attempted to foreground in its organization, too. I consciously circle around the book’s topic rather than addressing it in a strictly linear fashion, as a critic of an early draft of one of its chapters astutely observed, in part because this circular movement is in the nature of medievalism itself. The non-linear character of medievalism draws, among others, on the narrative technique of interlace (entrelacement) in medieval romance, and on a cumulative effect, or slow sedimentation of meaning, which I hope will emerge with an “alternative clarity” as the book unfolds.

In keeping with this circular motion, the book is divided into three parts, which return several times to the same authors and texts, viewing them each time from a slightly different perspective. While the structure is loosely chronological, I touch on texts whose influence was played out repeatedly, at various historical moments, and within multiple temporalities, thereby highlighting medievalism’s own heterochronicity. Part I, Conceptualizing the Medieval, examines late seventeenth-century conceptualizations of the medieval, beginning with a text written in the 1640s, but critically received especially starting in the 1720s, and ending with the reflections on the medieval of the philosophes and their critics in the 1750s. Part II, Reimagining the Medieval, then moves from theory to practice, exploring concrete examples of literary medievalism produced by some of the same authors whose theoretical works were examined in Part I. Part III, Studying the Medieval, finally moves back again from the praxis of early Enlightenment adaptations of medieval texts to the theoretical reflections of historians active in the 1720s through 1750s. This part foregrounds the critical dialogue between historical scholarship and other forms of understanding the medieval past. Linking up again with debates on how to “write medievally”, it argues that the professionalization of medieval studies coincided with broader philosophical shifts marking the beginning of modernity – and defining, too, the conceptual parameters within which we continue to speak of the medieval today.

¹⁸ Swan, “A Renaissance of Medievalisms.”
Eighteenth-Century Conceptualizations of the Medieval

Because the “medieval” that medievalism refers to is as much a rhetorical construct as an objective historical reality, the first of this book’s three parts starts out by asking some fundamental questions on the history of ideas during the early Enlightenment. The first of these relates to the perceived alterity of the Middle Ages. Was the medieval, in fact, perceived as distinct from modernity during the decades of “crisis of European consciousness”, and how was this historical otherness conceptualized – or not? The crisis of authority described by Hazard and Israel, although it touched on several fields, was perhaps most visible in the realm of historiography. Intellectuals’ increasing questioning of accepted historical narratives led some of them to adopt a stance that could be termed proto-historist. At the same time, prevailing eighteenth-century definitions of the medieval as essentially a literary category meant that considerations of historicity and philology remained intertwined. The Middle Ages, as a separate historical period, were both defined and refracted through its literary productions. The various ways in which early eighteenth-century authors conceived of the medieval past as a literary or historical category are the subject of this book’s opening chapter, “A Sense of the Past: Ancients, Moderns, and the Medieval”.

Apart from the absence until recently of a workable concept of medievalism, there is a second factor that explains why, despite its role in early eighteenth-century French culture, the medievalism of the 1680s through 1740s has been relatively neglected in scholarship. This is the fact that the Enlightenment has, perhaps more than any other epoch, suffered from a narrowly teleological, progressivist historiography. Because the eighteenth century dramatically ended in several great revolutions – including the American one in 1775–1783, and the French one in 1789–1799 – literary historiography has found it difficult to resist a narrative in which literary texts naturally led to revolutionary upheaval. One of the core assumptions of eighteenth-century scholarship, ever since its inception during the revolutionary era itself, has been that the deepest sources of socio-political transformation and, by extension, the birth of our modern era, can be traced back to the literature of the preceding period. Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that later accounts, including Hazard’s and Israel’s, placed disproportional emphasis on the history of ideas, especially in the political realm, and subsequently neglected fictional and non-discursive texts that did not fit into this strictly linear narrative. This has meant quite simply that, until recently, many of the genres and texts in which the medieval was most visible were not considered worthy of serious study.

This teleological view of the Enlightenment was first propounded by eighteenth-century authors themselves, or at least by the small group of Parisian philosophes whose reformist agenda dominated public discourse. Within their self-view as secular, progressive thinkers, essentially forwards- rather than backwards-looking, there was little or no place for the medieval. Progressive contempt for the Middle Ages and all they stood for was widespread. It functioned as an easy cliché, successfully obscuring other, contemporary traditions that, on the contrary, looked backwards, towards the medieval past, as much as forwards. The foundational rhetorics of the Enlightenment project drew on an opposition between medieval darkness and modern light that is embodied in the period’s own self-designation as an age of Enlightenment. The ways in which a fundamental opposition was elaborated between a modern age of light and the
Middle Ages as its polemic opposite, as well as the concept’s simultaneous contestation, are thus the subject of Chapter 2, “The Medievalist Rhetorics of Enlightenment”.

Medievalist Cultural Production: From Continuity to Reinvention
The normative, anti-medievalist self-definition of the Enlightenment as an age of historical progress did not, however, go uncontested, either in its own day or in more recent times. In modern scholarship the growing movement for a more inclusive understanding of Enlightenment culture came to a head in the 1980s, under the combined influence of cultural and gender studies. Cultural studies brought critical attention to bear not only on the canonical authors and genres associated with officially sanctioned movements and categories, but also on (non-canonical) texts as they related to issues of power and representation. Gender studies, for its part, opened up new perspectives by making scholars aware of hitherto neglected female authors and texts and alternative forms of engagement in literary debate. Emphasis was increasingly not on elite literary culture but, rather, on what Robert Darnton termed “the literary underground of the Ancien Régime.”

Book and publishing history, coupled with gender studies, raised awareness about the great mass of texts that had, in their own day, clearly spoken to contemporary audiences, as evidenced by print runs, imitations and adaptations, yet had been neglected by mainstream scholarship. This insight underlay studies such as Lise Andries’s exploration of the corpus of popular chapbook literature known as the Bibliothèque bleue, whose subjects often went back to medieval sources, and Angus Martin’s more recent inventory of eighteenth-century French medievalist fiction. In the realm of gender studies one of the details that emerged, but was rarely if at all addressed by scholars, was the fact that it seemed it was particularly often women who used the Middle Ages for ideological ends.

As Martin’s inventory, among others, made clear, significant numbers of authentic medieval texts started to be republished during the early eighteenth century, with two particular spurts in the 1690s and the 1720s to 1730s. Such evidence, of course, belied the commonly held view that eighteenth-century authors had no knowledge of or access to medieval texts. Thus, to cite but a few examples, in 1692 an important anthology, a Recueil des plus belles pièces des poètes françois that is today attributed to Bernard de Fontenelle (and in the seventeenth century to Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy), gave an important place to François Villon. The 1690s also witnessed the birth of the fairy tale, which often incorporated authentic medieval material into its own narratives. In 1706 a new version appeared of the medieval farce L‘Avocat Patelin, rewritten by David Augustin Brueys and Jean Palaprat. In 1724 the prolific Thomas-Simon Gueullette published a new edition of the Petit Jehan de Saintré, followed in 1726 by the

19 Darnton, The Literary Underground. A similar term was used in the title of a monograph on one of the period’s major medievalists: Sheridan, Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy and the Literary Underworld. See also, for eighteenth-century book history, Bollême, Furet et al., Livre et société dans la France du XVIIIe siècle.
20 Andries, La bibliothèque bleue.
22 Jones Day, The Search for Lyonnesse.
Quinze joies de mariage. The troubadours and the love ethos they represented enjoyed particular favour, with a translation in 1731 of Martial d'Auvergné's Arrests d'amour. In 1735 Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy produced a verse edition of what was one of the most influential medieval texts in the eighteenth century, the Roman de la rose. The year 1739 saw the publication of an anonymous adaptation of the Flemish text Le renard, ou le procez des bestes, and the year 1742, Les poésies de Thibaut de Champagne edited by Antoine-Alexandre Levesque de la Ravallière. Finally, fragments or looser adaptations of medieval texts appeared in other print venues, including literary journals such as the Mercure galant. In addition to these reprintings of authentic medieval texts there was also a modest production of often female-authored historical novels – or nouvelles, as they were known to contemporaries – set against a medieval backdrop. Thus, Angus Martin has catalogued 65 new historical novels and 46 reprintings of older titles that were published between 1700 and 1750, and that had a specifically medieval setting.

Perhaps the most important medieval genre to emerge from the findings of book historians, however, was neither reprintings of authentic medieval texts nor female-authored historical novels but, rather, the whole submerged archipelago of chivalric romance that survived, in various more-or-less bastardized forms, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The roman de chevalerie or, as it is better known to English readers, romance, provided the matrix for much of the critical engagement with the medieval that took place in early Enlightenment France. Again, this was a genre particularly often associated with a female readership, suggesting that there was a sense in which the Middle Ages themselves, during the eighteenth century, were gendered female. At the same time, the novel of chivalry appeared to be the crucial link relating the cultural production of the Middle Ages themselves to that of the eighteenth century. The central role of romance as a defining mode in Enlightenment medievalism, and the ways in which actual examples of chivalric fiction were read during the opening years of the Enlightenment, are the subject of Chapter 3, “Survivals: Reading the Medieval Roman at the Dawn of the Enlightenment”.

While book history proved especially fruitful, another strand of cultural studies paid increasing attention to textual artefacts that had, until recently, been considered only marginally textual or literary. This was the case, most notably, of the two genres already noted by Hazard, opera (or tragédie lyrique, as it was known to contemporaries) and the fairy tale. French opera, long considered only as an addendum to the great classicist genres, came into its own during the 1980s and 1990s as a subject in its own right, in studies such as Catherine Kintzler’s magisterial Poétique de l’opéra français de Corneille à Rousseau (1991). As Buford Norman, among others, pointed out, the fact that tragédie lyrique consistently rivalled the popularity of the more well-known masterpieces of tragédie déclamée called for a serious revaluation. Much the same held for fairy tales. While, following Hazard’s history of ideas approach, literary histories of the final decades of the seventeenth century tended, until the 1980s, to concentrate almost invariably on philosophers such as Bernard de Fontenelle and Pierre Bayle,

24 Norman, Touched by the Graces.
the rediscovery of the hundreds of literary fairy tales produced during the same decades began to give this period a very different aspect. What both these genres had in common, apart from their reference to medieval sources and narrative topoi, was the key role they gave to performance and the appeal they made to the senses. Opera, of course, was a multimedia production that appealed to its audiences’ sight and hearing, but fairy tales too developed a synesthetic practice of ekphrasis that focused on descriptions of experiences that were tactile and olfactory as well as visual and aural. Just as importantly, both opera and fairy tales were inscribed in a series of cultural practices that authors and audiences used in order to define and, sometimes, legitimize their own participation in the literary field. These genres, in other words, invite us to think of the medieval not so much as text, but as a kind of musical mode. This thesis is explored in Chapter 4, “Continuities: The Medieval as Performance”, in a series of close readings of specific opera and fairy tale texts.

I end this central section on literary readings and recreations of the medieval with an exploration of two textual traditions that emphasized erotic love, understood as a medieval quality par excellence. These are the tradition of the Ovidian heroide, which was increasingly medievalized as the eighteenth century wore on, and the famous letters of the twelfth-century nun Héloïse. Both strands came together in the letters of Madame de Sévigné, one of the period’s most influential medievalist authors, and in the fiction of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a thinker not often considered in a medievalist light, yet whose major work of fiction, La Nouvelle Héloïse, synthesized the previous tradition of literary engagement with the medieval past. These texts provide the primary material for Chapter 5, “Reconfigurations: Medievalism and Desire, Between Eros and Agape.” Through an exploration of Sévigné’s and Rousseau’s rewriting of the Abélard and Héloïse myth, I argue that these authors deployed medieval references in an attempt to secularize older notions of Christian agape, seeking to attain a new, distinctly modern reconciliation between secular and divine varieties of love.

The Emergence of Medieval Studies

Part III finally moves back again from early Enlightenment medievalist practices and texts to the new theoretical preoccupations highlighted by early eighteenth-century academic medievalism. This final part’s central thesis is that literary reimaginings of the medieval preceded and, to a great extent, set down the parameters for later, scholarly approaches to the era. The movement towards a new professionalization of medieval studies was particularly evident at one of the royal academies originally founded by Louis XIV, the Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Professional approaches could in many cases be seen as a reaction to older, characteristically aristocratic engagements with the medieval, and carried a political dimension that has, until present, not been fully explored. Chapter 6, “The Invention of Medieval Studies”, therefore focuses on the ideological contest between academic medievalists, and aristocratic scholar-amateurs. Studying key texts by Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, by Anne-Claude-Philippe, comte de Caylus, and by Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, this chapter teases out the specificity of
personalized, aristocratic approaches to the medieval as a movement that can be con-
tested to the nascent “scientific”, supposedly more objective method associated with
the Enlightenment *philosophes*. By thus ending the book with a consideration of the
ideological struggles that underlay the staking out of the modern field of academic
medievalism, I foreground some of the reasons why *galant*, aristocratic varieties of
medievalism were eventually marginalized in accounts of the French Enlightenment,
allowing the first romantics to present their own engagement with the medieval as a
radical break with the past, as a new beginning rather than a continuation of previous,
Enlightenment traditions.
I

CONCEPTUALIZING THE MEDIEVAL
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A Sense of the Past:
Ancients, Moderns, and the Medieval

This chapter argues that for early French Enlightenment authors, the medieval functioned not primarily as a historical concept, as it does for us today, but rather as a floating rhetorical category to which a precise content had yet to be ascribed. Modern ideas of the medieval as a discrete, closed-off period in history are themselves the product of discussions that took place, during the Enlightenment and at other historical moments, on the meaning and movement of history. Because the early Enlightenment’s concept of *moyen âge* was different from the way we conceive of it today, this chapter will first backtrack through the debate on how authors understood the medieval, as a historical concept, to lay the groundwork for a subsequent discussion of early Enlightenment attitudes towards medieval literary productions specifically. I explore how and when authors developed a sense of the otherness of the medieval, and how concepts of the medieval were related to broader reflections on history and the possibility of historical progress. Was the medieval, in other words, conceived as such, and if so, what categories did early Enlightenment readers and writers use to describe this epoch and its relation to their own modernity?

In order to answer this question, we must in turn interrogate our own, twenty-first-century notions of history. Our modern perception of the medieval as a separate historical period is, essentially, dependent on the idea of historical evolution, as most forcefully conceptualized by nineteenth-century German historism. According to this idea, history progresses by leaving an increasingly distant past behind itself, and historical periods follow one another in an exclusively and exclusionary forwards-moving motion. The eighteenth century logically grows out of the seventeenth century, and the seventeenth out of the sixteenth, which itself grows out of and closes off the long

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1 As stated earlier and as further explained in the present chapter, I use the term “historism” to refer to the ideas associated with historians such as Leopold von Ranke, Friedrich Meinecke, and Robin George Collingwood.
period designated as the Middle Ages. One of the basic tenets of this model of ever-progressing history is that the modern defines itself, and acquires its very identity, in relation to the medieval, whether it be in a consciously contrastive sense or, more subtly, by drawing on the medieval to create new forms of “conservative modernism”. The past then becomes, to each succeeding generation, and to use L.P. Hartley’s famous phrase, “a foreign country”. The chronological linearity of historical periods imposed by our own historiography means that, even though we can allow that some of the seeds of modernity may lie in the medieval past, the medieval cannot exist simultaneously with the modern.

Imagine now, instead, another view that sees (literary) history not as a single, linear progression but admits multiple temporalities. As in Borges’s famous reflection on reading, “Kafka and his precursors”, each reading of a text from the past creates it anew, thereby introducing an anachronistic, palimpsestic dimension into an otherwise linear historiography. In such a Borgesian history, influence works both backwards and forwards. It would then be possible, for example, to view Racine’s Phèdre as the work that “created” Euripides’s Hippolytus, or Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse as the work that made possible the twelfth-century letters of Abélard and Héloïse.

Texts are read, forgotten and then reread again, intervening cyclically in this history at the various moments when they (re)capture readers’ imaginations. Applying this model to literary history, Joep Leerssen has mused that during the Romantic rediscovery of the foundational medieval texts, “the Chanson de Roland hits the scene between Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo; Beowulf intervenes between Wordsworth and Carlyle”. Much more than a narrative structured by strict, linear chronology, such a history, in short, dramatizes interplay and continuing dialogue between different epochs, enabling a historiography in which the medieval and the modern can, indeed, be contemporaneous.

This chapter argues that these two conceptions of history – a linear, diachronic one and a cyclical, heterochronic one – in fact coexisted during the 1880s and 1890s, i.e. the decades marked both by the rise of medievalism in French literary life, and by the “crisis of European consciousness” that laid the seeds for the modernity of the Enlightenment. In making this argument, I focus in particular on one episode that took place during these decades: the so-called Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, which opposed defenders of the cultural heritage of Antiquity to those who held that modern culture had definitively surpassed the Ancients. During this episode long-simmering debates, which had until then been

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2 As argued, for example, by Nichols in “Modernism and the Politics of Medieval Studies”.
3 Borges, “Kafka y sus precursores”.
4 See also Steiner, Real Presences, 13. In this literary history, “Ulysses comes prior to and foretells the Odyssey.”
5 Leerssen, “Women Authors and Literary History”, 254.
confined to scholarly circles, entered the public sphere at large at precisely the moment when that public sphere was also taking shape. In the Quarrel, most importantly, three tendencies came together that would be crucial for the development of early eighteenth-century medievalism: a new sense of the past as distinct from the present, the re-emergence of the classical notion of a Golden Age long revolved, and a new attention to France's medieval heritage.

The Historist Outlook
The two different conceptions of history that coexisted during the 1680s and 1690s, a diachronic and a heterochronic one, continued to do so at least until the 1740s. This meant that to early eighteenth-century authors, the Middle Ages could appear either as contemporaneous with their own modernity, or as strictly separate from it – and often, in practice, appeared as both. By the close of this period, however, the linear model of history had gained more adherents, reaching a peak of recognition with the publication, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, of historical works such as Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* (1745–1750) and Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois* (1748). Along with the reflections on history of many lesser-known authors, these works shaped new notions of history as a linear movement forwards, even if defenders of the older scheme of cyclical return remained a vocal minority well into the eighteenth century. The modern view was finally consolidated, after the events of the French revolution, by a new definition of "revolution" itself. No longer perceived as cyclical – the revolutions of a wheel or, in its original astronomical sense, the "revolutions" of the sun and moon – the term "revolution" came to denote a decisive chronological break with the past. With this change in meaning, the new, diachronic or progressive model of literary history became the dominant one and remains so until today. The medieval, by the end of this development, had been definitively consigned to the role of historical other, the opposite pole of modernity. For the newly theorized separation of past and present implied, too, a view of the Middle Ages as a distinct and closed-off period, an object not of subjective, immediate experience but of detached historical study.

How this transformation in historical thought came about has been recounted, among others, by Friedrich Meinecke in his seminal *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*. Meinecke's thesis was that "the rise of historism was one of the greatest intellectual revolutions that has ever taken place in Western thought". Historism viewed history not as a cyclical movement whereby the same or very similar developments recurred at different moments of time, but as an open-ended process that proceeded by transformation, as the result of human actions and will, rather than by accumulation, repetition or superimposition. Historism emphasized historical individuality, replacing belief in universalism with particularism and breaking down the old scheme of "Natural Law and its belief in the invariability of the highest human ideals and an unchanging human nature that was held to be constant for all

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7 Schlobach, *Zyklentheorie und Epochenmetaphorik*.
8 Meinecke, *Historism*, liv.
Human volition acquired a more prominent role, and a non-teleological, non-theological interpretation of history became possible. With historism, finally, came a new historical relativism, or “a respect for the specific individual life of the historical structure.” At the same time, from the recognition of the fundamental alterity of the past, and the historian’s inability to understand it according to modern concepts and expectations, it followed that historism – or, as Frank Ankersmit prefers to term it, historical experience – could also produce in some historians an almost erotic sense of longing for the past:

Historical experience [is] how we experience the past and how this experience of the past may come into being by a movement comprising at the same time the discovery and a recovery of the past. Historical experience involves, in the first place, a Gestalt-switch from a timeless present into a world consisting of things past and present. This gives us the discovery of the past as a reality that has somehow “broken off” from a timeless present. This is “the moment of loss”. But at the same time historical experience aims at a recovery of the past by transcending again the barriers between past and present. And this could be characterized as “the moment of desire or of love”.

Historism, then, is essentially a sense of the irreducible otherness of the past, viewed as distinct from the present. Because of its otherness, the past needs to be understood according to its own historically embedded system of beliefs, values and cultural practices. But this sense of the past, as argued by Meinecke and Ankersmit, was itself a historical construct, the product of a historical development. Thus according to Meinecke, even if the groundwork for the emergence of historism was laid in the eighteenth century, full-blown, true historism was a nineteenth-century creation, that itself presupposed a certain kind of historical break with the past. Elaborating on this point, Ankersmit has argued that historism can in fact be regarded as a distinctly romantic response to the cataclysmic sense of a receding history after the events of 1789 to 1815. The French revolution “created an insurmountable barrier between past and present that could impossibly be denied or undone anymore – and this barrier became the clearly delineated face the past had turned toward us. The past had become, for the first time in history, an almost tangible reality in history.” It was on this sense of a past ineluctably gone that romanticism built much of its characteristic ethos of anguished nostalgia, an ethos that in its turn was fundamental to the development of romantic medievalism.

Meinecke’s and Ankersmit’s reflections on historism, at first sight, appear to unsettle the present undertaking. Indeed, if a sense of the medieval depends on a more general sense of the past, a sense that according to them only really arose with romanticism, can we then argue that there existed a form of medievalism during the first half of the

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9 Meinecke, Historism, 3.
10 Meinecke, Historism, 70.
11 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 9.
12 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 143.
eighteenth century? As I have noted, medievalist studies to date have focused primarily on the romantic and post-romantic periods, foregrounding the highly self-conscious relation to the medieval that is characteristic of them – i.e., their distinct sense of the past. Leslie Workman, noting the historically strong link between medievalism and romanticism, even went so far as to postulate that, in the earliest occurrences of the term “romantic”, the two terms were used more or less interchangeably. Others have suggested, on the basis of recorded usages of the term “medievalism”, that the phenomenon only arose in fully conscious form in the early nineteenth century.

While, in the following, I do not intend to dispute the thesis that medievalism as we know it today is a fundamentally nineteenth-century, (post-)romantic notion, I will be arguing that, during the 1860s through to the 1870s, an important discussion on the shape and direction of history took place that laid the foundations for the elaboration of modern forms of medievalism. During these decades, particularly during the years of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, new notions of history were debated that in turn made possible new questions and new attitudes towards France’s medieval past, exemplified by its re-emerging literary heritage. The form of historical consciousness with regard to the Middle Ages that was common during this period, while differing in important aspects from the medievalism of the romantic generation, can nonetheless usefully be described as “medievalist” to the extent that it effectively foregrounded the historical period that, to us today, is known as the Middle Ages.

The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and the Debate on History
Friedrich Meinecke was the first to recognize that, in his own account of the rise of historism, “the only practicable plan [was] to undertake a kind of mountain journey along the ridges, attempting to get across from one high peak to the next”, and necessarily privileging the works of the most well-known historians at the expense of other, possibly equally influential but lesser-known figures. Even though historism was according to him essentially a nineteenth-century movement, he also signalled the importance for its development of two authors working in the 1740s, Voltaire and Montesquieu, and briefly mentioned a third historian active during this decade, the founder of modern French medievalism, Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye.

The attention Meinecke paid to these authors was certainly justified. However, later scholarship has proposed that Voltaire and Montesquieu should perhaps be viewed more as the continuators of a much longer tradition of humanistic scholarship than as the initiators of a truly original line of thought. Donald Kelley and George Huppert have both argued independently of one another that in understanding the origins of historism, attention should be focused on the works of historical scholarship of the

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13 See especially his long article “Medievalism and Romanticism”.
14 On the first uses of the term “medievalism” in English, see Matthews, “From Mediaeval to Mediaevalism” and Simmons, “Medievalism: Its Linguistic History”.
15 Meinecke, Historism, lviii.
16 “The intellectual changes (especially those of the eighteenth century) can be followed in a countless number of smaller figures, whose participation in these changes must not be under-estimated. They would provide material for useful monographs.” Meinecke, Historism, lviii.
French Renaissance: Jean Bodin’s *Methodus, ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566), Etienne Pasquier’s *Recherches de la France* (1560–1621), Claude Fauchet’s *Antiquités gauloises et françaises* (1579), Nicolas Vignier’s *De la noblesse, ancienêté, remarques et mérites d’honneur de la troisième maison de France* (1587) and several others. In these works, humanist scholars developed new ways of looking at history not as the fulfilment of divine providence but as the rise of human civilization, emphasizing not permanence but change, not universality but particularism. Significantly, all of these scholars came to their innovative stance on history through an interest in the Middle Ages. George Huppert has surmised that “it was the chaos of the medieval worldview – the senseless *mutatio rerum* which the bishops used to contrast with the majestic certainties of sacred history – it was this wilderness of facts which prompted the efforts of modern thinkers in their campaign for a New History”.

Studying these works against the background of Meinecke’s definition of historism, he concluded that “historical-mindedness – historicism, if you will – [was] solidly established in the mental habits of a handful of scholars in the sixteenth century”.

Both Kelley’s and Huppert’s accounts therefore suggest a revised schema, whereby (proto-)historism did not go back to the 1740s, as Meinecke had held but, rather, to the French Renaissance, where it was influenced particularly by medievalist concerns. After a first flowering, however, this (proto-)historism lost favour during the absolutism of Louis XIII and especially Louis XIV, decades during which royal panegyric was increasingly substituted for historiography and historians were co-opted or silenced by royal institutions. Many authors interested in writing history, as Erica Harth among others has argued, took refuge in new, pseudohistorical genres, including the emerging genre of the *nouvelle*. Other, ecclesiastic scholars were able, in the relative seclusion of their monasteries, to continue the tradition of *savant* historiography away from the public eye. This was the case, for example, of the most influential of the late seventeenth-century historian-medievalists, Jean Mabillon, whose foundational work on diplomatics underlay much scholarship in the following century. It was thus, importantly, not only in the work of Benedictine historians, but also in popular fiction, that many of the ideas and images of the Middle Ages formulated by the Renaissance historians survived – a point insufficiently noted by previous studies, and one to which I will return in this book’s later chapters.

After this period of relative withdrawal, the proto-historism developed by Fauchet, Pasquier and their sixteenth-century colleagues re-emerged during the early French Enlightenment, in the 1680s and 1690s. Pierre Bayle, whose knowledge of Vignier’s work Huppert convincingly demonstrated, was one of the authors who drew on the work of the humanist historians. Just as influential, however, were the intellectuals who participated in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns that erupted anew during these decades. The existence of a “continuing tradition of humanist scholarship

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18 Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 166.
that linked the Enlightenment with the Renaissance” 21 meant, in other words, that these authors picked up an existing historiographic tradition where their predecessors had left off. The importance of the 1680s and 1690s lay not in their formulation of new or original ideas about the meaning and direction of history, but in the widening of the discussion. What had been primarily a scholarly question during the French Renaissance became a matter for generalized debate, welcoming contributions not only from historiographers, but also from mondain society at large. The Quarrel was crucial in helping shape new roles for the public in literary debate, essentially creating the modern public sphere. It was because of this unprecedented opening up of debate that the various currents of medievalism that came together during these decades – of which the historiographic one, described in the present chapter, is but one – were successfully able to generate new ways of conceptualizing and creatively reimagining the medieval. 22

The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns was a long-running debate that had originated three centuries earlier during the Italian Renaissance, as the first self-conscious moderns – Petrarch, and the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian humanists that he helped to launch – sought to define their own historical era in opposition to previous ones. 23 Intellectuals eager to legitimate their work engaged in a discussion on the movement and end of history. Seeing themselves as epitomizing the progressive development of human civilization, they formulated a historical model emphasizing linear progress, and contrasted it to older classical and Christian notions. These were, on one hand, the classical notion of cyclical return and, on the other hand, the Christian notion of degeneration, which understood human history as a long fall from grace leading up to ultimate, otherworldly salvation. In France, the praise of modern progress as opposed to ancient culture acquired distinctly patriotic overtones. In his Recherches for example, Pasquier devoted attention to a comparison of France and Rome, in which he argued that “French poetry, French architecture, and French law [were] not only comparable to the products of Roman civilization but [were] superior in the sense that they [were] alive and growing.” 24

The debate on the nature and movement of history simmered for a century until it reached a new bubbling point in 1687, with Charles Perrault's reading at the French Academy of his polemical poem Le siècle de Louis le Grand. This poem was a celebration of the age of Louis XIV that had both a literary-aesthetical and a political component. The poem tellingly began with a reference to the monarch's successes in “the hard profession of Mars” (le dur métier de Mars), i.e. war. Perrault's argument for the superiority of the Moderns was, to a perhaps unexpected extent, a technological

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21 Kelley, Foundations, 7.
22 I refer here to Habermas's influential account of the rise of the public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe, which, following recent scholarship, I date somewhat earlier than he does. For a discussion of the Quarrel's role in shaping concepts of the public, see DeJean, Ancients against Moderns, 31–77.
23 For an account of the prehistory of the French Quarrel, see Fumaroli, “Les abeilles et les araignées”. For an interpretation more specifically of the episode covering the 1680s through 1720s, see DeJean, Ancients against Moderns.
and military one. Thus, one of the signs of this superiority was the modern invention of more effective weapons of war: the cannons, guns and gunpowder that had brought Louis XIV military success, as well as Vauban’s modern system of fortifications. Perrault supported his political panegyric by contending that with the advent of French classicism, modern culture and historical progress were finally overtaking Antiquity. The debate that ensued pitted two of Louis XIV’s highest-ranking cultural officials against each other: on one side Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, Louis’s historiographer royal, who as leader of the Ancient camp held that modern culture would never equal the achievements of classical Antiquity, and on the other side Charles Perrault, the secretary of the prestigious Académie des Inscriptions or so-called Petite Académie, as leader of the Moderns. A spate of publications both for and against his initial thesis followed Perrault’s poem, culminating with his own phased publication of a multivolume *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*. This work presented a series of dialogues between three characters, an Abbé who defended the Moderns, a Président who pleaded the cause of the Ancients, and a Chevalier representing the *esprit enjoué* or playful aesthetic of the period. In it, Perrault systematically argued for Modern superiority in the fields of architecture, sculpture and painting (vol. I, 1688), eloquence (vol. II, 1690), poetry (vol. III, 1692) and astronomy, geography, navigation, war, philosophy, music and medicine (vol. IV, 1697). In a second phase of the Quarrel, spurred on in part by Perrault’s criticism of Homer in the third volume of the *Parallèle*, the debate centred more specifically around the value of Homer’s epics as opposed to modern literary productions, as his works came to exemplify for the Ancients a particular *ethos* and ideal of literary perfection.

The significance for literary history of the Quarrel, and the meaning of the positions adopted by the various combatants, remain today a subject of debate. In recent decades, Joan DeJean and Marc Fumaroli have written very different accounts of the Quarrel, the first explicitly endorsing the Modern standpoint, and the second more sympathetic to the Ancients. Both, perhaps not surprisingly, claim the camp of their choice as the harbinger of “true” literary modernity, or the various movements that culminated in nineteenth-century romanticism. Thus, DeJean argues that the Moderns consolidated a “sentimental revolution” that would lead from sensibility (*sensibilité*) to romanticism, announcing “the dawning of a new age – of individuality, of interiority, of heightened affectivity”.

Fumaroli, for his part, writes that the Ancients opposed a “poetics of emotions, an eloquence of the humours and passions” to the Moderns’ belief in Cartesian reason, thus making them the true ancestors of the romantic generation. In practice, as these differing interpretations indicate, Ancient and Modern standpoints were often less clear-cut than their rhetoric would suggest, and both contributed, each in their own way, to the new conception of history and of the French Middle Ages that would eventually lead to romanticism. In the following discussion, I take as my point of departure Perrault’s *Parallèle* not because of any ideological stance in favour of the Moderns, but because this was the most complete and systematic text

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to appear during the initial phase of the Quarrel addressing the issues it raised. At the same time, as one of the later founders of the genre of the fairy tale – a genre that, as I will explore later, explicitly drew on medieval precedents – Perrault occupies a pivotal position in any discussion of this period’s relation to the Middle Ages. The *Parallèle* can be regarded, then, as the opening salvo in a larger battle that was to rage during the decades to come, and which would underlie the development of new forms of literary medievalism.

The Idea of Progress

The Quarrel was, essentially, a debate about the possibility of historical progress. It contributed significantly to what Jürgen Voss has termed a “historization of the eighteenth-century world view” (*Vergeschichtlichung des Weltbildes*).27 Joan DeJean, following Paul Hazard, has written that “the conflict that generated the most intense anxiety during the actual fin de siècle period is referred to as the crisis in history.” 8 The participants in the debate increasingly asked questions about how knowledge of the past could be acquired, and how its cultural productions – most notably, the literary legacy of Antiquity – could properly be assessed. Was it possible, as a Modern, to judge critically the qualities of the productions of past centuries? This question, in turn, depended on determining whether history was, indeed, moving forwards, as the Moderns contended, or whether its movement was more complex, as the Ancients claimed.

All these issues crystallized around the key term “progress”, whose meaning was evolving rapidly during these decades, and whose nature and possibility remained an object of intense debate throughout the whole eighteenth century – becoming, in fact, perhaps the single most important issue defining Enlightenment thought. Following the lead of the Renaissance historian-medievalists, the Moderns were convinced that their own era was superior to the classical past. In assuming this position, Perrault did not however abandon the classical notion of cyclical return and the eschatological one of degeneration. This was evident in the Abbé’s description of the present century (*siècle*, synonymous with “period”), which drew on the well-worn metaphor of the course of history as the life of a man:29

> Let us take as an example the century in which we are living. One could consider as its childhood the time that elapsed between the wars of the League until the beginning of the ministry of cardinal Richelieu, its adolescence came afterwards and saw the birth of the French Academy; the virile age followed, and perhaps we are now beginning to enter its old age, as the lassitude (*dégoût*) people often feel for our best things appears to show.30

27 Voss, *Das Mittelalter*, 180.
29 The same metaphor was also used by Fontenelle in his *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, as Jauss pointed out. Jauss, “Ästhetische Normen”, 22.
30 “Prenons pour exemple le siecle où nous vivons. On peut regarder comme son enfance le temps qui s’est passé depuis la fin des guerres de la ligue jusqu’au commencement du Ministere du Cardinal de
Likening the progress of human history to the progress of a human life, which ended inevitably in death – or, alternatively, in the Christian reading, in life everlasting – raised obvious problems. In her discussion of the Quarrel, DeJean has rightly drawn attention to the feeling, shared by many participants in the Quarrel, of being at the end of history, of witnessing a cultural decadence common, too, to later fin-de-siècles. The Abbé’s hesitation about the endpoint of history – having reached the present stage of perfection, was culture going to begin declining again? – was not, however, a new one. Instead, it was linked to the older notions of “perfection” and “progress” themselves. Marc Fumaroli has pointed out that, like the term “revolution”, the terms “progress” and “perfection” had been borrowed from astronomy, where they were used to describe the movement of the sun rising and setting. (Tellingly, elsewhere in the dialogue the Abbé refused to take a stance on the question whether the sun revolved around the earth or, as Copernicus held, the opposite, betraying a lingering attachment to the outmoded astronomical models linked to cyclical notions of history). As Meinecke noted, the notions of “perfection” (and the accompanying verb perfectionner, “to perfect”) and of “progress” remained very present in Voltaire’s historical writings too. They were problematic, in his view, not only because of the mechanistic way in which Voltaire applied the notions, but also because of their implication that history could have an end. In other words, as Karl Löwith suggested, the terms carried echoes of older, eschatological models. Notions of perfection could be read as a secularization of Christian providence, with accompanying anxieties about the endpoint of historical development, i.e. the final apocalyptic age before ultimate salvation.

The survival of older notions of “progress” and “perfection” in the discourse of the Moderns complicates the Moderns’ basic thesis of the superiority of modern culture over Antiquity. As is so often the case, what the Moderns purported to believe was not always the same as what they actually did. One of the crucial elements in the poetic view of the world espoused by the Ancients, which the Moderns ostensibly rejected, was the myth of a Golden Age at the beginning of history, succeeded by increasing historical degeneration during silver, bronze and iron ages leading up to our own era. In a Christian version, this Golden Age was in turn assimilated to the innocence of Paradise, as described in Daniel’s vision of a statue with a golden head, silver chest, bronze thighs, iron legs and feet of clay (Daniel 2: 36–41) – a personification of history in the same vein as Perrault’s metaphor of history as the life of a man. Thus, despite their explicit rejection of the Golden Age, the terms the Moderns used retained links to this older notion, with its concomitant concept of history running down or even...
reaching its final end. Progress and modernity could then be defined, as in earlier Renaissance writings, not as an evolution forwards, but as a return to an original state of being, a recovery of what had been lost.

The medievalism of the early eighteenth century drew on a combination of elements from both the Ancient and Modern camps, especially as they intersected in this central idea of a long revolved Golden Age. The sense of history that took centre stage in the 1680s and 1690s, that was not yet fully historist but was both backwards- and forwards-looking, was expressed in a new term that also came into use during these decades: in the original Latin, *nostalgia*. Coined in 1688 by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, the term *nostalgia* was made up of the Greek words *nosteoo* (to return home safely) and *algos* (pain). In its original sense, the term described a medical condition akin to what we would today describe as homesickness – and indeed, Hofer’s French translation of the term was *mal du pays*. The term, however, carried a temporal as well as a geographic dimension. Derived from the Homeric epics that were at the centre of the later Quarrel, the term *nosteoo* referred to Odysseus’s tragic homecoming, in which the passage of time meant that he could never truly return to the place he had left behind. The rift that had opened, and which had initially been perceived as geographic, turned out to be temporal, too, as the romantics well understood when vernacularizing the term – the French *nostalgie* occurred for the first time in the 1835 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* – and harnessing it to their own literary movement. Thus, although the term *nostalgie* only entered the French language with romanticism, the feelings it expressed were clearly in the air in the 1680s, and contributed to the ambiance that would produce the flowering of literary medievalism in those years.

**Towards a Sense of Historical Particularism**

But even while retaining echoes of the older meaning of the terms “progress” and “perfection”, Perrault frequently also used the terms – like Voltaire after him – in a sense closer to our modern meaning, making of “progress” and “perfection” potentially open-ended notions. At the very beginning of the series of dialogues, Perrault told his readers that the art of artillery “has perfected itself to the point at which we presently see it”. Later on the Abbé explained that “we have today a more perfect knowledge of all the arts and sciences than we have ever had”. Progress in the *Parallèle* was often measured in terms of technological advances. Perrault, speaking through his spokesperson the Abbé, referred to several technologies the Moderns had which the Ancients didn’t. In the first volume of the book, he enumerated a curious assortment

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35 My emphasis on the history of the notion of decline differs from DeJean’s contention that Perrault “willed into existence the crucial element for a fin de siècle, the belief that civilization has begun to decline”. *Ancients against Moderns*, 16.


37 “Cet Art s’est perfectionné au point où nous le voyons presentement.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, 1, unpaginated, my emphasis.

38 “Nous avons aujourd’hui une plus parfaite connaissance de tous les Arts & de toutes les Sciences, qu’on ne l’a jamais eue.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, 1, 62, my emphasis.
of modern inventions: machines to make stockings (announcing perhaps the famous *Encyclopédie* article “Bas”), machines to make ribbons, bombs and cannons, modern paper (which the Abbé judged superior to ancient papyrus), and pocket watches. This list was further supplemented as the book advanced, ending with a new catalogue in the last volume, which discussed major inventions such as the printing press and the mariner’s compass. (Interestingly, Jean Bodin had listed a similar set of innovations in his own defence of the Moderns a century earlier: the printing press, the mariner’s compass, artillery, and techniques for working metal and fabric.)

At other points in the dialogues, however, the Abbé defined his notion of progress in more abstract terms, referring back to Perrault’s original *Siècle de Louis le Grand*:

[Perrault] takes as his foundation that nature is unchangeable and always the same in her productions … Thus when we compare the Ancients and the Moderns, it is not on the basis of the excellence of their purely natural talents, which have always been the same and of the same strength in the excellent men of all times, but only on the basis of the beauty of their works and the knowledge they had of the arts and sciences, in which we find great differences and inequalities in different centuries. For since the arts and sciences are nothing more than a collection of reflections, rules and precepts, the author of the poem rightly claims, and I strongly second him, that this collection, which necessarily increases from day to day, becomes larger as we advance in time.

This was an incremental notion of historical progress, where historical development took place by the simple accumulation, rather than transformation or true evolution, of knowledge. The value given to the new, here considered superior to the past because it was more than a mere repetition or return to it, was of course resolutely modern, and distinguished some late seventeenth-century conceptions of progress from earlier, Renaissance ones – even if in Perrault’s dialogues, as I have argued, both conceptions continued to coexist. Indeed, as the Abbé pointedly stated in his description of progress, human nature stayed the same and unchanged by history, and so this was not, yet, the truly historist notion of change but retained also, in addition to traces of cyclical models of history, important traces of classicist universalism.

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41 [Perrault] pose pour fondement que la Nature est immuable & toujours la mesme dans ses productions … Ainsi quand nous faisons la comparaison des Anciens & des Modernes, ce n’est point sur l’excellence de leurs talens purement naturels, qui ont esté les mesmes & de la mesme force dans les excellens hommes de tous les tems, mais seulement sur la beauté de leurs ouvrages & sur la connoissance qu’ils ont eue des Arts & des Sciences, où il se trouve, selon les differens siecles, beaucoup de difference & d’inégalité. Car comme les Sciences & les Arts ne sont autre chose qu’un amas de reflexions, de regles & de preceptes, l’Auteur du Poëme soutient avec raison, & je le soustiens fortement avec luy, que cet amas, qui s’augmente necessairement de jour en jour, est plus grand plus on avance dans les tems.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, I, 88–90.
42 The same argument is made again in Perrault, *Parallèle*, II, 65–6.
However, a new note was creeping into this narrative of incremental historical progress. This was a barely acknowledged feeling that, when looking at artefacts from the past, Perrault’s dialogue characters might also be looking at phenomena fundamentally different from those they saw around them. In his discussion of architectural styles, noting the plethora of conventions that had developed through history, the Abbé was led to make a distinction between two types of beauty. On one hand, he noted, there were certain types of beauty that were common to “all tastes, countries and times”, or forms of universal beauty. On the other hand however, he noted the existence also of “other beauties that are but arbitrary, that please because the eyes have grown accustomed to them, and that have no other advantage than to have been preferred to those that were just as good, and which would have pleased equally, if they had been chosen”. This is what Hans Robert Jauss described as Perrault’s idea of the *beau relatif*, an idea that made possible the later development of a historist outlook. While Perrault remained faithful to the humanist-classicist notion of the ideal or universal as being superior to the particular, his alter ego the Abbé did acknowledge the existence of aesthetic norms that could only be accounted for with reference to their embededness in a specific historical context. As the dialogues progressed, this recognition of the relativity of aesthetic standards became more pronounced, until the Abbé explicitly extended it to different centuries too:

> Other nations have their particular taste, which their orators had to study to be favourably heard. That which is said of different nations should be understood also of the humours and the different professions to be found in each nation, and also of different centuries and different times.

While the Abbé was the one here who expressed the concept of historic particularism, it was curiously, as Jauss has noted, the Ancients more often than the Moderns who appeared sensitive to historical relativism. This was because, in their defence of Homer in the latter part of the Quarrel, the Ancients sought to explain the many passages in his epics in which he appeared to go against the “universal” laws established by classicist literary doctrine. They did so, often, by appealing to the different *mœurs* or customs prevalent at the time of his writing. In the third volume of the *Parallèle*, the Président suggested that, in order to do justice to the literary productions of antiquity, “one must transport oneself into the times in which the thing took place”. As Jauss

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44 “De tous les gousts, de tous les pays & de tous les temps.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, I, 139.
45 “D’autre beautez qui ne sont qu’arbitraires, qui plaisent parce que les yeux s’y sont accoutumeez, & qui n’ont d’autre avantage que d’avoir esté preferees à d’autres qui les valoient bien, & qui auoiento plü égaalement, si on les eust choisies.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, I, 139.
46 “Les autres Nations ont eu leur goust particulier, qu’il a fallu que leurs Orateurs aient etudié pour se faire écouter favorablement: ce qui se dit des differentes Nations se doit entendre aussi des humeurs, & de professions differentes qui se rencontrent dans chaque nation, comme aussi des differentes siecles & des different tems.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, II, 51.
pointed out, citing among others Charles de Saint-Evremond, this standpoint was being elaborated well before Perrault published his Parallèle, although it was often only expressed in writings that circulated in small, scholarly or private circles. The question of historical relativism only came to public prominence with the Quarrel. Crucially, besides giving value to hitherto-disdained cultural phenomena, the new notion of relativism also viewed them as elements within a larger, coherent whole – a kind of anthropological structuralism avant la lettre. In the course of the eighteenth century, relativism gained increasing support as more historians searched for ways to understand societies distant from their own both temporally and geographically. The sense of historical particularism, as noted by Meinecke, reached a first great apogee in the medievalist work of Montesquieu. The final books of his De l'esprit des lois offered one of the most protracted Enlightenment considerations of the medieval, that was groundbreaking especially in his discussion of chivalry in Book 28, and of feudal law in Books 30–31. As Montesquieu described it, one of the first hurdles he had to overcome in his historical investigations was the tendency of previous authors to search for analogies between Roman and feudal law, often using creative etymologies to derive the latter from the former. This led him to conclude his chapter on terminology with an explicit statement of principle, which summed up the emerging eighteenth-century historist viewpoint:

To carry over into distant centuries all the notions of the century in which you happen to live, is the most fruitful of all sources of error. To those who would make modern all the past centuries, I would say what the Egyptian priests said to Solon: “Oh Athenians! You are but children!”

Montesquieu’s example demonstrates that while the sense of the past gaining acceptance in the eighteenth century was a general historical notion, in practice it often related specifically to the medieval. Sensitivity to historical particularism, and a subsequent sense of historical relativism, were essential prerequisites for the emergence of a self-conscious form of medievalism – even if, as I argue, in practice there were many shades between full-blown, conscious medievalism and vaguer, non-historical notions of the medieval.

The Middle Ages in the Quarrel
So what of the actual, historical Middle Ages in the Quarrel? What role, if any, did they play in helping to shape the competing notions of history held by the Ancients and


49 “Transporter dans des siècles reculés toutes les idées du siècle où l’on vit, c’est des sources de l’erreur celle qui est la plus féconde. A ces gens qui veulent rendre modernes tous les siècles anciens, je dirai ce que les prêtres d’Egypte dirent à Solon: ‘O Athéniens! vous n’êtes que des enfants!’” Montesquieu, L’Esprit des lois, II, 1066.
Moderns? Here again, the respective roles adopted by the participants in the Quarrel are unexpectedly complex, if not contradictory. While one would expect that the Ancients, with their more developed sensitivity to historical particularism, would be the better able to understand the cultural productions of the Middle Ages, the opposite appears true. The Moderns decried the medieval in their rhetoric, but in practice provided some modest, albeit not always fully exploited, openings for a new appreciation of its cultural productions.

In the official discourse of the Moderns, there was no place for the medieval. Perrault, like other Moderns, described the Middle Ages using the same *topoi* of darkness and decline as had been used by his humanist predecessors. Significantly, the most important term he used to describe this epoch was “barbarism” (*barbarie*), a term that in its Greek etymology directly referred to linguistic unintelligibility. Thus quite characteristically, in an overview of late antique history, the Abbé used the term to explain the inferiority of the writings of Cassiodorus relative to Cicero’s, arguing that “it isn’t strange that the flood of Goths and Vandals who brought barbarism into the heart of Rome, offset the advantage Cassiodorus had of having come after Cicero.”\(^5\)

The medieval was implicitly defined, in this passage and in others, by its very lack of linguistic or literary refinement, bringing questions of language and literature to the fore of considerations of this period.

The Middle Ages, the case of Cassiodorus’s relative inferiority suggested, posed a problem to Perrault’s theory of incremental historical progression, because they were a throwback to an earlier, less civilized time. Early on in the dialogues, the Président triumphantly announced to the Abbé that “according to your reasoning, the men of the ninth and tenth centuries should have been more able than those of antiquity, even though ignorance and barbarism reigned no less in these two centuries, than science and politeness in Augustus’s century.”\(^6\) A similar argument had been made somewhat earlier by Fontenelle, in his *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* (1687).\(^7\) Both authors unproblematically invoked the *topoi* of ignorance and “barbarism” to describe the Middle Ages. Perrault replied, however, that the lack of refinement of the Middle Ages was the consequence of the disorder of its political organization, which – unlike Louis’s century – did not offer a context conducive to the practice of literature. More importantly, progress did not work in a univocal, linear fashion, but proceeded by fits

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\(^6\) “Selon vostre raisonnement les hommes du neuvieme & du dixieme siecle auraient esté plus habiles que tous ceux de l’antiquite, quoique l’ignorance & la barbarie n’ayent pas moins reigne dans ces deux siecles, que la science & la politesse dans celuy d’Auguste.” Perrault, *Parallèle*, I, 52, my emphasis.

\(^7\) “Les siecles barbares qui ont suivi celuy d’Auguste, et precede celui-cy, fournissent aux partisans de l’Antiquite celuy de tous les raisonnemens qui a le plus d’apparence d’etre bon. D’ou vient-il, disent-ils, que dans ces siecles-là, l’ignorance etoit si epaissie et si profonde? C’est que l’on n’y connoissoit, plus les Grecs et les Latins, on ne les lisoit plus; mais du moment que l’on se remit devant les yeux ces excellentes modeles, on vit renaître la raison et le bon goût. Cela est vray, et ne prouve pourtant rien.” Fontenelle, *Digression sur les anciens et le modernes*, 234.
and starts, allowing for periods of relative decadence within an overall progression towards ultimate perfection.

Yet at the same time, from behind the conventional rhetoric of medieval darkness opposed to modern progress, there emerged another, less clearly articulated strand of thought in Perrault’s argument for modern superiority. This held, quite simply, that rather than standing completely opposite to present-day modernity on a relative scale of development, the Middle Ages were contiguous or even part of it. The term “barbarism”, used as synonymous with the medieval, was imperceptibly extended to other periods too, until in the end it appeared that only the very here-and-now, the 1680s and 1690s, was completely free of medieval darkness. In a discussion of the harangues of Antoine Le Maistre (pseud. Lamy), considered a model of their genre, the Abbé used the term “barbarism” as a foil to prove their excellence:

> It should be remarked that these harangues were composed more than fifty years ago, and yet they have a purity of style as if they had just been composed. It is an admirable thing, that this excellent man was … able to defend himself against the vices of his time, and the barbarism that still reigned then in our language.53

Definitions of the modern were increasingly narrowing, as the modern was defined as that which had “just been composed”. With the sense of time speeding up that characterized the Quarrel, came too a sense of rapidly receding history, with even relatively recent periods – here, the 1640s – now being relegated to “barbarism”. The medieval, in this reading, became a shifting category – quite simply put, everything that had not “just” taken place. The Renaissance, which we today view as a rupture with the medieval and the beginning of the early modern period, did not in Perrault’s reading belong to true modernity but was, at best, a noteworthy precursor. This explains some aesthetic choices that, to us today, may seem odd. Thus in a comparison of ancient with modern epic, the Abbé did not finally choose to use Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata as his modern point of reference, despite some obligatory nods in Tasso’s direction, but opted instead for Jean Chapelain’s more recent – and notoriously unsuccessful – La Pucelle. Likewise, poetic perfection started in his account not with the poets of the Pléiade, whom Perrault agreed with Boileau in consigning to the relative oblivion of literary history, but with “Voiture, Sarasin, and an infinity of similar geniuses who have been the delight of our century” (siècle).54

If, on the one hand, the medieval was moving closer to the present day, on the other hand modernity was encroaching on the medieval, for there was not always a sense, in Perrault’s Parallèle, of a strict separation between the two. The last volume of the Parallèle, which argued for the technical superiority of the Moderns over classical Antiquity, was perhaps the most surprising, for time and again Perrault resorted, for

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53 “Il faut remarquer qu’il y a plus de cinquante ans que ces harangues ont esté faites, & que cependant elles sont dans une aussi grande pureté de style, que si elles venoient d’estre composées. C’est une chose admirable, que cet excellent homme ait sceu non seulement se defendre des vices de son temps, & de la barbarie qui regnoit encore dans le langage.” Perrault, Parallèle, II, 245, my emphasis.

54 Perrault, Parallèle, IV, 290.
his examples, to the medieval period. In the field of astronomy, the Abbé dismissed the astronomical tables compiled in Antiquity for their inaccuracy, and then contrasted to them the tables compiled by Alfonso X of Castille, which were “much more exact and more correct”.

Regarding knowledge of the earth, the Abbé disdainfully compared the Ancients’ belief that the earth was flat with modern knowledge, which was exemplified by Saint Augustine, who “never doubted that the earth was round, and consequently, that there were seas or lands directly opposite to those on which we walk”.

And if medieval astronomy was superior to antique astronomy, the same held for various technological inventions. The Abbé explained that eyeglasses had been invented “in the year twelve hundred, or thereabouts”, and then added that it was a cruel fate the Greeks and Romans had suffered, being unable to enjoy the pleasures of reading past the age of forty or fifty years. The mariner’s compass was not only a medieval invention, but the Abbé disputed its supposed Chinese provenance, arguing instead for a native origin, on the basis of a reference to a compass-like “Marinette” in a poem by Guyot de Provins, which Claude Fauchet had dated around 1180. Significantly, in making his case the Abbé directly quoted the relevant verses – one of the rare instances of French medieval poetry being quoted verbatim, rather than being “corrected” in line with modern taste, in the 1690s. The reference to Claude Fauchet’s *De l’origine de la langue et de la poésie française* (1581), of course, in turn provided yet more evidence of the basic continuity between French humanist medievalism, and later eighteenth-century varieties.

There was, then, an unbroken line leading from medieval technical innovations to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, which Perrault presented as demonstrating the achievements of the age (siècle) of Louis XIV – despite the fact that most of these innovations had not taken place on French soil at all. Already in the original poem *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, various inventions had figured in a prominent role, ranging from the telescope (which Perrault did not attribute to a particular inventor, perhaps because of the lack of French candidates), the discoveries and innovations of Christian Huygens, made partly under the patronage of Louis XIV at the Académie des Sciences (the pendulum clock), the microscope (unattributed) and the circulation of blood (also unattributed). Now, in the final book of the *Parallèle*, these modern inventions were placed in the framework of a larger historical continuity. The medieval was not, then, perceived as radically different from scientific modernity, but as an important stage within its larger evolution.

The Relation between Past and Present

The final volume of Perrault’s *Parallèle* appeared in the same year, 1697, as his *Contes*.

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*de ma mère l’oie*, the slender volume of fairy tales that would become one of the most important examples of full-fledged literary medievalism during this decade. The historical reflection expressed especially in the last volume of the *Parallèle*, it appeared, was part of a larger evolution including also the re-evaluation of the medieval in various literary texts. From a historical point of view, what was remarkable in the *Parallèle*’s final volume was the matter-of-factness of Perrault’s presenting medieval inventions as leading up to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. Events or innovations that took place in the twelfth century were not described as having taken place in a period radically separate from the present, but merely in a previous time contiguous with the present. Despite his use elsewhere of the stock term “barbarism”, the medieval was no longer really perceived as separate from the modern. The lack of historical marking was further reinforced by the telling absence, in the entire *Parallèle*, of the historical term *moyen âge* – a lack that was perhaps not exceptional in this period, given that the term *moyen âge* was almost entirely absent even in the works of the age’s greatest scholarly medievalist, Jean Mabillon. The past had not yet, as for the romantics, “broken off” from the present, but was part of present-day modernity.

This sense of contiguity of past and present was reflected not only in works of criticism such as Perrault’s *Parallèle*, but also in fiction, where perceived proximity or contiguity could veer even into a telescoping sense of simultaneity. This appeared perhaps nowhere more clearly than in a literary genre that re-emerged during the decades in which the Quarrel was being fought out: the dialogues of the dead, in which famous personages – literary, historical or mythical – were made to enter into dialogue with one another. Written by both defenders of the Ancients and of the Moderns, the dialogues of the dead dramatized the communication between past and present. Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, a prominent Modern, published a series of *Nouveaux Dialogues des Morts* (1683), in which different historical periods unproblematically conversed with each other. Responding to this unprecedented mixing of historical eras, Fontenelle’s Ancient counterpart François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon wrote a more cautious series of *Dialogues des Morts* (1692–1696) in which he imposed a nominally stricter separation of different historical periods. In Fénelon’s dialogues, the Ancients conversed more often with Ancients, and Moderns with Moderns, and frequently the dialogues

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61 Bruun, “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages”.
62 This sense of the continuity of past and present was, of course, facilitated by the survival of medieval or medievalist artefacts well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The physical cities that most French authors lived in during the eighteenth century were, essentially, still medieval cities – none perhaps more so than Paris, as Perrault himself realized, well versed in architecture as he was. It was, in some senses, only after the massive destruction of churches and other architectural relics of the medieval past that took place during the revolutionary upheaval that many authors became distinctly aware of their belonging to another – now definitely closed-off – era.
63 I thank Marc-André Bernier for drawing my attention to this genre.
64 Similarly, in Jacques-François Demachy’s much later volume of the same title, published in 1755, Mohammed conversed with Luther, Aristotle with Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, and Christina of Sweden with Catherine the Great.
brought together people who had really known each other in history. Thus Socrates was in dialogue with Alcibiades, Augustus with Cicero, Alexander with Aristotle, and Louis XI with Philippe de Commines. However, even in Fénelon's dialogues anachronisms occurred, as when, for example, dramatically crossing a millennium-wide divide between Ancients and Moderns, Aristotle engaged in philosophical discussion with Descartes. (Somewhat disappointingly, they talked primarily about whether animals had souls.)

The past, rather than being hermetically sealed off from the present, merged with it in the dialogues of the dead, suggesting that the rift that was opening between past and present in historical writing was not yet, in imaginative texts, unbridgeable. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood have argued that this is, in fact, a defining quality of many artworks, for “to describe the work of art as ‘anachronic’ … is to say what the artwork does, qua art”. Such works, according to them, consciously play on the sensation of “time folding over on itself”, resisting chronological anchoring and offering a site of reflection on their own temporal instability. Nagel and Wood propose that the period of the Italian Renaissance, covering the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, was one moment when this type of consciously “anachronic” works came to the fore – i.e., a moment during which the movement of history was also at the centre of intellectual debate. I propose that another such moment was the early French Enlightenment. There was, in the 1680s and 1690s, a sense of the proximity, even simultaneity of past and present, articulated in works of literature, at the same time as historical thought was exploring the possibility of the non-commensurability of the two. Literary medievalism was to function, in the ensuing decades, as a kind of bridge between the two competing notions of history, for it was both historical and non-historical, both ahead of its time and archaic. Folding over or telescoping past into present, medievalism was fundamentally “out of sync” with literary history itself, and as such poses a challenge to our own ways of writing history as a unilinear, narrowly evolutionary narrative.

The Middle Ages as Problematic Historical Category
If the Middle Ages were not properly a historical category for late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century authors, then to what did they refer? I purposely end my account of early Enlightenment conceptions of the medieval where other accounts might have started: with a look at the terminology used by authors and historians to describe the period we know today as the Middle Ages. This is because words that appear the same can be misleading, subtly changing their meanings during the course of history. This holds, too, for the term moyen âge. While our own definitions often describe the Middle Ages, within straightforward chronological boundaries, as the period between the end of Antiquity, traditionally the fall of the Western Roman empire in 476, and the capture of Constantinople in 1453, with the year 1500 as a more general cut-off date, these markers were not yet universally accepted in the 1690s through 1740s, even if the term moyen âge itself was increasingly used. Indeed, despite the proliferation of

Nagel and Wood, Anachronic Renaissance, 14.
the term *moyen âge* during these decades, the medieval was not perceived primarily in chronological terms, but rather in linguistic or literary ones.

The new historical consciousness fostered by the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns was evident, in scholarship, in the regularization of the terminology used to describe historical periods. The idea of the medieval as a “middle period” separating Antiquity and modernity had of course existed well before the 1680s, but in this decade a new scholarly discourse emerged concerning the Middle Ages. In French, the term *moyen âge* had occurred for the first time, according to Jürgen Voss, in the humanist historian Pierre Pithou’s *Mémoires des comtes hereditaires de Champagne*, where the period of the “Empereurs Romains”, i.e. Charlemagne’s reign and thereafter (c. 768–987), was referred to as the *moyen âge*. This use was followed shortly thereafter by Pasquier’s reference to the church and poets of the *moyen âge* in the revised, 1596 edition of his *Recherches de la France*. After isolated occurrences throughout the seventeenth century, the term emerged again in 1681, in Louis Moréri’s influential *Grand dictionnaire historique*, becoming thereafter the term of choice to describe a variously-defined historical period within the larger period we today designate as medieval. The triumph of the term *moyen âge* was sealed by its appearance in the first dictionaries codifying the French language, first in 1690 in Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*, and then in 1694 in the official *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* – for which Perrault, incidentally, wrote the preface.

In gaining widespread acceptance, the term *moyen âge* led to the gradual disappearance of other terms, most notably the equally common, at least until the 1680s, *temps moyen* and *moyen temps*. While the older term referred clearly to a temporal demarcation (*temps*), it is significant that the newer term, *moyen âge*, carried biological connotations referring, again, to a (human) lifespan (*âge*). In other words, the term that finally prevailed – *moyen âge* – bore echoes still of the classical notion of the regular return of cycles of birth, growth and decay. This was reminiscent of Perrault’s restraint in his *Parallèle* in using properly historical terms. Marked by the curious absence, in its historical narrative, of the term *moyen âge*, the *Parallèle* instead chose to privilege another term, *siècle*, which also carried distinctly non-chronological meanings. Joan DeJean has contended that, in the *Parallèle*, Perrault was moving towards the meaning of *siècle* that dominates in modern usage, i.e. a period of one hundred years, as opposed to the earlier meaning of “age” or “generation” (from the Latin *saeculum*).

Again, older meanings connected to natural cycles of growth and decay coexisted with newer, chronological notions. Perrault’s not yet fully crystallized use of these terms indicates that a term such as *moyen âge*, which today is to us an unambiguous chronological marker, did not describe (only) a historical category for eighteenth-century authors, but another type of phenomenon altogether.

A second sign of the early eighteenth-century fluidity of the term *moyen âge* is provided by its concrete uses as a term of chronological demarcation. Voss notes that our
present-day definition of the term, i.e. the period until the fifteenth century, only came into general use after the French revolution, making its first dictionary appearance in the 1798 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. By contrast, from the 1680s through to the 1740s, authors used the term to describe very different time spans. A first set of authors used the term to refer to the period from the fall of the Roman empire to the tenth century, as for example in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694 and later editions).\(^6\) This was a dynastic definition of the term, which made the middle age end with the end of the "second race" of French kings, the Carolingians.\(^6\) A second group of texts defined the Middle Ages as the period from the fall of the Roman Empire, or thereabouts, to the twelfth century.\(^7\) Finally, a much smaller, third group, made the *moyen âge* extend from the fifth or sixth to the fifteenth century, while yet other writers made the *moyen âge* end in the sixteenth century, or in the period we would today designate as the French Renaissance. According to Voss, the most frequently used of the three competing definitions was that of a "short Middle Ages" from the fall of the Roman empire to the tenth century. In other words, lacking a definition of the *moyen âge* chronologically comparable to our own, late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century authors could clearly also not have a concept of medievalism, at least expressed in terms of the *moyen âge*, that we today would recognize as such.

But the definition of the *moyen âge* was even more floating than Voss's inventories would indicate. Many of the definitions omitted references to concrete dates altogether. In the earliest, sixteenth-century usages, which continued to have currency well into the eighteenth century, the Middle Ages were defined not in historical terms at all, but in linguistic or literary ones. The medieval had been perceived, since the founding texts of humanism, as a lack or an absence of good language. In French Renaissance letters, this view had been most famously expressed by François Rabelais, in Gargantua's account of his youth in his epistle to his son at the beginning of *Pantagruel*:

> The age was still dark and reeling from the misfortune and calamities caused by the Goths, who had destroyed all good literature. But thanks to divine goodness, light and dignity have been returned to literature, and I see today such progress that I would have difficulty being admitted to elementary classes, I who, in my mature age, was rightly considered the most learned of the age.\(^71\)

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\(^6\) The abbé Fleury, a partisan of the Ancients, also described the age in his 1708 "Discours sur l'histoire ecclésiastique" as the period extending from the fifth to the tenth century. Voss, *Das Mittelalter*, 78.

\(^6\) The sharpest of these dynastic demarcations was provided by Lenglet-Dufresnoy, one of the early eighteenth-century authors most appreciative of the literary heritage of the Middle Ages. In his *Méthode pour étudier l'histoire* (1713) Lenglet-Dufresnoy distinguished between a *moyen âge* lasting from 476 to 752, corresponding to the Merovingian dynasty, and a second *moyen âge de l'Empire*, corresponding to the Carolingian and Capetian reigns. However, confusingly, he also proposed a second definition. When referring to the "Ecrivains des bas siecle", he meant instead authors who had written in the period from the ninth to the sixteenth century. Definitions of the Middle Ages varied, then, depending on whether the term was being used in a political-historical sense, or in a literary one.

\(^7\) This is the usage found, for example, in Guillaume Marcel's *L'histoire de l'origine et des progres de la monarchie française* (1686), as reported by Voss, *Das Mittelalter*, 78.

\(^71\) "Le temps estoit encore tenebreux et sentant l'infelicité et la calamité des Gothz, qui avoient mis à destruction toute bonne literature. Mais, par la bonté divine, la lumiere et la dignite a esté de mon eage
Note here that, although Gargantua did not actually use the term *moyen âge* in this passage, nor any similar temporal term, it was clear that this was what he was referring to. Instead, he deployed three of the constitutive *topoi* of the historical myth of the Middle Ages created by European humanism, and relayed by Rabelais to succeeding generations of French authors. Firstly, it was an *époque ténébreuse* or age of darkness (that could thus be contrasted to the *lumière* and *dignité* of the succeeding ages of light); secondly, it was a period marked by political stagnation or even decline (the *malheur* and *désastres* opposed to modern-day *progrès*), and thirdly and most importantly for us here, it was an age deprived of literature (*bonne littérature*). This view, despite the use of the catch-term “progress”, fitted well with the cyclical view of history, where classical perfection was followed by medieval decadence, and then the rise of “good literature” (*bonne littérature*) again in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. It remained largely unmodified until the end of the eighteenth century, even if some descriptions added to the definition a reference to the sciences, as for example in Louis-Elie Dupin’s explanation, in his *Histoire profane* (1714–1716), that “the Sciences and Arts that had fallen in the tenth century, continued in this decadence until the fifteenth century, but since then they renewed themselves, and flourished in the sixteenth century.”

The negative definition of the medieval as a lack or absence participated in a larger semantic network that established an equivalency between several terms, but revolved consistently around notions of language and literature. Besides darkness and decadence, these included also the term Perrault used to describe the era, “barbarism” (*barbarie*). “Barbarism” was, of course, a term originally denoting gibberish, a language unintelligible to the cultured listener. Perrault’s choice to use a linguistic category to define the medieval rather than the temporal one of *moyen âge* was not exceptional, but characteristic of his period. The *topoi* relating to the period’s absence of good language and literature stood in for, and made unnecessary any precise chronological boundaries or the use of the term *moyen âge* – even if some authors sometimes did mention such boundaries. So strong was the tendency to equate the medieval with linguistic and / or literary considerations that Voss refers to this as an essential element of the definition, every bit as much as the conventional references to darkness or to decline. Even in cases where the medieval was not described negatively, the reference to language and literature remained, for example in the definition given in 1690 by Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*:

**MIDDLE,** adj. and noun. That is in the middle, between two extremities. He is of middle height, of middle size. It is said too that an author is of the Middle Age (*moyen âge*) to indicate that he is neither ancient nor new.73

rendue es lettres, et y voy tel amendement que de present à difficulté serois je receu en la premiere classe des petitz grimaulx, qui en mon eage virile estoys (non à tort) réputé le plus sçavant dudict siecle. “Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, .73 "*Les Sciences et les Arts* qui étoient tombés dans le dixiéme siecle, continuèrent dans cette decadence jusqu’au quinzieme siecle, mais depuis elles se renouvellerent, et fleurirent dans le sieziéme." Cited in Voss, *Das Mittelalter*, 185 n. 9, my emphasis.

73 "MOYEN, ENNE. adj. & subst. Qui est au milieu, entre deux extremitez. Il est de moyenne taille, de moyenne grandeur. On dit aussi, qu’un Auteur est du moyen âge, pour dire, qu’il n’est ni ancien, ni
Whereas Perrault in 1697 annexed the medieval to the modern, in this definition it was situated between the two periods – underlining again the chronological variability of the term. The 1694 *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, too, elaborated on the linguistic or literary element: “Those Authors who wrote since the fall of the Roman Empire until around the end of the tenth century, or thereabouts, are called ‘authors of the Middle Age’ (*Auteurs du moyen âge*). The repeated use of the same, primarily linguistic and literary terms – decadence, darkness, barbarism, lack of letters – to describe the medieval period makes of them more accepted defining elements than other, chronological markers, which, as we have seen, were in practice extremely varied and fluid. The medieval as a *historical* concept was yet in its infancy between the 1680s and 1740s, for only in the second half of the eighteenth century would it evolve into a term primarily designating a chronological period. The medieval was, rather, used by late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century authors in a variety of linguistic and literary meanings that, at first sight, may appear strange to us today.

Early Enlightenment conceptualizations of the medieval gave a central place to (literary) texts for a variety of reasons. The term *moyen âge*, and its accompanying sense of the past, was first of all inextricably linked to literature because, as the humanist historians well realized, history was necessarily mediated through written documents. The past was not available directly, but was most often represented or transmitted through texts. Philology, as developed by sixteenth-century humanists and later pursued by early Enlightenment scholars, was the base science of historiography, much as mathematics was the base science of the natural sciences. What mathematics was to Perrault’s tale of unremitting technological progress, philology was to the progress of the humanities. Secondly, and more importantly, the historical consciousness that arose with the Quarrel gave a pivotal role to literature because the Modern idea of historical progress, while easy to accept in the domains of science and technology, was more difficult to sustain in the realm of literature. That the weapons of modern warfare – cannons, guns and the fortifications of Vauban – were superior to those of antiquity was easy enough to demonstrate, but could the same argument be made about the relative merits of modern epics – Jean Chapelain’s *Pucelle*, for example, as opposed to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Because the Quarrel was played out most fiercely around questions of literary merit, reflections on history, too, tended to focus on the literary productions of the past. Thus, the literary heritage of the Middle Ages came to be indistinguishable, for many authors, from the medieval itself. For us today, this means that a properly historist consideration of how the medieval was conceptualized in the early French Enlightenment must discard our own concept of the medieval as a historical concept, and replace it by the early Enlightenment concept of the *moyen âge* – tellingly associated with terms such as *barbarie* – as a literary or linguistic marker.

**The Medieval as Heterochronic Site**

What emerges from this overview of conceptualizations of the medieval during the
The Middle Ages were not, during the early decades of the Enlightenment, a historical or chronological category, but a category that functioned somewhat differently. Rather than perceiving a clear break between their own era and the medieval past, many authors of this period instead operated on the implicit assumption of a basic communicability or contiguity between the two periods. This could in some instances veer into a telescoping of the medieval and the modern, whereby the two were felt actually to coincide. In such cases, the very absence of any term explicitly referring to the Middle Ages was significant, for this lack pointed to a deeply-experienced – rather than consciously articulated – sense of contiguity of the two.

Yet at the same time, authors’ tendency to construe their own works as a link in a larger, continuous tradition did not preclude their simultaneous awareness of the Middle Ages as a distinct historical period. This is especially clear in the case of Perrault, who both presented medieval technological progress as part of his own modernity, and foregrounded the alterity of the medieval in his use of the *topos* of medieval “barbarism”.

And thus what may appear to us moderns as a Janus-faced medievalism, appealing at the same time to a sense of distance and of contiguity, was in fact a very common stance during the 1680s through 1740s. Such heterochronicity – or, as Alexander Nagel puts it with reference to the Renaissance, “anachrony” – was a defining characteristic of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century medievalisms, as distinct from their later, romantic varieties. This was because conceptions of time were also changing, moving from models based on notions of synchronicity and cyclic return to conceptions based on linearity and diachronic development. Within the former conception, there was nothing odd about the medieval being synchronous with the early modern, or with medievals conversing with their seventeenth- or eighteenth-century counterparts (as they actually did in the dialogues of the dead).

Similarly dealing with early modern cultural practices that do not fit easily into post-romantic definitions of medievalism, Nils Holger Petersen has argued that, when referring to early-modern artefacts, “medievalism should not be restricted to features in which a historical consciousness is explicitly at work” because, for authors like Perrault, as we have seen, the Middle Ages had never really ended. And Antoine Compagnon reminds us, writing about the workings of literary history in particular, that the endurance through time of specific cultural forms and texts means that “every present is made up of a coincidence of moments belonging to differential chronologies.” It is a heightened awareness of this fact that gave the medievalism of the 1680s through 1740s its characteristic aspect. Because the medieval was conceived as a space

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75 Famously coined by Paul Zumthor, the term *mouvance* refers to the performative, non-fixed aspect of medieval texts, as I further discuss in chapter 4.

76 Similarly, in the same years ecclesiastic historians like Mabillon often regarded their medieval predecessors as “contemporaries in the spirit.” Bruun, “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages.”

77 Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*.

78 Petersen, “Medievalism and Medieval Reception: A Terminological Question”, 42.

both in history and outside of it, it introduced a jarring note, but one full of creative potential, into the literary culture of the early French Enlightenment, challenging us today to write its history anew.
If the medieval did not function in the early eighteenth century, as it does in our own time, as a historical or chronological category, then how exactly did it work? I argued in the previous chapter that in actual linguistic usage, the term moyen âge often served as a literary or linguistic term, as reflected also in the common use of the accompanying adjective barbare to describe the period. In this chapter, elaborating on this notion of the medieval as a non-historical concept, I argue that during the early eighteenth century, the medieval came to embody essentially a moral category or an epistemological anchoring-point for the authors whose works it inspired. It did this, to an important extent, by unsettling one of modernity’s central metaphors: that of medieval darkness contrasted to modern-day light, equated finally with the Enlightenment itself.

The relation between the medieval and the modernity of the late seventeenth century was always a vexed one. Presenting itself most often as a conscious break with the medieval, modernity in fact drew on many medieval traditions in its own self-definition – as Perrault came to recognize in the last volume of his Parallèle. Modernity’s self-definition was, right from the beginning, founded on the opposing images of historical light and darkness, equated respectively with the present-day age and the medieval past. French Renaissance literature borrowed the metaphor of modern light contrasted to a previous “dark age” (époque ténébreuse), as in Gargantua’s famous letter, from Italian humanism, which had in turn borrowed it from medieval theology. Reversing the Biblical and Augustinian metaphor pitting Christian light against pagan darkness, Italian historians polemically presented pagan Antiquity instead as a source of light, and the Middle Ages as a period of darkness and ignorance. Petrarch, considered in many modern accounts as the “father of Humanism”, was also “the father of

1 Although in eighteenth-century accounts, as I will show later, he was just as frequently considered a medieval author.
the concept or attitude which regards the Middle Ages as the ‘Dark Ages’. At the same time, however, the humanist metaphor of light was complicated by enduring cultural practices and reuses of the medieval. While the most strident versions of humanism did, in theory, posit a clear opposition to the medieval, Renaissance culture as a whole still coexisted with some forms of medievalism. This was exemplified, in Italy, by the pseudo-chivalric epics of Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, which mixed classical elements with narrative models drawn from medieval romance. In France, Honoré d’Urfé’s utopian romance L’Astrée proposed a fusion of Golden Age classicism with patriotic French medievalism. In addition, French humanist historians such as Pasquier and Fauchet adopted a more nuanced approach than their Italian counterparts. Since the Middle Ages were to French humanists what Latin antiquity was to the Italians, i.e. the source of their national past, French historians did not altogether reject its heritage, despite their frequent adoption, in their explicit legitimizing discourse, of the same metaphor of modern light versus medieval darkness.

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, the metaphor of modern light acquired new meanings. As the Enlightenment unfolded, the terms lumière, les Lumières versus darkness (ténèbres) were increasingly and insistently mobilized in the ongoing debate on what human society and culture should be like. So widely accepted did these terms become that critics of Enlightenment reform adopted the light–dark metaphor as naturally as did the small group of progressive thinkers – the French philosophes – most commonly identified with the movement. While the metaphor of light deployed by Enlightenment thinkers became a banality – and indeed, since then it has become so ingrained in our everyday language that it has lost much of its meaning – its very banality invites us to take it seriously. Cognitive linguists and philosophers have argued that metaphors are not “just words”, but fundamentally structure thinking and are central to the performance of culture. Because of this, they have a poetic and persuasive power that made them particularly effective tools in the philosophical and political debates that marked the Enlightenment. Yet simultaneously, they carried with them a long tradition of meanings and valuations that could not simply be replaced by others, but had to be renegotiated. Within this eighteenth-century process of renegotiation of meaning, the medieval began to acquire some of the modern connotations that would eventually emerge, fully concretized, with the romantic revolution.

In its most common eighteenth-century use, the metaphor of light was assigned primarily a theological meaning, foregrounding perceived oppositions between light as reason and light as revelation. While this meaning was not always made explicit, the foremost participants in Enlightenment debate – including authors like Voltaire and Rousseau, whose knowledge of the Bible was a deep one, and was strengthened by daily readings – were well aware of the implications of their choice of terminology. Whereas Christian tradition had foregrounded divine light descending on the believer, revealing hidden truths, eighteenth-century thinkers (incidentally following Thomas

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2 Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception”, 242.
3 Delon, “Les Lumières”.
4 Black, Models and Metaphors; Kövecses, Metaphor in Culture; Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By.
Aquinas in this) spoke of a “natural light” of reason providing access to knowledge. This is the sense in which the term had been used by Descartes, who had introduced in his Meditations the image of lumen naturale as a source of cognitive certainty, as opposed to divine light, thereby giving its metaphorical identity to the intellectual revolution his philosophy helped bring about. During the eighteenth century, some thinkers did make attempts to reconcile reason and revelation. More generally, however, the image of light was used to create a polemic contrast with various forms of darkness to be eradicated or transformed by the progress of history: the (Christian) medieval, the female, the Dark Continent, the non-European. Finally, returning to the religious debates originally surrounding the concept, and linking up with the older tradition of negative theology, light (glitter, false light) could also be perceived as a negative quality, and blindness as a form of superior sight. Thus in several works, ranging from Diderot's Essai sur les aveugles to some of Rousseau's texts, blindness became a hypothetical site from which to rethink the possibility of human knowing.

But together with this theological meaning, the metaphor of light also bore more specific, historical connotations, which allowed the Enlightenment to define itself specifically in relation to the medieval. As an Age of Light, and the culmination of a long process of historical progress, the eighteenth century of the philosophes perceived itself to be the absolute opposite of the Dark Ages. Drawing on the theological connotations of the light–darkness opposition, the Encyclopedists saw the medieval institutionalization of religion, in particular, as a source of darkness. Summing up their negative assessment, Voltaire famously condemned the Middle Ages as a period of “ignorant superstition”, during which “all was but confusion, tyranny, barbarism and poverty”. Thus despite the tentative openings towards the medieval past that Perrault had proposed in the last volume of his Parallèle, the foundational rhetorics of the Enlightenment movement that ensued were based instead on a radical rejection of this past. Taking from the Ancients their basic allegiance to classical models – but without the added nuance introduced by the historist reassessment of Homer – the philosophes followed the cue of the Italian humanists in opposing the Middle Ages to the pagan culture of classical Antiquity, on which they modelled their own ideals. Antiquity, perceived in the tradition of French classicism as the purveyor of timeless, supposedly universal values rather than divisive particularisms, became a powerful ally in the ideological battle for a new society. John Pocock thus rightly reminds us, writing about Edward Gibbon's largely French education during the first half of the century, that “modernity was engrossed in the study of antiquity, and could not live without reinforcing Europe's obsession with its classical past. The enemy was not the primitive but the medieval”. Lionel Gossman for his part, in his seminal Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment, demonstrated that despite his life-long study
of medieval texts, even the eighteenth-century founder of medieval studies, Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, remained fundamentally unable to value these texts on their own merits. In other words, the relation between the medieval artefacts that were occasionally read and studied during the eighteenth century on one hand, and Enlightenment discourse on the other, is most often one of stark contrast. The great intellectuals of the period, who, like Gibbon and Sainte-Palaye, were by their very education steeped in the classical tradition, did not show any noticeable sympathy for the medieval. Instead, they sought to construct a new Dark Ages – a new historical narrative or cultural memory of the medieval — against which they could offset the achievements of their own century.

In the following pages, I argue that when the Enlightenment rhetorics of light and dark is reframed in its original eighteenth-century context, the medieval emerges as one of the Enlightenment's defining categories, ultimately revealing the tensions inherent in its own discourse. To make this argument, rather than attempting to produce an impossibly exhaustive account, I focus mainly on two texts composed at the beginning and at the end of the process of Enlightenment appropriations of the light–dark metaphor. The first of these texts, Jean Chapelain's dialogue *La lecture des vieux romans*, composed around 1647, was written in the decade during which the intellectual transformations culminating in the Enlightenment started, the 1640s. René Descartes's *Meditationes*, in which he had first introduced the concept of *lumen naturale*, date from 1641; his earlier *Discours de la méthode*, in which he had already developed many of the ideas underlying the concept, from 1637. The second text I examine, Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, was published over a century later, in 1750, a date by which Jonathan Israel has argued, as we noted, that “all major intellectual innovations and accomplishments of the European Enlightenment were well advanced if not largely complete”.

By this time, the use of the term *Lumières* to refer to the present historical age was so widespread that it had virtually become a cliché. Although these two texts were produced in entirely different intellectual and literary climates, they are linked by their use of a rhetorics of light and dark that ultimately challenges the notion of Enlightenment. Equally importantly, they share a distinctly modern, post-humanist view of history. Italian humanism replaced the biblically-inspired notion of four world monarchies with a division of history into three new periods – ancient, medieval and modern times. Enlightenment thought now added to the schema a fourth age: that of French cultural ascendancy, which entailed a re-alignment of previous definitions of ancient and modern.

The Enlightenment's most stereotypical view of the Middle Ages was summarized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the opening paragraphs of his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. Seeking to answer the question whether the progress of the arts had contributed to the moral improvement of humankind, Rousseau initially assumed the role of devil's advocate, reiterating the traditional opposition between the barbaric past and the enlightened present:

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It is a great and fine sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him. … All of these marvels have been revived in recent generations. Europe had sunk back into the barbarism of the first ages. The peoples of that part of the world that is today so enlightened lived, a few centuries ago, in a condition worse than ignorance. … A revolution was needed to bring men back to common sense … The fall of the throne of Constantine brought into Italy the debris of ancient Greece. France in turn was enriched by these precious spoils. Soon the sciences followed letters; the art of writing was joined by the art of thinking.¹⁰

This was the cliché image of the Middle Ages, which underlay the most progressivist strands of Enlightenment discourse. The Middle Ages were described, negatively, as an age of “barbarism” (barbarie), i.e. lacking “the art of writing”, and there was a clear opposition between the light (lumières) of the present and the darkness (ténèbres) of the past. It was only through reason (raison), the Cartesian inner light implicitly contrasted to divine illumination, that humankind had extricated itself from its original state during “the first ages”. The passage was marked by an easy mixing of conjectural history with real history. Rousseau described the primordial state of humankind as being close to nature, a state that often functioned for him as a hypothetical construct, yet he followed this passage of conjectural history with straightforward references to real historical events, including the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453. Finally, by its division of human history into four ages – classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance, and French ascendancy – the Discours sur les sciences referred to the humanist tripartite division of history, but with the Enlightenment now functioning as the fourth element, i.e. the culmination of the artistic and scientific aspirations of previous generations. Variations on this schema could be found in the writings of many other Enlightenment thinkers, most famously in Voltaire’s, which read like a systematic condemnation of everything associated with the medieval past. In his Siècle de Louis XIV, humanity was described as having known four ages of light. These were the age of Alexander and Pericles, the age of Caesar and Augustus, the Italian Renaissance, and the age of Louis XIV, whose legacy Voltaire sought to preserve for the Enlightenment. Medieval darkness was, by implication, the foil against which present progress was to be viewed.

Jean Chapelain’s dialogue La lecture des vieux romans, written a century before Rousseau’s text, drew on a similar rhetorics of light and dark. Nonetheless, at first sight, the two texts may appear to convey diametrically opposed viewpoints. While

¹⁰ “C’est un grand et beau spectacle de voir l’homme sortir en quelque maniere du néant par ses propres efforts; dissiper, par les lumieres de sa raison les ténèbres dans lesquelles la nature l’avoir enveloppé … Toutes ces merveilles se sont renouvelles depuis peu de Générations. L’Europe étoit retombée dans la Barbarie des premiers âges. Les Peuples de cette Partie du Monde aujourd’hui si éclairée vivoient, il y a quelques siècles, dans un état pire que l’ignorance … Il falloit une revolution pour ramener les hommes au sens commun … La chute du Trône de Constantine porta dans l’Italie les débris de l’ancienne Grece. La France s’enrichit à son tour de ces précieuses dépouilles. Bientôt les sciences suivirent les Lettres; à l’Art d’écrire se joignit l’Art de penser.” Rousseau, Discours sur les sciences, 6.
Rousseau ostensibly condemned the medieval, Chapelain’s dialogue on the contrary argued for a rehabilitation of medieval romans, on moral rather than stylistic grounds. This view found little support in the decades following the dialogue’s composition. French classicism, which took hold of the literary field from the 1650s to the 1680s, resolutely turned its back on medieval precedents in favour of the supposedly universal values inspired by the texts and authors of classical Antiquity. It was only towards the end of the century, with the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, that the first signs became visible of renewed interest in the medieval, and it was only some time later, in 1728, that Chapelain’s dialogue, left in manuscript form upon his death, was finally published in the periodical Continuations des Mémoires de Littérature et d’Histoire. This was, therefore, a text that did not sit easily with the Zeitgeist of the period in which it was composed, all the more when one bears in mind that Chapelain himself was to become one of the major ideologues of the same classicism that was so hostile to medieval literature.

While this dialogue seems to bear little relation to what was immediately to follow it, it appears less unusual when viewed in relation to what preceded it. Chapelain was not only one of the future architects of classicist doctrine, but also one of the last representatives of the humanist, Gallican tradition that had included the likes of Fauchet and Pasquier. As such, Chapelain was instrumental in adapting Italian and French humanist thought to a new political context in the heart of the French absolutist state, building on the patriotic impulse already present in the works of the French medievalist historiographers. La lecture des vieux romans can thus be viewed simultaneously as a new departure – for, as I will demonstrate, it anticipated developments during the early Enlightenment – and as the final link in a genealogy leading from medieval romans themselves, through their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century prose adaptations and Italian imitations, to the transformation of the roman genre during the seventeenth century. Chapelain’s dialogue participated both in the tradition of specifically French medievalist historiography, and in an older humanist discourse that made a place for at least some forms of medievalism. Throughout his career, Chapelain remained faithful especially to the Italianate medievalist tradition. From his first formulation of the theory of classicist verisimilitude (vraisemblance) in 1623, in a preface to Giambattista Marino’s epic poem Adonis, to his final demise as a figure of literary authority in 1656, with the publication of La Pucelle, the medievalist epic Perrault held up as a literary model in his Parallèle, Chapelain drew on Italian, medievalist sources to nourish his poetical vision. Throughout his life, his greatest literary models remained Ludovico Ariosto’s and Torquato Tasso’s chivalric classics Orlando Furioso and Gerusalemme Liberata, with their idealized picture of a past, medieval Golden Age. A polemic in 1639 that pitted Chapelain against other members of the salon of the marquise de Rambouillet, defending Ariosto’s merits against his detractors, was thus but one sign of a much deeper and long-lasting affinity.

Nationalism and the Ancient-Modern Opposition

In his dialogue, the illustrious Academician Chapelain described how he was discovered by two of his learned colleagues – “caught in the act” might be the more appropriate term – reading the medieval romance *Lancelot* (known today as the *Lancelot propre*). Although he admitted, in a concession to classicist taste, that this work may have been “wretched and puny” (chétif et maigre), his library catalogue reveals that he possessed two sixteenth-century editions of it. The main text of *La lecture* consists of a transcription of the dialogue that followed, in which Chapelain offered a spirited defence of his choice of reading matter and tried to persuade his colleagues, the philologist-grammarian Gilles Ménage and the poet Jean-François Sarasin, of its interest. A first set of arguments hinged on the question of national identity, and was framed within the context of the simmering opposition between Ancients and Moderns. Chapelain coined an intriguing expression that foregrounded three crucial concepts: darkness, antiquity, and modernity:

*Lancelot* … was composed in the dark recesses of our modern Antiquity and with no other reading than the book of the world.\(^3\)

Chapelain was the first of many authors to bring together the two contradictory concepts of antiquity (*antiquité*) and modernity (*moderne*).\(^4\) By doing so, he was not only making use of rhetorical paradox. He was, more importantly, implying that antiquity was a broad category, encompassing both the works of the classical and of the medieval worlds. This was close to earlier, Renaissance divisions of history which, according to Nagel and Wood, “catalogued [the medieval] in the Census of Antique Works of Art known to the Renaissance, alongside Hellenistic sarcophagi and statuary.” As they go on to note, these older categories “introduce a stranger antiquarianism, one that does not so much dispel as thrive on temporal confusion” .\(^5\)

But at the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, Chapelain’s reference to the “book of the world” (*livre du monde*) also firmly foregrounded modernity, in a reference to the famous contrast Descartes had established some years earlier, at the outset of his *Discours de la méthode*, between book-learning, i.e. the realm of revealed knowledge, and true knowledge, mediated by human reason and personal observation of the natural world (“the great book of the world”):

As soon as my age permitted me to escape the supervision of my teachers, I completely abandoned the study of letters. And resolving to look for no other science

\(^3\) Chapelain, *La lecture*, 200.

\(^4\) “Lancelot … a été composé dans les ténèbres de notre Antiquité moderne et sans autre lecture que celle du livre du monde.” Chapelain, *La lecture*, 177.

Thus, the expression “the dark recesses of our modern Antiquity” (les ténèbres de notre Antiquité moderne) pithily summarized the central argument of Chapelain’s dialogue. The medievals, rather than being archaic and unworthy of serious consideration, were in fact thoroughly modern by their attention to the “book of the world”. This claim of medieval modernity has, in fact, long been one of the legitimizing gestures of medievalist scholarship, and can be found in our own day in authors ranging from Hans Robert Jauss to Charles Méla and Umberto Eco. In Chapelain’s dialogue, the expression “modern Antiquity” was therefore purposefully enigmatic, bringing together two seemingly contradictory elements – Antiquity and modernity – and resting on an evocative metaphor, the image of darkness (les ténèbres). This raises several questions. For what was, exactly, Antiquity, if it could not be defined by its distance from the present? If modern Antiquity was defined by its dark recesses, then what were the areas of light to which it was implicitly contrasted? How could modernity and Antiquity coincide, in a strictly historical sense? And, of course, what exactly, besides its attention to the book of the world, was so modern about Chapelain’s Antiquity?

By the terms in which the argument was couched, it was apparent that La lecture sought to provoke. At the time of its writing, Parisian literary society was already dividing into the two camps that would later fight out the final phase of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns inaugurated in 1687 by Charles Perrault’s Siècle de Louis le Grand. In the decade in which Chapelain penned his dialogue, the 1640s, the Moderns were closely associated with Cardinal de Richelieu’s construction of an absolutist state, and were represented by the abbé de Boisrobert (Discours contre les Anciens, 1637) and Nicolas de Rampalle (L’erreur combattue, 1641), while the Ancients were defended by François de Grenaille (La mode ou le caractère du temps, 1642) and other ecclesiastics. Within this debate about the respective merits of Ancients and Moderns, Chapelain assumed an ambiguous position. Despite his later identification with the Modern party, in his construction of classicist doctrine he drew on a deep appreciation of the classical tradition. In the opening paragraphs of La lecture, Ménage, himself a known partisan of the Ancients, referred to Chapelain’s intermediary position:

Monsieur Ménage, who is completely immersed in the ancient Greeks and Latins and whose erudition in the matter barely allows him to admit there may be anything praiseworthy in what the Moderns do, finding me looking into this book that even the Moderns name only with disdain, said to me with his usual gaiety, poking fun at me: “What, is that the Virgil you have taken as your example, and

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16 “Sitôt que l’âge me permit de sortir de la sujétion de mes précepteurs, je quittai entièrement l’étude des lettres. Et me résolvant de ne chercher plus d’autre science que celle qui se pouvait trouver en moi-même, ou bien dans le grand livre du monde, j’employai le reste de ma jeunesse à voyager … “ Descartes, Discours de la méthode, 76–7.

17 Jauss, “The Alterity and Modernity”; Cazelles and Méla, Modernité du Moyen Age; Eco, “Living in the New Middle Ages”.
is Lancelot the hero on which you model the Count of Dunois [in La Pucelle]? I must admit I would not have expected that of a man to whom Antiquity is not unknown, and whom we have heard speak reasonably of its philosophers, its poets and its orators.”

The dialogue was framed from the beginning as a debate that was to be read within the context of the opposition between Ancients and Moderns. At the same time, however, it marked a turning point in the history of the Quarrel because of the attention it gave to national literary traditions. The first sentence of La lecture referred to “our old romans” (nos vieux romans), with the possessive pronoun hinting at the possibility of a patriotic interpretation of the dialogue. This suggested a link with the Gallican tradition of medieval historiography exemplified by Fauchet and Pasquier – two authors Chapelain indeed explicitly referenced. Following up the argument proposed by Ménage’s ironic reply, Chapelain – again speaking through Ménage – posited the comparability of the two traditions, classical antiquity on one hand and medieval French tradition on the other:

Just as the poems of Homer were the myths of the Greeks and Romans, so our old romans are also the myths of the French and the English.

Ménage / Chapelain’s choice of subject for the comparison was deliberate, for Homer was in the process of becoming the ultimate reference point for any discussion of the standards to be followed by acceptable literature. Chapelain’s revaluation of medieval literature undermined classicism from within, and equally importantly, it argued for the possibility of a national literary historiography, as proposed earlier by the humanist historiographers. Just as modern Italians looked back to Roman Antiquity as the source of their literature, so should modern Frenchmen and Frenchwomen look back to medieval romans as the source of their own traditions. This was why Chapelain’s first argument in favour of medieval fiction was a linguistic one. Addressing the grammarian Ménage, he argued that reading Lancelot was worthwhile at the very least because it provided scholars like himself with the material to reconstruct “the language and style of our ancestors.” Of course, as Ménage and Chapelain, a founding member of the French Academy, well knew, this was an endeavour compatible with Richelieu’s nationalistic project of documenting and standardizing the French language. In tacit acknowledgement of this, Chapelain invoked one of the encomiastic topoi of the

18 “M. Ménage qui est tout dans les anciens Grecs et Latins et l’érudition duquel ne lui permet qu’à peine d’avouer qu’il y ait rien de loulable en quoi que fassent les Modernes, me trouvant sur ce livre que les Modernes mêmes ne nomment qu’avec mépris, me dit suivant sa gaîté accoutumée, en se moquant de moi: ‘Quoi, c’est donc là le Virgile que vous avez pris pour exemple, et Lancelot est le héros sur lequel vous formez le comte de Dunois? Je vous avoue que je n’eusse pas attendu cela d’un homme à qui l’Antiquité n’est pas inconnue, et que nous avons ouï parler raisonnablement de ses philosophes, de ses poètes et de ses orateurs.’” Chapelain, La lecture, 164–5.

19 “Comme les poésies d’Homère étaient les fables des Grecs et des Romains, nos vieux romans sont aussi les fables des Français et des Anglais.” Chapelain, La lecture, 172.

20 “Le langage et le style de nos ancêtres”. Chapelain, La lecture, 167.
Modern discourse, adopted later by Perrault in the *Parallèle*, that of the present perfection of the French language:

To sum everything up in a word, you will observe, by comparing it to the old style, the new one, what changes our language has suffered, how little by little it has lost its original rusticity and what paths it has travelled to arrive at the refinement and majesty, the politeness and abundance in which we presently see it.21

What remained unsaid in this passage was the extent to which this linguistic perfection, thanks in part to Chapelain’s own activities in the French Academy, would come to be perceived as the result not only of a natural development, but also of state intervention. In using a linguistic argument in defence of medieval literature, Chapelain’s *Lecture* played into the hands of those Moderns who, in the later phase of the Quarrel, framed their argument in narrowly nationalistic and royalist terms. One of Chapelain’s originalities as a thinker, despite his own patriotic stance, was indeed his openness to non-French influences, yet it was precisely by turning their back on Italian precedents that the combatants in the later Quarrel often defined themselves. In the eyes of Perrault and his followers, it was French culture that disproved the thesis of the superiority of the Ancients. Whereas Chapelain still looked to the Italians Tasso and Ariosto as literary models, Perrault (interestingly seconded in his rejection of Tasso by his Ancient opponent, Nicolas Boileau) bypassed their epics when constructing his new literary canon, preferring to them instead Chapelain’s own French *Pucelle*. The *Lecture*, in contrast, betrayed its debt to humanism by its refusal to choose between one or the other camp. In this, it was closer to the positions taken by Chapelain’s Italian predecessors – one thinks of Alessandro Tassoni, whose *Ingegni antichi e moderni* (1621) likewise occupied a middle ground – than to the dogmatic positions later taken by the combatants in the French Quarrel. This nuance was lost in the seventeenth-century reception of his dialogue. In his misreading of Chapelain, whose *Pucelle* Perrault invoked in his argument for the Moderns, what remained was only the glory of the French state, “this immense splendour / With which we see our century and France blaze”,22 now explicitly identified with Louis XIV’s solar reign. In this new view – which was taken up by Voltaire and was crucial to the Enlightened age’s view of itself – the present perfection of the French language was further proof, among a host of other arguments, of history having entered a fourth phase, with France supplanting Italy as the standard-bearer of civilization, succeeding Italy as the heir of classical Antiquity.

**From *Vraisemblance* to an Anthropology of the Medieval**

In the course of the eighteenth century, interest in the medieval acquired a more

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21 "Pour tout dire en un mot, vous y observerez, par la comparaison de ce vieux style, le nouveau, quels changements a souffert notre langage, comment il a dépouillé peu à peu sa rusticité première et par quels chemins il a passé pour venir à la douceur et à la majesté, à la politesse et à l’abondance où nous le voyons maintenant." Chapelain, *La lecture*, 169.

anthropological focus that was also anticipated by Chapelain and his humanist precur-
sors. In his Lecture, Chapelain followed his linguistic argument in favour of medieval
romance with a second argument, based on the classicist notion of verisimilitude
(*vraisemblance*). Like the sixteenth-century historiographers in whose traces he fol-
lowed, including Pasquier and Fauchet, and also his own contemporary, Charles du
Cange, he argued that medieval texts could be used as a source of historical knowledge,
not of actual fact, but of the customs or *mœurs* of a people. Rather than describing real
historical events, medieval romance painted a generally realistic picture of life as it had
taken place during the past:

*[Lancelot]* is a faithful rendition, if not of what passed between the kings and
knights of those times, at least of what people were persuaded could come to
pass, or the vestiges of similar things that used to be practised in previous cen-
turies. I think I can assure you even more strongly that it is a naive and, in a
manner of speaking, a certain and exact history of the customs that reigned in
the courts of those days.23

The wording of the passage contained a reference to Aristotle’s famous injunc-
tion that “the poet’s function is not to report things that have happened, but rather
to tell of such things as might happen”.24 This opposition was linked in contemporary
poetical debates to the notions of truth or *vérité* (“what passed”) and verisimilitude
or *vraisemblance* (“what could come to pass”), the latter considered superior to the
former. Chapelain rehabilitated medieval fiction by arguing that it fully met the clas-
sicist requirement of poetic *vraisemblance*, at least in its most narrow social sense, i.e.
that which was perceived to be probable or realistic within a particular socio-histori-
cal setting.25 Having previously argued, in his *Sentiments sur le Cid* (1638), against the
uncritical use of history because it could produce situations that were not morally
acceptable, Chapelain now postulated that because medieval fiction was verisimilar
(*vraisemblable*), it could be used as a reliable source by historians.

La lecture deliberately stretched the notion of poetic *vraisemblance*. Chapelain was
ambiguous in his use of the term, which besides moral or social meanings could also
carry philosophical ones. While the social acceptance of *vraisemblance* could, indeed,
lead to an instrumental view of poetry, the philosophical acceptance, i.e. *vraisemblance*
as the uncovering of profounder truths, led, according to Aron Kibédi Varga, “to the
Romantics and to all those for whom poetry is a way of knowing”.26 It is significant,
therefore, that Chapelain gave a positive connotation to the notion of naïveté – the
opposite of social sophistication – as a guarantee of the text’s truth value (“an exact

23 “[Lancelot] est une relation fidèle, sinon de ce qui arrivait entre les rois et les chevaliers de ce temps-
là, au moins de ce qu’on était persuadé qui pouvait arriver, soit par les vestiges de semblables choses qui
avaient accoutumé de se pratiquer aux siècles précédents. Je crois vous pouvoir assurer encore plus forte-
ment que c’est une représentation naïve et, s’il faut ainsi dire, une histoire certaine et exacte des mœurs qui


25 Cavaillé, “Galanterie et histoire de ‘l’antiquité moderne’.”

history). More surprisingly, in a view that, according to Carlo Ginzburg, may well have anticipated Rousseau and the Romantics,27 products of the imagination (songes and rêveries) were described as potentially closer to the truth than mere, dry facts. Chapelain summarized his view in the conclusion to this passage, when he opposed annals and chronicles, “which tell us only of the birth and death of princes, with the accidents that marked their reigns” to medieval fiction, which “familiarizes us with them and shows us the depth of their soul”.28 Sounding the depths of the human soul would, indeed, seem to be an altogether different undertaking from producing fiction that was socially acceptable to its age.

Chapelain’s idea that fiction could be used as a historical source quickly became a topos in other texts that called for a revaluation of medieval literature or, at the very least, for their critical study. In scholarly circles it was taken up by the likes of Antoine Galland and, especially, by the founder of modern medievalist studies in France, Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye. By mid-century the truth value of romans had become such a commonplace that Helvétius was only summing up accepted wisdom when he wrote in De l'esprit:

Old romans [are] still agreeable to some philosophers, who regard them as the true history of the morals of a people considered in a certain century and under a certain form of government.29

The historicity that Chapelain and his successors described was not that of political history but, rather, what we know today as social history or even what the French describe, pace Ginzburg, as histoire des mentalités.30 The polysemic term mœurs could be translated both as “customs” or, when used to describe a general ethos, as “morals”. According to Chapelain, the Lancelot could be read as a history of the mœurs of the thirteenth century, while Helvétius claimed that medieval chivalric fiction was “the true history of the morals of a people”. This suggested a shift of emphasis whereby interest in political history – the succession of kings and queens and of conflict between states – made way for an interest in social history, or even social science. It coincided with the rise of a new genre of history practiced by the eighteenth-century philosophes, termed “philosophical” history. This new history sought to “to depict for posterity, not the actions of a single man, but the spirit of men”, as Voltaire wrote in his Le siècle de Louis XIV.31 In this optic, literary history was regarded as a vital component of any history, and could be invoked to describe or explain social institutions of old.

28 “Lesquelles ne nous apprennent que la naissance et la mort des princes, avec les accidents qui y ont signalé leurs règnes” and “nous familiarise avec eux et nous montre le fond de leur âme”. Chapelain, La lecture, 181.
30 Ginzburg, “Fiction as Historical Evidence”, 382.
31 “Peindre à la postérité, non les actions d’un seul homme, mais l'esprit des hommes”. Voltaire, Le Siècle de Louis XIV, 616.
Chapelain's intuition of the historical value of medieval fiction was followed up in the 1660s by his colleagues Sarasin and Pierre-Daniel Huet, who both wrote about the relations between French medieval romance, “the politeness of our gallantry (galanterie)”, and “the great liberty in which men live with women in France”32. This view announced Montesquieu’s discussion of chivalry in Book 28 of his *Esprit des lois*:

Our relations with women are founded on the contentment attached to the pleasure of the senses, on the charm of loving and being loved, and the desire to please them … This general desire to please produces gallantry, which is not at all love, but delicacy, lightness, the perpetual evasions of love …

Our chivalric romances flattered this desire to please, and gave to a part of Europe that spirit of gallantry that one can say was little known to the ancients.33

Rather than merely reflecting the customs or ethos of an age, medieval fiction was now said to help create and strengthen this ethos. The national character of the French, here described in relation to women’s role in the public sphere – a central question in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns34 – could be defined by a “spirit of gallantry” (esprit de galanterie) that went back to a medieval context. Montesquieu was attracted to the Middle Ages because he felt this period held important clues about the form of government most uniquely suited to the French temperament. This was a radicalization of Chapelain’s position for, while Chapelain did apply the term galanterie both to medieval and seventeenth-century practices, he made important distinctions between them.35 Montesquieu’s discussion of medieval galanterie was framed by another discussion, on the role of combats in feudal society, which hinted at the links he made elsewhere between monarchy and warfare. The chapters on chivalry were quoted at length in the article on chivalry (chevalerie) in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, surely in part because they reflected this new anthropological view of history, whereby culture and society were perceived to be inextricably linked. In accordance with the Enlightenment’s new valuation of literature, in which men (and sometimes women) of letters were seen as representatives of an intellectual avant-garde, medieval literature was seen as a point of light in a dark period in history, in short: as a civilizing force. This was not so far from Chapelain’s earlier claim, in which he provocatively questioned the common equivalence between the Middle Ages and barbarism:

I have read this book [Lancelot] and … I have seen in it the source of all the romans that, for four or five hundred years now, have been the noblest amuse-

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33 “Notre liaison avec les femmes est fondée sur le bonheur attaché au plaisir des sens, sur le charme d’aimer et d’être aimé, et encore sur le désir de leur plaire … Ce désir général de plaire produit la galanterie, qui n’est point l’amour, mais le délicat, mais le léger, mais le perpetuel mensonge de l’amour … Nos romans de chevalerie flattèrent ce désir de plaire, et donnèrent à une partie de l’Europe cet esprit de galanterie que l’on peut dire avoir été peu connu par les anciens.” Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des lois*, II, 954–5.
35 See Viala’s discussion of this point in *La France galante*, 374–5.
ment of the courts in Europe and have prevented barbarism from completely overtaking the world.36

Medieval romance, considered a shaping force in creating medieval society, was perceived as preventing rather than strengthening barbarism. Reversing conventional definitions, in which barbarie was held to be the proper, pejorative adjective to describe this historical period, Chapelain postulated that the negative view of the medieval was erroneous, for it failed to account for the fact that it was the Middle Ages that gave birth to that ultimate expression of modern refinement: the novel or roman.

The Middle Ages as a Counter-Model for Modern Society

If medieval literature could be presented as a civilizing force, that belied the linguistic denotation of the conventional adjective barbarie, it was because the customs (mœurs) it helped create had a fundamentally moral dimension. While the term mœurs could, in its weakest sense, denote merely the customs of a people or an age, the strong sense of the term – morals or morality – was never far from the surface in Chapelain’s text. His third and most far-reaching argument in favour of medieval fiction, following upon the linguistic and historical ones, was an ethical argument. While the literary style in which events and behaviour were described in medieval romans often really was barbaric, i.e. devoid of rhetorical elegance, the events and behaviour themselves were exemplary. Lancelot, for example, was to Chapelain the ideal lover:

There never was so perfect a gallant man as Lancelot: he doesn’t merely act the lover, he truly is so … the lady is perfectly adored, and … instead of words, he gives her only effects, in which the eyes and the ears encounter less satisfaction, but in which the spirit and the heart encounter it entirely.37

This was an example of perfect sincerity, in which language and rhetoric, perceived as a source of falsehood, did not intervene to corrupt pure sentiment. One of the most persistent commonplaces associated with the medieval past was indeed that of the courtly lover, whose love – perhaps for being unfulfilled – was purer than modern varieties. But Chapelain’s version, by stressing the fact that the medieval lover’s deeds spoke louder than his words, added an anti-rhetorical bias to the appreciation of the medieval that was, in fact, to become an important theme in Enlightenment medievalist discourse. The medieval was conceived not only as a site outside of history, but also to a certain extent, outside of language.

36 “J’ai lu ce livre [Lancelot] et … j’y ai vu la source de tous les romans qui, depuis quatre ou cinq siècles, ont fait le plus noble divertissement des cours de l’Europe et ont empêché que la barbarie n’occupât le monde entièrement.” Chapelain, La lecture, 166.
37 “Il n’y eut jamais de si parfait galant que Lancelot; il ne joue point l’amoureux, il l’est véritablement … la dame est parfaitement adorée et … au lieu de paroles, on ne lui donne que des effets, où les yeux et les oreilles rencontrent moins de satisfaction, mais où l’esprit et le cœur la rencontrent tout entière.” Chapelain, La lecture, 196–7.
The Medievalist Rhetorics of Enlightenment

The praise of courtly love and medieval lovers’ sincerity was frequently linked to another *topos*, that of the good old days (*bon vieux temps*). This *topos*, Johan Huizinga has argued, ultimately went back to the declining Middle Ages themselves, which looked “more towards an ideal past than towards an earthly future”. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century revival of chivalry, in particular, was an imagined return to antiquity that easily fused with the later, Renaissance idea of a return to a mythical Golden Age. In Italy, the medieval–humanist idea of the good old days surfaced among others in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, beginning with the first cantó’s nostalgic exclamation “Great was the goodness of the knights of old!” (I: 22). In France, the *bon vieux temps* was immortalized in Eustache Deschamps’s late medieval poetry and, most famously perhaps, in two rondeaux by Clément Marot and Victor Brodeau that dramatized the debate about whether the past had, indeed, been a period of greater moral rectitude than the present. Feeding as it did into the myth of the Golden Age, which had gained a new lease of life during the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, the commonplace of the *bon vieux temps* came to stand in the eighteenth century not for a sharply defined historical notion, but for a moral point of reference. As in the late Middle Ages, the memory of the *bon vieux temps* was closely linked to a perceived degeneration of morals, for example in Frederick the Great’s altogether typical lament that “The good old days (*le bon vieux temps*) are no more, the century is degenerating / Love used to be tender, discrete, sincere / Debauchery replaces the sentiments of the heart.” The medieval past, by the middle of the eighteenth century, came to be perceived by some authors as the counternpoint or reverse of the corrupt present, as a Golden Age that, by its mythical nature, placed itself outside of history. A similar valuation surfaced too in the defining genre of the dialogues of the dead, as in the dialogue Baculard d’Arnaud penned with Jean de Meung on the latter’s *Roman de la Rose* – “O good old days, will you no longer return / Bring us back that happy frankness / Which today passes for stupidity.” Significantly, by mid-century the reference to *franchise* or frankness also bore an obvious reference to one of the ethnic groups – the Franks – that were increasingly perceived to incarnate the aristocratic, medieval French past.

In the most radical version of this view, the Golden Age acquired a political dimension that drew on the humanist ideal of intellectual independence expressed during the Italian quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. This was, according to Marc Fumaroli,

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38 Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 38.
40 Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 3.
43 “Le bon vieux temps n’est plus, le siècle dégénère, / L’amour étoit jadis tendre, discret, sincère: / Il n’est plus à présent que léger et trompeur, / La débauche succède aux sentiments du cœur.” Frederick the Great, “Sur la modération dans l’amour”, 135.
“a geopolitical vision of the independent man of letters, and not the blinkered subject of a national or ecclesiastic state”. In the specifically aristocratic form that this ideal of independence assumed in the course of the ensuing centuries, the vision of the medieval Golden Age came to be linked often with the military, aristocratic values equated with the system of chivalry. Despite Chapelain’s participation in the institutions of absolutism, faint echoes of this ideal could still be heard in his comments on “the military virtue” (la vertu militaire) of medieval paladins and the “peoples of the North” (peuples du Nord) with whom he associated them: Goths, Teutons, Huns, Normans and Scyths, among others. Chapelain’s Lecture balanced uneasily, on this point, between admiration of the medieval and a royalist discourse that could not but condemn this “rest of the ancient brutality of the French (les Français)”. Eighty years before Henri de Bougainville’s anti-monarchist defence of feudalism, which again focused particular attention on the military worth of the “peoples of the North”, it was clear that praise of the medieval could be linked to the adoption of a critical stance in discussions of the present, absolutist state.

Medievalist discourse most clearly engaged with Enlightenment thought in its philosophical dimension. Discussions of the Middle Ages regularly invoked another commonplace in describing their significance for modern humankind, that of the infancy of mankind. In critiques of the medieval, this topos took on the form of the quasi-Hobbesian silvestres homines or uncivilized, brutal men evoked by Ménage in Chapelain’s Lecture. The more positive image of infancy could be understood either in mythical terms, as in the many literary texts that classicized the Middle Ages by presenting them as a quasi-utopian Golden Age, or in more anthropological or historical ones, as in Montesquieu’s use of the medieval past as a point of origin for modern political institutions. The question of origins – the origin of languages, the origin of inequality, and so forth – was one that particularly engaged the philosophes and Enlightenment thought in general. Infancy or the state of childhood, likewise, provided another great current in the Enlightenment, which was from the beginning preoccupied with pedagogy and forming future generations of citizens. Thus the notion of mankind’s medieval infancy had several dimensions, including historical and philosophical ones.

Two adjectives that recurred regularly in discussions of mankind’s medieval infancy were “naïve” and “innocent”. In Chapelain’s Lecture, both of these were imbued with strong positive connotations. A century later, a typical medievalist work such as Marguerite de Lubert’s translation cum abridgement of the chivalric romance Amadis de Gaule, while modernizing the original text, still drew attention to the fact that the translator had sought to preserve “these precious traits of simplicity, which depict the

45 Fumaroli, "Les abeilles et les araignées", 33.
46 Chapelain, La lecture, 194.
47 Chapelain, La lecture, 186–7.
48 Chapelain, La lecture, 188.
49 Chapelain, La lecture, 186.
customs of our first ages”

The author of the preface underlined the Gallic innocence of the world described:

We have therefore not permitted ourselves any change that could alter the substance of the work, and which would make the historian depart from his Gallic simplicity … We were for a long time undecided on certain acts of piety that precede, accompany, and follow the combats of the knights and their reception. However, although they may be somewhat comical, as they are true to custom, and serve to characterize the innocence of that age, we have considered it appropriate to preserve them.

Although the form of religious faith practised in the Middle Ages could at times appear comical to modern audiences, who had been corrupted by centuries of civilization, it was supposedly more sincere than eighteenth-century expressions of faith. This echoed Chapelain’s insistence, throughout his Lecture, on the religious sincerity demonstrated by the protagonists of medieval romance, rendering his Middle Ages also “modern” by definition, by the fact that they belonged to the Christian era rather than to pagan Antiquity.

As in the later, romantic idealization of the Middle Ages, religion played an important role in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century argument for the period’s rehabilitation. Like medieval love, which was perceived to be purer than modern love, medieval morality too was perceived to be purer than modern customs. From here to the hypothesis of medieval virtue was but one step, which Chapelain did not hesitate to make:

The centuries closer to our own, as they draw closer to the light, draw away from virtue … If nothing else, what touches me is their [medieval knights’] zeal in keeping their word, their maxim of always observing exactly what they have promised: a morality worthy of the admiration of the enlightened ages, and which, by its constant practice, leaves well behind it the fanfare of precepts and theory.

The language of this passage offered an ironic criticism of the prevailing metaphor of modern enlightenment as opposed to medieval darkness, for the “enlightened ages”

50 "Ces précieux traits de simplicité, qui peignent les mœurs de nos premiers âges." Lubert, Amadis des Gaules, x.

51 "On ne s’est donc permis aucun changement qui pût altérer le fond de l’ouvrage, & faire déroger l’Historien à sa simplicité Gauloise … On a été long-temps indécis sur certains Actes de piété qui précèdent, accompagnent, & suivent les combats des Chevaliers & leurs réceptions. Mais, quoiqu’ils soient un peu burlesques, comme ils sont dans la vérité des mœurs, & qu’ils servent à caractériser l’innocence de ces tems-là, on a jugé a propos de les conserver." Lubert, Amadis des Gaules, xiii-xvi.

52 Mortgat-Longuet, Clio au Parnasse, 247.

53 "Les siècles les plus voisins du nôtre, à mesure qu’ils se sont approchés de la lumière, se sont reculés de la vertu … Si rien m’y touche, c’est cette jalousie de leur [les chevaliers] parole, cette maxime d’observer toujours ponctuellement ce qu’ils ont promis: morale digne de l’admiration des âges illuminés, et qui, par sa constante pratique, laisse bien loin derrière soi la fanfare de la théorie des préceptes.” Chapelain, La lecture, 193.
(âges illuminés) were now opposed to virtue, empty modern theory to the richness of medieval praxis.

The Bon Vieux Temps Under Fire

But Chapelain’s vision of primeval medieval innocence did not remain uncontested. In the sixteenth-century rondeaux by Marot and Brodeau that had crystallized the concept of the bon vieux temps, Marot’s idealization of medieval “Amours” had already been countered by Brodeau’s contention that the past was, on the contrary, marked by its lack of refinement and gross morals. This debate was picked up again by a new generation of authors, starting in the 1680s. In 1684, Philippe Quinault and Jean-Baptiste Lully’s medievalist opera Amadis became the catalyst for a series of medievalist poems that further explored this theme. Addressing a ballad to the great mondain artistic patron, Charles de Sainte-Maure, duc de Montausier, the popular poetess Antoinette Deshoulières produced a ballad whose refrain lamented “On n’aime plus comme on aimoit jadis” (People no longer love as in olden days) rhyming with the envoi “Ramenez-nous le siècle d’Amadis” (Bring us back the age of the knight Amadis). This was the first of a whole series of verses exchanged between a number of society poets loosely associated with the Préciosité movement, and including, besides Deshoulières herself, the duc de Saint-Aignan, Étienne Pavillon, Losme de Montchesnay and Jean de La Fontaine. The poetic forms they used, most notably the ballad, were themselves nominally medieval, and had gained new favour among the cultivated public in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Sometimes too, to add some local colour to their compositions, these authors made use of a highly conventionalized “old language” (vieux langage), which was in reality nothing more than a pastiche of sixteenth-century French, the sixteenth century being, as in the historians’ writings, easily assimilated to the medieval.

But no sooner had the galant idealization of the medieval started to emerge as a full-blown literary phenomenon than other authors took up the more sceptical viewpoint expressed by Brodeau in his satirical response to Marot. Thus, at the end of his one-act comedy La naissance d’Amadis (1694), the popular dramatist Jean François Regnard brought to the stage a Gallic character (un Gaulois) singing:

Love at present is degenerating,
It is but finesse and mystery,
Will we not see in our age,
People love as they used to
In the good old days?

This song was of course a parody of the discursive and poetic commonplace of the bon vieux temps, because the action of the play consisted in transposing Quinault’s opera or

55 Edelman, Attitudes, 284–90.
56 “L’Amour, à présent dégenere, / Ce n’est que finesse & mistere, / Ne verrons-nous de nos ans, / S’aymer comme on souloit faire / Au bon vieux temps.” Regnard, La naissance d’Amadis, 224.
tragédie lyrique into the baser mode of burlesque comedy. But whereas Regnard’s criticism remained relatively superficial, others took the philosophical challenge posed by the medieval more seriously. Among the first to attempt to address the issues posed by Marot and Brodeau’s exchange, and Chapelain’s subsequent dialogue, was an influential partisan of the Ancients, Abbé Claude Fleury. As an historian of the Middle Ages, who had worked with the likes of Mabillon, the father of modern diplomatics, and as a close associate of Fénelon, Racine and Boileau, Fleury boasted both the support of the most visible authors of his day, and the scholarly credentials to give his view of the medieval a particular authority. Yet his attitude towards the medieval was curiously ambivalent. While on the one hand he combated the prejudices (préjugés) towards the medieval evinced by the fifteenth-century Italian humanists – he explicitly named Lorenzo Valla, Bartolomeo Sacchi, and Angelo Poliziano – on the other hand he often adopted the same rhetorical topos of light as they had. In his magnum opus, an Histoire ecclésiastique that covered fourteen centuries and appeared in twenty volumes between 1690 and 1720, Fleury offered a sometimes spirited response to Chapelain’s idealized view by distinguishing between two types of antiquité, medieval antiquity on one hand, and what he termed “good antiquity” (bonne antiquité), i.e. classical antiquity, on the other.

Drawing out the lessons of his Histoire in a series of accompanying Discours sur l’histoire ecclésiastique, he wrote that:

Ignorance is good for nothing, and I know not where this supposed simplicity is that preserves virtue. All I know is that in the darkest ages (les siècles les plus ténébreux) and among the most uncouth nations, the most abominable vices reigned.

Despite his intimate knowledge of medieval material, Fleury thus proposed a return to the negative connotations inherent in the conventional description of the medieval as “dark” (ténébreux), where Chapelain had instead sought to bring about its rehabilitation. This negative view was largely adopted by the philosophes and the Encyclopedists, who in general, opposed Chapelain’s view of medieval purity in the name of historical progress. Because it was so far removed in time from the present age of technological and scientific modernity, the medieval could not possibly be other than culturally and morally inferior to the present. Thus, before embarking on his own career as a writer of historical works, Voltaire mockingly commented on the commonplace of the good old days in the opening verses of his poem “Le Mondain” (1736):

He who wishes may long for the good old days (bon vieux temps),
And the Age of Gold, and the reign of Astrée,
And the happy days of Saturn and Rhea,
And the garden of our first parents;
As for me, I thank wise nature
Who, for my good, had me born in this age
That is so disparaged by our dour rebels:
This profane age was made for my habits.
I love luxury, and even softness,
All the pleasures, the arts of every sort,
Cleanliness, taste, ornaments:
Every gentleman has such sentiments. 60

As these critical verses demonstrated, the idea of the good old days implied an ideological standpoint that Voltaire refuted by suggesting that this bon vieux temps belonged only to the realm of fiction, and was as such comparable to the pastoral novels of Honoré d’Urfé or the myths of the ancient Romans. The Middle Ages functioned, in the view that Voltaire contested, as the other face of the present, or as an empty site on which, because of its absence from the classicist canons, authors could project their own fantasies – in other words, as an imaginary site that offered new creative and reflexive possibilities. Conscious of the subversive potential of this rising medievalism, Voltaire denigrated the partisans of the anti-progressivist view as rebels (frondeurs) or political agitators. In using the specific term frondeur, most commonly applied at the time to the combatants in the civil wars that had ushered in the reign of Louis XIV, the future historian and apologist of Louis’s reign was also making a political statement. Indeed, the medieval was threatening precisely because it could be used to question the values Voltaire himself held dear: the “pleasures”, the “arts” and the “taste” (goût) of the age of Enlightenment, which were one of the defining elements in its claim to cultural superiority. Voltaire’s critical reaction suggests that the medieval could in some cases function as a destabilizing utopian space, allowing authors to question the Enlightenment idea of progress and, ultimately, the notion of civilization itself.

The writings of the philosophes and the partisans of social reform have today come to dominate our own perceptions of the Enlightenment. However, throughout the eighteenth century, alternative traditions of engagement with the medieval, inspired by Chapelain and the viewpoint he represented, continued to find adherents, both among the disenfranchised aristocracy and among the members of the new “literary underground”. One of the latter group of authors was the polygraph Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy, perhaps one of the most influential if least acknowledged promoters of the medieval in early eighteenth-century France. A self-designated “frank Gallic man in my style as in my actions” (franc Gaulois dans mon style comme dans mes actions), Lenglet-Dufresnoy published eighteenth-century versions of several medieval texts,

60 “Regrettera qui veut le bon vieux temps, / Et l’âge d’or, et le règne d’Astrée, / Et les beaux jours de Saturne et de Rhée, / Et le jardin de nos premiers parents; / Moi je rends grâce à la nature sage / Qui, pour mon bien, m’a fait naître en cet âge / Tant décrié par nos tristes frondeurs: / Ce temps profane est tout fait pour mes mœurs. / J’aime le luxe, et même la mollesse, / Tous les plaisirs, les arts de toute espèce, / La propreté, le goût, les ornements: / Tout honnête homme a de tels sentiments.” Voltaire, “Le mondain”, 295.
including the *Roman de la Rose* in 1735, the *Mémoires* of Philippe de Commines in 1747 and, left in manuscript form, a modern edition of the poetry of François Villon. In addition, he produced several popular volumes on historiography that focused particular attention on the period he himself termed the *moyen âge*, but which he variously defined as extending from the fifth to either the eighth, twelfth or sixteenth century. In his *Méthode pour étudier l'histoire*, he gave a measured answer to the central question that engaged the Enlightenment, i.e. whether civilization had really progressed from its previous stages in history:

> Are we for all that better than the Frenchmen who lived under Saint Louis and under Philip the Fair? I do not think we should blame a nation, because we do not find in its people all the politeness of courtiers … The ancient Scyths were a barbarous nation, but equitable and fair. The Goths and Lombards were not polite, but their laws, which we admire still today, will make them always seem like people who loved justice and fairness.\(^1\)

Significantly, too, in Lenglet-Dufresnoy’s comments, a shift was discernible from a traditional dynastic history towards a more inclusive, national one. Like the humanist historiographer Pasquier, “who went straight to the Gauls and identified them as his ancestors, founding thereby a nationalism independent of the royal dynasties”,\(^2\) Lenglet-Dufresnoy foregrounded not only the French kings of old, but also the mostly Germanic ethnic groups – Scyths, Goths, and Lombards – who had populated medieval Europe. This implied that the nation – in the eighteenth-century sense of an ethnic people, rather than in the later nineteenth-century, political sense – could perhaps exist separately from its kings, its church, and Rome – a Gallican position that was one of the important cornerstones of much erudite medievalism, as I shall discuss in later chapters.

The question of historical progress, and the problem the medieval in particular represented within this debate, continued however to be phrased primarily in terms of the light–darkness dichotomy first posited by the humanist historiographers. This threatened to be its undoing for, reduced to banal, empty metaphors, the discussion was at risk of losing its deeper, philosophical import. Thus in 1737 the historian abbé Claude-Pierre Goujet proposed a kind of middle road in his treatise *De l'état des Sciences en France depuis la mort de Charlemagne jusqu'à celle du Roi Robert*:

> There is no age that does not have … its two faces: one luminous, the other darkened by shadow. It is but to give half a picture of the age to show only its deformities. And that is the stance that has been taken by all those who have set

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\(^1\) “Sommes-nous pour cela meilleurs que les Français qui vivaient sous Saint-Louis et sous Philippe le Bel? Je ne crois donc pas qu'on doive blâmer une nation, parce qu'on ne trouve pas dans le peuple toute la politesse des courtisans … Les anciens Scythes étoient une nation barbare, mais équitable et juste; les Goths et les Lombards n'étoient point polis, mais leurs loix que nous admirons encore aujourd'hui les feront toujours passer pour des peuples qui aimeront la justice et l'équité.” *Lenglet-Dufresnoy, Méthode pour étudier l'histoire*, 29.

out to describe the state of the sciences in France during the ninth and tenth centuries.\textsuperscript{53}

The medieval, in this more nuanced view, was indeed presented both as an area of light and of darkness, but this middle-of-the-road position was made possible only by smoothing over or leaving out the most striking element in Chapelain’s original plea in favour of the medieval, i.e. its astonishing claim to moral superiority. It would take an author of the rhetorical skill and stature of the philosophes to reinvigorate the debate.

**Enlightenment Contested**

In Rousseau’s *Discours sur les sciences*, the dialogue initiated by Chapelain and then variously pursued by the Enlightenment philosophes and lesser-known authors gained a spectacular new lease on life. This text, like Chapelain’s *Lecture* a century earlier, stood again at the crossroads of two competing visions of the medieval. Drawing simultaneously on humanist and classicist precedents, Rousseau’s *Discours sur les sciences* was the text in which he first revealed himself as an outspoken critic of Enlightenment, following his famous “illumination” on the road to Vincennes. More importantly, this text dramatized a return to the older, humanist views of the medieval that Chapelain had espoused a century earlier. Like Chapelain, Rousseau’s poetic affinities were with the Italian medievalist authors. Tasso’s chivalric epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*, as he himself admitted, was the work of literature that most moved him during his life, and it was the only one he read in the last months before his death.\textsuperscript{64} At the same time, as Patrick Riley has demonstrated, Rousseau was also fundamentally Ancient in his outlook, for he took from the Ancients their ideals of republican simplicity and disinterested virtue as epitomized in Fénelon’s vision of the Golden Age in his *Télémaque*.\textsuperscript{5}

What has not received enough critical attention is the way in which Rousseau actually combined these influences by consistently projecting medievalist themes onto his imagined classical Golden Age. His medievalism was evident in the very titles of his most well-known works, from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, with its reference to the twelfth-century ill-fated lovers Héloïse and Abélard (whose narrative of persecution Rousseau adopted as his own) right through to the *Confessions*, with its crucial Augustinian intertext. This medievalist strand, which made of Rousseau, as he characterized himself, a “modern who has an ancient soul”,\textsuperscript{66} emerged already in his first major work, the *Discours sur les sciences*.

In its opening paragraph, as we have seen, Rousseau’s text reproduced the stereotypical image of the Middle Ages as an age of darkness, in contrast to the present-day

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\textsuperscript{53} “Il n’y a point de siecle qui n’ait … ses deux faces: l’une lumineuse, l’autre qui est obscurcie par les ténèbres. C’est ne representer chaque siecle qu’à demi que de m’en montrer que la difformité: Et tel est le parti qu’ont embrassé presque tous ceux qui ont entrepris de parler de l’état des Sciences en France dans le IX et le X siècle.” Goujet, *De l’état des Sciences en France*, 1.

\textsuperscript{54} Starobinski, *Rousseau e Tasso*; Hamman, “La vie de Jean-Jacques Rousseau”, 859; Montoya, “Naturalizing the commonplace”.

\textsuperscript{55} Riley, “Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel”.

\textsuperscript{56} Cited in Riley, “Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel”, 91.
The emphatic tone of the passage, however, would have alerted the reader familiar with the text’s genealogy to other possible subtexts. Rousseau had already announced in the preface, after all, what his position would be: to argue against the idea that the progress of the arts and sciences had purified society’s mœurs, which would qualify his praise in this first passage. In addition, he included an epigraph on the title page, borrowed from Ovid’s *Tristia*, which called for explanation: “Here they take me for a barbarian because they do not understand me.” The word *barbarus* or “barbarian” was ambiguous. While Ovid, lamenting his exile “among these Scythian tribes” (*hic in Scythicis gentibus*), clearly intended it as an antithesis, Rousseau intimated that his use of the term might be different. Thus, by designating himself on the title page of his book as a “Citizen of Geneva” (*Citoyen de Genève*), he distanced himself from Parisian society, the epitome of civilization in his day. His stated aim to criticize the arts and sciences also suggested a position closer to that of the title-page barbarus than was Ovid’s in the original elegy. Rousseau’s basic sympathy, if not actual identification with, the Scythian barbarian is supported by a further reading of the *Discours sur les sciences*, and explains why he reused the epigraph in one of his last and most personal works, the posthumously published *Dialogues de Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*.

Rousseau’s framing strategies rendered problematic the introductory passages, with their cliché image of the medieval. As it turned out, it was not the Middle Ages that were dark, but the present, for, Rousseau went on to argue, it was precisely the progress of the arts and sciences that had caused the corruption of virtue and morality.

Our souls have been corrupted as our Sciences and Arts have advanced towards perfection … We have seen virtue flee as their light dawned on our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed in all times and in all places.

Like Chapelain before him, who had posited an opposition between “the enlightened ages” (*les âges illuminés*) and “virtue” (*vertu*), Rousseau too perceived a profound incompatibility between virtue and light (*lumière*). This opposition covered another one, that between knowledge and virtue (or, in Chapelain’s wording, rhetoric versus naïveté). Rousseau underscored this opposition on the opening page of his *Discours sur les sciences* by declaring that “it is not Science I am mistreating … it is Virtue I am defending.” Summing up his argument at the end of the *Discours sur les sciences*, he entreated his readers: “Let us remain in our obscurity … let us leave to others the care to instruct Peoples of their duties, and let us limit ourselves to fulfilling our own.” By concluding on this note, he thus redefined obscurity as a positive trait, to be contrasted to the false glitter (*éclat*) or light (*lumière*) of contemporary philosophy,

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68 “Nos ames se sont corrompues a mesure que nos Sciences et nos Arts se sont avancés à la perfection ... On a vu la vertu s'enfuir a mesure que leur lumière s'élevoit sur notre horizon, et le même phénomène s'est observé dans tous les tems et dans tous les lieux.” Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences*, 9–10.
69 “Ce n’est point la Science que je maltraite ... c’est la Vertu que je défends.” Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences*, 5.
70 “Restons dans notre obscurité ... laissons à d'autres le soin d'instruire les Peuples de leurs devoirs, et bornons-nous à bien remplir les nôtres.” Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences*, 30.
which despite its outward appearance, had little to say about practical virtue. While the *philosophes* offered only the emptiness of rhetoric, those who were attentive to the medieval perceived a model that, because of its very absence of “good” language and the “barbarousness” that was its defining trait, offered the possibility of authentic, practical virtue.

The concern with obscurity was an important undercurrent that traversed Rousseau’s writing and complemented his well-known obsession with transparency and light, most famously of all in his *Confessions* and *Dialogues*. Although in these texts, images of shadows and darkness were often used to describe the plot he believed his enemies had mounted against him, they were also applied to his own literary work. Rousseau referred to the *Confessions* as a “dark and dirty maze”, and indeed claimed that his aim was to describe “the shadowy work in which … I find myself buried without, whatever my efforts, being able to penetrate its terrifying darkness”. Hélène Vianu has drawn attention to the central image of the sunlit tree in Rousseau’s writing, with the play of light and dark in its branches, as a means to understand the role he assigned to obscurity in his thinking. The relation between light and dark was a dialectical one, a dramatic chiaroscuro that created meaning out of apparent contradiction. Thus, there was a central contrast throughout his work between the Golden Age ideal of “an obscure and simple life, but steady and sweet”, as described in the *Confessions* and as realized – in fiction – at Clarens, and the light of contemporary society, whose brightness only blinded men to true virtue.

In his condemnation of Enlightenment, Rousseau did however single out a few real – as opposed to fictional – societies, which in his view had escaped at least in part the corrupting influence of civilization. Rousseau scholarship has rightly emphasized the role played by Sparta as a model of antique virtue. In the *Discours sur les sciences*, Rousseau also specifically named five other societies as counter-models to the depraved present. These were, in the order in which he named them, the Persians under Cyrus the Great and the Scythians, as evoked by Xenophon in his *Cyropedia*; the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus in his *Germania*; Rome “in the days of its poverty and ignorance”; and modern-day Switzerland, which he praised for its inhabitants’ courage and patriotism. Having identified himself, on the title-page, both with the Swiss and with the Scythian *barbarus* described by Ovid, Rousseau now cited some of these same peoples as counter-models to polite Parisian society – as the Scyths had indeed already figured in Chapelain’s *Lecture* and in Lenglet-Dufresnoy’s historical writings as the medieval opposite of contemporary Frenchmen. The qualities praised in these examples were primarily military, in keeping with Rousseau’s argument that the cultivation of the arts weakened the body and fostered a servile attitude. As in

72 “L’œuvre de ténèbres dans lequel … je me trouve enseveli, sans que, de quelque façon que je m’y sois pu prendre, il m’ait été possible d’en percer l’effrayante obscurité”. *Rousseau, Les Confessions*, 589.
73 Vianu, “La lumière et l’ombre dans l’œuvre de Jean-Jacques Rousseau”.
75 Grell, *Le dix-huitième siècle et l’antiquité*, 460–8; Shklar, “Rousseau’s Two Models”.
76 *Rousseau, Discours sur les sciences*, 11.
Boulainvilliers's medievalist condemnation of absolutism, a political form that he considered a degeneration from original feudal virtue, military values were central to the critique of contemporary society.

The Middle Ages were not explicitly named in this enumeration, but their presence seems indisputable. Tacitus's positive description of the mores of the Germanic tribes had already been invoked by northern humanists, including Fauchet and Pasquier, who by opposing local, medieval antiquity to classical Antiquity, had troubled the Italian concept of humanist enlightenment contrasted to medieval darkness. Moreover, in Rousseau's own day allusions to the Germanic tribes were doubly significant, for they implied a possible stance within the debate among political thinkers as to the respective merits of the Franks and the Gauls. Praise of the warrior qualities of the Germanic Franks was an essential component in Boulainvilliers's defence of feudalism, which he held to have been the state of society after the conquest of the Gaulish inhabitants of France by the invading Franks, the ancestors of the present-day French aristocracy.

Rousseau's praise of the “simplicity, innocence and virtues” of the Germanic warrior tribes could not be considered in isolation from these larger political debates shaping the notion of what could be termed, somewhat paradoxically, an “aristocratic republicanism”. More importantly, by holding up these new examples of antique virtue with their strong militarist component, he turned the language of Enlightenment on its head, recalling Chapelain's earlier, ironic use of the image of the blind man who, in not seeing the light, was actually more enlightened than modern man:

I will leave you to judge whether … these knights … were not honest barbarians and worthy louts, and if it is not surprising that our cleverness may be illuminated in its duty by their ignorance; that such blind men may serve as guides to visionaries like ourselves, in short, that they had great virtues, in the purest terms of nature, and that we are so covered with vice in the midst of the teachings of art.79

In this passage, a Rousseau-like opposition was created between nature and virtue on one hand, and art and vice on the other. By its association with vice, it was clear that “art” was to be understood in a sense close to its etymological companion, “artifice”. The passage formulated a pessimistic point of view, betraying the influence of older models of cyclical history hidden by the Moderns' outwardly progressivist rhetoric. Echoing Perrault's musing that, civilization having reached its peak, “we are perhaps entering the old age of the century in which we live”,80 Rousseau returned his reader to an Ancient view of history not as unremitting progress, but as an increasing distance

77 Burke, The European Renaissance, 97.
78 Rousseau, Discours sur les sciences, 11.
79 “Je vous laisse à juger si … les chevaliers … n’étaient pas d’honnêtes barbares et d’estimables lourdauds, et s’il n’y a pas à s’étonner que notre habileté puisse être éclairée dans son devoir par leur ignorance; que de tels aveugles puissent servir de guides à des clairvoyants comme nous, enfin, qu’ils eussent de si grandes vertus, dans les purs termes de la nature, et que nous soyons si couverts de vices au milieu des enseignements de l’art.” Chapelain, La lecture, 194.
80 Perrault, Parallèle, 1, 54.
from the original Golden Age. The juxtaposition of elements drawn from very different historical periods – classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, the present – only served to further strengthen this fundamentally non-historical understanding of history. Of course, this anti-progressivist vision drew on the same sources, most notably the Ancient myth of a past Golden Age, as Chapelain’s vision of a moral decline accompanying the progress of civilization.

The shadow side of the foundational rhetorics of Enlightenment, crystallized in the image of medieval darkness, revealed the complexity of eighteenth-century thought. Enlightenment, by its very invocation of the notion of lumières, with its many different meanings, contained in it the seeds of its own autocritique. The intriguing expression coined by Chapelain in 1647, “the dark recesses of modern Antiquity” (les ténèbres de notre Antiquité moderne), should be read within the larger context of the Enlightenment debate about historical evolution. Culminating in the profound critique of Enlightenment expressed by that “modern who has an ancient soul”, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this debate had as its ultimate object a diagnosis of the modern condition itself. Chapelain and Rousseau drew on humanist precedents in order to propose a vision in which modernity could be perceived not as the result of a process of historical progress, but, rather, as moral and political degeneration. Ages previously viewed as dark were now viewed in terms of moral exemplarity, while the philosophes’ light of reason was suspected to conceal merely false glitter (éclat). Within this questioning of Enlightenment values, reconceptualizations of the medieval – no longer viewed exclusively as a barbaric past, but increasingly, as a site of lost innocence – played a crucial role.
II

REIMAGINING
THE MEDIEVAL
Understanding the medieval as essentially a moral–literary concept, late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century readers perceived it to be exemplified above all by one genre: the roman. In contrast to ecclesiastic historians and antiquaries who, like Mabillon, worked on charters, registers and capitularies that they did not explicitly designate as medieval,¹ it was to the roman that most other, non-professional or semi-professional readers turned when speaking of this period. Chapelain derived his arguments in favour of a reassessment of the medieval from his reading of the thirteenth-century Lancelot. Likewise, when commenting on the particularly French spirit of gallantry (esprit de galanterie) in his Esprit des Lois, even the immensely learned magistrate Montesquieu referred to practices described not in his torical documents, but in popular chivalric fiction. That roman was often synonymous with “medieval” was signalled by the first edition of the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (1696), when it listed as examples of the term’s usage “Old romans (les vieux romans). Modern romans. The roman of Lancelot du Lac, of Perceforest. The roman de la Rose. The roman of Amadis. A new roman. The roman of ASTRÆE, of Polexandre, of Cyrus, of Cassandre.”

But if the medieval was invariably defined in relation to the genre of the roman, then what did this imply for the way that readers approached real examples of medieval narrative fiction? This chapter will explore how, during the early period covering the 1680s to the 1700s, the roman or chivalric romance (roman de chevalerie) was read by contemporary readers, and how these readings related to other conceptualizations of the medieval. This is a vast subject, and one on which much basic research in book history needs still to be carried out before a synthetic overview is possible.² Existing

¹ Bruun, “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages”.
² Helwi Blom’s PhD dissertation, “Vieux romans et ‘Grand Siècle’”, unfortunately did not become available in time for me to incorporate her findings on the seventeenth-century French reception of medieval romans de chevalerie in the present chapter.
lacunae relate particularly to early Enlightenment library holdings, book and manuscript ownership and use, and the sheer inventorying and making sense of the many hundreds of references to medieval romans that appear in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writings. My approach, therefore, is a partial one. After introducing the questions involved, and indicating some paths that book historians might follow to answer them, my analysis gravitates around a single case study, that of the well-known late seventeenth-century reader of romans, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné. Focusing specifically on the “primal scene” of every medievalist revival – the scene of discovery of an old manuscript or medieval book – I relate Sévigné’s remarks on medieval romans to other traces of early Enlightenment readers and readings of medieval texts, and beyond these, to the critical debate on the significance of the medieval past for literary modernity.

Defining the Roman

The term roman was a notoriously slippery one. While modern English usage draws a clear distinction between two separate genres, “romance” and the (modern) novel, such a separation did not gain widespread acceptance in eighteenth-century France. In English, the term “romance” has come to denote lengthy works of narrative fiction that centre around a hero’s – less often a heroine’s – quest for the object of his love, a quest during which he typically faces numerous setbacks, is aided or opposed by sorceresses, magicians, and other magical creatures, and ranges across vast geographical expanses. The term “novel”, on the other hand, implies usually a shorter format, a more focused plot, and a certain attempt at psychological and / or historical realism. The novel is for English speakers, crucially, a modern genre, while romance is an older one, so that the terminological separation of the two categories implies also a chronological one, with romance classified as old-fashioned or potentially even medieval, and the novel as modern. As Barbara Fuchs notes:

Critics have pointed out the problematic metonymic association of romance with the Middle Ages, whereby the entire historical period is bathed in a sentimental glow of fanciful idealization. As Rita Copeland incisively notes, already by the sixteenth century “the definitive characteristic of romance is no longer its form, with which its very modernity was bound up, but its content: love, chivalry, adventure, the Arthurian ‘golden age’, the exoticism and fancy of a distantly imagined past, indeed, everything associated with the word aventure”.

In French, by contrast, the term roman continues today to denote both what English speakers would understand as romance, and the modern novel. Throughout the eighteenth century, the term roman was used both in a very general sense, i.e. as a broad category referring to all narrative fiction, modern and medieval, or more rarely, in a usage similar to the English one, to refer to fiction dating back to the medieval period. Most often, roman described romances and novels more or less interchangeably,

3 Fuchs, Romance, 38.
Survivals
despite several attempts to introduce new terms into critical discourse – such as, in
the late seventeenth century, the term *nouvelle*, applied to shorter historical novels – to
more clearly distinguish modern productions from older ones.

Besides designating narrative fiction, the term *roman* was also sometimes used in
another sense, as an adjective embracing all (older) literary productions written in the
Romance language (*langue romane*), as opposed to Latin. This very loose use of the
term is evident in the text that is frequently considered the first modern French history
of the novel, Pierre-Daniel Huet’s *Lettre-traité sur l’origine des romans* (1670). Despite
his work’s title, Huet referred to lyrical and dramatic texts – “romances (*romans*) and
fabliaux, tragedies, comedies and pastorals, chants, songs and *chanterels*”; among
many others – as well as to narrative texts in his chapter on medieval novelists (*romanciers*), “Les romanciers du moyen âge”:

All these works and many others were composed in the Roman language, which
the Romans introduced into Gaul, and which, having been corrupted by mixture
with the Gallic language that had preceded it, and the Frankish and Tudesque
languages that followed, was neither Gallic nor Frankish, but mixed, yet none-
theless predominantly Roman (*romain*), and thereby was called Romance (*roman*), to distinguish it from the languages particular to each region … Since
Romance was then the most polite and most universal language, the storytellers
of Provence, that is to say the prose authors, and the poets called *trouvères* …
used it to write their tales and their poems, which were therefore called romances
(*romans*).5

Carrying over this adjectival use of the term *roman* to analyses of content, authors
who referred to medieval *romans* spoke strikingly often not of specific works, but of
generic traits or general notions they associated with the medieval. Most commonly, as
in Chapelain and Montesquieu’s discussions of the Middle Ages, attention was focused
on the ethos of chivalry, as codified into French law, or on the figure that most fully
incarnated chivalric values, the knight. Even in works of literary criticism, attention
to specific texts was sometimes absent. Although Huet devoted a lengthy chapter to
medieval romances, he provided no analysis of individual texts, in marked contrast
to his previous, detailed discussion of a number of named Greek novels. Instead, he
remained at the level of general considerations, and limited himself to enumerating
several titles he had clearly not read, but knew through two earlier sources, the histori-
cal works of the sixteenth-century authors Claude Fauchet and Jean de Nostredame.6

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5 “Tous ces ouvrages et plusieurs autres étaient composés en langage romain qui était celui que les
Romains introduisirent dans les Gaules, qui, s’étant corrompu par le mélange du langage gaulois qui l’avait
précédé, et du franc ou tudesque qui l’avait suivi, n’était ni latin ni gaulois ni franc, mais mixte, où le romain
pourtant tenait le dessus, et qui pour cela s’appelait roman, pour le distinguer du langage particulier de
chaque pays … Le roman étant donc la langue la plus polie et la plus universelle, les conteurs de Provence,
c’est-à-dire les auteurs de prose, et les poètes qu’on appelait trouvères … s’en servirent pour écrire leurs
Listing the novels produced from the eleventh century onwards, he thus mentioned “the novels of Garin le Lorrain, Tristan, Lancelot du Lac, André de France … Bertain, of the Saint Graal, Merlin, Artus, Perceval, Perceforest and the majority of those twenty-seven poets who lived before the year 1300, whom Président Fauchet enumerated and those of Provence, whose lives Jean de Nostre-Dame wrote.”

Significantly, one of the sources Huet cited was itself a romanesque one, Jean de Nostredame’s bestselling, and frequently reprinted, Vies des plus célèbres et anciens poètes provençaux (1575). This work had been intended partly as a roman à clef about the author’s own circle of aristocratic friends, and partly as a regionalist, fictionalized adaptation of the extant troubadour biographies or medieval Vidas, but was increasingly read, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as a real work of history. Nostredame, in a stratagem worthy of his more famous brother, the prophet Michel de Nostredame (Nostradamus), mixed biographies of real troubadours with those of fictitious ones, but did this within a specific historical context, in which medievalism functioned as a counter to prevailing humanist doctrine. A central role was played in this process by what can be considered the “primal scene” of every medievalist revival, i.e. the scene of discovery of an old, hitherto unknown manuscript or medieval book. Like the primal scene of sexuality surreptitiously viewed by the child in Freudian psychology, the primal scene of medievalism, too, was a generative act. The rediscovered old manuscript generated new text, often becoming itself an object of hidden or unacknowledged desire. Nostredame thus foregrounded a number of hitherto unknown medieval manuscripts at the beginning of his own work. Giving his Vies an aura of authenticity by listing his source manuscripts – invented, in some part – he adopted a discursive stance similar to humanist scholars carefully listing their ancient sources:

The lives of our Provençal poets have been gathered from several ancient authors, great and excellent personages, who wrote in our Provençal language, and even from the Monk of the Golden Isles (Monge des Isles d’Or) and Hugues de Saint Cesari, who catalogued and compiled their lives, works and customs in this same language, to which I have helped myself in my own book, as I have made use of the works of the Monk of Montmajour … and several other authors.

In reality, the Monk of the Golden Isles (whose name was an anagram of his friend’s name, Reimond de Soliés) and Hugues de Saint Cesari were creations of Nostredame’s, as were the biographies of medieval troubadours he attributed to them. By referring to these invented sources, however, Nostredame was drawing on a commonplace regularly exploited by authors of medieval and medievalist fiction: the fiction of the newly discovered old manuscript that conferred auctoritas to the present-day author.

7 Huet, Lettre-traité, 134–6.
8 “Les vies de nos poètes provençaux ont esté recueillies de plusieurs anciens auteurs, grands et excellens personnages, qui ont escript en nostre langue provençalle, et mesmes du Monge des Isles d’Or, et de Hugues de Saint Cesari, qui ont fait le Catalogue, et compillé leurs œuvres, vies et coutumes en celle mesme langue, desquels je me suis aydé en ce recueil, comme aussi j’ay fait des œuvres du Monge de Montmajour … et de plusieurs autres auteurs.” Nostredame, Les vies des plus célèbres et anciens poètes provençaux, 7.
9 On the history of this topos, see Herman and Hallyn, Le topos du manuscrit trouvé.
importantly, at the date at which he wrote this preface, during the French Renaissance, the cliché also had a polemical value, for it could be read as a parody of the philological work of humanist scholars. These scholars really were unearthing old manuscripts, but whereas theirs went back to Greek and Latin antiquity, Nostredame proposed that medieval manuscripts might, perhaps, be just as interesting. Like sixteenth-century humanist scholars, but in a quasi-satirical mode, Nostredame legitimated his work by showcasing his use of ancient sources, suggesting the same type of careful textual work and critical apparatus. Medievalism, in other words, was a kind of alternative or even anti-humanism, and was initially valued as much for its use as a rhetorical strategy as for its actual content or reference to real medieval texts.

Nostredame’s approach to the medieval in many ways set the stage for seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century attitudes. Thus frequently, despite authors’ repeated reference to the medieval and to the genre that most epitomized it, the roman, there was initially – with a few exceptions, most notably Jean Chapelain – a lack of real knowledge and aesthetic appreciation of medieval literature even among some of its most well-known commentators. This was, in a sense, a negative medievalism, or medievalism in the absence of a defined object. Examining contemporary English conceptualizations of the medieval, John Ganim has argued that “the study of medieval literature in general is born in a nostalgic love for the age and its imputed values, rather than in a veneration of authors (such as Shakespeare) or of particular texts. This sentimental romance of the period precedes any response to any particular work.” Crucially, he notes, during the early English Enlightenment the medieval was equated primarily with the roman or, as he has it in its English equivalent, romance. “The story of the study of romance”, writes Ganim, “is in many ways the master narrative of the study of medieval literature and of medieval culture in general.” The roman as a genre – in the first place as symbol, regardless of concrete content – was the epitome of the medieval, and the medieval was itself conceived as a kind of fictional realm or romance. As a site of unbridled imagination, the roman was also the foremost site of engagement with the medieval precisely because, to many readers, it remained so singularly unknown and undefined – and could therefore be coloured in creatively by inventive authors such as Nostredame. As Ganim concludes, “critical discourse surrounding the romances first imagines the Middle Ages as a romance, and then gradually becomes a species of romance itself.”

It was only very haltingly therefore that, within this context that tended to romanticize the medieval, a small number of authors did begin to make attempts to speak with more analytic precision of medieval chivalric fiction. The most striking exception to the generally fluid use of the term roman in the seventeenth century was Chapelain, who did single out a specific title, Lancelot, for detailed critical analysis. In addition, in his Lecture he also mentioned “Tristan, and all those other authors of antique romances (romans), Merlin, Artus, Perceforest”. As his Lecture made abundantly clear – and as is

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11 Ganim, Medievalism and Orientalism, 18.
12 Chapelain, La lecture, 191.
confirmed by his library catalogue – Chapelain really did read the texts he referenced, giving its highly original character to his contribution to French medievalism. Rather than referring indiscriminately to all romans, Chapelain sought to introduce a new term to describe specifically the genre of longer medieval fiction: vieux romans. This term was used sporadically throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to denote medieval romances, as opposed to their modern equivalents, but didn’t succeed in gaining widespread acceptance, surely in part because interest in medieval texts was itself still so weak. When the medievalist revival did finally take off, starting in the 1680s, the term vieux romans was most often replaced by a new term, roman de chevalerie. First proposed in 1664 by Charles Sorel in his Bibliothèque française (1664),
this was the term that became most commonly used during the early Enlightenment. Thus when in 1734 Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy set about writing the first major eighteenth-century consideration of the roman genre, De l’usage des romans, he started by cataloguing the various kinds then known, distinguishing eleven distinct classes of romans (as opposed to nouvelles, contes, or other short fiction). Two of these categories related directly to the medieval, betraying the genre’s defining ancestry: the class of “chivalric romance” (Romans de Chevalerie, class VII in his hierarchy), and “old French verse romances, printed or manuscript” (Romans antiques en Vers français imprimés ou Manuscrits, class VIII). The class of chivalric romances was further divided into several subcategories: “chivalric romances of the Round Table” (Romans de Chevalerie de la Table Ronde), “chivalric romances of Charlemagne and the twelve Peers of France” (Romans de Chevalerie de Charlemagne & des douze Pairs de France), “chivalric romances of Amadis and their continuations” (Romans de Chevalerie d’Amadis & la suite), which was then further subdivided into Spanish, Italian and French varieties, and finally “other mixed chivalric romances” (Autres Romans de Chevalerie mélangés), again including separate Spanish, Italian and French subdivisions.

Lenglet-Dufresnoy appeared here to be proposing an eighteenth-century revision of Jean Bodel’s medieval tripartite division between the “matter of Brittany”, “matter of France”, i.e. romances dealing with Charlemagne and the Peers of France, and “matter of Rome”. His first two categories corresponded exactly to the first two of the twelfth-century divisions. His third category, however, contained works that had not yet existed when Bodel had first expounded the tripartite system, yet were easily annexed to it because of their chivalric subject matter. Significantly perhaps, the matter of Rome virtually disappeared in this updating of the medieval scheme, signalling the Moderns’ definitive turning away from the models of classical antiquity. By the time Lenglet-Dufresnoy wrote his De l’usage des romans, knowledge of authentic medieval texts was clearly on the rise, explaining a new desire to distinguish between modern and medieval varieties of the roman genre, within a larger historical framework.

Camille Esmein found only 20 occurrences of the term vieux romans in the Frantext database for the period 1580–1730. “Les ‘vieux romans’ entre contre-modèle et étape historique”, 461.

It was in fact a shorter version of another term, roman de chevalerie errante, that he had already used in his Berger extravagant (1666–1667). Vieillard, “Qu'est-ce que le ‘roman de chevalerie’?”, 12–13.

[Lenglet-Dufresnoy], De l’usage des romans, II, Table of contents.
Medieval and Medievalist Romans in Eighteenth-Century Libraries

The conceptualization of the medieval around one central literary genre, that of romans or romans de chevalerie, whether known or imaginary ones, invites us to question the place of real medieval books and manuscripts in early Enlightenment reading culture. Despite a critical discourse that overwhelmingly rejected medieval chivalric fiction, at least until post-1728 receptions of Chapelain’s Lecture, medieval texts still had a considerable presence in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century libraries and, beyond them, in readers’ memories. But until the 1720s, when the first modern editions and reprintings started to be published, their physical presence was primarily a survival, as many private and institutional libraries still held numbers of medieval or medievally-inspired volumes, either in original manuscript form or in later, fifteenth- or sixteenth-century printed editions.

For a long time, literary criticism continued along the Aristotelian line first set down in the field of narrative fiction by Jacques Amyot in the sixteenth century. Drawing on Amyot’s influential proclamation of the classical ancestry of the Renaissance French roman, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critics largely rejected medieval reading matter as unfit for serious consideration, even if medieval or medievalist texts continued to be reprinted into the 1620s and 1630s at least. In the second half of the seventeenth century this negative attitude was further strengthened by the emergence of a full-fledged classicist doctrine, codified in Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s programmatic Art poétique, which explicitly rejected all medieval models. Chapelain’s defence of Lancelot, drawing on earlier traditions of Renaissance medievalism, was the great exception to the general rule of critical disregard or even outright contempt for the medieval. In his Art poétique, Boileau only grudgingly conceded a passing mention to François Villon, who, so he wrote, “was first able, in those crude centuries / To untangle the confused art of our old Romance authors (Romanciers)”. Classicism considerably sharpened its attacks against the roman genre, singling out for critique two elements. These were the genre’s lack of verisimilitude and its non-historical nature, that differentiated it from the most prestigious genres of the classicist genre system, tragedy and epic; and its immorality, the roman being commonly held to lead innocent (female) readers astray by its portrayal of love and unbridled amorous passion. Sexuality and the roman were held, in critical discourse, to feed dangerously into each other – incidentally, a specifically medieval stance on romance that had been exemplified already in the famous Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante’s Inferno. As for the argument against fiction, that had Platonic precedents, but gained particular prominence again under seventeenth-century absolutism, which witnessed both a crisis of historical representation due to increasing restrictions on history writing, and the subsequent

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16. For a brief overview of the seventeenth-century reception of medieval chivalric romances, see Berger, “Aspekte der Rezeption des mittelalterlichen Romans im 17. Jahrhundert”. This study however focuses mostly on the period before the 1680s.

17. Plazenet-Hau, “L’impulsion érudite du renouveau romanesque”.

emergence of other, pseudohistorical narrative genres. By the end of the century, therefore, detractors of the medieval could draw not only on the new ideology of historical progress, but also on a rich humanist and classicist arsenal of critical *topoi* and arguments levelled against the *roman* genre, making a prominent early Enlightenment thinker such as Pierre Bayle easily dismiss a medieval work such as *Les Quatre Fils Aymon* as “a tale to put one to sleep.”

Yet despite an official stance that explicitly rejected *vieux romans*, there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that these same books retained their popularity both among elite and among non-professional readers, and that this taste resurfaced again towards the end of the century. There was, in other words, a significant disjunction between official discourse and popular taste. Pierre de Villiers, in his *Entretiens sur les contes de fées* (1699) referred to “the taste we still have for our old romances” (*vieux Romans*). If Pierre Bayle took the time to condemn *Les Quatre Fils Aymon*, then surely it was because some readers continued to enjoy reading it. In his *Confessions* and *Dialogues*, Rousseau recalled youthful reading fare that included “Cassandre and old romances” (*vieux Romans*), Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, but also recently republished chivalric works such as the *comte de Caylus*’ French version of the fifteenth-century Catalan classic *Tirant le Blanc*. In eighteenth-century fiction, finally, examples abound of – mostly female – characters who, in the tradition of Don Quixote, abandoned themselves to the voluptuous pleasures of medieval or medievalist fiction, such as the countess in Lesage’s *Diable boiteux* who, described as a “reader of romances” (*romans*), had “a head full of knightly ideas”.

Moving beyond the realm of anecdote and fiction into the more concrete one of actual, eighteenth-century library holdings, there is some evidence – but again, of a fragmentary rather than systematic nature – to support the view of the continuing popularity of chivalric romance among at least some early Enlightenment readers. Examining a sample of French private library auction catalogues from the period 1700–1775, Helwi Blom has shown that in the years 1700–1725, 30% of the library catalogues listed one or more volumes of chivalric romance (*romans de chevalerie*). This figure increased to 36% in the years 1725–1750, and rose to 58% in the years 1750–1775. Clearly then, interest in the genre grew as the century advanced. Bearing in mind the time lag inherent to auction catalogues, that listed books only after their owner’s death and therefore mostly described libraries built up two or three decades prior to the catalogue’s printing, the clearest jump in interest can be dated to the 1720s and 1730s, i.e. the decades that also witnessed increased editorial and publishers’ interest in medieval material.

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25 Blom, “La présence de romans de chevalerie”.
Finally, in addition to these general trends, book history research has also uncovered the names of individual library owners who had a special predilection for the medieval, as evidenced by the numbers of medieval romances (romans de chevalerie) listed in their library catalogues. These included, for the period that concerns us, the well-known collectors Jean-Pierre Imbert Châtre de Cangé (1733), whose catalogue listed over eighty different editions of romans de chevalerie, as well as the comtesse de Verruë (1737), whose extensive library contained large numbers of chivalric romances, plays and prints; but also an anonymous “Monsieur ***”, whose 1739 library catalogue explicitly referred to the “old chivalric romances, modern novels, poets and facetious writings” it held; the marquise de Vassé (1750), whose library catalogue listed over thirty romans de chevalerie; Jean-Baptiste-Denis Guyon, seigneur de Sardières (1759); and the royal mistress the marquise de Pompadour (1765), whose library held some fifty romans de chevalerie.

Out of this mass of anecdotal evidence, two interesting patterns emerge. The first is that the ownership of medieval romans, often associated with bibliophile or collector’s libraries, appeared unrelated to the exercise of a profession, and might consequently be viewed primarily as a private rather than public activity. Significantly, the early Enlightenment was also a period during which new distinctions were emerging between private and public realms. Until the late seventeenth century, library ownership was almost invariably conceptualized as an extension of readers’ public functions – as, for example, in the magistrates’ and professional libraries described in Gabriel Naudé’s influential Avis pour dresser une bibliothèque (1627). Consequently, such libraries made ample room for reference works or books that would add to their owners’ encyclopaedic knowledge in their professional domain, but completely left out the category of belles-lettres or what we would today describe as works of literature. By contrast, in the early Enlightenment new notions started to be elaborated of private reading and of specialized private libraries or curiosity cabinets (cabinets de curiosités). As Jean Viardot has demonstrated, these new conceptualizations in turn made possible new types of libraries, which emphasized reading for pleasure rather than for encyclopaedic knowledge or professional gain. Described by Samuel Formey in his Conseils pour former une bibliothèque peu nombreuse, mais choisie (1746), this new ideal regarded reading as an activity undertaken for private pleasure, and consequently allowing for the inclusion of a mass of non-functional reading material including romans and other texts subsumed under the broad category of literature (belles-lettres). François Boucher’s famous 1756 half-reclining portrait of Madame de Pompadour – who was revealed by her library catalogue, as we saw, to be an avid reader of chivalric romances – holding a half-read novel in her hand, clearly reflects this new approach to the reading of fiction for pleasure, which included medieval chivalric narrative too.

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26 Much valuable information on these catalogues is now available online. Charon, Esprit des livres. Catalogues de vente de bibliothèques.
27 “Anciens romans de Chevalerie, Romans modernes, Poetes et Faceties”.
29 Viardot, “Livres rares et pratiques bibliophiliques”.
The second pattern that emerges from anecdotal evidence concerning readers of *vieux romans* is closely related to the previous one. Indeed, once reading was understood no longer as an activity proceeding from a public, professional role but as a private occupation, a new legitimacy was created for the single largest category of non-professional readers in the early Enlightenment: women. Despite the fact that men were generally the owners of the largest libraries, when it came to the specific genre of the *roman de chevalerie*, and more generally the new category of literature (*belles-lettres*), women were dominant.30 This was reflected too in fictional depictions of reading, that often portrayed women as the prototypical readers of *romans*, in particular medieval ones. More generally, in early eighteenth-century critical considerations it was a commonplace – even if an empirically unverified one – that women were the foremost readers of novels.31 Regardless of whether the association of women with novel readership was based on fact or not, there were several reasons why women rather than men were linked to medieval fiction. Because their education did not usually include Latin, the language of scholarship and of the classics, women’s literary culture was more often based on vernacular works, including the works of narrative fiction they found in their family library shelves. Their “classics” were not those of classical antiquity, which they could often read only in translation, but rather, the vernacular works that held a place in the national or patriotic narratives of Fauchet or Pasquier. It is likely that the gendering of *vieux romans* as a particularly female genre significantly reinforced the general opprobrium that rested on these texts in official critical discourse, at least until the end of the seventeenth century – a subject to which I shall return in my final chapter, when discussing the institutionalization of medieval studies.

**Which Medieval Romans Were Read?**

The contradiction between official doctrine, that rejected *vieux romans* as suitable literary models, and actual reading practices, is tellingly illustrated by some of the most prominent defenders of classicism. Chapelain, as we have seen, was both one of the architects of classicism and, as the private reader portrayed in the *Lecture* – whose dialogue form itself sought to emphasize these readings’ non-erudite nature – a lover of medieval fiction. The catalogue of Chapelain’s library listed printed editions of several late medieval *romans*, including besides *Lancelot*, also *Perceforest*, *Artus de Bretagne*, *Meliadus*, *Merlin* and *Tristan*, thereby corroborating his reference in *La lecture* to these same titles. But even Boileau himself, in his 1696 epistle “To my gardener”, did not hesitate to include references to medieval chivalric fiction. Describing his own nervous state while composing his works, “agitated by the demon” of poetic inspiration, Boileau rhetorically asked his gardener whether he didn’t remind him at those moments of the characters he knew from popular chivalric romances:

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30 This is particularly evident in perhaps the only case in this period in which both a husband and a wife’s separate library catalogues have been preserved: that of Jean Le Clerc and his wife Maria Leti. Montoya, “A Woman Reader at the Turn of the Century”.

Do you not suspect that agitated by the demon,  
Just like that cousin of the quatre fils Aimon,  
Whose marvellous history you sometimes read,  
I ruminate some magic spell while walking?  
Not so. You remember you were told in your village  
That your master is paid to consign to writing  
The feats of a great King more celebrated for valour  
Than Ogier le Danois or Pierre de Provence.\textsuperscript{32}

While Boileau presented these books as titles that his gardener purportedly enjoyed reading, it was nonetheless clear that he knew them well, too, as revealed by the details of plot he mentioned. Referring to the magician Maugis, “that cousin of the quatre fils Aimon” in the eponymous roman, as well as humorously comparing Louis XIV to Ogier le Danois and Pierre de Provence, protagonists in other medieval romances of the same title, Boileau revealed that, towards the end of the seventeenth century, his readers were still familiar enough with medieval reading matter to be able to recognize his allusions to these texts.

As interesting as the reference itself, however, are the specific titles Boileau refers to. Les quatre fils Aymon, Ogier le Danois and Pierre de Provence were all available to late seventeenth-century readers both in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century printed editions and in more recent, abridged versions. Originally an anonymous epic \textit{chanson de geste} dating back to the thirteenth century, \textit{Renaut de Montauban} was more commonly known, by reference to its protagonists, as Les quatre fils Aymon, a title consolidated by a hugely successful prose adaptation and printed edition in 1485 and later, sixteenth-century printed versions.\textit{Ogier le Danois} likewise went back to a thirteenth-century \textit{chanson de geste}, which had given rise to numerous continuations and prose adaptations, including several printed versions published between 1496 and 1583. \textit{Pierre de Provence}, finally, or the \textit{Histoire de Pierre de Provence et la belle Maguelonne}, as it was also known, was of an even later date. Composed in the first half of the fifteenth century, it too was first printed in 1480, and abridged in numerous subsequent versions. Thus all these titles, rather than being “original” versions of \textit{chansons de geste} originating in the high Middle Ages, dated back to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century prose adaptations, that had survived in printed form through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by way of printers such as Jehan Trepperel in Paris, or Olivier Arnoulet in Lyon.\textsuperscript{33} This same late dating applied to the medieval books that Chapelain’s library catalogue listed, for these were not medieval manuscripts, but Renaissance printed

\textsuperscript{32} “Ne soupçonnes-tu point qu’agité du démon, / Ainsi que ce cousin des quatre fils Aimon, / Dont tu lis quelquefois la merveilleuse histoire, / Je rumine en marchant quelque endroit du grimoire? / Mais non: tu te souvien qu’au village on t’a dit / Que ton maître est gagé pour mettre par écrit / Les faits de ce grand roi vanté pour sa vaillance / Plus qu’Ogier le Danois ni Pierre de Provence.” Boileau, \textit{Satires, Epîtres, Art poétique}, 214–15. I cite the last three verses in the original version published in 1696. In later editions, they were replaced with new verses: “Que ton maître est nommé pour coucher par écrit / Les faits d’un roi plus grand en sagesse, en vaillance, / Que Charlemagne aidé des douze pairs de France.”

\textsuperscript{33} On late medieval prose romances and their survival in printed versions, see among others Gaucher and Lestringant, \textit{Topiques romanesques: Récriture des romans médiévaux}. 
books. *Lancelot* was available to Chapelain through a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century printed edition. *Perceforest*, originally composed in the fourteenth century, was also known primarily through its sixteenth-century printed editions. In other words, the medieval literature still known to readers by the end of the seventeenth century was primarily produced during the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, i.e. during the period traditionally described as marking the transition from medieval to humanist modes of writing. As I noted previously, early Enlightenment readers tended to elide the medieval period and what we know today as the Renaissance, a slippage that the evidence from book history also supports.

Finally, the medieval texts Boileau named are also significant for their reference to another category of texts through which late medieval romans were transmitted to the early Enlightenment. This was the so-called *Bibliothèque bleue*, or the series of inexpensive pamphlet literature that was consumed not only by a lower-class or artisan readership, but also by aristocratic readers. Lise Andries has argued that the launching of the *Bibliothèque bleue* by the publishing house of Jean Oudot in the 1660s should be seen as a response to the declining popularity of the chivalric romances, which were being “abandoned by the cultivated public.” Yet if they were a response to a decline, they also made possible a revival of medieval material, as testified by Boileau’s words to his gardener. Andries has thus calculated that of the 21 works of fiction listed in the catalogue drawn up by Nicolas Oudot’s widow at the beginning of the eighteenth century, fifteen were reprintings of abridged late medieval chivalric romances. The texts we most commonly associate today with medieval French fiction, notably Arthurian romance, were absent in this corpus that drew primarily on the Carolingian “matter of France”. Nonetheless the *Bibliothèque bleue* continued to publish several medieval texts well into the eighteenth century, including perennials such as the titles named by Boileau, and other, similar ones such as *Huon de Bordeaux* and *Valentin et Orson*. This was a rich repository that, in the 1680s and 1690s, lay ready for a new revival of elite literary interest in the medieval, providing material for new medievalist authors to draw on. Thus for example, when introducing his verse tale *Grisélidis*, one of the very first fairy tales published in France – a genre that self-consciously drew on medieval models, as I shall explore below – Perrault explicitly mentioned that he was reviving a story that had long lain dormant in the *Bibliothèque bleue*:

> If I had followed all the advice I was given on the work I am sending you, nothing would have remained but the tale, plain and dry, and in that case I would have done better not to touch it and to leave it in *its blue paper* where it has been for so many years.\(^{35}\)

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34 Andries, “La *Bibliothèque bleue* et la redécouverte des romans de chevalerie”, 53.

35 “Si je m’étais rendu à tous les différents avis qui m’ont été donnés sur l’ouvrage que je vous envoie, il n’y serait rien demeuré que le conte tout sec et tout uni, et en ce cas j’aurais mieux fait de n’y pas toucher et de le laisser dans *son papier bleu* où il est depuis tant d’années.” Perrault, “À Monsieur en lui envoyant *Grisélidis*”, in *Contes*, 215.
Perrault further emphasized the enduring popularity of these medieval texts when, mocking his foremost opponent in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, Boileau, he joked that “for all his pride in the sales of his Satires, their sales will never approach those of Jean de Paris, Pierre de Province [sic], La Misère des clercs, La Malice des femmes, nor the least of the almanacs printed in Troyes at the Chapon d’or.”

**Madame de Sévigné, an Early Enlightenment Reader**

Medieval chivalric fiction thus clearly survived, in various more or less bastardized but recognizable forms, into the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, despite a critical discourse that was not always favourable to it. In studying this survival the more interesting question, beyond ascertaining the presence in libraries of these texts, is how they were actually read by contemporary readers. One especially fruitful instrument for exploring this question, as pointed out by book historians, are so-called ego-documents, i.e. correspondences, journals and other autobiographical works, documenting contemporary reading practices. Especially revealing are ego-documents produced by non-professional readers, or readers who were not literary authors in their own right, and whose reading could consequently not be regarded in functional terms. Although, for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, relatively few such documents have survived, there is one extraordinary exception. These are the hundreds of letters that the well-known reader of romans Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, wrote to her friends and family members, especially her daughter Françoise de Grignan in Provence, from the 1670s to the 1690s. In her correspondence, she commented extensively on her daily readings, and sprinkled her letters liberally with citations and references to them. Thus, her letters provide a significant reflection of one individual’s reading habits towards the end of the seventeenth century.

Madame de Sévigné, an aristocrat who lived during the last decades of the classicist reign of Louis XIV, is not typically considered in an eighteenth-century context, but there are nonetheless several compelling reasons to do so here. First of all, Sévigné’s letters appear to offer a reflection of private reading, exemplifying a new interiority – or rather, a separation of private and public realms – that was gaining ground during the early Enlightenment. Like Chapelain’s Lecture, her letters were published only several decades after their original composition – even if a few individual letters had already been reproduced in the printed correspondence of her cousin, the well-known libertine author Roger de Bussy, comte de Rabutin. When Sévigné’s letters did appear in print, in 1725, they struck a new chord with eighteenth-century readers by their emphasis on the private realms of female experience and sensibility (sensibilité). Janet Gurkin Altman has thus argued that “the publication of the Sévigné correspondence constitutes part of a major shift in literary and political focus in the early Enlightenment.”

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66 “Il a beau se glorifier du grand debit que l’on fait de ses Satyres, ce debit n’approchera jamais de celui de Jean de Paris, de Pierre de province [sic], de la Misere des Clercs, de la malice des femmes, ni du moindre des Almanachs imprimez à Troye au Chapon d’or.” Perrault, L’apologie des femmes, 30.

67 Blaak, Literacy in Everyday Life.
– one that, similarly to changes in historical thinking, shifted attention away from classicist universalism “towards the particularities of historical and cultural difference”.38 Both as a reader of medieval and medievalist fiction, and as an aristocrat who engaged with the medieval past in other ways, Sévigné’s case makes evident the link between private reading and more public expressions of literary medievalism.

The medieval, indeed, was far from absent in Sévigné’s correspondence. Excluding contemporary authors to whom she referred in a purely topical manner, for example on the occasion of the performance of their work, chivalric texts and themes held a prominent place among the works she most often cited. After the Bible, which remained the most frequently cited text of all (108 times), the second work she most often cited was Torquato Tasso’s Renaissance retelling of the Crusades, Gerusalemme Liberata (cited 38 times). This was followed by a seventeenth-century “modern classic”, Pierre Corneille’s tragicomedies Le Cid (cited 27 times), and then again by another popular romance, Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (cited 24 times) that offered a Renaissance reworking of the medieval Roland theme. Fifth on the list came Cervantes’s Don Quixote (cited 23 times), and only then the first appearance of a classical text: Virgil’s Aeneid (cited 22 times). In another category came a number of titles that she cited 15 or 16 times in her correspondence: François Rabelais’s Œuvres, Flavius Josephus’s History of the Jews, La Calprenède’s Cléopâtre, and Nicolas Herberay des Essarts’s French translation of the Spanish chivalric romance Amadis de Gaule. Sévigné’s was therefore essentially a French and Italian-language culture, and the absence of Homer and of classical authors other than Virgil – whom she read in French translation – was noteworthy. Most visibly, the focus on narrative fiction privileged texts that emphasized notions of chivalry, ranging from Herberay des Essarts’s popular Amadis de Gaule to the pseudo-chivalric epics of Tasso and Ariosto, but including also Cervantes’s seminal critique of the genre in Don Quixote.

Just as importantly, although it is not immediately evident from the this list, Sévigné also had some knowledge of medieval literary texts in the strictest sense of the word, i.e. works composed before 1000. Thus, in her correspondence she referenced the Roman de la Rose, Philippe de Commynes’s Mémoires,39 and “Patelin”, the protagonist of the eponymous fifteenth-century farce.40 She also mentioned Archbishop Turpin from the cycle of Roland, known during this period not through the original chanson the geste (which was rediscovered only in the 1830s) but through the pseudo-Turpin’s widely available Historia Caroli Magni.41 In addition, Sévigné alluded to characters she more probably knew in these years not through original medieval texts, but through their later incarnations in the Bibliothèque bleue, including the fairy Mélusine,42 and Jean de Paris.43 Finally, in addition to these explicit references, Sévigné and her correspondents also made more implicit references to vernacular, medieval romans. Thus,

39 Sévigné, Correspondance, II, 635.
40 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 288.
41 Sévigné, Correspondance, II, 146; III, 799.
42 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 150, 154, 158, 169, 172, 191, 206.
43 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 302.
Survivals

echoing Boileau’s allusion to *Pierre de Provence*, Sévigné’s correspondence too contains numerous references – in total, some thirty mentions between 1675 and 1691 – to “the beautiful Madelonne”, “the beautiful Maguelonne” or even “poor Madelonne in her castle in Provence”, i.e. the famous object of Pierre de Provence’s amorous quest. Living her life like a novel or even a medieval chivalric romance, Sévigné referred to her own daughter as “Madelonne” in her correspondence with her cousin, Roger de Bussy-Rabutin, apparently in reference to her new dwelling-place in Provence. Françoise de Grignan’s husband, by extension, became Pierre de Provence, as he is designated in some letters.44 Other such references to characters from works of chivalric fiction, projected onto living people, abound. Sévigné mentioned a lapdog named Marphise, after a character in Ariosto’s epic,45 compared a female correspondent to princess Olympia (again in Ariosto),46 and referred to her daughter’s château at Grignan as Apollidon’s castle (from *Amadis de Gaule*).47

Moving beyond these textual references to specific *romans*, Sévigné’s correspondence was marked also by a whole series of references to the more generally “romanesque”, or that which was felt to be typical of the plots and themes of romance. Fiction and real life were easily confused in Sévigné’s reports of her family’s doings. Writing, for example, of a family member’s valiant actions during Louis XIV’s Dutch campaign, she typically commented that “the duc de Sault, the chevalier de Grignan and their cavalry have distinguished themselves, and the English above all have done *romanesque* things”.48 Real-life family members, in this case, were seen to have acted like the protagonists of heroic novels, or of chivalric epics such as Tasso’s. In another instance, referring to the return from a diplomatic mission in Vienna of the son of a friend, Sévigné wrote:

> [Providence] has decided, for example, that our cousin from Germany be novelistically (*romanesquement*) transplanted, and apparently very happy. We cannot read the cards at all, but after all it is Providence that has led him along such extraordinary paths, and so far from allowing us to guess the end of the novel (*la fin du roman*), that one cannot draw any conclusion from it, nor reproach oneself for it.49

In such descriptions, life itself was presented as a kind of novel, in a highly original use of the characteristically late seventeenth-century metaphor of the book of the world that invoked not the book of Scripture, but medievalist fiction instead as the ultimate

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44 Sévigné, *Correspondance*, II, 604. *This letter was written by Bussy-Rabutin.*
47 Sévigné, *Correspondance*, I, 278; II, 836; III, 583.
48 “Le duc de Sault, le chevalier de Grignan et leur cavalerie se sont distingués, et les Anglais surtout ont fait des choses *romanesques*.” Sévigné, *Correspondance*, II, 43, my emphasis.
reference-point for making sense of the world. Sévigné used this idea of life as fiction most powerfully in the many letters she wrote about the flight of James II from England following the English revolution of 1689, which brought the Protestant stadholder William of Orange and his wife Mary to the throne instead. It is perhaps an indication of the impression these events made on the aristocrat Sévigné that she consistently described them in terms of her favourite reading material, the chivalric romances of Herberay des Essarts, Tasso and Ariosto. Indeed, this recourse to the world of fiction appeared symptomatic of observers facing completely new situations or events. Just as, two centuries earlier, the Spanish conquistadors had imaginatively populated America with characters and place names from chivalric fiction, even naming California after Amadis, so too Sévigné, confronted by the unprecedented and unthinkable – the revolutionary overthrow of a legitimate ruler – could describe it only in terms of fiction. The English king’s flight, Sévigné characteristically wrote, “will make a novel (roman) one day.” Finishing up her description of how the duc de Lauzun brought the English queen to safety in France, she remarked that this was “the first volume of the novel (roman), of which you will immediately have the sequel.”

Because these events seemed to come straight out of romance, they were marked by their “romanesque” quality. Thus when Lauzun started to fall out of favour, she remarked that “people have taken away the romanèsque and the marvellous (le roman- esque et le merveilleux) from his adventure; it has become almost all plain. Behold the world and the times.” Her remarks established a clear opposition between the present day, where everything was plain, and a past full of adventure, or the aventure that was one of the characteristic traits of medieval romance. The link to medievalist romance was again explicit in her description of the situation of the exiled English king and queen in Saint-Germain:

These Majesties have accepted, of everything the King wanted to give them, but fifty thousand francs a month, and do not at all want to live like kings. Quite a number of Englishmen have joined them; without them, they would have been content with even less. In short, they have decided to live frugally. They reminded me at first of my dear romances (mes chers romans), but there should be some enjoyment in the game.

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50 On eighteenth-century uses of this metaphor, see my “Naturalizing the Commonplace: New Readings of Tasso”.
51 Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 428.
52 Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 444.
53 “L’étoile de M. de Lauzun repâlit. Il n’a point de logement, il n’a point ses anciennes entrées. On lui a ôté le romanèsque et le merveilleux de son aventure; elle est devenue quasi tout une. Voilà le monde et le temps.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 473.
54 “Ces Majestés n’ont accepté de tout ce que le Roi voulait leur donner que cinquante mille francs par mois, et ne veulent point vivre comme rois. Il leur est venu bien des Anglais; sans cela, ils se seraient contenta-tés encore de moins. Enfin, ils ont résolu de faire vie qui dure. Ils montent souvent d’abord de mes chers romans, mais il faudrait un peu d’amour sur le jeu.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 486.
In this letter, she alluded to her previous accounts of these same events, in which she had drawn a parallel between characters from *Amadis de Gaule* and personages in the royal entourage. These examples make clear that as much as precise textual references, elements from medieval or medievalist fiction functioned in Sévigné's correspondence as basic building blocks in her representation of her social world. Medieval romance was perceived in this period not necessarily in terms of textuality, but in more diffuse, performative ways.

At the same time, Sévigné's letters reveal a last meaning of the term *roman* that needs to be noted. Besides its reference to a narrative genre or to the vernacular language of composition, *roman* denoted too a highly colourful or adventurous situation or character, typically found in texts of chivalric fiction. Adjectivized as *romanesque*, the term was, in the course of the eighteenth century, eventually replaced by the new term *romantique*. Used initially as a simple synonym of *romanesque* to describe an unusual situation that seemed to come out of a novel or a romance, the meaning of *romantique* however gradually evolved, too. By the 1770s, when Rousseau used the term in his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, the term *romantique* was acquiring new, strongly anti-classicist connotations of wildness or nature. Describing the landscape of his native Switzerland, Rousseau famously wrote that “the shores of the lake of Bienna are wilder and more *romantic* than those of Lake Geneva”, thereby giving the term *romantique* the additional meaning of wildness, purity or (medieval) barbarism, i.e. the contrary of eighteenth-century, refined civilization. In short, this evolution testifies to the linguistic filiation between late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century definitions of the *roman* as both a medievalist genre and a language or narrative content, and the nineteenth-century literary movement that called itself romantic, and that defined itself in part by foregrounding the medieval.

**Renaissance Models: Herberay des Essarts’s *Amadis***

Beyond the allusions to “the beautiful Madelonne” and other characters from medieval chivalric fiction, either mediated through the *Bibliothèque bleue* or through more direct readings, Sévigné's choices as reader are typical of her epoch in that three works in particular stand out: Nicolas de Herberay des Essarts's extremely popular translation of the fifteenth-century Castilian chivalric novel *Amadis de Gaula*; Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, a richly textured Renaissance pastiche of narratives recounting the exploits of the eponymous French knight; and Torquato Tasso's medievalist epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), that Sévigné – like, presumably, many of her contemporaries – read in the Italian original. Although all of these texts had clear links to medieval models, only the first of them was nominally medieval itself. Within the context of the common elision during this period of the Middle Ages with the

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56 To these titles could possibly be added a fourth one: Honoré d’Urfé’s early seventeenth-century pastoral romance *L’Astrée*, which Sévigné also frequently referenced, and which played an important role in early Enlightenment conceptualizations of the medieval.
Renaissance, it was again Renaissance texts that most fully embodied the idea of the medieval for early eighteenth-century readers.

In early modern and Enlightenment French medievalism, a central role was played by Herberay des Essarts’s *Amadis*. *Amadis* and its sequels fulfilled for French readers the same function that Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* had, for Italian readers, in helping crystallize notions and definitions of the *roman* genre itself. References to and rewritings of the French *Amadis de Gaule* remained ubiquitous during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. First published in Spanish around 1500 by Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo, but certainly drawing on older sources (fragments dating from the fourteenth century have been identified), *Amadis* was translated and adapted in France by Nicolas de Herberay, seigneur des Essarts, in 1540–1548, as *Amadis de Gaule*, and subsequently spawned numerous continuations and imitations, until the 1620s at least, when the stream of publications finally dried up. Herberay des Essarts’s *Amadis* became one of the great bestsellers of the sixteenth century and enjoyed special popularity at court, with Francis I named in some accounts as the instigator of the French adaptation. As a work of modern fiction, *Amadis de Gaule* was read both as a *roman à clef* and as a novelized courtesy manual in the same spirit as Castiglione’s *Corteggiano*. Its readership, characteristically, was often identified as a female one. According to Marian Rothstein, “contemporary testimony repeatedly declares that the novel appealed to ladies, but except when they are manifest readers, as dedicatees, they have disappointingly left no trace of their responses”. When eighteenth-century French readers read *Amadis*, they turned therefore not to the Castilian original, but to Herberay des Essarts’s more accessible and more refined translation-adaptation. The book’s medieval character lay not primarily in its dating – Des Essarts’s version was an unapologetically modern reworking – but in the half-nostalgic image it gave of past chivalric society.

The centrality of Des Essarts’s romance in the early Enlightenment medievalist revival is reflected in the artistic event that most visibly marked its beginning: the creation and performance of the first of three medievalist operas by the librettist Philippe Quinault and the composer Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Amadis* (later renamed *Amadis de Gaule*) in January 1684, at the Palais-Royal theatre in Paris. This opera marked a major turning-point in Quinault and Lully’s highly successful career as Louis XIV’s more or less official librettist-composer team. The opera, as I noted in the previous chapter, had an immense impact, spawning numerous parodies, imitations, and new performances well into the following century, with the last recorded eighteenth-century performance in 1759. Following upon its success, Quinault and Lully decisively turned their backs on the classical subjects that had, until then, been the mainstay of French opera or *tragédie lyrique*. *Amadis* was swiftly followed by *Roland* (based on Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*) in 1685, and finally *Armide* (based on Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*) in 1686. The importance of these three productions in the history of French medievalism can

57 Cappello, “Aux origines de la réflexion française sur le roman”.
58 Because of the large number of *Amadis*-related texts, it would be more correct to refer to *Amadis* in the plural than to the singular *Amadis de Gaule*.
59 Rothstein, *Reading the Renaissance*, 115.
hardly be overstated, for they helped bring about a critical turn in aesthetic sensibilities that would be further played out in the eighteenth century.

Tradition has it that Amadis was composed on the express orders of Louis XIV himself, reflecting a change in royal self-representations, and a turn towards medieval models in addition to classical ones. It certainly was not the first time that an attempt had been made to introduce into opera a subject taken from Herberay des Essarts’s novel. In 1679 the lesser-known composer Louvat had already written an Urgande, a “tragedy ornamented with ballet entries”, also composed, according to the title page, “at the express command of the king”. But it was thanks to Quinault and Lully that the public developed a new taste for the story of Amadis, which had sunk into relative oblivion since the first half of the seventeenth century. Described as an opera created on the margins of the novel,60 it was marked by a conscious modernization of the medieval matter. Besides introducing new characters, such as the magician Alquis, as the husband of the sorceress Urgande, Quinault altered the chronology, and significantly modified the events described in the novel. More noticeably still, he suppressed all representations or detailed allusions to combats, i.e. one of the defining traits of the medieval genre of chivalric romance – although one which, in Renaissance rewritings, was already being pushed to the background. Instead, Quinault subtly nationalized the medieval narrative, a change that may certainly explain the royal favour his opera enjoyed, but which was in itself not particularly new. It had already played an important role, in the sixteenth-century Amadis de Gaule, in Des Essarts’s version of the primal scene of medievalism. Describing his discovery of the “remains of an old book”, the author figure included transparent allusions to contemporary humanist discourse:

It is certain that Amadis was first put into our French language, since Amadis is Gallic (Gaulois), and not Spanish. And that this is so is shown by the fact that I found some remains of an old book written by hand in the Picard language, on which I surmise the Spanish made their translation, not at all following the true original, as can be seen by it, since they left out some parts, and augmented other ones.61

The old manuscript from Picardy was, according to Des Essarts’s modern editor, an invention of his, that therefore had little historical significance. What mattered was that by showcasing his original, ancient sources, Des Essarts – like Nostredame after him – was offering a pastiche of humanistic practices, and proposing medievalism as a form of anti-classicism, a century before the participants in the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns were again to reiterate the same discursive moves. Amadis then, although nominally a medieval romance, was very much the product of humanism. Just as

60 Gros, Philippe Quinault: Sa vie et son œuvre, 567.
importantly, the fiction of a *Galic* manuscript implied, too, a proto-nationalist cultural discourse opposing French claims to originality to Spanish ones – a patriotic element that was to retain its importance in subsequent medievalist elaborations, including eighteenth-century ones.

In his libretto for the opera *Amadis*, Philippe Quinault introduced several references to the cultural superiority France had attained under Louis XIV. Playing into the patriotic discourse that the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns was shortly going to relaunch – Perrault’s reading of his *Siècle de Louis le Grand* took place in 1687, three years after *Amadis*’s creation – Quinault gave shape to a homegrown, medieval antiquity as an alternative to the classical heritage hitherto celebrated by the Ancients. Monarchical discourse during this period was beginning to question Ancient values and was “looking for a national mythology”, and so *Amadis* also contributed substantially to transforming the modes of representation of the royal state. Jean-Marie Apostolidès has signalled an increasing change of focus, in representations of Louis XIV, whereby the king gradually began to turn away from his traditional representation as a mythological figure from antiquity, and preferred to be portrayed instead in the garb of a hero from France’s national history, as the heir of great medieval warrior kings such as Charlemagne, or celebrated monarchs like Saint Louis. As an expansionist king, who sought to increase France’s territory through military and political means, Louis in addition worked to propagate a distinctly French identity in France’s new border regions. The medieval past thus provided the ideal material with which to construct such a new, national state identity.

This monarchical appropriation of the medieval past naturally focused on figures and representations of kingship, in marked contrast to other representations of the medieval that, as I shall discuss below, instead underscored an aristocratic worldview. Official, state-sanctioned literary productions proposed idealized images of royal authority. Opera played the leading role in this process, due to the fact that it was closely controlled by the state and because, as a multimedia genre, it reached a vast audience through means other than textual. Operas were not only the object of numerous public performances, but their subjects were relayed through other media, including publications of the librettos, the periodical press and individual songs that, extracted from the opera scores, made their way into popular culture, sometimes well beyond Versailles and the Parisian sphere of influence. In the libretto of *Amadis*, the patriotic discourse that equated medieval heroes with the present-day king was made most explicit in the prologue, where Quinault had the sorceress Urgande sing:

> Let us remove Amadis from eternal night.  
> The heavens allow this, a new fate is calling him

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64 For a detailed discussion of monarchical appropriations of medieval performance, see Roussillon, *Plaisir et pouvoir*.
Where his blood formerly reigned.65

These verses referred to Louis XIV, who was portrayed as the descendant of the medieval chivalric hero Amadis, king of Gaule. (Further emphasizing this fact, later versions of the opera added de Gaule to the original title.) In addition, the prologue’s reference elsewhere to “pleasant climes” (des climats heureux) has been read as an allusion to Louis’s expansionary military policies.66 Of course, some geographical adjustment was needed to make this genealogy possible, for Amadis was now considered no longer as the king of Gaula in the Spanish original, i.e. Wales, but of the French Gaule, i.e. the territory roughly corresponding, in late seventeenth-century popular historical conceptions, to present-day France. This interpretation, which made of Amadis a French knight and of Amadis de Gaule an originally French text, was adopted by subsequent French commentators right until the end of the eighteenth century. Thus is 1787, in his Traduction libre d’Amadis de Gaule, the foremost representative of the new style troubadour, the comte de Tressan, straightforwardly declared – lack of evidence notwithstanding – that “we owe Amadis de Gaule to one of our novelists (Romanciers) from the end of the reign of Louis the Young or Philip Augustus.”67

But Quinault’s verses also referred more directly to the librettist and composer’s achievement in “removing Amadis from eternal night”, i.e. in making his story known again to an audience that had, perhaps, lost familiarity with the medieval text. By resuscitating Amadis and by integrating him into a new, French pantheon, Urgande became a fictional double of Quinault and Lully themselves. Just as the sorceress Urgande brought back to life a hero held to be dead, the composer and librettist, acting like literary sorcerers, resuscitated a work of chivalric fiction that had fallen into neglect. This was, once again, an allusion to the primal scene of every medievalist revival: that of the literal rediscovery of an ancient medieval text or manuscript. For Quinault and Lully’s Amadis really did send French readers to their libraries, where they dusted off their old editions of chivalric tales and discovered them anew. Although before 1684 Madame de Sévigné had repeatedly referred to her daughter’s “castle of Apollidon” and to “the glory of Niquée”; both alluding to details in Amadis, in a series of letters from October 1694, her cousin Philippe-Emmanuel de Coulanges described to her how at that date he really did rediscover a complete sixteenth-century edition of Amadis in the back of a cabinet in his chateau at Ancy-le-Franc:

Only yesterday, in a new adventure,
Gradafilée with a benign air
Appeared before us, with her shield-bearer
Busando the dwarf, all alone
She came to warn Madame
That in this chateau, the finest in these parts,

65 “Retirons Amadis de la Nuit éternelle. / Le Ciel nous le permet, un sort nouveau l’appelle / Où son sang régnait autrefois.” Quinault, Amadis, 154.
66 Cornic, “Ad limina templis Polymniae”, 53.
An old Clermont (God take his soul!)
Had hidden the good man Amadis.
We sought him, and could not believe it
But the giantess, instructed about the treasure
Showed it to us in the back of a closet
Where it has slept for over a hundred years.\textsuperscript{68}

In a series of three songs intended to be sung to well-known tunes of the day, Coulanges described in detail the actual finding, dusting off and reading of the twenty-four volumes of the original \textit{Amadis}. The references to characters from the romance in his song – Gradafilée, Busando and the hero Amadis – underlined the fact that it was real readings, rather than hearsay, that were now called for. Further emphasizing this point, he added to Sévigné that “if you don’t know \textit{Amadis}, it is Greek that I am sending you.”\textsuperscript{69} Thus, while the scene of discovery of an old book or manuscript was itself a \textit{topos} in medievalist fiction – as in Herberay’s \textit{Amadis} itself – in the 1680s and 1690s, it also reflected a new reality: that of numerous readers who were, indeed, now physically rediscovering old volumes of chivalric romance and viewing them in a fresh light.

\textbf{The Creation of Modern Classics: Tasso’s \textit{Gerusalemme Liberata}}

In contrast to the active rediscovery of \textit{Amadis} during the 1680s and 1690s, other works of chivalric romance remained more easily accessible to the late seventeenth-century reading public through modern re-editions. This was the case, especially, for the two great Italian Renaissance classics of Tasso and Ariosto, \textit{Gerusalemme Liberata} and \textit{Orlando Furioso}. These texts functioned as major reference-points in early Enlightenment medievalism, in ways that are illustrated, once again, by Madame de Sévigné’s correspondence. Sévigné was an avid reader especially of Tasso’s \textit{Gerusalemme Liberata}, many of whose passages she knew by heart and repeatedly cited in her letters to her daughter. Assuming that these readings are indeed representative of broader trends towards the end of the seventeenth century, this would suggest that, for some readers at least, medieval texts were by these decades acquiring the position of new, “modern classics”.

Madame de Sévigné’s letters reveal a series of citational practices that are strongly reminiscent of medieval and humanist commonplacing, or the convention of using citations drawn from classical authors as rhetorical tools conferring authority to the viewpoints expressed. She drew her pseudo-commonplaces, however, not from classical literature, as her predecessors had done, but from modern texts, thereby transferring commonplace modes of reading from Latin texts onto vernacular, chivalric fiction. In

\textsuperscript{68} “Encore hier, aventure nouvelle / Gradafilée avec un air benin / Nous apparut, et n’avait avec elle, / Pour écuyer, que Busando, le nain. / Elle venait pour avertir Madame / Qu’en ce château, le plus beau du pays, / Un vieux Clermont (Dieu veuille avoir son âme!) / Avait caché le bonhomme Amadis. / Nous le cherchons, et ne le pouvons croire; / Mais la géante, instruite du trésor, / Nous le fait voir dans le fond d’une armoire, / Où pour le moins depuis cent ans il dort.” Sévigné, \textit{Correspondance}, III, 1646.

\textsuperscript{69} “Si vous ne connaissez point l’\textit{Amadis}, c’est du grec que je vous envoie”. Sévigné, \textit{Correspondance}, III, 1066.
doing so, she was adopting practices that had been developed during the earlier, Italian phase of the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, when humanist critics had proclaimed certain contemporary works of chivalric fiction – particularly, the chivalric epics of Ariosto and Tasso – to be “modern classics” that, like the Latin-language classics of Antiquity, were suitable for commonplacing. In Italy, as Daniel javitch has shown, Ariosto was excerpted with gusto by compilers of florilegia or anthologies of Imprese, which provided readers with pithy sayings and phrases with which to enrich their own rhetorical efforts. In France, following the Italian example, similar conventions developed. Referring to Amadis de Gaule, Étienne Pasquier, in his Recherches de la France, praised it as a “romance in which you can pick all the fine flowers of our French language”. The active practice of commonplacing chivalric fiction was exemplified by seventeenth-century commonplace anthologies such as the Trésor des Amadis and the Fleurs du bien dire, which excerpted quotable phrases respectively from Herberay des Essarts’s Amadis and from Honoré d’Urfé’s immensely popular medievalist pastoral L’Astrée.

Adopting these commonplacing practices as her own, Sévigné especially frequently chose to reference Tasso. Thus for example, commenting on her daughter’s description of Marseille with its galériens or chains of labouring convicts easily brought to mind a verse from his Gerusalemme Liberata:

What! men moaning day and night under the weight of their chains! … I have this image in my head,

E di mezzo l’horrore esce il dilettò.

The verse’s commonplace nature, incidentally, was demonstrated by the fact that it was cited also by other contemporary authors, including Dominique Bouhours in his bestselling Entretiens d’Ariste et d’ Eugène (1671), published in the same year as the writing of Sévigné’s letter. Similarly, when an acquaintance’s husband died (possibly as the result of poisoning), Sévigné responded by adapting another verse from Tasso:

The other day I went to visit poor Madame Matharel; she thought to burst into tears: pietoso pianse al suo pianto.

The imprecise nature of many of these citations clearly demonstrated that these were verses Madame de Sévigné knew by heart, and did not have to actively look up when writing to her correspondents. In her readings, Tasso’s epic appeared thus less
as a fixed text, than as part of a larger field of cultural, citational practices. At the same time, these commonplacings practices acquired new polemical value within the context of the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns. It was around Tasso, especially, that critical debate on literary medievalism often coalesced. By the end of the seventeenth century, the use of certain works of chivalric fiction as vernacular classics was so well established that Boileau, as arbiter of classicist taste, felt the need to condemn his contemporaries’ tendency to prefer “the glitter (clinquant) of Tasso to all the gold of Virgil.”76 Following the example set by Boileau’s criticism of Tasso’s glitter (clinquant), Bouhours in turn mocked a fictional character, Philante, for likewise also preferring Tasso to Homer and Virgil:

\[\text{As for Philante, all that is flowery, all that glitters, charms him. The Greeks and the Romans in his opinion are not equal to the Spaniards and the Italians. He admires among others Lope de Vega and Tasso; and he is so taken with the Gerusalemme Liberata that he prefers it distinctly to the Iliad and the Aeneid.77}\]

Tasso was here characterized, in an assessment that was itself becoming a commonplace by this date, as both flowery and glittering (qui brille). Playing on the early Enlightenment concept of light, the false light of the medieval was presented as the opposite of the more sober, restrained ideal of classicism. In opposing Tasso to Homer in 1687, the same year in which Perrault’s Siècle de Louis le Grand appeared, Philante was also describing a well-known standpoint in the Quarrel.78 Seeking to position themselves against the great names of classicism, the Moderns turned to non-classical and even medieval or medievalist themes and authors in search of poetic inspiration, as Boileau and Bouhours’s comparison between Tasso and the classical authors Homer and Virgil became a cliché of critical discourse. To the aesthetic provocation of chivalric romance, whose increasing visibility was exemplified in the 1680s by Quinault and Lully’s medievalist operas, Boileau replied by condemning not only the genre of opera – which, having no classical antecedents, he considered unworthy of inclusion in the literary canon – but also by taking aim at what he saw as the moral depravity of this new literature. Criticizing Quinault and Lully’s Armide et Renaud, Boileau referred mockingly to “all those commonplaces of lewd morality, / That Lully warmed over with his music.”79 This moral argument was central to the Ancient standpoint. Medievalist fiction was guilty of practising easy rhetoric, producing false glitter or clinquant rather than literature that rang true. Even more seriously, this false glitter could entice readers away from the path of true light (read: Christian virtue). In his famous

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76 Boileau, “Satire IX”, in Satires, Épîtres, Art poétique, 111.
77 “[Pour Philante, tout ce qui est fleuri, tout ce qui brille, le charme. Les Grecs & les Romains ne valent pas à son gré les Espagnols & les Italiens. Il admire entr’ autres Lope de Vegue & le Tasse; & il est si entêté de la Gierusalemme [sic] liberata qu’il la préfere sans façon à l’Iliade & à l’Enéide.” Bouhours, La Manière de bien penser, 2.
78 For an overview of the role Tasso played during the Quarrel, see Simpson, Le Tasse et la littérature et l’art baroques, 112–27, 136–42.
79 “Tous ces lieux communs de morale lubrique, / Que Lulli réchauffa de sa musique.” Boileau, Satires, Épîtres, Art poétique, 127.
“Satire X”, reiterating the moral argument that had been made against romans at least since Dante, Boileau described the corruption of a young, convent-schooled girl, led astray by Quinault and Lully’s medievalist opera:

But by what movements excited in her heart
Will she feel all her senses being agitated?
I cannot guarantee that upon returning, less timid,
And now a worthy pupil of Angelica and Armida,
She will not at once, filled by these sweet sounds,
Go practice her lessons with some Medoro.\(^{80}\)

The conjunction of romans, chivalric fiction, and the operatic works they inspired with moral depravity and sexual desire was one of the central arguments in the debate that opposed medievalists and anti-medievalists. By evoking, alongside Ariosto’s Angelica, the pagan temptress Armida from Tasso’s Gerusalemme, Boileau irrevocably associated chivalric fiction with the arts of seduction, in a contest that hinged on the notion of authority itself. Indeed, while the Moderns invoked chivalric fiction as a means to question the authority of classical antiquity, the Ancients replied, with unabashed anachronism, with the authority of Christian morality. Crucially, Modern usages of chivalric fiction demonstrated that commonplacing the medieval did not imply a simple return to tradition, but on the contrary, a critical stance that opened up new intellectual possibilities for early Enlightenment authors.

Opening Literature to New Social Groups
Madame de Sévigné’s practice of commonplacing was finally also linked to two other, related factors: the literary conventions of her chosen genre, the letter, and the possibilities that medievalism offered relatively uneducated outsiders like the female Sévigné to participate in literary culture. The letter genre, which Sévigné practised, was characterized by its traditional reliance on commonplaces, or readymade blocks of text that could be incorporated into the new letter. In Sévigné’s day, this was reflected by the existence of an entire subgenre of manuals of epistolary rhetoric drawing on the medieval *ars dictaminis*, and providing readers with usable lists of epistolary commonplaces, as described by Ann Moss:

The commonplace-book formula is here incorporated into French-language manuals of epistolary rhetoric, which, besides the model phrases (now hardly quotations), arranged under heads which point both to abstract concepts and to stratagems for argument, also include model love letters, sometimes arranged in a narrative sequence, like an embryonic novel. Letter-writing was the most “elementary” form of composition. Significantly, these rather ramshackle

collections are directed to a female readership literate in the vernacular, as well as to men.\textsuperscript{81}

Interestingly, Moss suggests here that the vernacularizing of the commonplace-book was accompanied by a feminization of the genre, and an association with the novel or roman. This point indeed appears borne out by Madame de Sévigné’s epistolary practice. Even before she had begun writing her letters, women had increasingly been considered – on little empirical evidence – to be the most accomplished letter-writers.\textsuperscript{82} This was because letters were felt to be the expression of “natural” sentiments, even amorous passions – such as, most famously, the one immortalized in the epistolary exchange between the medieval nun Héloïse and her lover Abélard, discussed in chapter 5 – that were part of the private rather than public realm. The literary aesthetic that letters represented was thus the same one associated, in critical discourse, with the medievalist genre of the roman, thereby facilitating the further elision of medievalism with a distinctly female audience.

Commonplacing practices, applied now to vernacular fiction, acquired a new function in salon culture that provided openings to several classes of outsiders hitherto held at arm’s length by the established literary institutions: bourgeois authors, but also, most notably, women.\textsuperscript{83} The salons with which women writers like Sévigné were associated functioned, in many ways, as an informal counterpart to the royal academies established in the second half of the seventeenth century, and which worked by exclusion as much as by inclusion.\textsuperscript{84} A writer like Madame de Sévigné came to literature not through the traditional, Latin-based cursus, which was closed to women, but as an autodidact. Consequently, her literary education was essentially grounded in salon culture, which claimed to reject the learned, pedantic style associated with the academies in favour of a more natural, spontaneous style. Her “classical” language was not Latin, which she read only with difficulty, but rather Italian, and it was to Italian authors and literary models that she consistently turned. Yet at the same time, because of her status as autodidact, commonplaces would also have held a particular attraction for her, as an easy way to acquire the mechanics of literary composition. Commonplace thinking therefore played an ambiguous role within salon culture. Belying his criticism of the commonplace book, “which smelled too much of the classroom”,\textsuperscript{85} a salon luminary such as Dominique Bouhours still drew on commonplaces in his bestselling Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit (1687). Another important figure for nascent salon culture, Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt, produced new commonplace books even while explicitly condemning the genre. Chivalric fiction, in other words, by furnishing salon culture with many of its commonplaces, played a vital role in the literary socialization of a new class of authors who – like Madame de Sévigné – would deeply mark

\textsuperscript{81} Moss, Printed commonplace-books, 263.

\textsuperscript{82} Longino Farrell, Performing Motherhood, 28–56.

\textsuperscript{83} On salon culture as an instrument of social mobility for the educated bourgeoisie, see Lougee, Le Paradis des Femmes.

\textsuperscript{84} DeJean, “The Salons, ‘Preciosity’, and the Sphere of Women’s Influence”.

\textsuperscript{85} “Qui sentoit trop son Colège”. Cited in Moss, Printed commonplace-books, 261.
the literary culture of the eighteenth century, and would indeed themselves become sources for new commonplacing practices. Upon their publication in 1725, Sévigné’s letters rapidly assumed the status themselves of modern classics, and more often than any others, her letters were excerpted and incorporated into new commonplace manuals, or reproduced in extenso in manuals of epistolary rhetoric.  

Aristocratic Medievalisms

The possibilities the medieval roman and romanesque material offered as a tool facilitating the socialization of hitherto marginal groups worked both ways, however. Viewed from the standpoint of royal power, medievalism equally provided a tool to co-opt the ancient nobility or noblesse d’épée into the national state, by presenting its chivalric past as a model to be imitated by the entire nation. In co-opting medievalist representations, Louis XIV was thus also seeking to redefine or tame a potentially subversive aristocratic element. In new, state-sanctioned representations of royal power, such as Quinault and Lully’s medievalist operas, the ancient nobility was represented in obeisance to the king, rather than – as they themselves would have it – as an independent group that had freely elected him from among their own midst. At the same time, because chivalric fiction was also associated with popular culture, mediated by the Bibliothèque bleue, the promotion of its themes and protagonists to the quasi-official status of national ideology facilitated the inclusion in the state imagery of other groups that had until then occupied marginal or unofficial positions. These included women, who did not have access to the official education provided by the well-known, royal collèges but were considered avid readers of romance, and also the provincial bourgeoisie, whose literary culture was limited at best, but was felt to have affinities with the popular fiction and religiosity of the readers of the Bibliothèque bleue. Finally, peasants too, as well as members of the “popular classes”, although not actually included in the state apparatus in any meaningful way (except as subjects of taxation), did see their literary culture partially absorbed into official representations of kingship and the national state. This occurred both through the creation of new genres such as the fairy tale – examined in the following chapter – but also by the inclusion of elements and historic figures from the Bibliothèque bleue corpus into absolutist self-representations.

Literary medievalism therefore acted paradoxically as a new source of cultural capital that could be mobilized both by the absolutist state, but also by hitherto marginalized groups seeking entry into the literary field. This double-edged character was, at the same time, fundamentally troubled by medievalism’s historic association with the ethos of another specific social group: the ancient aristocracy or noblesse d’épée. Long-standing aristocratic practices viewed continuities between the medieval and the (early) modern, at the most basic level, in family, personal terms. Aristocratic readers such as Madame de Sévigné experienced the Middle Ages as a defining element in their own genealogical identity, because belonging to the ancient nobility rested on family histories that went back to a medieval, chivalric past. Yet under Louis XIV, the ancient aristocracy underwent an identity crisis, as the Sun King tightened his control over
the absolutist state by creating a new aristocracy loyal to him, the so-called noblesse de robe, and by increasingly depriving aristocratic families of their traditional prerogatives. Aristocratic women such as Sévigné, it has been argued, were particularly conscious of their loss of influence following upon the aristocracy’s last stand against royal power during the Fronde period of civil unrest.  

Within this context, it was hardly surprising that questions of medieval ancestry came again to the fore. The ancient nobility appealed to the medieval to counter the growing influence of the more recent noblesse de robe, whose ranks were rapidly growing with the expansion of the absolutist state. Called upon on the one hand by Louis XIV to back up their claims to nobility with written proofs, members of the old aristocracy developed a heightened interest in medieval charters, genealogies, and chivalric orders – an interest in turn facilitated by Mabillon’s recent work in diplomacy. More importantly, on the other hand, some aristocrats developed a new nostalgia for the Middle Ages, a period that was perceived to potentially provide an ideological alternative to the present age of royal absolutism.

Madame de Sévigné was, in this sense, a typical aristocratic reader. Throughout her letters, she came back time and again to the subject of her own family genealogy, as well as that of the even more illustrious family her daughter had married into, the ancient Provençal house of Adhémar. Among her earliest extant writings are a series of letters she addressed to her cousin Roger de Bussy-Rabutin commenting on the family genealogy he spent many years compiling, and that established the family’s ancestry back to a famous founding ancestor, Mayeul de Rabutin, in 1118. The key notion when speaking of this family history was that of chivalry (chevalerie). Thus Sévigné noted that the Rabutin genealogy encompassed “three hundred and fifty years of chivalry”, or, on a more proprietary note, she lightly referred to “our fine and ancient chivalry.” The Rabutins compared their own family’s ancient provenance (ancienneté) to that of their aristocratic friends, as for example when, on a visit in 1687, they established that their cousin Madame de Coligny’s ancestry, like theirs, also went back to the twelfth century. Chivalry was an attribute uniting all aristocratic families. Upon the death of the great aristocratic man of letters François de Beauvillier, duc de Saint-Aignan (who had participated in the 1684 exchange of verses on the bon vieux temps discussed in the previous chapter), Sévigné thus consoled her cousin by writing that “he loved you faithfully. You were his brother in arms, and chivalry united you.” Ever critically assessing their contemporaries’ claims to nobility, aristocrats like Sévigné actively entertained a very long historical memory, enabling her for example to note approvingly, in a letter mentioning the magistrate Jean-Aymar Nicolaï, that “he is the eighth first president of the Chambre des comptes, and he was already a gentleman when he was given the post

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87 DeJean, Tender Geographies.
88 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 106.
89 “Notre belle et ancienne chevalerie.” Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 159. See also III, 219.
90 Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 306.
as a reward by King Philip Augustus” – i.e. in the twelfth century. That the genealogy, unknown to Sévigné, was not entirely accurate, was less important than the prestige it conferred to the Nicolaï family, for fact and fiction mingled easily, making the notion of medieval chivalry bleed into a language more commonly associated with fiction. Thus when addressing her daughter and recommending to her a favourite historical work, Louis Maimbourg’s *Histoire des Croisades pour la délivrance de la Terre Sainte* (1675–1676), Sévigné stressed the link between family history and medievalist fiction: “You should read the *Croisades*. You would see there one Aimar de Monteil and one Castellane, at your choosing; they are heroes. One wants to reread Tasso when one has read that book.” As the slippage from a work of history – Maimbourg’s *Croisades* – to one of fiction demonstrates, the relation to the medieval past described in Tasso’s chivalric fiction was exceptionally direct for aristocratic readers who, like Sévigné’s daughter, really were linked by marriage to the present-day house of Adhémar. One of the great attractions of *Gerusalemme Liberata* for a reader like Sévigné was that Tasso’s epic described the deeds of historical Crusader figures who were, in fact, real ancestors of the present-day Grignan family.

The medieval had, finally, a moral dimension. Sévigné expressed a sense of self-knowledge conferred by a link to medieval chivalry in a letter of July 1685 in which, speaking of her cousin Bussy-Rabutin’s genealogy, she gave the notion of veracity a new weight:

Let us come to our Mayeul and our Amé. In truth, my dear cousin, this is very fine. There is an air of truth in this account that gives me pleasure. It is not at all from ourselves that we draw these titles, it is from ancient charters and works of history … I confess that I am charmed by it, and touched by a true joy that you at least have drawn from your misfortunes, as you put it so well, the knowledge of what you are.

There is a complex semantic network here linking notions of medieval ancestry and chivalry to the idea of the medieval revealing a profounder truth, both in a strictly historical sense and in a moral one. Knowing one’s own medieval genealogy was described by Bussy-Rabutin and Sévigné as knowing who one really was. To be an aristocrat meant, in the most basic way, to behave medievally and conversely, being medieval meant behaving aristocratically or nobly. The word “aristocrat” is, of course, primarily a later, Revolutionary invention, for at the dawn of the Enlightenment, the main term

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92 “Il est le huitième premier président de la chambre des comptes, et il était bien gentilhomme quand il l’eut pour récompense, sous Philippe-Auguste”. Sévigné, *Correspondance*, III, 919. On the inaccuracies in her genealogy, see Roger Duchêne’s comments in the *Correspondance*, III, 1582, note 6.
94 “Venons à nos Mayeul et à nos Amé. En vérité, mon cher cousin, cela est fort beau. Il y a un air de vérité qui fait plaisir. Ce n’est point chez nous que nous trouvons ces titres, c’est dans des chartes anciennes et dans les histoires … je vous avoue que j’en suis charmée, et touchée d’une véritable joie que vous ayez au moins tiré de vos malheurs, comme vous dites si bien, la connaissance de ce que vous êtes.” Sévigné, *Correspondance*, III, 216. Emphasis in the original.
used to designate an aristocrat was the morally laden noble. As in Chapelain's Lecture and Rousseau's later reflections, the medieval hereby acquired a moral dimension, and it was with this meaning that Sévigné invoked it in her correspondence. These moral connotations of aristocratic forms of medievalism can be further gleaned from the letters Sévigné wrote to her recently wedded daughter and her husband, emphasizing the fact that they belonged to one of the most illustrious families in the realm. Rebuking her son-in-law for his unchivalrous behaviour towards her daughter, she accused him of sullying the blood of the Adhémar family: “You would not be able to neglect [your duty] without ingratitude, and without doing a disservice to the blood of the Adhémar. I see one … who was a very great lord, six hundred years ago. He was loved like you are; he would never have wanted to cause a moment's distress to a wife like yours.” Similarly, medieval ancestry and aristocracy were associated with notions of honesty (honnêteté) and sincerity – incidentally, a defining term in Rousseau’s moral vocabulary – when, praising a friend, she lauded him for the “sincerity and honesty of the ancient knights.” All these traits came together, finally, in the crucial notion of the good old days (bon vieux temps) as evoked by her cousin Coulanges in his 1694 letter about the rediscovery of Amadis:

Here we are again in our magnificent chateau … Madame de Louvois has found a taste for royalty and for solitude, very contrary things that she didn't know, in a word the taste of the great lords of the good old days (bon vieux temps) … . Out of respect they went to visit their king, but once they had paid their respects and performed their duty, they were not displeased to find themselves sovereigns themselves …

It is clear here that medievalism went hand in hand, for aristocrats like Sévigné and her family, not only with the moral qualities of nobility, but also with a defence of the aristocracy’s traditional independence, as “sovereigns themselves”, against the encroaching modern state then in the process of being constructed.

Primal Scenes: From Family Romance to Legitimizing Authorship
In remembering family history, Madame de Sévigné was not only, in an essentially conservative movement, helping to consolidate her own class interests. She was also, more progressively, engaged in rediscovering the medieval on its own terms. Thus one of the most striking medievalist aspects of her letters is their inclusion of several

95 “Vous ne sauriez y manquer sans ingratitude, et sans faire tort au sang des Adhémar. J'en vois un dans les Croisades qui était un grandissime seigneur, il y a six cent ans. Il était aimé comme vous; il n'aurait jamais voulu donner un moment de chagrin à une femme comme la vôtre.” Sévigné, Correspondance, II, 11.
96 “C'est une sincérité et une honnêteté de l'ancienne chevalerie.” Sévigné, Correspondance, II, 513.
97 “Nous voici encore dans notre magnifique château. Mme de Louvois s'est trouvé un goût pour la royauté et pour la solitude, choses fort contraires qu'elle ne connaissait point, en un mot le goût des grands seigneurs du bon vieux temps … Ils allaient par respect visiter leur souverain, mais leur cour faite et ce devoir rendu, ils n'étaient pas fâchés de se trouver souverains eux-mêmes.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 1064.
primal scenes in which either Madame de Sévigné herself or one of her correspondents unearthed a hitherto forgotten or only vaguely remembered medieval text. I have already noted the rediscovery in 1694, in Coulanges’s library at Ancy-le-Franc, of a sixteenth-century edition of *Amadis de Gaule*. Two other important primal scenes also punctuated the correspondence, and actually predated the rediscovery of *Amadis*.

The first of these scenes was from the beginning framed in romanesque terms, and Sévigné’s own role in it has indeed been disputed by her modern editor, Roger Duchêne. It was announced in a letter Sévigné’s cousin Bussy-Rabutin wrote to her in April 1687, revealing to her the existence of another medieval text that had long lain dormant in scholars’ libraries: the famous love letters that the twelfth-century nun Héloïse had sent to her former lover, the philosopher Pierre Abélard. Emphasizing the interest of the rediscovered letters, Bussy-Rabutin playfully offered his cousin a new translation of the first two of the three extant letters by Héloïse. He introduced it by explaining that “it is not, my dear cousin, that you have not heard tell of Abélard and Héloïse; but I don’t think that you have ever seen a translation of their letters. As for myself, I know of none.”

In fact, Bussy-Rabutin was not the first to rediscover the letters in the seventeenth century. In 1616 already, a Latin edition had been published. In 1642, Jean-François de Grenaille included translations of some of Héloïse’s letters in his epistolary manual *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames tant anciennes que modernes*, and in 1675, an obscure provincial author, Jacques Alluis, had also produced a novelized version of the letters under the title *Les Amours d’Abailard & d’Héloïse*.

However, Bussy-Rabutin’s was perhaps the first version that succeeded in attracting the attention of a large, fashionable audience, first through its manuscript circulation and then, starting in 1697, by its inclusion in a volume of posthumously published writings put together by his son Amé-Nicolas de Bussy-Rabutin. As a well-known and well-connected aristocratic man of letters, Bussy-Rabutin could be sure of attracting numerous readers, and his highly romanticized version of the letters, emphasizing the nun’s forbidden passion, found an eager audience among readers accustomed to the love plots of romances and their recent derivates, the historical *nouvelle*.

This is not the place to examine at length the myth of Héloïse that Bussy-Rabutin helped to create. What is significant in the present context is the way Héloïse’s medieval letters were again packaged in a typically romanesque, primal scene of rediscovery. It was not enough for the text to be rediscovered; it needed, too, the assurance of a new, modern audience. Thus Amé-Nicolas de Bussy-Rabutin, in editing his father’s letters, was careful to include also an apocryphal response by Sévigné, whose publicitary function was evident. In this letter, Sévigné thanked Bussy-Rabutin for his translation, and singled out for attention the wit (*esprit*) he had given the medieval nun. Implicitly recalling the flirtatious relationship she had previously entertained with her

98 “Il n’est pas, ma chere Cousine, que vous n’ayez ouï parler d’Abelard & d’Heloïsse; mais je ne croi pas que vous ayez jamais vu de traduction de leurs Lettres: pour moi je n’en connois point.” Bussy, *Lettres*, V, 225.

99 On the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century reception of Héloïse’s letters, see Charrier, *Héloïse dans l’histoire*.

100 On its apocryphal nature, see Roger Duchêne’s comments in Sévigné, *Correspondance*, III, 1288.
Medievalist Enlightenment

cousin, she ended her letter by praising him, noting that his French “has delicacies and turns of phrase that Latin does not have”; and concluding that “nothing is above what you write.” In other words, through her comments on Héloïse’s love letters to Abélard, Sévigné was also keeping alive a present-day correspondence with her own libertine cousin, Bussy-Rabutin. Life once again imitated medieval text, projecting the romance of the medieval onto present-day epistolary exchanges. The act of discovery of a medieval text thus itself became part of a miniaturized romance in which, it was suggested, medieval text generated the modern woman of letters Sévigné’s response. Like the other primal scenes of medievalism, this scene too was largely a fabrication, but it served to provide a present-day narrative context explaining the rediscovery of medieval writings, and thereby – by its own appeal to the romance form – provoking interest in these texts that, until then, had not been considered worthy of serious literary attention.

The relation between the primal scene and modern authorship gained a last, significant twist in the chronologically second of the three primal scenes that punctuated Sévigné’s correspondence. This second scene was set in motion when, in November 1689, a new correspondent, Louis-Hercule de Francheville de Québriac, wrote to Sévigné asking her to help him find out more about the medieval Cours d’amour. These so-called courts of love, supposedly presided by aristocratic ladies and troubadour patrons, were a legend going back to André Le Chapelain’s thirteenth-century De arte honeste amandi, and further elaborated by Martial d’Auvergne in a series of fifteenth-century Arresta amorum. They were subsequently popularized by Nostredame, who described how in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, four tribunals had been established in Provence, at which learned ladies handed down judgements on various questions, often expressed in verse form by well-known troubadours, touching on love and matters of amorous protocol. Quickly adopted by other authors, the myth of the Cours d’amour gained numerous adherents in the seventeenth century, causing Québriac, a collector of curiosities and dilettante historian, to seek to establish whether the myth had a basis in historical fact. He turned to Madame de Sévigné because she was particularly well-placed to help him, not only through her contacts with the Provençal nobility into which her daughter had married, but also because the tradition of the courts of love had supposedly implicated the Adhémar family too. Sévigné intervened on Québriac’s behalf, asking her daughter to help her with the question, and was gratified to receive an answer from one abbé Viani, of the Saint-Jean church in Aix-en-Provence:

[This letter] fills the void that had made me lose the thread of the conversation; I would also have lost the finest teachings in the world on this Cours d’amour, which my new friend [Québriac] would have greatly regretted … Ah! how fine this Adhémar is! But also, how he is loved! His mistress must have been very afflicted to see him dying in kissing her hand; I doubt, like you, that she became

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101 “Votre François a des délicatesses & des tours que le Latin n’a pas … rien n’est au-dessus de ce que vous écrivez.” Bussy, Lettres, V, 249.
102 Sévigné describes him as an “homme de cabinet et curieux”. Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 754.
a nun. I find this tale very fine; it is a little piece of ancient gallantry (l’ancienne galanterie), mixed with poetry and wit (bel esprit), that I find worthy of curiosity. One finds everywhere your Adhémars, your Castellanes, and the site of the Grignan family more considerable in the time of Frederick I than that of Louis XIV.103

Again, the nostalgia for a time when aristocratic powers were still at their height was explicitly worded. Historically, Sévigné referred to three medieval authors: two ancestors of the seventeenth-century Adhémar-Grignan family, Boniface de Castellane and Guillaume Adhémar, and the latter’s mistress, the well-known troibairitz the comtesse de Die. All three had already been the subject of the semi-fictionalized troubadours’ biographies included in Jean de Nostredame’s Vies des troubadours. As Nostredame had written, it was to Guillaume Adhémar’s father that Sévigné’s daughter ultimately owed her family seat at Grignan:

Guillaume Adhémar was a Provençal gentleman, much loved and appreciated by emperor Frederick for his knowledge and virtue; it is held that he was the son of Gerard, to whom Frederick, the emperor, had given the town of Grignan, [and] was a good poet in the Provençal language, a good comic … . The Monk of the Golden Isles says that he was in love with the comtesse de Die, one of the presidents of the Court of Love at Signe and Pierrefeu.104

For Sévigné, it was clear that her family romance had a literary component, too, and that her daughter could assume a place in a long lineage of authors. The letters exchanged by Sévigné and Québriac had a larger influence that quickly extended beyond the private spheres of the two correspondents. Getting wind of Sévigné’s letters, the society journal Mercure galant published a poem in January 1690, by a certain Mr de Calvy, that itself re-enacted Nostredame’s and Sévigné’s self-conscious aristocratic medievalism. In this poem “from the troubadour Adhémar to the countess of Grignan”, a voice from the past literally spoke with the present, incarnated by Madame de Sévigné’s daughter, rehearsing all the commonplaces of the period’s medievalist literature. The poem’s opening lines referred to “a famous troubadour / Who has left his

103 “Elle [cette lettre] remplit le vide qui me faisait perdre le fil de la conversation; j’aurais perdu aussi la plus belle instruction du monde sur cette Cour d’amour, dont mon nouvel ami eût été au désespoir … . Ah! que cet Adhémar est joli! Mais aussi, qu’il est aimé! Sa maîtresse devait être bien affligée de le voir expirer en baisant sa main; je doute, comme vous, qu’elle se soit fait monge. Je trouve toute cette relation fort jolie; c’est un petit morceau de l’ancienne galanterie, mêlée avec la poésie et le bel esprit, que je trouve digne de curiosité. On trouve partout vos Adhémar, vos Castellane, et la place de Grignan plus considérable du temps de Frédéric Ier que du temps de Louis XIV.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 794–5.

104 “Guilhem Adhemar estoit gentilhomme provençal, grandement aymé et prisé de l’empereur Frideric, pour son savoir et vertu; on estime qu’il fut fils de Gerard, auquel Frideric, empereur, avoit infe-odé la place de Grignan, fut bon poète en la langue provençalle, bon comique … . Le Monge des Isles d’Or dict qu’il estoit amoureux de la comtesse de Die, l’une des presidente de la Cour d’Amour de Signe et de Pierrefeu.” Nostredame, Les vies des plus célèbres poètes provençaux, 30.
dark abode for you,” thus playing once again with the rhetorics of light and darkness that permeated much of the period’s engagement with the medieval. The third strophe referenced the theory that held that the troubadours had been the inventors of poetic rhyme. And the following strophe, in Nostredame’s anti-humanist tradition, proposed a comparison between the poetry of the troubadours and that “of Rome and Greece” in which it was the first that was deemed more worthy of attention.

The poem in the Mercure was part of a larger revival of interest in the troubadours. Following upon the exchange of letters and the published poems, a Provençal magistrate, Jean-François de Gaufridi, published a voluminous Histoire de Provence (1694), in which he once again mentioned the Cours d’amour, Guillaume Adhémar and the comtesse de Die. In the line of Chapelain, and announcing Montesquieu, he explicitly linked the courts to women’s civilizing influence, and the French spirit of galanterie.

Then in the first years of the eighteenth century, the Cours d’amour were revived in aristocratic circles by the rebellious aristocrat the duchesse du Maine when she created a mock chivalrous order, the Ordre de l’Abeille, in express imitation of the Provençal Cours. As her salon guest Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier reported, “I cannot leave the article of the Cours d’amour without announcing that a great princess has just created an institution that reminds us of this gallant assembly, correcting it of all its imperfections.” And in 1704, Pierre de Galaup, a member of Provençal society well connected with Parisian literary circles, including the salons previously frequented by Chapelain, published a text commemorating a visit of the Dukes of Burgundy and Berry that, by its mention of the Cours d’amour, provoked a small-scale literary dispute and exchange of texts between several authors. The dispute was closed by his publication in 170 of an Apologie des anciens historiens et des troubadours, and a series of letters written between 1706 and 1712, that he significantly addressed to Pauline de Grignan, i.e. Madame de Sévigné’s granddaughter. The literary genealogy founded by the troubadour ancestors of the Grignan family, in other words, did not stop with Madame de Sévigné, but extended well into the eighteenth century, generating ever-new views on the medieval past.

The later history of the early Enlightenment rediscovery of the troubadour Cours d’amour is, finally, illustrative of the most important function of the primal scene of the rediscovered manuscript. In a recent volume on this literary topos, Jan Herman has hypothesized that it held several meanings. The lost manuscript, he writes, “visualizes a lacuna, a gap, which hides what is essential.” It could therefore serve to denote an absence, reminding us that the medieval was, for early Enlightenment authors,

106 Referring to the courts of love, he explained that “c’est là où se rendoient les Poètes qui avoient des questions à faire resoudre & des disputes à faire juger. Les Dames les decidoient souverainement. Je ne doute pas que ces sortes de conferences n’ayent autant incité les Provencaux à la Poésie que l’exemple des grands Princes qui s’en méloient; car comme rien ne polit tant l’esprit que la conversation des Dames, rien ne donne aussi tant qu’elles le veritable genie pour les vers.” Gaufridi, Histoire de Provence, 105.
107 Cited in Denis, Le Parnasse galant, 170.
109 Herman, “En guise d’introduction”, xv.
as much an absence as a presence. But it could also, in a second movement, confer authority to the modern text, with its reference to earlier, more famous discovered manuscripts, in some cases actually God-given (Deuteronomy). In yet another variant, the rediscovered manuscript was used to give a veneer of authenticity to fiction, assuring its truth value within a classicist value system that condemned fiction for its untrue nature. Most importantly of all, Herman postulates that in the course of the eighteenth century, the function of the topos started to change, and increasingly came to foreground the act of writing itself. In Sévigné’s letters on the Cours d’amour, the semi-mythical ancestors mentioned were all, significantly, themselves authors, so that evoking their memory was also a way of reflecting on authorship. The commonplace of the medieval rediscovered text offered both a pretext to generate new, modern texts, and a way to legitimize them, allowing literary newcomers like Sévigné to inscribe themselves imaginatively within a larger genealogy of authors. Madame de Sévigné, the “outsider” woman author coming into writing, did so by invoking the memory of a semi-mythical medieval past, where her daughter’s family ancestors, Boniface de Castellane and Guillaume Adhémar, as well as the female trobairitz the comtesse de Die, stood as guarantors of her own right to take up the pen. In an effective mise en abyme, these medieval ancestors were in turn inscribed into a construction of social reality that viewed the medieval past as a kind of roman, a site providing imaginative possibilities felt to be lacking in the modern, absolutist state.

It was this original interlinking of the genre of the roman, aristocratic varieties of medievalism, and present-day authorship that gave early Enlightenment medievalism some of its characteristic flavour. Early Enlightenment authors implicitly legitimized their own interventions as authors by drawing on the myth of a medieval origin and on the primal scene of the rediscovered medieval text. In short, for aristocratic readers, the medieval was not only – as in Ganim’s analysis – conceived as the realm of romance, but was a kind of family romance, peopled by real historical figures and family ancestors. In the meeting of chivalric fiction and family genealogies, a medievalism was created that, like that of the Moderns, viewed modernity not as the opposite of the medieval past, but as its natural historical outgrowth, and writing as the tangible expression of a link with that imaginary past.
Despite a rhetorics of Enlightenment that habitually contrasted the medieval to the modern, a number of early Enlightenment authors seem to have perceived no fundamental historical break between the two periods. By his striking refusal to use the term “middle ages” (moyen âge) in the Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes, Perrault implicitly annexed the medieval period to modernity. Similarly, in his Esprit des Lois Montesquieu emphasized the continuity between the modern French spirit of gallantry (esprit de galanterie) and the medieval cultural practices illustrated by chivalric fiction. And even earlier, in his prescient dialogue on medieval romance, Chapelain had already suggested that there was a relation between medieval and modern forms of expression, with Lancelot and similar titles singled out as “the source of all the romances (romans) that, for four or five centuries, have been the noblest amusement of the courts of Europe”. These statements, then, were part of a broader debate, between eighteenth-century medievalists and anti-medievalists, on the legacies of the medieval past, as transmitted particularly through chivalric fiction. Chapelain’s thesis of continuity between medieval and modern literature offered a rebuttal of other, progressivist assessments, which on the contrary sought to distance modern literary productions from their medieval precursors. Regardless of the question whether such continuity really existed, i.e. whether seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary productions drew on authentic medieval models, the fact that authors emphasized such historical connections is revealing. Showcasing medieval models, I suggested earlier, was in the first place a rhetorical move that simultaneously

1 “La source de tous les romans qui, depuis quatre ou cinq siècles, ont fait le plus noble divertissement des cours de l’Europe”. Chapelain, La lecture, 166.

2 One of the most recent critics of the notion of continuity is Alain Viala, who in his study of literary galanterie, criticizes “certain historians who took galanterie for the modern form of courtliness (courtoisie)”, and concludes that “the explanation by a French genealogy from the Courts of Love to galant circles hardly holds up”. Viala, La France galante, 375.
mimicked and turned inside out prevalent humanist exhibitions of Greco-Latin models. The kind of comparison that Chapelain’s interlocutor had posited, only half in jest, between Homer and the author of Lancelot was taken up insistently during the years of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, as medievalist authors polemically pointed to the connections between their own works and premodern antecedents.

But might this idea of continuity also reflect, at least in some cases, a more profound historical reality? In various sociocultural subfields, and particularly in literature, I contend, there appeared to be real lines of communication between medieval and modern traditions – even if, at first sight, these lines were sometimes obscured by the adoption of innovative themes and forms. This chapter proposes that such lines of communication between the premodern and the modern can be teased out by focusing on the central role of performance and embodiment in medievalist cultural practices. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century engagement with the medieval often took the form not of a scholarly appraisal of a period long revolved, but of a more personal encounter with what, for some authors, was part of their own family history. Like Madame de Sévigné living her life as a chivalric romance, the medieval was not a fixed or dead past, but the subject of recurring, daily rituals and sometimes elaborate social performances. This sense of performativity, or the heightened theatricality of the medieval, in turn underlay the generic shift that took place in the 1680s and 1690s, and which led to the creation of two new medievalist literary genres – opera and the fairy tale – that variously sought to embody or “touch” the medieval past, to use Carolyn Dinshaw’s evocative image. Through a close reading of some of these texts, this chapter argues that such expressions of early Enlightenment medievalism challenge us to reevaluate our own thinking on what constitutes legitimate historical understanding in order to incorporate other, non-analytic kinds of engagement with the past, that foreground continuity rather than rupture with the medieval.

Performativity, Touch Across Time and Sublime Historical Experience

In the previous chapter, I suggested that it is perhaps possible to discern genuine historical understanding in cases where, like Madame de Sévigné living her life as though it were a medievalist novel, readers allowed themselves to be spiritually and morally nourished by the medieval. Most often, this movement of historical replenishment took the form of performance or stylized play, as aristocrats and authors carried out ritualized actions reminiscent of specific medieval practices. Although performativity is not unique to medievalist cultural production, it does provide a particularly productive concept in describing early Enlightenment medievalisms. Following Ute Berns, I adopt here a narratological definition that distinguishes between two kinds of performativity. The first one refers to various kinds of physical or embodied performance of social rituals (as in a wedding ceremony) or representations of fictional situations (as in theatre). For analytical purposes, this kind of real-life performativity can be divided further into instances in which performance functions like Austinian speech acts, i.e. actually brings something about in the real world (a wedding ceremony, where the words “I pronounce you man and wife” really do marry two people) and instances in which performance merely imitates real-world acts (a theatrical representation
of a wedding ceremony). The second kind of performativity he distinguishes, on the other hand, refers to the imitation or illusion of a performance within a narrative text, either at the level of the fiction (histoire) or at that of the narration. All four kinds of performativity were at work in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century literary medievalisms, making possible a new, non-analytic understanding of the premodern past.

The performativity both of late medieval and of early Enlightenment culture has often been remarked on. In his Waning of the Middle Ages, for example, Johan Huizinga described in great detail the declining Middle Ages’ love of ceremony and pageantry, and late medieval sensibility’s tendency to give physical form to concepts, through allegory and related figures. According to Huizinga, beyond its obvious artistic appeal to the senses and to aesthetic sensibility, performance culture acted as a social agent by sublimating the raw violence and passions of everyday life. In this function, it survived well into later centuries, including late seventeenth-century French court culture:

The need of high culture found its most direct expression in all that constitutes ceremonial and etiquette. The actions of princes, even daily and common actions, all assume a quasi-symbolic form and tend to raise themselves to the rank of mysteries. Births, marriages, deaths, are framed in an apparatus of solemn and sublime formalities. The emotions which accompany them are dramatized and amplified. Byzantism is nothing but the expression of the same tendency, and to realize that it survived the Middle Ages, it is sufficient to remember the Roi-Soleil.

Rituals and physical embodiments of ideas had an important intellectual function, for they represented a non-rational, non-exclusively linguistic form of understanding. At the most basic level, much performative energy coalesced around the late medieval festival or carnival, as famously theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. During carnival, “life itself plays and, during a certain time, play transforms itself into life itself”. Crucially, carnival “ignores all distinction between actors and spectators”, thereby setting it apart from theatre proper. The performativity of carnival privileged the body, requiring the bodily participation of all the senses, but especially those of sight, hearing, and touch. By bodily opening itself up to the world – notably through the speaking mouth and by invoking the body’s sexual and excremental orifices – the carnivalesque made possible a renewed and potentially subversive understanding of it. Of course Bakhtin’s late medieval, mostly parodic and / or grotesque carnival is not the same, in all aspects, as early Enlightenment forms of medievalism. But it does share elements of performativity that are at work too in, for instance, Madame de Sévigné’s tendency to live life romantically, i.e. like a medievalist romance – an attitude she shared with a great

3 Berns, “Performativity”.
4 Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, 41.
5 Bakhtine, L’oeuvre de François Rabelais, 16.
6 Bakhtine, L’oeuvre de François Rabelais, 15.
many other aristocratic literary figures of her time. Madame de Sévigné and others like her did not self-consciously re-enact the medieval during set moments, only to subsequently take off the mask they had temporarily donned, but made of medievalist performance a constitutive element of their social identity as aristocrats. Regardless of whether, in “playing” medieval, they actually continued real forms and traditions from the past, the spirit of play they embodied was very much a medieval one – and specifically, a late medieval or early Renaissance one. For as Michel Stanesco has pointed out, further building on Huizinga’s insights, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reality was systematically made to imitate chivalric fiction, as, “by a strange specular reversal, knights made an effort to give reality a ‘romanesque effect’ (effet de roman), just as ‘true details’ were inserted into novels to guarantee their credibility.”

To a large extent therefore, in “playing” medieval, Madame de Sévigné and other aristocrats were perpetuating ceremonial and ritual practices common in their own time, and that themselves likely continued older, medieval traditions. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, stress was consistently laid on display and outer appearances, on the surface and on the mask as much as on what was hidden below – if the modern separation between public and private domains could be said to apply at all to the social rituals of aristocrats like Madame de Sévigné. Like medieval political entities, the modern state created by Louis XIV was, in many senses, a theatrical one, the object of a vast, centrally orchestrated performance of absolutist power – whose themes were, coincidentally, often explicitly medievalist, and among whose principal architects figured two of the period’s most original medievalists, Jean Chapelain and Charles Perrault. Attention to appearances and to the outward rituals of everyday life, finally, fulfilled an epistemological function similar to late medieval festivals, for this superficiality grounded a particular form of historical understanding. By their very nature, Frank Ankersmit points out, “historical experience and knowledge are ‘impressionist’ in the sense of having their natural habitat on the surface of things, or where they come closest to each other.”

Early Enlightenment medievalisms, as a kind of original, sensory and sense-productive form of understanding, as physical incorporation or performance of the past, allowed the past and present to touch. Such non-linguistic forms of grasping the medieval past have been theorized by Carolyn Dinshaw, who proposes the evocative concept of a “touch across time”. To the idea of the medieval past as distinct or separate from the present, Dinshaw opposes another conceptualization, in which “the modern is not characterized as simply different from the medieval but is touched by the medieval, and the medieval is touched by the modern.” The interposition of the experiencing subject into the encounter with the past is crucial, and others have proposed to see in some authors’ desire to actually “touch” medieval bodies across time,

7 DeJean, Tender Geographies, 20 and 41; Edelman, Attitudes of Seventeenth-Century France, 99–100.
8 Stanesco, Jeux d’errance, 18.
9 Roussillon, Plaisir et pouvoir.
11 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 112, emphasis in the original.
12 Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, 43.
to “hear” the voices that had left no trace, or to themselves embody the past, a solution to the famous conundrum posed by Plato’s rejection of poetry and fiction from the ideal republic. For, argues Jacques Rancière in an important reflection on historical understanding, even while excluding false mimesis, i.e. the possibility of a truthful representation of the past, Plato left open the possibility of an access to truth through diegesis, i.e. through the figure of the present-day, speaking subject. While the past itself could not be recovered, the present-day subject’s experience of it could be said to contain another, alternative truth about the past. Thus, this kind of embodied historical understanding – epitomized for both Dinshaw and Rancière by the romantic historian Jules Michelet – is as legitimate, as a form of knowing, as the other, “scientific” model of historiography that has come to dominate our own academic historical discourse:

Romantic writing, that which renders a new history possible, situates itself from the outset beyond the classic alternative between mimetic naïveté and interpretative science. Both of these always presupposed an exteriority: that of the model being imitated or the meaning hidden under the story. Michelet, for his part, installs himself in the continuity of a narration that excludes both figures of exteriority, imitation and interpretation.33

The epistemological import of embodied understandings of the past has been recognized too by Frank Ankersmit, whose concept of sublime historical experience represents a uniquely non-analytic and non-linguistic way of understanding the past. As Ankersmit writes, “how we feel about the past is no less important than what we know about it – and probably even more so. ‘Sentir, c’est penser’, as Rousseau liked to say.”14 This experiential way of understanding the past, he argues, provides an alternative to Cartesian-inflected, rationalistic approaches, and indeed goes back to earlier forms of knowing, represented notably by Aristotle, for whom “knowledge of the world results from our interaction with the world as embodied by experience, and not from looking at the world (with the Cartesian and with the analytic tradition) from the point of view of the moon.”15 Transcending questions of truth and falsity, the past as understood from a sublime historical perspective then takes on the form of timeless myth, that belongs both to the past and lives on in the present, abolishing the sense of chronological distance that is the marker of true historism. Of course, this sense of heterochronicity, of the coincidence of different historical periods or of actual dialogue between past and present, is exactly what defined many early Enlightenment forms of medievalism, including Madame de Sévigné’s performative understanding of the medieval. The medieval past, in short, was not only an entity that could be perceived through textual traces, but could also be seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted.

Finally, it is but one step from this physical incarnation of the past, living and passing through the present-day subject’s body, to other notions of historical understanding as being akin to various forms of bodily desire. This desire to physically touch the past

34 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 10.
35 Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience, 248.
is very often, specifically, a desire to make the past come alive again, in a kind of resurrection ritual that can take on explicitly erotic overtones. As another commentator of Michelet, Roland Barthes, evocatively wrote, the encounter with the past can assume the form of a new physical contact with another body, just as for Michelet, “the mass of history is not … a puzzle to be pieced together, it is a body to embrace (étreindre). The historian exists only to recognize a bodily heat.”\(^{16}\) The encounter with the past, in other words, becomes eroticized, making the final defining element in the embodied understanding of the past an amorous and / or erotic one, and thereby linking up with another central topos of Enlightenment medievalisms, that of the medieval as the site par excellence of erotic desire and passionate love.

Yet at the same time as it offered an apparently direct, experiential access to the past, performativity turned the everyday into something more, and thereby also created a new conceptual frame around its object, allowing the subject of the performance to assume a reflexive distance from it that ultimately facilitated critical reflection. In this sense, performance made possible both a sensory turning towards and an intellectual turning away from the medieval, breaking down the traditional philosophical separation between the physical and the conceptual much as romantic writing rejected the separation of mimesis and interpretation.

That early Enlightenment performance practices were productive of sense appears clear, then. But this holds, too, for more fictionalized or ostensibly theatrical varieties of performance. For the line separating performance proper, as an Austinian, real-life social act, from theatricality, was – then as now – often hard to draw.\(^{17}\) Theatrical performances frequently presented themselves as the imitation of life, or inscribed themselves in concrete social rituals. As such, they were central elements, among others, in royal self-representations – as we saw with the court performances of Amadis de Gaule, and Louis XIV’s identification with the operatic, chivalric hero. Such performances of ostensibly fictional material could nonetheless have real truth-value. Jay Winter argues that in performing the past, both (subjective) memory and (objective) history mingle to create new meaning. J.L. Austin’s original theory of performativity, he recalls, “was a challenge to logical positivists as to the existence of a class of meaningful statements which were beyond the reach of tests of their truth content, and are therefore ‘not verifiable, because they do not describe an action but perform it – and a deed cannot be either true or false’.”\(^{18}\) Performative medievalist practices, in other words, “present truths about [the past] rather than the demonstrable truth about a particular set of events.”\(^{19}\) In considering early Enlightenment medievalisms, it is therefore essential to move beyond evaluations of the authenticity or historical accuracy of images and / or practices, to considerations of how authors infused new meanings, revelatory of deeper truths, into medieval traditions or texts.

\(^{16}\) Barthes, Michelet, 65.

\(^{17}\) The interface between the two is the subject of Parker and Sedgwick, Performativity and Performance.

\(^{18}\) Winter, “The Performance of the Past”, 11.

\(^{19}\) Winter, “The Performance of the Past”, 16.
The field of literature itself was to a great extent a site of performative practice in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France. Literary texts operated within a context where rhetorical models were still dominant, emphasizing the spoken word. Imitating an oral exchange between living beings, written texts took conversation, alongside formal rhetoric, as one of their central structuring categories, as Jean-Marc Chatelain reminds us:

In the logic of a literature that privileges the form of the conversation, the art of reading in turn comes to privilege the form of hearing, at least in a metaphorical sense: reading, in the final analysis, consists of listening to a text as one would listen to a person talking. It is not, as in a scholarly view, confronting readings with one another and moving always from book to book, from text to text, but it is allowing an echo to arise, a kind of resonance between life and reading, between the world one inhabits, as one inhabits it or as one would want to inhabit it, and that which, through reading, inhabits us.20

Reading and writing became one of the defining social performances of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century aristocratic culture, as aristocrats lost their military prerogatives and, pushed into a life of enforced leisure, developed new forms of literary sociability with which to distinguish themselves. Collectively engaging in literary play became a way of affirming their own class belonging and their own social identity. “Through performance”, writes Winter, “we move from the individual to the group to the individual, thereby reconfirming the insights of Maurice Halbwachs eighty years ago on the social framework of remembrance.”21 Reading was conceptualized not as the solitary perusal of a printed text, but as a collective, bodily exchange between living beings, as the recovery of a human voice or, in the phrase that Madame de Sévigné used to describe her letters, a kind of written conversation. As Madame de Sévigné rhetorically asked her daughter, contrasting her own letters to more conventional ones, “do you think I take any less pleasure than you do in our conversation? I take a rest from other letters when I write to you.”22 Such metaphorized verbal exchanges in turn underlay various forms of playacting or reconstituting, through dramatic play, the world portrayed in fiction. “It was not a question of representing the text but rather, if one could say so, of acting it, of activating and experiencing its meaning”,23 in a movement akin to the musician’s interpretation of a piece of music. The concept of play hereby acquired a double sense. Both as a site of bodily, sensory enjoyment and of freedom, play or playacting was also an undertaking of active interpretation or creation of meaning, echoing Paul Ricoeur’s concept of fiction as a non-mimetic image making possible “new ways of being-in-the-world”.24

20 Chatelain, La bibliothèque de l’honnête homme, 41.
22 “Croyez-vous que je ne prenne moins de plaisir que vous à notre conversation [i.e. their epistolary exchanges]? Je me repose des autres lettres quand je vous écris.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 393.
23 Chatelain, La bibliothèque de l’honnête homme, 46.
24 For another application of Ricoeur’s concept of being-in-the-world to the field of medievalism, see Rider, “L’utilité du Moyen Age.”
The ultimate role of the image is not only to diffuse meaning across diverse sensorial fields, to hallucinate thought in some way, but on the contrary to effect a sort of *época* of the real, to suspend our attention to the real, to place us in a state of non-engagement with regard to perception or action, in short, to suspend meaning in the neutralized atmosphere to which one could give the name of the dimension of fiction. In this state of non-engagement we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world.25

Medievalist texts, in other words, by their non-textual or performative aspects, represented for early eighteenth-century readers not primarily a reflection of a historical reality, but a crucial instrument shaping reality. The “authenticity” of the past represented in medievalist literature was subordinated to its epistemological function, for it was as an absence, as a non-historically determined site of desire, and as a moral concept, that the medieval made it possible to think modernity anew.

**Generic Shifts: From *Roman de Chevalerie* to Opera and Fairy Tale**

Besides various forms of social performance, other kinds of performativity, both theatrical and textually inscribed, were central to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century medievalist culture. Reflecting the importance of bodily forms of understanding, the medieval – as initially mediated primarily through the *roman* genre – underwent a significant generic shift during the early Enlightenment, that opened up new possibilities for sensory, corporeal engagements. The 1680s and 1690s witnessed the birth and flourishing of two new, modern literary genres: opera and the fairy tale. Both of these new genres adopted themes and narrative *topoi* from chivalric fiction, that in turn became generically defining elements. Both also had a strong performative element. Opera physically represented and embodied the medieval by drawing on its own inherent theatricality, while fairy tales instead showcased narratively embedded, verbal representations of performance.

Opera was, chronologically, the first genre around which interest in the medieval coalesced during the 1680s. The three medievalist operas of Philippe Quinault and Jean-Baptiste Lully revived the themes and ethos of the *roman de chevalerie* not in a textual form, but in a newer, hybrid one. Many other operas, too, drew inspiration from the medieval and medievalist *roman*. In doing so, they were following the earlier model of the dramatic pastoral, that had already exploited themes from chivalric romance. Among the most well-known subjects were the story of the crusader knight Tancrède, which had figured in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and had been the subject of several early musical renderings, including a royal ballet in 1619 and an Italian opera by Monteverdi in 1624. In 1702 *Tancrède* was transformed into a popular French opera by Antoine Danchet and André Campra – presaging by half a century Voltaire’s more famous, non-musical version of the theme in his tragedy of the same title. Three years later, in 1705, the same successful librettist-composer couple produced *Alcine*, based again on an episode from Ariosto. Other authors produced continuations of the

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canonical medievalist operas of Quinault and Lully, such as Simon Joseph Pellegrin and Henri Desmarest’s *Renaud ou La Suite d’Armide* in 1722, an opera that according to Laura Naudeix significantly drew on the spectator’s knowledge of the medievalist model, as incarnated by the Quinault-Lully opera, to make of her “an active actor in the representation”.

Finally, paying homage to one of the sources of much operatic creativity, in 1745 Rousseau took as the subject of the first act of his *opéra-ballet*, entitled *Les Muses galantes*, Torquato Tasso, whose *Gerusalemme Liberata* had inspired so many other *tragédies lyriques*.

To early Enlightenment spectators, it was above all the fabulous or marvellous (le merveilleux) – supernatural occurrences, feats of magic performed by magicians or sorcerers, mythical creatures such as dragons or hippogriffs – that defined French opera or *tragédie lyrique*. In a reaction to the hegemony of the classicist-Cartesian aesthetic, opera participated in a movement of “re-enchantment of the world” that was at odds with the developing, rationalistic ideals of mainstream Enlightenment discourse.

Catherine Kintzler, who has retraced the history of critical thinking about the opera genre, has noted the frequency with which commentators, from Quinault to Charles Perrault (*Critique de l’opéra* in 1674) to La Bruyère, Le Brun, Mably and the Encyclopedists, remarked on its use of the marvellous. Arguing for the existence of a “poetics of enchantment”, she posits that marvellous elements, borrowed from medieval romance, were the foundation stone of the edifice of eighteenth-century French opera, a position summed up in Melchior Grimm’s article “Poème lyrique” in the *Encyclopédie* in 1756:

> It is thus the visually marvellous (merveilleux visible) that is the soul of French opera; it is the gods, the goddesses, the half-gods; the ghosts, the genies, the fairies, the sorceresses, the virtues. The visually marvellous seemed so essential to this drama, that no poet would ever treat a historical subject without mixing in some supernatural incident and some fantastical creatures of his own invention.

Feats of magic, enchantments, wizards and sorceresses had all, of course, migrated from chivalric romance, known primarily through the Renaissance reworkings of Tasso and Ariosto, to the new genre of opera, giving them a new lease on life within a new cultural context. The magical and / or marvellous stood for another, potentially darker and more irrational world, that did not comply with the strictures of modern-day, progressivist Enlightenment. Within the classicist genre system, opera or *tragédie*...
lyrique became the natural complement of spoken tragedy or tragédie déclamée, since all those elements that were rejected by the latter genre found a welcome home in opera.

Like opera, fairy tales from the beginning also drew on medieval chivalric fiction, and on the narrative characters and situations typical of it. Like opera too, one of the defining elements of fairy tale plots was their recourse to the fabulous or marvellous. In the earliest references to the genre, which are again to be found in Madame de Sévigné’s letters,\(^9\) allusion was most often made to the paradigmatic scene in which fairies bestow a set of gifts upon a new-born princess, a theme that went back to the fourteenth-century chivalric romance *Perceforest* and would recur, among others, in Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty”\(^{30}\) Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s tale “L’Ile de la félicité”, incorporated in 1690 into her medieval romantic novel *L’Histoire d’Hypolite, comte de Duglas* and often considered the first fairy tale published in France, was a reworking of the Breton lai “Guingamor” and possibly of other medieval texts, suggesting if not actual, direct influence, then perhaps a common source.\(^{31}\)

Her subsequent, highly influential collection, *Contes des fées* (1697) – the first to use this term to designate the new genre – also made generous use of medieval motifs. Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d’Auneuil, may have drawn on the plots of chivalric romances and medieval lais such as Marie de France’s “Lanval” in her collections *La Tiranie des fées détruite* (1702) and *Les chevaliers errans et le Génie familier* (1709).\(^{32}\) And of course the collection of eight tales that really brought the genre to critical prominence, placing it firmly within the context of the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, Charles Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, foregrounded in its title a link to a vaguely defined past time that could be, and was, read by some as medieval. Summing up the available evidence, Raymonde Robert, in her classic study of the French fairy tale, established that during the first decade of fairy tale production, the 1690s, fully half of the fairy tales published drew on folkloric motifs that ultimately went back to medieval texts.\(^{33}\)

More generally, it was from the *roman de chevalerie* that the fairy tale drew many of its stock themes and elements – the couple of perfect lovers, descriptions of otherworldly palaces, supernatural adventures, magical metamorphoses – making it according to Jean-Paul

\(^{9}\) Sévigné, *Correspondance*, II, 516, 737, 999, 1001; III, 441.

\(^{30}\) The same holds for what, according to Jean-Paul Sermain, was perhaps the first published instance of a proto-fairy tale, the sieur de Garouville’s *La Comtesse de Falinsperck*, included in his collection *Lamant oisif contenant cinquante nouvelles espagnoles* (1671), that equally described the famous scene of the three gifts, bestowed here by an otherworldly dwarf who identified himself both with good genies (*bons génies*) and with fairies (*fées*). Sermain, *Le conte de fées du classicisme aux Lumières*, 20.


\(^{32}\) Stedman, “Proleptic Subversion: Longing for the Middle Ages”, 374. Although Stedman cites both Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France as sources, she does not make clear how D’Auneuil might have encountered them, in an age when references to these works were virtually nonexistent. L’Héritier for example, one of the best-informed medievalists of this period, referred only to Marie de France’s *Ysopets*, not to the *Lais* that were according to Stedman the inspiration for some fairy tales.

Sermain a kind of “memory of the old roman” as acknowledged, among others, by the common use of the terms nouvelle and roman to refer to fairy tales.

But unlike opera’s easy, relatively unreflective adoption of medieval themes, fairy tales not only exploited medieval topics, but also showcased their supposed ties with premodern prototypes. Several fairy tale authors explicitly mentioned their medieval sources, or referred to them in an oblique but easily decipherable way. In the preface to her tale “L’Enchanteur”, included in her collection Les Fées, contes des contes (1697), Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force declared that she had drawn her inspiration from “an ancient Gothic book called Perceval”. Perrault’s deliberate use of linguistic archaisms and other historical markers reinforced the reference to the times past (temps passé) in his collection’s title. The author who most consistently showcased medievalist attributes was Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier, a niece of Perrault’s and also the prime theoretician of the nascent genre. All of the tales in her two published volumes of fairy tales, her Œuvres mêlées (1696) and La Tour ténébreuse (1705), had a medieval setting, or drew on explicitly named medieval sources. Her tale “Artaut, ou l’avare puni”, for example, openly stated its source: the tenth chapter of the Mémoires ou vie de Saint Louis by the fourteenth-century chronicler Jean de Joinville. “La robe de sincérité” was a classicist adaptation of the medieval “Lai du court mantel”, a text that would be rewritten again in 1746 by another fairy tale author and prominent medievalist, Anne-Claude de Tubyères, comte de Caylus. Another of L’Héritier’s tales, “Les enchantements de l’éloquence”, was instrumental in establishing a new literary genealogy that united medieval “Gallic fables” (Fables gauloises) and modern fairy tales. Finally, a third volume of nouvelles, Les caprices du destin (1718), did not contain fairy tales but did include a novel-length adaptation of an episode taken from Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso.

Opera: Theatricality and Performativity

But it was opera that first emerged as a new, medievalist literary genre, making use of its appeal to sensory and physical experience. Opera simultaneously appealed to several senses. Visually, it offered spectators a wondrous spectacle replete with special effects or machines. Music was directed at spectators’ sense of hearing, while the stories it told brought to life another, magical world imbued with rich theatricality. As the “dark face” of classicist tragedy, at the same time, it gave a prominent role to corporeal

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34 Sermain, Le conte de fées du classicisme aux Lumières, 66.
35 For example by Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier. See her terminology, see my “Contes du style des troubadours”, 5.
36 And while tragédie lyrique was increasingly co-opted into the Aristotelian genre system of which tragédie déclamée was the pinnacle – as argued by Kintzler – fairy tales were more difficult to incorporate into existing classicist hierarchies. Instead, some fairy tale authors sought to create a separate place for the genre outside of the classicist genre system.
37 [La Force], Les fées contes des contes, 58. This was the anonymous twelfth-century Livre de Caradoc in the so-called Continuation Perceval, not Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval.
38 L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 120.
39 In his collection Les manteaux. For more on Caylus, see chapter 6.
elements that had been ruled out, in tragedy, by rules of moral propriety (*bienséance*). In addition to magical and / or marvellous elements, opera was receptive to the physical violence that had been banished from the French stage by neo-Aristotelian doctrine. Presaging the later rise of so-called Gothic narrative genres, it accorded an important role to horror. As Kintzler notes, “there was no lyrical tragedy without its scene of torture, its carnage, its black mass, its hell, its shipwreck, its earthquake, or even several of these elements.”

Now this element of horror sought to provoke a bodily engagement with the action portrayed. As Ellen Moers perceptively wrote about the Gothic:

> What I mean – or what anyone else means – by “the Gothic” is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definitive auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reaction to fear.

Horror made opera pass from theatricality as representation to the active involvement of spectators through their bodily reactions to the performance. With its appeal to medievalist romance and to elements of physical horror, opera represented another, alternative aesthetic, that opposed it on many fronts to the hallowed genres of classicism – even if, as Kintzler persuasively argues, it was eventually co-opted into the genre system of classicism by theories that presented it as the logical complement of tragedy. The appeal of this new aesthetic was enormous. In the context of a study of Quinault and Lully’s *Amadis de Gaule*, I have documented elsewhere the ubiquity of eighteenth-century performances of the “matter of Amadis.” Following upon Quinault and Lully’s 1684 *Amadis* (that enjoyed a dozen reruns until 1759), another opera was produced in 1699, Antoine Houdar de La Motte and André Cardinal Destouches’s *Amadis de Grèce*, one comedy, one theatrical *intermède*, and six parodies of the original opera or its 1699 successor. Antoinette Deshoulières’s verses on the chivalric lovers of old, occasioned by the opera, enjoyed widespread popularity. Her poetry was set to music and reprinted over a dozen times in the course of the eighteenth century, making her – together with the medievalist ethos it exemplified – arguably the most well-known representative of lyric during the French Enlightenment. And in 1750 and 1751, a modern abridgment was published of Herberay des Essarts’s Renaissance version of the original Spanish romance *Amadis de Gaula*. A similar, performance-based reception held for Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, and for Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, both of which demonstrated

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40 Kintzler, *Poétique de l'opéra français*, 188.
42 Montoya, “D’un Amadis à l’autre.”
43 On Deshoulières’s eighteenth-century reception, see Sophie Tonolo’s modern edition of her *Poésies,* 29–42.
the prevalence of performative, multimodal rather than only textual rewritings of the original chivalric epics.

Through these re-enactments of chivalric romance, medievalist texts (re)entered the realm of performance, taking on a new oral, ephemeral form, and sometimes leaving no textual trace other than a brief mention in a contemporary theatrical periodical or dictionary. In some instances, songs or airs taken from successful operas were diffused beyond theatre halls through oral means as well as through the *Recueil d’airs sérieux et à boire*, published by the Ballard dynasty of music printers which, in monthly issues, brought out the words and melodies of the most popular songs of the day. This substantially broadened the audience for medievalist opera, extending it even to illiterate, provincial parts of the population – who were, however, already familiar with medievalist epic through the *Bibliothèque bleue* tradition of chapbooks whose reception was, often, collective and oral. In other words, these medievalist works all shared a fundamentally oral orientation – even if, in the case of eighteenth-century operas and their spin-offs, this was an indirect, second-degree orality that passed initially through print-based transmission.

Finally, besides these theatrical genres, there existed a whole range of opera-inspired cultural practices that more directly re-enacted the medieval, not as the theatrical representation of a ritual, but as the ritual itself. Moving beyond the field of literature as text, Quinault and Lully’s medievalist operas may have contributed to the revival of practices such as the *carrousel*, in which aristocrats jostled with one another in elaborate stagings of combats imitating famous battles from history. After having apparently lost favour in royal circles for some decades – the last major *carrousel* recorded before the medievalist vogue of the 1680s took place during the court festivities of the *Plaisirs de l’île enchantée* in 1664 – the practice was revived in the mid 1680s by the son of Louis XIV, Louis de France, known as Monseigneur or the Grand Dauphin. In June 1685, he organized the first such new-style *carrousel*, the *Carrousel des galans Maures de Grenade* that, as the name indicated, took its theme from a fifteenth-century episode in Spanish-Moorish history – incidentally demonstrating, in the process, the easy association of medievalism with orientalism.


The database of theatrical performances has been invaluable in reconstructing this history. However, the possibility remains that other, even more ephemeral performances or kinds of manuscript circulation of medievalist “texts” also took place, without leaving any written trace. Chaouche, *César*. Online: http://www.cesar.org.uk/cesar/ (accessed June 30, 2011).

Indeed, the *Recueils d’airs sérieux et à boire* reprinted a number of airs and parodic airs taken from Quinault and Lully’s medievalist operas.

Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*. 


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47 Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*. 
and Lully’s operas. Nathan Edelman, writing about the phenomenon of seventeenth-century carrousels and mock tournaments, comments that all that remained in them of the medieval were “certain outward features” – yet this was surely the point of their medievalism for, as Ankersmit remarked, it was only on the surface that past and present could really touch, in a “fleeting kiss” rendered all the more poignant for its evanescent character. And of course, by their conspicuous celebration of the military worth of the aristocracy, from whose ranks all the carrousels’ participants were drawn, such festivals did actually perpetuate the traditions, ethos and identity of a social group that historically had its origin and raison d’être in the medieval past. While the modern subject matter of the carrousels would have been unthinkable in a medieval context – aristocrats impersonating Moors in 1685, and intrepid women warriors in the 1686 Carrousel des galantes Amazones – their ethos and epistemological function retained clear similarities to their late medieval models.

**Medievalism and Music as Natural Language**

Opera as a musical genre finally also contained another sensory appeal to the medieval that significantly enhanced its performative impact. This new element was music, which played a constitutive role in opera’s medievalism. Music participated in performative practices not only by itself being the object of performance, but also because, according to early Enlightenment theoretical reflections, it provoked a primarily sensory reaction among its audience. “The effect that was sought after”, writes Kintzler, “was of a physical nature”, just as the subjects represented on stage – magic, monsters, torture and scenes in the underworld – sought to provoke a physiological rather than intellectual reaction of horror in the audience. The musician’s task was to “shake the auditory membranes in order to excite a whole arsenal of passions”, provoking a physical absorption of opera’s meaning by the audience rather than an analytical, detached reaction. Sensorily implicated by the music, auditors themselves became participants and agents in a larger social performance.

Essentially emotive and sensory, the language of music was the opposite of the language of reason. Because of this, it participated in a larger field of associations that, in the progressivist rhetorics of Enlightenment, viewed the Dark Ages as the contrary of the Age of Light. Defined as the historical other of the age of reason, the medieval was associated with the bodily and the non-rational, and was felt to be more easily experienced through the senses than through reason. Yet as the eighteenth century unfolded, new views began to be elaborated that increasingly viewed music, in a more positive light, as the defining element in the first age of mankind. In these views, it was precisely the corporeality and lack of intellectual refinement of music that made it a purer language than human speech and writing. Already in classicist aesthetics, music

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48 The carrousel was described, among others, by Madame de Sévigné. Correspondance, II, 198, 248, 456.


50 Kintzler, Poétique de l’opéra, 293–4.

51 Kintzler, Poétique de l’opéra, 302.
Continuities

had sometimes been granted a role within the quest after universal truths or concepts reduced to their essence. Because it was non-mimetic, at least in its instrumental form, music “could attain essential nature by leaving behind observable nature,” i.e. it could give access to a hidden, transcendental reality. In the quasi-mystical perspective of Jean-Philippe Rameau in his later years, music came to be seen as the universal language of nature, reminding listeners of a reality similar to that described in the neo-Pythagorean theory of the music of the spheres. And for the abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos, the Enlightenment’s first major theoretician of art, music moved well beyond the conventional signs of which language is made up, reminding hearers of primitive, natural signs, born of the imitation of the sounds of passion.

All of these new views on music crystallized in the thinking of a figure we have already encountered as one of the eighteenth century’s major – if unacknowledged – medievalists, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The moral degeneration of mankind in the state of civilization, according to Rousseau, was also a fall from music, which had dominated the original state of primitive humankind, described in a medievalist-sounding phrase as its “happy days” (ces heureux temps). The original language of humankind had been song, and the human voice the expression of human passion before historical corruption set in:

Song by degrees became an art entirely separate from the spoken word from which it derives its origin … the harmony of the sounds made men forget the inflections of the voice and … finally, restricted to the purely physical effect of the concourse of vibrations, music found itself deprived of the moral effects that it had produced when it was doubly the voice of nature.53

Rousseau thus introduced two new elements into Enlightenment considerations of music: a chronological dimension, and a moral one. The state of music was a historical phase in the tale of humankind’s progressive moral degeneration, representing an intermediary stage in history in which human beings no longer lived in their original solitude, but were just entering society, and had not yet been completely divided by warfare and private property. Music was therefore associated with moral transparency, or an access to truth uncorrupted by the artifices of modern-day civilization. Because of its historical remoteness from present-day society, it was a more original, non-textual and therefore natural language that, independently of social conventions, could be heard and understood by all – if they but listened attentively.

But the exact historical location of Rousseau’s quasi-Edenic state of musical communion remained imprecise. In some passages in the Essai sur l’origine des langues, he associated song and the human voice with the medieval, for example when he

52 Kintzler, Poétique de l’opéra, 304.
53 “Voilà comment le chant devint par degrés un art entièrement séparé de la parole dont il tire son origine, comment les harmoniques des sons firent oublier les inflexions de la voix, et comment enfin, bornée à l’effet purement phisique du concours des vibrations, la musique se trouva privée des effets moraux qu’elle avait produits quand elle était doublément la voix de la nature.” Rousseau, Essai sur l’origine des langues, 142.
mentioned the singing of sections from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* by modern-day Venetian gondoliers, a practice that he also lovingly evoked in his *Dictionnaire de musique*. But in other passages, when referring explicitly to medieval history, he was markedly more negative. The fall from music was, in these passages, identified with the barbarian invasions that marked the beginning of the historical Middle Ages. Bruce Holsinger has argued that, on one hand, Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* “promotes an immense anti-medievalism as a central part of its argumentative tactics”. Yet on the other hand, Rousseau saw a possible way out from modern degeneration, among others, in “that most medieval of liturgical phenomena, the ‘neume’ or *pneuma* … [that] Augustine and later writers on the liturgy described as the untexted melisma built on the last syllable of the Alleluia”.

This ambivalence is, of course, at the heart of early Enlightenment medievalisms. Precisely because the medieval was defined as both a historical and as a non-historical concept, or as a moral category, authors sometimes rejected the historical Middle Ages even while celebrating the ethos it represented, or, like Rousseau, simultaneously condemned and praised the medieval as an alternative source of truth.

In contrast to modern, textually-based art forms, described in Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* as the sign of physical absence or non-communication, song made possible a metaphorical touch between human beings, however momentary:

> As soon as vocal signs strike the ear, they announce a being similar to yourself; they are, so to speak, the organs of the soul, and if they thus describe solitude, they also tell you that you are not alone in it. Birds whistle, man only sings, and one cannot hear either song or symphony without immediately telling oneself: there is another sensitive being here.

For Rousseau, the attempt to recover primitive song appeared then part of a deeper preoccupation with modern, textualized art forms as the expression of an absence, a non-concordance of expression with that which was expressed, rational distance rather than physical proximity. Music was, at least in its first historical expression, a sign of physical communication, of passion and even desire. As Jacques Derrida wrote about the *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, “the condemnation of failed and finished writing will assume another form, the one in which we still live today: it is the non-presence to oneself that will be denounced”. It was by introducing the new categories of history and of morality into his consideration of music, conceived as prototypically medieval because of its association with the pre-rational, that Rousseau thus “shattered

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54 The comparison also appears in the entry on “Barcarolles” in Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire de musique*, 651.


58 Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 29.
the dualism of the physical and the conceptual". Not surprisingly, crowning this rehabilitation of music versus speech, Rousseau came increasingly to reject modern forms of theatricality (spectacle). Deeming institutionalized forms of theatricality, by their inherent artificiality, agents of moral corruption, most famously in his Lettre à d’Alembert, Rousseau opposed to them instead primeval performance, incarnated by the popular festival (fête), where the separation between audience and participants – as in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque – was completely, radically abolished.

Literary Galanterie as a Form of Medievalism

The performativity of early Enlightenment medievalist practices, that showcased their musical, sensory nature to give new meaning to premodern traditions, suggests obvious parallels with medieval forms of literature. Thematically, the regularity with which subjects drawn from chivalric fiction continued to be taken up by opera is striking. Beyond the similarities with the ceremonial and carnivalesque practices described by Huizinga and Bakhtin, this thematic continuity invites us to question whether, indeed, it might also be possible to speak of concrete survivals of medieval performance traditions into the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Jelle Koopmans, for one, has suggested such a survival, hypothesizing that evidence documenting the existence of a class of chanteurs de geste, or singers of chivalric epics, in the late fifteenth century, may well be indicative of even later survivals, and of the "possible continuity between medieval drama and opera". Three hundred years later, at the end of the eighteenth century, the influential compiler of novels and medieval romances Louis-Elisabeth de la Vergne, comte de Tressan referred to supposed vestiges of the Song of Roland sung by peasants in the Pyrenees, and written down by his colleague the marquis du Viviers Lausac. While the paraphrases Tressan proposed do not, to us today, sound anything like the Chanson de Roland we now know, this supposed survival of medieval literary traditions into the late eighteenth century should not, perhaps, be altogether dismissed. Absence of evidence, after all, is not necessarily evidence of absence, even if great care is indeed called for when evaluating the authenticity of such – possibly ideologically-inspired – claims of medieval survivals.

But aside from such tenuous hypotheses, it does appear clear that eighteenth-century opera participated in forms of textuality similar to medieval ones more fully than did other genres. By the oral nature and textual instability of theatrical, performed genres such as opera, early Enlightenment medievalisms recalled various forms of medieval textual mouvance, or “the fundamental mobility of medieval texts” theorized by Paul Zumthor. In this view, written texts are no more than “traces” of an original work that was, essentially, performative. As Zumthor wrote:

59 Kintzler, Poétique de l’opéra, 356.
60 Kintzler, Poétique de l’opéra, 395.
61 Koopmans, “Quand les chevaliers se mettent à chanter”, 222.
62 Haines, Eight Centuries of Troubadours, 108.
63 Zumthor, Essai de poétique médiévale, 91.
The literary work, thus conceived, is by definition dynamic. It grows, transforms itself and declines. The multiplicity and diversity of the texts that manifest it constitutes as it were its internal sound effects. What we perceive, in each of these written enunciations in which this poetry decomposes itself for us and offers itself up as a unit for analysis, is less a completion than a text in the process of being made; rather than an essence, a production; rather than a finished meaning, a continually renewed practice of signifying; rather than a structure, a phase in a process of structuring.64

This performative rather than textual aspect of medieval literary works was inherent, too, to the literary movements within which medievalism typically manifested itself in the early Enlightenment. Both opera and fairy tales participated in an ethos of literary gallantry (galanterie), a tradition that could be viewed both as an aesthetic and “a new way of being-in-the-world”, in Ricoeur’s sense. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement of galanterie, together with the related one of préciosité, had a complex relation to the medieval. The adjective galant itself designated that which was “of fine appearance, distinguished, or even noble and chivalrous”, or simply the “chivalrous”, according to Cotgrave’s French-English dictionary.65 Many of the genres revived by the galant movement were themselves medieval, including poetic forms such as the ballad, the rondeau, and the chanson, while one of the movement’s primary sources of inspiration, as Alain Génetiot has demonstrated, was “the entire heroic imagery of the chansons de geste … or more precisely that of the ‘old romances’ (vieux romans), that is to say the prose versions of the chivalric fictions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.”66

Several features of galanterie were central to early Enlightenment medievalisms. The movement’s two primary genres were the letter and the court festival (fête galante), both of which evoked a performative production, rather than a finished text. The letter did this by being coded not as text, but as a written conversation, while the fête did this by “combining the arts of the word, of dance and of music with the exhibition of the richness and prowess of the king and his worthies”.67 Galanterie’s close relation, préciosité, served as a way for young men of ambition to perform love verbally in a salon setting, allowing them – as in the medieval tradition of fin’amors – thereby to assume new positions of influence in the aristocratic society of their day.68 Such social mobility, of course, was not without recalling the playful turning inside out of social hierarchies that had been one of the aims of the medieval carnivalesque, too. By thus foregrounding social interaction, game-playing, orality, and the evanescent rather than the permanent, galanterie laid the bases for the ethos of literary medievalism.

In strictly formal terms, galanterie in some instances assumed the form of an anticlassicism by privileging not generic purity, but hybrids and sensory experience.

64 Zumthor, Essai de poétique médiévale, 94.
65 Viala, La France galante, 27.
66 Génetiot, Poétique du loisir mondain, 62.
67 Viala, La France galante, 86.
68 On this social mobility, see Lougee, Le paradis des femmes.
Opera spectacularly combined different genres and modes of expression, while in the 1690s to the early 1700s, fairy tales were often inserted into larger literary ensembles combining genres as diverse as the letter, occasional poetry directed to living addressees, texts of narrative fiction, and historical writing. Typical examples of this hybrid nature were L’Héritier’s *Œuvres mêlées*, that – as the title indicated – combined several pieces of *galant* poetry, tales in prose and tales in verse, letters explicating the theory of the new fairy tale genre, and even a panegyric text celebrating the recently deceased Antoinette Deshoulières, her *Triomphe de Madame Deshoulières*. Other fairy tale collections combined a novelistic frame narrative with individual tales, that themselves included poems, letters and other kinds of inserted texts. Such formal hybridity drew on an anti-classicist aesthetic that privileged what has been termed the “baroque”, the rococo or even the monstrous. A key term in this other, alternative aesthetic was that of the *chimère*, denoting both the fantastical or the dreamed-of, and more specifically – in the classical tradition – the monstrous, mythological figure of the chimera. By appealing to spectators’ sense of horror, and by reintroducing literary monsters – in both a formal and thematic sense – into its own productions, *galanterie* again opened up a space for literary and intellectual experimentation.

### From Galanterie to Nature

Alain Viala has, however, pointed out that despite some apparently medieval sources of inspiration, *galant* authors did not often invoke the medieval, certainly not in the first, defining decades of the movement, the 1650s and 1660s. Only during its later phases did a few authors begin explicitly to claim a medieval ancestry. I believe this is because by the end of the seventeenth century commentators were increasingly, in the name of classicist-rationalist simplicity, criticizing *galanterie* and its associated movement of *préciosité* for its overly artificial nature. Invoking the medieval was then, for the *galant* holdouts, a defensive rhetorical gesture that served to argue for the “natural” simplicity of *galanterie* against its critics by laying claim to a historical filiation with a “naïve”, uncultivated past. In her programmatic tale “Les enchantements de l’éloquence”, included in her *Œuvres mêlées*, L’Héritier contrasted two different models of rhetoric, an untutored, “natural” eloquence and a rebarbative, artificial rhetoric, in a plea for a new aesthetic of naturalness. Such claims drew on the earlier equation of the medieval with unrefined purity of morals that, as I argued, was one of the hallmarks of Chapelain’s moral repositioning of the medieval. In some cases the filiation with Chapelain was clear. L’Héritier herself was one of the key members of the literary salon gatherings hosted by Madeleine de Scudéry, whose other prominent guests included Chapelain. Describing the medieval source of one of her tales, L’Héritier used

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69 On the definition of the term and on the later aesthetic of the *chimère*, see especially Camille, *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame*, 25.

70 Viala, *La France galante*, 63. Somewhat oddly, the lateness of these claims leads Viala to reject altogether the thesis of a medieval filiation. See also, on the relation between *galanterie* and medievalism, Denis, *Le Parnasse galant*, 164–73.

71 For a more detailed analysis, see Fumaroli, “Les Fées de Charles Perrault ou de la littérature”.
a similar phrase to describe Joinville – “this Historian as exact as he is naïve” – as Chapelain had when describing Lancelot as “a naïve representation and, so to speak, a certain and exact history of the morals that reigned then at court”. Naïveté, in such assessments, served as a guarantee of moral purity and of an exactitude that, if not necessarily true in historical terms, certainly had a superior truth-value.

In the 1680s, the late galant authors who most fully embodied this turn towards a new ideal of simplicity and nature were the poet Antoinette Deshoulières and the epistolarian Madame de Sévigné. The literary genres they practised, respectively short poetic forms, such as the rondeau and the chanson, and the letter as a form of “written conversation”, both privileged medievalist orality. Both, as aristocratic women writers uncorrupted by formal education, were felt to represent the “natural”, untutored poetic inspiration that was one of the defining traits of the medieval. Both also revived an aesthetics of negligence or style négligé that, in a previous generation, had been incarnated by the mediavely-inflected writings of Jean de La Fontaine, among others. In the new, post-Cartesian context, however, “ naïve nature” was increasingly opposed also to the abstract rationalism that was one of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment worldview, giving this new aesthetic an innovative, potentially subversive edge.

Antoinette Deshoulières, the instigator of the Amadis poetic joust, developed in her poetry a characteristic ideal of a return to pastoral simplicity in which nature played a central role. As her modern editor Sophie Tonolo has pointed out, her work “expressed an aspiration towards a sensualist poetry that would represent fine nature with simplicity, allowing it to impress souls naturally and delicately”. Critics opposed her pastoral vision, marked by a strong moral appeal to primeval simplicity, to the artificiality of more traditionally galant poets such as Fontenelle. In turning her back on high-class society and the luxuries of modern civilization, and evoking instead a retreat into idyllic, “primitive” nature, Deshoulières’s ideal of a “contented obscurity” (heureuse obscurité) announced the very terms – the “obscure and simple life, but steady and sweet” (vie obscure et simple) lamented in the Confessions – which Rousseau was later to use in constructing his own medievalist vision. Over a century after her death, Sainte-Beuve perceptively wrote that Deshoulières was thus “simultaneously ahead of [her] time and behind it, part of the age that was ending and the century that was coming, containing both the précieux and the bold in [her works]”.

In other words, rather than completely rejecting galanterie, as Viala maintains, later authors like Rousseau instead took up the legacy of one of the movements into which

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72 “Cet Historien aussi exact que naïf.” L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 120.
73 Chapelain, La Lecture, 177.
74 On La Fontaine’s medievalism, see Lapp, The Esthetics of Negligence, especially chapter 4, “The Gallic Tradition”.
75 The classic study of the Enlightenment ideal of nature remains Ehrard, L’idée de nature en France. However, he mentions neither Deshoulières nor Sévigné in his discussion of nature as an aesthetic ideal.
76 Tonolo, “Introduction” to Deshoulières, Poésies, 32.
78 Rousseau, Les Confessions, 43–4.
79 Sainte-Beuve, “Une ruelle poétique”, 1305.
80 Viala, La France galante, 467–72.
galanterie had branched off in the 1680s and 1690s. The main branch, represented by a worldly, Modern poet like Fontenelle, continued to emphasize the refinement of earlier court spectacles and salon games. A new kind of galanterie, however, associated with a heterogeneous group of medievally-inspired authors also began to emerge in the 1680s, and instead called for a return to a simpler, more natural past that was sometimes still conventionally identified with Antiquity, but which increasingly also acquired traits associated with the newly reimagined Middle Ages.

The other author who epitomized stylistic simplicity – and who, like Deshoulières, enjoyed her greatest popularity decades after her own death – was Madame de Sévigné. In her letters, the natural was defined as the non-rhetorical or the untutored. One of their most striking attributes – in fact, what gave her correspondence its originality to an Enlightenment readership – was their explicit advocacy of a “natural” literary style. Rejecting the “store-bought” manner (ce style de cinq sols)\(^8\) associated with the epistolary manuals or secrétaires of her day,\(^8\) she self-consciously referred to her own “neglected” (style négligé) or natural style (style naturel).\(^8\) One of Sévigné’s correspondents, Jean Corbinelli, helpfully outlined the characteristics of this so-called natural style:

> Sometimes one should be … simply a man of elegance (galant homme), who speaks without too much order or rule, and who cannot avoid charming by his negligence, who never displays his wit too much, who frequently suppresses a thousand clever remarks that occur to him on the subject, because he does not want to appear a wit.\(^8\)

Critically, in his definition of what constituted natural style, he equated it with galanterie, the defining quality of the “man of elegance” (galant homme) or the aristocratic literary dilettante who made his – and particularly her – home in the literary salons of the period. Madame de Sévigné’s adoption of style négligé can be explained in large part by the fact that this aristocratic ideal was fully compatible with the construction of a female authorial persona. An essential component in this ideal of “spontaneous” or supposedly natural style was, indeed, the denial of any intent to publish the works thus produced. Epistolarity itself was redefined not as a textual or rhetorical genre, but as natural, spontaneous conversation written down. Thus, Sévigné’s letters could come to represent one of the most fully developed examples of “literature without literature” (because never intended for publication) or even “texts without texts”, i.e. letters

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81 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 187 and 258.
82 Because such manuals of epistolary rhetoric were supposedly sold for five sols, or a quarter of a livre. In Madame de Sévigné’s days, one livre per day was considered an adequate subsistence wage.
83 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 355, 398, 428, etc.
84 “De plus, il faut quelquefois n’être rien de tout cela, mais simplement un galant homme, qui parle sans trop d’ordre ni de règle, et qui ne laisse pas de charmer par sa négligence, qui ne pousse jamais trop avant son esprit, qui supprime souvent mille belles choses qui lui viennent en foule sur son sujet, parce qu’il ne veut point paraître bel esprit.” Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 510.
as the textual traces of an oral exchange between two human beings.\footnote{On the galant notions of “literature without literature” and letters as written conversation, see among others Chatelain, \textit{La bibliothèque de l'honnête homme}, 9–47.} To Sévigné’s eighteenth-century readers, it was precisely the letters’ purportedly non-textual nature that served as a guarantee of the authenticity of the emotions they expressed, thereby ultimately conferring an ethical value to her stylistic ideal of nature.

The distinctly moral sense of the new literary aesthetic of the natural was foregrounded by other authors, too. Fairy tales in particular were routinely presented as texts whose purpose was instructive and / or moral. In the \textit{Lettre à Madame D.G**} that concluded the first part of her \textit{Œuvres mêlées}, L’Héritier developed a theory of the origins of fairy tales that, by relating them to proverbs, i.e. the textual traces of ancient medieval wisdom, gave them a moral dimension:

Our ancestors, who were ingenious in their simplicity, remarking that the wisest maxims impress themselves poorly on our spirit when they are presented completely naked, clothed them, so to speak, and made them appear in ornament. They exposed them in little stories that they invented, or in the telling of events that they embellished. And since these stories had no other goal than the instruction of young people, and only the marvelous (merveilleux) strikes the imagination vividly, they were not miserly with it: wonders are frequent in their fables.\footnote{“Nos ancêtres, qui étoient ingénieux dans leur simplicité, s’apercevant que les maximes les plus sages s’impriment mal dans l’esprit, si on les lui presente toutes nues, les habilèrent, pour parler ainsi, & les firent paroître sous des ornemens. Ils les exposerent dans de petites Histoires qu’ils inventerent, ou dans le recit de quelques événemens qu’ils embellirent: Et comme ces recits n’avoient pour but que l’instruction des jeunes gens, & qu’il n’y a que le merveilleux qui frappe bien vivement l’imagination, ils n’en furent pas avaris; les prodiges sont frequens dans leurs Fables.” L’Héritier, \textit{Œuvres mêlées}, 300.}

The most important elements in the early Enlightenment rehabilitation of the medieval were brought together in this programmatic statement: medieval simplicity (simplicité), that guaranteed its moral value and protected it from the accusations of artificiality levelled at late galanterie, magic (merveilleux) as a defining element of the new ethos, and the medieval’s superior moral value, making it an ideal tool, among others, for “the instruction of young people”. Both Perrault and L’Héritier drew explicit comparisons between classically-inspired genres such as the fable, that corrupted their readers’ morals, and the newer, simpler and morally more worthy genre of the medievalist fairy tale. This opposed them to the earlier generation of medievalist authors, as La Fontaine’s \textit{Fables}, representing an older form of galanterie, were replaced and supplanted by the modern conte de fées or literary fairy tale.

**Performing Authorship: Fairy Tales**

Fairy tales, as the second new genre particularly receptive to influences from chivalric fiction, partook at many levels of the performative practices associated with galanterie. During the first decades of the fairy tale fashion, the 1680s and 1690s, their
production mostly took place within the context of mondain sociability, and was often a collaborative effort, or a salon game of competitive emulation, in which the process of composition was valued as much as the story itself. The female authors of fairy tales designated themselves in various writings as “illustrious fairies” (illustres fées), metaphorically taking on the roles of their fairy protagonists in working various forms of (literary) magic.\textsuperscript{87} If they lived their lives like medievalist fiction, in this case it was also, singularly, a fiction of their own invention. Emphasizing his tales’ links to an oral, medieval literary tradition, Perrault first brought out his Contes du temps passé not as a printed book but as a sumptuously decorated manuscript, intended to be collectively read, whose illustrations recalled medieval illuminations.\textsuperscript{88} Of course, the non-scriptural context of composition could not be incorporated directly into the text, and therefore had to be suggested instead through various mimetic strategies. While opera was inherently performative, with actors or performers physically embodying the medieval, in the fairy tale performativity was embedded in the text. And so while both fairy tales and opera recycled the narrative traditions, themes and tone of (late) medieval chivalric fiction, there was a significant difference in how they did so, with fairy tales focusing on the exhibition of those elements absent in the opera genre, i.e. on the narrator and narrative voice.

Besides the literary conventions required by the genre – descriptions of castles, sorcerers, magical objects and other medievalist attributes, and references to characters bearing names such as Merlin or Mélusine – fairy tales also betrayed a link with late chivalric fiction through their self-consciously ironic tone. The genre offered not so much a simple reuse as a pastiche of narrative topoi and situations associated with chivalric fiction – a pastiche that in turn recalled the ironic self-reflexivity of Renaissance authors such as Ariosto in his Orlando Furioso. In this pastiche, irony and the metadiscursive stance it implied played a central role. Irony, after all, is a figure of style that makes a strong appeal to the reader. Called upon to interpret words that mean something else than they literally say, the reader is drawn into complicity with the author, thereby creating a particularly active, performative reading situation.

Fairy tales’ metadiscursive stance was at its most evident in their use of ostensibly medieval elements. L’Héritier, for example, presented the medieval setting of her tales in a self-conscious, playful mode that consistently foregrounded the narrator’s telling of the tale. Her story Marmoisan, ou l’innocente tromperie started in ironic fashion:

In the times when France was divided among several kings, I haven’t been told during which reign, nor in which century, but no matter: there lived a nobleman, named the count of Solac.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} Böhm, “La participation des fées modernes”.
\textsuperscript{88} Hoogenboezem, “Medievalism and Magic”.
\textsuperscript{89} “Dans le temps, que la France estoit partagée entre plusieurs Rois, on ne m’a pas dit sous quel Regne, ny en quel siecle, mais il n’importe: il y avait un Seigneur, nommé le Comte de Solac.” L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 6, my emphasis.
In a similar vein, L’Adroite Princesse evoked a recognizably medieval past in its opening sentence, which framed the narrative and instructed the reader about how to read the rest:

During the time of the first crusades, a king of I don’t know which kingdom of Europe, decided to go wage war on the infidels in Palestine.90

Such references to the narrator’s supposed ignorance seemed to contain an allusion not only to Cervantes’s famous exhibition of a pseudo-oral stance in the opening lines of Don Quixote, but also to late medieval texts. The topos had been used among others by François Villon, a poet recently brought again to public attention by several anthologies, including one attributed to another fairy tale author, Madame d’Aulnoy.91 In the “Ballad of the Lords”, included in his Testament, Villon had taken up the hallowed theme of the bon vieux temps, making use of a similar ironic aside when enumerating the great kings of old who were no more:

But where is Charlemagne?
Likewise, the Scottish king
Who had half his face, they say
As red as an amethyst
From his forehead to his chin,
The famous king of Cyprus,
Alas! and the good king of Spain,
Whose name I do not know.92

While, in Villon’s poem, the poet’s supposed ignorance of the King of Spain’s name served, most likely, to reinforce the central theme of the vanity of all earthly glory, in L’Héritier’s version supposed narrative ignorance instead drew attention more pointedly to the narrator. In all these cases, the introduction of irony put the figure of the teller or narrator centre stage, simultaneously making an appeal to the reader, who was called upon to actively engage in interpreting the text. By encouraging such an active attitude, a new reading situation was created whereby, despite the presence of the printed text, the collaborative, performative creation of the narration could again be re-enacted.

There were other ways, too, in which fairy tales showcased the (fictional) narrator, making the evocation of the original narrative performance one of the defining gestures of the new genre of the fairy tale. In some cases, collections of fairy tales introduced a frame narrative in which the narrator and her (almost never his) audience

90 “Du temps des premiers Croisades, un Roy de je ne sai quel Royaume de l’Europe, se resolut d’aller faire la guerre aux Infideles dans la Palestine.” L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 233, my emphasis.
91 Recueil des plus belles pièces des poètes français, published in 1692. This anthology is now attributed to Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle.
92 “Mais où est le preux Charlemaigne? / Semblablement, le roy Scotiste / Qui demy face ot, ce dit on, / Vermaille comme une emastiste / Depuis le front jusques au menton, / Le roy de Chippre de renom, / Helas! et le bon roy d’Espaigne / Duquel je ne scay pas le nom?” Villon, Poésies complètes, 119–20, my emphasis.
were shown together, in the act of composing and telling the fairy tales. This was the case, for example, in the third volume of Madame d'Aulnoy’s *Contes des fées*, that was framed by a “Récit de Saint-Cloud” telling how a certain “Madame D …” – a clear reference to D’Aulnoy herself – read to her friends a series of tales. Illustrations played an important role in this process. In the first major collection of fairy tales, Perrault’s *Contes du temps passé*, the framing was realized by a programmatic frontispiece, in which the author – presumably Perrault himself – was shown seated, in the act of listening to a tale told by an aged peasant teller. Later fairy tale collections by other authors picked up on this visual tradition, proposing various portrayals of the author. The fairy tale teller was pictured, among others, as an old crone threatening her young pupil-readers, as an aristocratic lady surrounded by her young charges, or as a salon hostess or goddess-figure in a pastoral setting, in the act of receiving poetic inspiration. All these illustrations, by stressing the oral creation and transmission of the tales – their medieval *mouvance*, one could say – thereby also emphasized the bodily, collective performance of listening to the tale, as opposed to reading the printed text.

Exhibiting the narrative act, or the oral equivalent of the primal scene of medievalism, finally also served to emphasize the tales’ link to a remote historical past. Narrative exhibitionism created simultaneously an effect of proximity, and of distance. The reader was made privy to an intimate scene of storytelling, yet at the same time he was also made aware of his social (in the case of Perrault’s peasant teller), geographic (in D’Aulnoy’s “Récit de Saint-Cloud”) and chronological distance from the scene depicted. This distance was underlined by by authors’ and illustrators’ use of framing strategies ranging from the invisible fourth wall, proscenium or theatrical curtain, to linguistic indications of the historical remoteness of the period portrayed. As Jean-Paul Sermain writes, “paradoxically, the tale that presents itself as faithful to a remote, almost primitive past, aims to provoke in the reader a completely new consciousness of modernity”. Or, as Jean-Marc Chatelain puts it somewhat differently, “these different games with medieval literary tradition accentuate the playful relation to the Middle Ages … invent an ironic relation, made of distance and proximity at the same time: a relation of ‘estrangement’ that is the same one inscribed in Chapelain’s dialogue *De la lecture des vieux romans*.”

While irony drew the reader’s attention to the narrator figure, and frontispieces and other illustrations framed the text by exhibiting its supposedly oral creation and transmission, performances of authorship also took place at the level of the *histoire* or fiction recounted. Similarly to the ways in which other medievalist texts were generated by the primal scene of the rediscovered old manuscript, fairy tales sometimes directly inscribed a (fictional) medieval text into their own narrative. Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy’s “Le rameau d'or”, first published in her collection *Les Contes des fées* in 1697, was symptomatic of this reflexivity. In it, the narrator described how a young prince

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93 Daphne Hoogenboezem is currently completing a doctoral dissertation, titled “Le conte des fées en images: le rôle de l’illustration chez Perrault et de Madame d’Aulnoy (1695–1800)”, that explores this function of fairy tale frontispieces.


was locked up in a tower that had been built two hundred years ago, i.e. – counting backwards from the text’s publication – in the fifteenth century. Once imprisoned, the prince discovered some books in the tower library, but “when he wanted to read them, he found the language so ancient that he couldn’t understand a thing; he would leave them, then pick them up again, trying to understand something in them, or at the very least to amuse himself with them.” In this narrative *mise en abyme*, the difficulties encountered by the modern reader wishing to decipher a medieval text were explicitly evoked. This specular relationship between modernity and the medieval became even more pronounced as the narrative unfolded. Observing the stained glass windows in the tower, the prince discovered paintings depicting “stories that had taken place several centuries ago”, but whose protagonist was, surprisingly, himself. When the light fell on the windows, he discovered behind them a room with a beautiful, sleeping lady. The prince awakened the sleeping lady, who had been under an enchantment for over two centuries, thereby himself really becoming the protagonist of the tale depicted on the stained glass windows. The couple’s embrace, uniting a medieval and a modern character, was of course symbolic of the literary meeting between the medieval and the modern exemplified by D’Aulnoy’s tale. Not only did the sight of the medieval / the sleeping beauty awaken desire – in this case, the young prince’s – but fairy tales themselves narratively reawakened a tradition that, like the princess, had been sleeping for centuries.

In L’Héritier’s second collection of tales, *La Tour ténébreuse et les jours lumineux*, she used another series of framing strategies that again foregrounded the role of the tales’ purported composer. The collection’s long, publicitary title identified this author as the son of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Richard the Lionheart:

*The Dark Tower and the Luminous Days, English Tales, Accompanied by Short Histories, and Taken from an Ancient Chronicle Composed by Richard, Known as the Lionheart, King of England. Containing the Story of Diverse Adventures of this King.*

Taking her cue perhaps from Jean de Nostredame, who had already portrayed Richard I as a poet, as well as patron of troubadour poets, L’Héritier presented Richard as the author of a series of medieval texts. By contrasting darkness and light, the title gestured towards early Enlightenment conceptualizations of the medieval as the opposite of modern light, but implying also by the reference to “luminous days”, in the tradition of Chapelain, that the medieval rather than the modern was the true source of enlightenment. The text’s structure subtly worked to reinforce this revalidation of the medieval. The frame narrative took up the story of the captivity of Richard I near Linz, at Dürnstein castle, after his return from the third crusade, an episode that had been

96 Aulnoy, *Contes de fées*, 295.
97 Aulnoy, *Contes de fées*, 296.
98 *LA TOUR TENEBREUSE ET LES JOURS LUMINEUX, CONTES ANGLOIS, Accompagnez d’Historiettes, & tirez d’une ancienne Chronique composée par RICHARD, surnommé COEUR DE LION, Roy d’Angleterre. Avec le Récit de diverses Avantures de ce Roy.*
recounted by several previous historians, including Fauchet. To this narrative, L'Hermitier then added the fiction that while in prison, Richard I passed the time by telling a series of fairy tales. This was perhaps a reference to Nostredame's earlier description of Richard as a king who “passed his time rhyming and delighted in reading good romances (romans)”. These tales L'Hermitier purported to have subsequently written down, centuries after their telling. To make this transmission credible, she invoked again the primal scene, positing the existence of a rediscovered medieval manuscript containing these forgotten literary works: Chroniques & Fabliaux de la composition de Richard Roy d'Angleterre, recueillis tout de nouvel, & conjoints ensemble par le labour de Jehan de Sorels, l'An 1308. The description she gave of this supposed medieval codex – whose existence some scholars have seriously debated – was every bit as believable as Nostredame's fabrications:

This manuscript dating from the eighth year of the fourteenth century contains, first of all, a history of the life and principal actions of King Richard, written by himself … After King Richard's history, there are in this manuscript several tales and several short gallant (galant) romans, all likewise designated as fabliaux. These works are preceded by a notice by Jehan de Sorels, where he describes to his readers his efforts and exactitude in collecting all these texts dispersed in the works of different authors and in different books.

L'Hermitier's purpose in describing this manuscript was both fictional and extra-fictional. In the context of her narrative, the manuscript gave historical credibility to the tales supposedly composed by Richard while in captivity. On an extra-fictional level, however, the manuscript also created an aristocratic literary genealogy within which L'Hermitier, the real author, could inscribe herself. By making Richard the author of “short gallant romans”, or in the modern definition of the word, fictional prose narratives, L'Hermitier, who was also an author of prose narratives, could therefore present herself, not as the inventor of frivolous novels, but as the worthy literary successor of a well-known monarch of old, Richard the Lionheart.

Troubadour Theory
Moving beyond the realm of fiction or the histoire, other authors, including L'Hermitier, attempted to perform – half in jest, half in earnest – a new medieval genealogy for the fairy tale that made radical claims to historical accuracy. In her dedication of her fairy tale “Les Enchantements de l'éloquence” to the duchesse d'Epernon, L'Hermitier

99 “Passoit le temps à rithmer et se delectoit à lire leurs beaux romans.” Nostredame, Les vies des plus célèbres poètes provençaux, 86.
100 “Ce Manuscrit daté de la huitième année du quatorzième Siècle, contient premierement un recit de la Vie & des principales actions du Roy Richard, écrit par lui-même … Après l'Histoire du Roy Richard, il y a dans ce Manuscrit plusieurs Contes & plusieurs petites nouvelles galantes, renfermez tous également sous le titre de Fabliaux. Tous ces ouvrages sont precedez d'un Avertissement de Jehan de Sorels, ou il rend compte à ses lecteurs des peines & de l'exactitude avec lesquelles il a recueilli toutes ces pieces dispersées dans divers Auteurs et dans divers livres.” L'Hermitier, La Tour ténébreuse, unpaginated preface.
described the transmission of her tales, arguing for the existence of a “direct line” (**droite ligne**) between the medieval past and the modern present:

You would therefore, good duchess, like to interrupt for some moments your serious and learned occupations to listen to one of these Gallic fables, which apparently come to us in a direct line from the tellers or troubadours of Provence, who were so famous in another age.\footnote{101 “Vous voulez donc, belle Duchesse, interrompre pour quelques momens vos occupations sérieuses & sçavantes, pour écouter une de ces Fables gauloises, qui viennent apparemment en droite ligne des Conteurs ou Troubadours de Provence, si celebres autrefois.” L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 307.}

Elsewhere, L’Héritier described fairy tales as “tales in the style of the troubadours” (**contes du style des Troubadours**)\footnote{102 L’Héritier, Œuvres mêlées, 307.} or “novellas from the source of the troubadours” (**nouvelles de la source des Troubadours**).\footnote{103 L’Héritier’s evocation of the figure of the troubadour, like Madame de Sévigné’s correspondence on the *Cours d’amour*, contributed significantly to the new prominence of troubadour lore in the 1690s. Just as the Grignan family had incarnated a real link to the medieval past, L’Héritier herself was directly linked to the troubadours when in 1696, in recognition of her poetic works, she was elected to Toulouse’s newly-resuscitated Académie des Jeux Floraux. This Academy, originally known as the Consistoire du Gai Savoir, had supposedly been founded in 1323 by seven troubadours who regularly held meetings, established poetic rules, and awarded literary prizes. Revived in 1694, it was granted patent letters by Louis XIV, in another example of the new interest within official circles for elements of France’s medieval past, and in an active attempt to continue the poetic activities of the troubadours in a modern, non-regionalist setting.\footnote{104 The rediscovery of the troubadours, as we have seen, drew primarily on Nostredame’s *Vies des plus célèbres et anciens poètes provençaux*, which mixed biographies of real troubadours with fictitious ones, listing its supposed source manuscripts and detailing the author’s method of scholarly textual analysis. While medieval scholars have overwhelmingly condemned Nostredame’s work because of his obvious fabrications, a more recent interpretation has on the contrary suggested that Nostredame could more usefully be viewed as one of “a long line of ‘improvers’ of [medieval traditions] that went back to the medieval performers and scribes themselves,”\footnote{105 Kendrick, “The Science of Imposture”, 101. and that continued into the eighteenth century. As Laura Kendrick argues, “what Nostredame did was further fictionalize and modernize medieval *vidas* [troubadour biographies] that were, in his view, already fictions (both those ‘sources’ he invented and those that earlier interpreters had invented before him).”\footnote{106 Kendrick, “The Science of Imposture”, 100.}}

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an attempt to recreate the medieval in any historically objective sense, but rather to ensure the continuity of a tradition or a collective memory that had been transmitted and transformed through the intervening centuries.

In the domain of literary historiography, the troubadours, by virtue of their association with aristocratic patrons, and because of the performative character of their art, furnished a particularly attractive ancestry for later literary productions. Their poetry expressed an elevated aristocratic ethos that could be fit into modern-day aristocratic, literary self-fashionings. By inscribing themselves into a literary genealogy that began with the troubadours, modern authors performed their own authorship. Thus L’Héritier traced the heritage of the troubadours down to her own time, linking them to the “gallant spirit” (esprit galant) associated with modern salon culture:

The troubadours were the authors of the little histories of which I have spoken … They filled their tales with surprising wonders produced by fairies and sorcerers … However, these gallant (galant) troubadours saw their projects much improved on. Before them, no-one had ever heard of romans: they were then composed. From century to century, these kinds of productions were embellished and finally reached the summit of perfection to which the illustrious Mademoiselle de Scudéry has brought them, with such brilliance that posterity will agree with us that the admirable romances (romans) of this learned maiden are veritable prose poems, but of a prose as eloquent as it is polite.107

L’Héritier’s ambiguous use of the term roman recalled that of her predecessors, Claude Fauchet and Pierre-Daniel Huet, whose earlier histories of French literature she cited as sources for her knowledge of its development. Consciously exploiting the ambiguity of the term roman, she suggested that the troubadours’ poems, known as romans because composed in the Romance language (Langage Roman), were the real ancestors of the modern prose novel or roman – as exemplified by the works of L’Héritier’s salon companion Madeleine de Scudéry108 – thereby co-opting troubadour poetry for modern narrative fiction.

L’Héritier’s genealogy linking troubadour poetry to the modern roman made an important – and until now, little acknowledged – contribution to the early Enlightenment’s first attempts to write national literary history. During the course of the eighteenth century, with the publication of the first modern histories of French-language literature, it became a critical commonplace to trace back the origins of French literature to the troubadours – even in the complete absence of evidence to
support the claim. At the beginning of the century, this commonplace was developed in several works. The Provençal author Joseph Mervesin was one of the first to attempt a history of vernacular French literature. His *Histoire de la poésie française* (1706) perhaps predictably, given his own regionalist affiliations, dated the origins of French letters to twelfth-century Provence and the advent of “these worthy geniuses, who drew the Muses out of the slumber into which they had long ago fallen in France.”\textsuperscript{109} Strikingly, this very first history of French literature unabashedly drew on L'Héritier's own re-invention of medieval texts. The first medieval author mentioned by name in the *Histoire* was, indeed, Richard I. Mervesin referred explicitly to Richard’s “tales” (*contes*) and to L'Héritier’s novel, in a manner that implied that her text could be used as a source for scholars who, like himself, were engaged in writing French literary history:

> Emperor Frederick attracted several [troubadours] to his court. Richard the Lionheart, king of England, honoured them with his friendship, as one can see in the tales of this king, which Mademoiselle L'Héritier has recently published, but since they wrote only in Provençal or *Roman*, it would not be fitting to consider them further.\textsuperscript{110}

Mervesin was not the only author to adopt L'Héritier's troubadour genealogy of French literature. In his *Histoire de la poésie française, avec une défense de la poésie*, written at the same time as Mervesin’s but published only in 1739, the French Academician abbé Guillaume Massieu likewise granted a place of honour to the troubadours. In his account, he commented at length on the legendary episodes that had been the subject of L'Héritier’s *Tour ténébreuse*, citing as his source — not surprisingly, since these early literary histories freely borrowed *topoi* from the medievalist novel — “an ancient chronicle” (*une vieille chronique*).\textsuperscript{111} And in the realm of theatre historiography, the historians Claude and François Parfait, basing themselves again on Nostredame, devoted a large part of the first volume of their *Histoire du théâtre français* (1735) to a demonstration of the theory that the first French plays had been written by the troubadours. Not to be deterred by the lack of textual evidence, they supplied a series of apocryphal texts, which had been circulating for some time already in literary circles, to back their claim. In all these cases, scholarly works therefore made use of fictional as well as historical sources in reconstructing the medieval past, and apparently felt no need to justify this practice now universally rejected by modern scholarship. “Fictional” recreations of medieval literature inspired and helped shape later, more serious attempts to retrieve this forgotten heritage, for it was not an objective historical truth that was at stake, but


\textsuperscript{110} “L’Empereur Frederic en attira plusieurs [troubadours] à sa Cour. Richard Cœur-de-Lyon, roi d’Angleterre, les honora de son amitié; ce qu’on peut voir dans les Contes de ce roi, que Mademoiselle Lheritier vient de mettre au jour, & comme ils nont écrit qu’en Provençal ou en Roman, il ne seroit pas à propos d’en parler davantage.” Mervesin, *Histoire de la poésie française*, 69.

\textsuperscript{111} Massieu, *Histoire de la poésie française*, 134.
the performance of a past that, by its embodiment in the present, could come to life again and acquire new meaning.

**Female Genealogies**

In tracing the origins of the *roman* and of modern French literature back to the troubadours, medievalist authors were helping consolidate the literary values and ethos of Enlightened literary modernity. At the same time, some fairy tale authors drew a link between medieval models and a specifically female, modern tradition – hence the pointed reference to Scudéry, among others, in L’Héritier’s consideration of the fairy tale genre. In concluding one of the earliest fairy tales published in France, “Peau d’âne”, which first appeared in 1694, three years before his *Contes du temps passé*, Charles Perrault briefly commented on the transmission of folktales. According to him, these travelled along female lines:

> The tale of Donkeyskin is difficult to believe,
> But as long as there will be children in the world,
> Mothers and grandmothers,
> Its memory will be kept.112

A few years later, in the dedication of “Les enchantements de l’éloquence” to the duchesse d’Epernon, L’Héritier copied Perrault’s phrasing almost word for word, retaining the reference to “children, mothers and grandmothers”, but further elaborating on Perrault’s initial idea:

> You are doubtless surprised, you who the profoundest scholarship has never surprised, that these tales, as incredible as they are, have come down to us from age to age, without anyone having taken the trouble to write them down.
> They are not easy to believe
> But as long as there will be children in the world
> Mothers and grandmothers
> Their memory will be kept.

> A lady very knowledgeable in Greek and Roman antiquities, and even more knowledgeable in Gallic antiquities, told me this story when I was a child.113

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113 “Vous vous étonnez sans doute, vous que la sçience la plus profonde n’a jamais étonné [sic], que ces Contes tout incroiables qu’ils sont, soient venus d’âge en âge jusqu’à nous, sans qu’on se soit donné le soin de les écrire. Ils ne sont pas aisez à croire: / Mais tant que dans le monde on verra des enfans, / Des meres & des mere-grands, / On en gardera la memoire. Une Dame tres-instruite des antiquitez Grecques & Romaines, & encore plus savante dans les Antiquitez Gauloises, m’a fait ce Conte quand j’étois enfant”. L’Héritier, *Œuvres mêlées*, 164–5.
In other words, fairy tales or “Gallic fables” not only represented a homegrown, French Antiquity as worthy of emulation as Greek and Roman Antiquity. Because this Gallic antiquity had been transmitted by generations of women – “children, mothers and grandmothers” – the genealogy of the fairy tale also gave women a literary tradition of their own. This was the point L’Héritier sought to emphasize by describing how she had been told this fairy tale by “a lady knowledgeable in Gallic antiquities.” Women's right to take up the pen, it was implied, was legitimated by the fact that it was they who had preserved and transmitted national literary heritage across the centuries. Fairy tales, seen in this light, were comparable in intent to the other, more openly polemical texts that the Moderns wrote in praise of women authors. These included Perrault's *Apologie des femmes*, as well as L’Héritier’s lengthier *Parnasse reconnaisant, ou le triomphe de Madame Deshoulières*, which closed her first volume of fairy tales, and her *Apothéose de Mademoiselle de Scudéry* published in 1702. In all these texts, the medieval was subtly gendered female, implicitly recalling, too, the associations of darkness, and non-rational or bodily experience that attached themselves to women in the misogynistic discourse of the day.

Because L’Héritier’s interest in medieval literary traditions, like Nostredame’s before her, proceeded primarily from her ideological investment in performing the authorship of an emerging class of writers, it can be considered largely a discursive or rhetorical strategy. But as in all performances of collective identity, there was also a relationship between these rhetorical Middle Ages and the “real” or historical Middle Ages. Even if this relation was not one of objective truth per se, it did still have a truth-value of its own. Thus in her *Apothéose de Mademoiselle de Scudéry*, L’Héritier recalled the names of Marie de France and the comtesse de Die to give weight to her thesis of a female literary genealogy extending all the way back to the Middle Ages, and of which Scudéry was the most recent representative. In her *Triomphe de Madame Deshoulières*, L’Héritier provided a description of a series of triumphal arches decorated with statues of famous women from antiquity, which drew on the medieval model of Christine de Pizan’s construction of a metaphorical City of Ladies. In Pizan’s *Cité des dames* already, the architectural metaphor had served to frame and establish the authorship of the narrating subject, Christine de Pizan, who thereby fashioned herself as an individual, named author – in one of the first examples in French literature of such a writer’s assumption of scriptural authority.¹¹³

L’Héritier was not the only one to notice Pizan’s exceptional performance of medieval female authorship. Christine de Pizan was one of the first medieval authors to become the object of serious academic study. Sometime between 1705 and 1710, at the newly reformed Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres,¹¹⁵ Jean Boivin de Villeneuve – incidentally, the successor of Pierre-Daniel Huet at the French Academy – presented a paper to his fellow academicians on Christine de Pizan and her father Thomas. As librarian of the royal library, the *Bibliothèque du Roi*, the academician Boivin had unique access to its extensive collection of medieval manuscripts, including

¹¹³ Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*.
¹¹⁵ This Academy is the subject of chapter 6.
Pizan’s Boivin’s was, in fact, the very first paper on a medieval author read at that illustrious academy. In it, he concentrated largely on furnishing a biography of Christine, which he considered of interest for its bearing – along with her historical writings – on fourteenth-century history. Disappointingly for modern scholars perhaps, he said almost nothing about the literary works for which she is best known today, although he did conscientiously enumerate them all. At the end of his paper he did, however, comment at length on the portrait of Christine preserved in one of the manuscripts of her Cité des Dames. Because of its unique nature, I quote his description in extenso:

The portraits we have of Christine in some of her books, illuminated in her time, agree enough with the idea that she herself took care to give us of her physiognomy, when among the great advantages for which she recognized that she should be grateful to the Creator, she included that of “having a body without any deformity and rather comely, and not sickly, but well complexioned.”

Of all the miniatures in which she is represented, the most perfect, so it seems to me, is the one found in manuscript 7395 [of the Bibliothèque du Roi] at the head of the book entitled La Cité des Dames. One can see in it a lady seated under a dais, her head above her left hand, and her arm leaning on a desk. She has a round face, regular features, a delicate complexion and is fairly buxom. Her eyes are closed, and she appears to be sleeping. Her hairdress is a kind of butterfly henin, blue or violet, surrounded by a very loose gauze, which being raised all around, leaves her face bare (à nu), and does not even hide her ears. An extremely fine shirt, of which one can see only the top, and which is slightly open, sufficiently covers her neck and shoulders. A blue dress embroidered with gold at the bottom, and with feuille-morte on the inside, opens onto her breast, as do modern women’s cloaks, and allows a little purple-coloured corset to be glimpsed, bordered by a gold braid.116

The extraordinary attention Boivin paid to this portrait of a fourteenth-century female author is not only remarkable as an example of early Enlightenment scholarly medievalism. By its focus on Christine’s physical body, it suggested how, for early Enlightenment medievalists as for later, romantic historians, the desire to rediscover

116 “Les portraits que nous avons de Christine dans quelques-uns de ses livres, enluminez de son temps, s’accordent assez avec l’idée qu’elle-même a eu de nous donner de sa physionomie, lorsqu’entre les grands avantages dont elle reconnaît qu’elle est redevable au Créateur, elle met celui d’avoir corps sans nulle difformité & assez plaisant, & non maladis, mais bien complexionné … De toutes les miniatures où elle est représentée, la plus parfaite, à ce qui me paraît, est celle qui se trouve dans le manuscrit 7395 à la tête du livre intitulé la Cité des Dames. On y voit une dame assise sous un dais, la tête penchée sur la main gauche, & le coude appuyé sur un bureau. Elle a le visage rond, les traits réguliers, le teint délicat & assez d’embonpoint. Ses yeux sont fermes, & elle paroit sommeiller. Sa coëffure est une espéce de cul de chapeau, bleu ou violet, en pain de sucre, ombragé d’une gaze très-déliée, qui estant relevée tout autour, laisse voir à nu le visage, & ne cache pas même les oreilles. Une chemise extrêmement fine, dont on n’appercçoit que le haut, & qui est un peu entrouverte, couvre suffisamment les épaules & la gorge. Une robe bleüe brodée d’or par le bas, & doublée de feuille-mort, s’ouvre sur le sein, comme aujourd’hui les manteaux de femme, & laisse entrevoir un petit corset de couleur de pourpre, bordé d’un passement d’or.” Boivin de Villeneuve, “Vie de Christine de Pisan”, 713–14.
the medieval was also a desire to touch a body across time – in Christine's case, a body that was explicitly described, in erotically charged language, as "buxom", "naked" and "opened on the breast". This was, tellingly, the image of the medieval female author that was transmitted to later generations, and was quoted in full among others in Louis de Jaucourt's long article "Venise" in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Such images contributed both to the general process whereby the medieval was metaphorically gendered female, a body to be physically desired, yet simultaneously stimulated serious scholarly interest in the "real", historical Middle Ages.

**Recreating Medieval Song**

The embodied conception of the medieval exemplified by Boivin's attention to Christine's body was also evident elsewhere. It influenced, too, L'Héritier and later literary historians' choice of a troubadour ancestry for modern literature – rather than a more obvious genealogy going back to medieval *romans de chevalerie*, to which opera and the fairy tale really were indebted. Their choice can of course partly be explained by narrative fiction's exclusion from the literary system of classicism, making it a poor candidate as a foundation on which to build the edifice of modern French literature. But this choice was also related to troubadour lyric's defining link to music, that some authors viewed as the morally uncorrupted, original language of humankind. Troubadour song was not a textually fixed literary genre, but inscribed itself within a specific socio-cultural performance context. As the expression of a set of particular social relations, it re-enacted and gave them reality through performance, much as early Enlightenment *galanterie* also contributed to modern literary self-fashionings. By singing the troubadour's desire for his high-born patroness, troubadour lyric celebrated the aristocratic lady, and also foregrounded bodily desire. Troubadour song finally, by its appeal to sensory perception, privileged a non-analytic mode of knowing that was the opposite of Enlightenment reason. Performed song, in other words, incarnated contemporary ideas of the medieval more fully than mere text could.

Because of this, authors strove to push their own literary productions beyond the printed text, and to re-enter the realm of oral performance. Recalling other *salon* texts, fairy tales incorporated different kinds of writing – fictional narratives, poems, and letters addressed to real patrons or friends – into the narrative framework, in an attempt to suggest the social practices within which the tales had been produced. In some cases, other non-textual media were drawn into the fairy tale. In Charlotte-Rose Caumont de La Force's "La puissance d'amour", published in her *Les fées, contes des contes* in 1697, she had her heroine Lantine sing a song, and printed the music for it on the facing page, enabling readers to themselves reproduce and perform her words. (Whether they actually did so remains unknown.) Madame de Lubert, in her fairy tale "La veillée galante" from 1747, likewise included the musical notation of the vaudevilles sung by the peasant characters in one of the embedded tales. And in the realm of late *galant* poetry, musical settings of popular poems were common, with a poet like Deshoulières drawing much of her particular poetic style or tone from musical genres.

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117 For an analysis, see Zygel-Basso, "The 'bon vieux temps' in women's fairy tales", 298–9.
As Tonolo has noted, the commonplace motif of the poet as singer was so omnipresent in her work that it acquired a new valuation. “The genre of the song itself”, she writes, “is a guiding theme, from the [medieval] ballad and the rondeau, musical genres par excellence, to … polemics … resolved through a series of songs.” Her famous ballad on the occasion of Amadis contained a “verse emblematic of the ideal value that the poet-ess accorded to music”,118 lamenting the fact that in the present century, true love could be found only in song (Dans un siècle où l’Amour n’est que dans les chansons). Like Rousseau after her, Deshoulières – and beyond her, the galant movement of which she was a leading figure – believed that sincere moral sentiment, uncorrupted by modern civilization, had music as its last remaining refuge.

One of the more remarkable examples of this performative practice of galant medievalist genres can again be found in L’Héritier’s oeuvre, in her Tour ténébreuse. In the preface, she reproduced original Occitan and Old French versions of three songs composed, according to her, by Richard I himself and by Blondel de Nesle, the poet with whom he was linked in the legend of his Austrian captivity. Close examination of these texts reveals that L’Héritier’s statement was surprisingly accurate. The second song she cited, in Old French, was indeed the sixth strophe of a twelfth-century lyric by Blondel de Nesle, “Chanson IV” in Yvan Lepage’s recent edition, which began in L’Héritier’s version “Se loyautez valoit mielx que trahir”.119 The spelling of her version revealed that she took it from Claude Fauchet’s Recueil de l’origine de la langue et poésie française, which she had previously cited as one of her sources in her Œuvres mêlées.120 The third song, in turn, was an accurate rendering of a song still ascribed to Richard I, the Occitan lyric “Ja nuls hom pres non dira sa razon”, which he was reputed to have composed during his Dürnstein captivity, and which had been reproduced in previous publications, including (partially) in Nostredame’s Vies. Only in the case of the first song was L’Héritier not correct. The lyric she cited, “Domna vostra beutas”, was not by Blondel, as she claimed, but by another thirteenth-century troubadour, Blacatz. According to Alfred Jeanroy, her version showed that she must have read this lyric in ms. I of the Bibliothèque du roi, which was generally open only to serious scholars, but to which L’Héritier may have had access through her various salon contacts.121 Boivin, the author of Christine de Pizan’s biography, was one of the library’s keepers during the period in which L’Héritier composed her book. Although there is no conclusive evidence of contact between the two, the coincidence that both – alone among early Enlightenment authors – betrayed knowledge of Pizan’s Cité des dames is suggestive of possibly deeper ties. Another librarian with whom it is certain that L’Héritier had contact was Jean-Paul Bignon, who later became the official Bibliothécaire du Roi and was himself also an occasional author of fairy tales. The three lyrics L’Héritier quoted were, in any case, authentic medieval texts, one of which was known only through

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118 Tonolo, “Introduction”, in Deshoulières, Poésies, 69–70.
120 Fauchet, Recueil de l’origine de la langue et poésie française, 130–1.
manuscript transmission, and which L'Héritier was thus the first to publish, preceding by more than a century the first, scholarly editions of these songs.

While L'Héritier's publication of authentic medieval texts was in itself remarkable, it is just as interesting that even while exhibiting these texts, she integrated them into her own narrative. After presenting the original texts in her preface, she proceeded to work modern translations of the songs into the plot of her novel and tales, where they played a functional role, bringing medieval lyric back to life again in a new, modern setting. At the same time, L'Héritier commissioned a salon acquaintance of hers, the amateur poet and musician Cheron de Rochesources, to compose new music for her modern translations of these songs. This music was published, also in 1705, in the monthly Recueil d'airs sérieux et à boire. (Later Dutch reprints of the Tour ténébreuse, in their turn, added the music to the text.) The musicologist John Haines has written that the melody composed by Cheron de Rochesources was important “for its musical contribution which may well have influenced later composers.” Indeed, he hypothesizes that this is perhaps the earliest known example of the musical genre that, later in the century, would become known as romance, and that defined itself by laying claim to a medieval character. Thus, explains Haines, the refrains “display the kind of musical conciseness and simplicity which would typify the mature romance from around 1800: all are set for unaccompanied voice, with a minimum of ornaments”.122 While actual troubadour melodies were not published during the eighteenth century – the single exception, to which I shall return shortly, appeared in England, not in France – L'Héritier and Cheron's new musical setting did represent a singular, genuine revival if not actual “survival” of medieval troubadour lyric.

The short text presenting the music drew attention to the care L'Héritier had taken in modernizing the lyrics, in such a way as to respect the spirit of the medieval source:

The five following airs, by Monsieur Cheron, have been taken from the Contes Anglais which Mademoiselle L'Héritier will shortly publish. These tales were composed, some five centuries ago, by the King of England Richard I, named the Lionheart, during his captivity. The old words of these airs were in the Roman language, which people spoke then in the greatest part of Europe. Mademoiselle L'Héritier, in translating these songs into French, has preserved with exactitude all the terms and thoughts, not wanting in any way to alter such a respectable original in order to give a more lyrical or easy turn to the music.123

L'Héritier here juxtaposed an emphasis on “original” texts (un Original si respectable), and the need to translate and popularize for a modern audience, through the highly

122 Haines, Eight Centuries of Troubadours, 126.
Continuities

accessible medium of music, these lyrics that had been forgotten and had become unreadable to all but a handful of antiquarians. In other words, through her collaboration with Cheron, L'Héritier created a unique situation whereby medieval lyric was not only exhumed from the manuscripts where it had long lain forgotten. She also recontextualized it in modern fairy tales, where it very literally came back to life as modern, orally transmitted song. In keeping with the early Enlightenment conceptualization of the medieval, that did not depend on the notion of a perceived break with the past, L'Héritier thus privileged dynamic, oral transmission rather than scholarly, textual fixity, living performance over text.

This Enlightenment recreation of medieval song laid the basis for much later, musical engagement with the medieval. Adapted and published in July 1776 in Tressan's Bibliothèque des romans, L'Héritier's Tour ténébreuse went on to become the inspiration for Michel-Jean Sedaine's libretto for André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's popular opera Richard Cœur de Lion (1784). In the nascent field of musicology, her medieval texts kept alive the memory of the troubadours, and were included, with a new pseudo-medieval musical setting, in Jean-Benjamin de Laborde's important Essai sur la musique, published in 1780. The influence of L'Héritier's lyrics extended beyond France. Two years after Laborde, Charles Burney's English-language General History of Music (1782), included her version of Blacatz's "Domna vostra beutas", and was the source cited for Blacatz' text – still attributed to Blondel – in the fourth edition of Thomas Percy's immensely popular Reliques of Ancient English Poetry in 1791.212 But Burney's work was groundbreaking in another respect, too. In it, accompanying his reprinting of medievalist texts by L'Héritier and other authors, he announced a triumphant new find: the only troubadour melody printed in the eighteenth century, Gaucelm Faidit's "Fort chausa est", which Burney had discovered in the Vatican library after meticulous research. In a remarkable case of literary coincidence, this melody was a lament on the death of King Richard I,15 the protagonist of L'Héritier's earlier novel. Thus this discovery, which was ultimately inspired by the groundwork of L'Héritier and other galant authors, inadvertently illustrated how the advent of serious scholarship implied the demise of the earlier, fictional literary genealogies espoused by Enlightenment traditions of medievalist performance.

Text versus Performance

Early Enlightenment performances of the medieval, by assimilating the medieval and the modern, betrayed a fluid relationship to the medieval past that was characteristic of the pre-Romantic period as a whole. Rather than adopting the objective stance of the modern text editor, authors like L'Héritier inscribed themselves in a performance tradition that, they claimed, went back to the Middle Ages. Music, as a supposedly natural language, played a key role in imagining an alternative, non-analytic mode of apprehending the past. Like the later eighteenth-century and early romantic medievalists whom they inspired, early Enlightenment medievalists saw themselves as continuing

125 Haines, Eight Centuries of Troubadours, 119.
the work of medieval poets, who had of course themselves been engaged in the perpetual rewriting and recreation of texts, in the tradition of premodern textual mouvance. The operas and fairy tales of the 1680s and 1690s did not merely use medieval elements for decorative or polemical purposes. They actually engaged in a direct dialogue with the past and attempted to perpetuate its heritage by resetting it in a modern context. Through such practices, the memory of the past could very concretely protrude into the present, “touching” and transforming it, engendering a sublime historical experience, or the touch across time that took place when two historical epochs came together, in a fleeting “kiss of Romeo and Juliet”. Performance, as a superficial, sensory form of embodied understanding, underlay this logically impossible simultaneity of two different historical periods.

Performance and performativity played a central, defining role in early Enlightenment medievalisms not only by making possible a new historical understanding, but also by redefining literature itself. Creating a “resonance between life and reading”, medievalist texts took their readers well beyond the intellectual reading experience, suggesting through their orality and performative aspects a new episteme or way of being-in-the-world. But by thus leaving behind the text, they also suggested the possibility of medievalism as an emptiness or absence, and text as the trace of voices that could no longer be heard. The final paradox, therefore, was that although the medieval was inextricably defined in relation to literature in the early Enlightenment, understanding it often presupposed other modes of cognition than the textual. Challenging rational modernity’s key conceptual categories, medievalism thus ultimately became an understanding of history that abolished chronology, an analytical category that drew meaning from non-rational, sensory experience, and a form of literature without text.
Desire was a defining element in early Enlightenment medievalisms, I have argued, because these medievalisms often expressed their longing for the past in an erotic or sexualized language. Embodied, performative forms of knowledge represented one response to the desire to physically touch the past. The roman genre provided another response to this eroticization of the past due to its association with illicit desire and its supposedly seductive, corrupting power. For late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century authors, it was a cliché to think of the Middle Ages as a period characterized, above all, by the prominent place its literature assigned to love. Epitomized by the legendary Cours d’amour, immortalized in troubadour lyric, and remembered through the amorous quests that provided the backbone of chivalric narrative, earthly love was what summed up the medieval, more than anything else, in the popular imagination. “Lovers no longer love as in olden days” (On n’aime plus comme on aimoit jadis), sang Deshoulières in her famous ballad, echoed by the fairy tale author Charlotte Rose Caumont de La Force, who was only stating the obvious when she described the Middle Ages as “the time of the great passions”.¹

This perception had its basis in developments that can be traced back to the historical Middle Ages, and especially the literary-philosophical flowering that began in the twelfth century and was marked by an unprecedented new debate on the nature of love.² Crucially, this reflection took place both in a worldly and in a theological context, bringing together views that, at first sight, appeared incompatible – yet which some scholars have related to one another in various ways. Thus Denis de Rougemont argued, not uncontroversially, that by drawing on various forms of Eastern and pre-Christian mysticism, the Middle Ages invented the idea of love as an all-consuming,

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² Although some scholars have nuanced the narrative of the twelfth-century “invention of modern love” by pointing out that the term “courtly love” itself was only invented in the nineteenth century. Hult, “Gaston Paris and the Invention of Courtly Love”. 
transcendental passion, i.e. as an experience leading to physical death and spiritual rebirth. More recently, Charles Baladier has used Lacan’s insights on courtly love to show how medieval scholastic theology shaped humankind as a subject of desire,\(^3\) while in a stimulating anthology, Ruedi Imbach and Íñigo Atucha have illustrated the depth and diversity of the theological and poetical reflection that took place, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, on the nature of earthly and divine love. The existence of an important theological strand in medieval thinking about love, then, makes late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century reconfigurations of the phenomenon a potentially revealing source for understanding the place of religion in the supposedly secular literature of modernity. Specifically, it invites us to ask how literary medievalism helped shape the larger movement of secularization that took place during the early Enlightenment. For if, with Charles Taylor and others, we understand this secularization to be a process growing out of religious debate rather than merely stripping religion away from an earlier, “natural” view of the world,\(^4\) then early Enlightenment revisions of (theological) medieval concepts of love also contributed to this larger movement.

Because of the richness of the premodern debate on love and desire, this period furnished eighteenth-century authors with a substantial corpus of texts and themes around which to build their own, modern concepts of desire, that could and often did harbour a distinctly religious dimension. These literary reworkings acquired a new resonance, within the early decades of the Enlightenment, through one emerging genre in particular: the epistolary novel or sequence of love letters. Going back to classical as well as to medieval sources, epistolarity came to be associated with two models of desire, one pagan and one Christian, whose influences were so closely interwoven as to make them at times indistinguishable: the fictional, Ovidian genre of the heroi, and the real twelfth-century letters of Abelard and Heloise. While the first of the two models drew on the classical and Platonic notion of *eros*, or the notion of love as a physical, potentially transformative experience drawing the individual towards a higher being, the medieval letters instead were the product of a culture in the process of redefining the notion of Christian *agape*, or boundless, divine love descending from God onto the faithful. While pagan *eros* underscored the violence of passion, *agape* instead proposed a new, disinterested form of love.

This chapter explores how, in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century varieties of medievalism, medieval religious *agape* and classical *eros* intersected in the epistolary genre. By considering two original rewritings of the Ovidian-Heloiian corpus, Madame de Sevigné’s letters to her daughter in Provence and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Heloise*, I argue that the early Enlightenment decisively transformed the medieval object of desire, associating it increasingly with two characteristically modern expressions of sensibility: bourgeois ideals of marriage and motherhood, and a new, secularized form of medieval religious desire.

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Earthly and Divine Love in Abélard and Héloïse's Letters
In his provocative and stimulating essay L'amour et l'Occident, Denis de Rougemont proposed that the birth of modern love could be dated, with surprising precision, to the year 1118, i.e. the year in which according to him the young philosopher Pierre Abélard and his pupil Héloïse met in Paris and fell in love.5 The collection of eight letters in which they subsequently described their eventful romance constituted, in Rougemont's account, “the first great romance (roman) of passionate love in our history”.6 To these letters, written after the events described in them, he added the popular songs – now lost – that Abélard addressed to his mistress during the events themselves. Drawing on the conventions of troubadour lyric and epitomizing a new, non-Christian ideal of love, this lyrical production made of Abélard one of history’s most famous – if not known as such – trouvères, or even troubadours. Yet despite the central role he assigned to the letters and Abélard’s lost lyrics in his discussion of modern concepts of desire, Rougemont did not study them in depth. This is all the more surprising for the fact that the letters were profoundly ambivalent, and a prime illustration of Rougemont’s central thesis. In these letters two distinct, apparently contradictory approaches to love came together, one that viewed love in earthly terms, and one that inscribed it into a larger theological vision leading, ultimately, to heavenly salvation. It was through the various ways in which they sought to negotiate this tension that the letters shaped both a new critical engagement with the divine, and new conceptualizations of love.

The original corpus of letters was composed around or after 1131, i.e. several years after the events they described had taken place, and brought together five letters written by Abélard, and three by Héloïse.7 In the first five letters, the correspondents recounted the story of Héloïse’s seduction by her teacher, the young philosopher Pierre Abélard, her subsequent pregnancy, secret marriage, and the birth of their son Astrolabe. These initial events were then followed by the dramatic end of the romance when, upon being discovered by her uncle, Abélard was forcibly castrated and the two lovers entered monastic life. The last letters moved beyond the original love story to describe the former lovers’ new life in Christ, debating and drawing up an order for the female monastic community of the Paraclete, of which Héloïse became the first abbess. When read together, the letters thus appeared to follow the dual structure typical of conversion narratives. Imitating the bipartite ordering of the Christian Bible into an Old and a New Testament, they fell into two parts, a first one telling of a fall from grace, and a second one that, analogically echoing the first, told of the protagonists’ subsequent redemption. Following the confessional mode established by Saint Augustine, the redemption in the second part was made more striking for the depths to which the sinners had fallen in the first part. Héloïse insisted on her own previous sinfulness

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5 Recent scholarship dates the encounter slightly earlier, to 1116 or 1117. Rougemont, L'amour et l'Occident, 77, note 1.
6 Rougemont, L'amour et l'Occident, 121.
7 An additional corpus of letters has since been attributed to Abélard and Héloïse. Since these were not, however, known to early Enlightenment authors, I have omitted them from my discussion. Mews, The Lost Love Letters of Héloïse and Abélard.
– even seemed to revel in it – in order to make the story of her turning to God a more powerful one. The most quoted passage from her letters, that largely cemented later views of her as passionate woman-out-of-control, occurred when she described herself in her first letter as a “concubine” to Abélard:

And although the name and quality of wife seemed more saintly and more solid, that of friend (*amice*) seemed sweeter, or even – if I did not fear to offend you – that of concubine, because I made a greater sacrifice in assuming it.8

Héloïse concluded this passage by writing, in even stronger language, that:

God is my witness that if the master of the universe, Augustus himself, wanted to honour me by taking me for his wife and giving me the perpetual use of all the treasures of the earth, I would find it sweeter and more fitting to be called your whore (*meretrix*) than his empress.9

The message of the letters was thus highly equivocal, emerging only when they were carefully read as a whole. While some modern commentators have argued that “only a Christian reading of the Letters, as the story of a sinful life followed by conversion, would have been possible for medieval readers”, others have instead pointed out that “medieval responses … often were sympathetically romantic, in just the way that ‘historical’ critics denounce as a modern anachronism”.10 Rather than proposing a true synthesis then, the letters retained a double structure, displaying a fundamental tension between the tenets of pagan *eros*, i.e. carnal passion that moved upwards from the lover to the object of his love, and Christian *agape*, that moved downwards from God to the faithful. The most powerful arguments in favour of a Christian reading were structural rather than content-related, relying on the ordering of the letters and on the relative weight given to the two parts of the narrative. The last three letters, i.e. those that had an exclusively religious content, took up over twice as many pages as the first ones, which recounted the earthly love between Abélard and Héloïse. If in these later letters earthly desire finally made way for a deeper kind of desire, for the body of a heavenly lover, as Héloïse assumed the role of bride of Christ, this interpretation was not always the one retained by their commentators.

The twelfth-century correspondence of Abélard and Héloïse clearly posed a problem for its readers. Could earthly and divine love – corresponding to the first and second parts of the letter collection – be reconciled, or were they fundamentally in conflict

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8  “Et si uxoris nomen sanctius ac validius videtur, dulcius michi semper exstitit amice vocabulum, aut – si non indigneris – concubine vel scorti; ut, quo me videelicet pro tem amplius humiliarem, ampliorum apud te consequeretur gratiam.” *Lettres d’Abélard et Héloïse*, 144.

9  “Deum testem invoco, si me Augustus universo presidens mundo matrimonii honore dignaretur, totumque michi orbem confirmaret in perpetuo possidendum, karius michi et dignius videretur tua dici meretrix quam illius imperatrix.” *Lettres d’Abélard et Héloïse*, 144. During the early Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle paraphrased this passage by writing that Héloïse “aimeroit mieux être la putain de Pierre Abéland, que la femme légitime de l’Empereur de toute la Terre.” Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, 714, note K.

with one another? This conflict was a defining one for the Christian tradition, and
indeed continues to provoke scholarly debate today. Authors in our own time point to
the fact that "there remains a fundamental tension in Christianity. Flourishing [in the
world] is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal." Or put slightly differ-
etently, this tension lies "between the demand to love God, which means to follow him
even to the cross, to be ready to renounce everything on one hand; and the demand
to affirm ordinary human life and flourishing, on the other." This is one of the deep
tensions that were long held in an uneasy balance within Western Christendom – what
Taylor refers to as "an equilibrium in tension" – until the process of secularization
definitively tipped the balance towards an immanent rather than transcendent view of
human fulfilment.

As has also been pointed out, the period that witnessed the composition of Abélard
and Héloïse's letters, i.e. the twelfth century, also witnessed a surge of new reflections
on the nature and practice of divine love, ranging from scholastic commentary on
the notion of Christian charity (caritas) to Bernard of Clairvaux's mystically infected
celebrations of the love of God, and the new cult he helped to create around the
Virgin Mary. Thus the new conceptualization of human love to be found not only in
Abélard and Héloïse's correspondence, but also in the troubadour love ethic and in
the chivalric romances that were composed around the same time was, by a striking
coincidence, seconded by a parallel reflection on divine love. Often physical love and
/or marriage, as most famously celebrated in the Biblical Song of Solomon, were the
topics around which debate coalesced. While troubadours and other secular authors
celebrated earthly love, scholastic authors, following Augustine's injunction to use the
things of this world but not enjoy them (uti, non frui), refused it any legitimacy. Yet
at the same time, religious authors adapted the erotic vocabulary of profane love to a
theological context, for example allegorically reading the Song of Songs as describing
the marriage between the faithful and the Church. Because of these contradictions,
the nature of the relation between secular and divine notions of love during the latter
part of the Middle Ages remains contested. Classic views range from the thesis that the
two concepts were entirely autonomous, making it impossible to establish any relation
between them (Etienne Gilson) to views that, instead, see a basic dichotomy or opposi-
tion between secular and theological concepts of love (Anders Nygren, Rougemont). And
today still, the tension between the two forms of love that Abélard and Héloïse's
letters expressed continues to generate discussion.

A middle position in this debate on the relation between secular and theological
reflections on love during the premodern era – or pagan eros versus Christian agape
– has been suggested recently by Charles Baladier. Taking up the notion of intertextu-
ality, he argues that "the reflections of the theologians and the language of love of the
courtly poets could be considered as entertaining a mutual relation of intertextuality

11 Taylor, A Secular Age, 18.
12 Taylor, A Secular Age, 80.
13 Taylor, A Secular Age, 44.
14 Gilson, La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard; Nygren, Eros et Agape; Rougemont, L'Amour et l'Oc-
   cident. These views are discussed and contrasted in Baladier, Eros au Moyen Âge, 15–30.
or, at the very least, as allowing us today to make them enter into a dialogue within an
interpretation that will never be finished”. Hence Baladier accords a new significance
to the fact that although the object to which the secular and religious accounts of love
referred was different, the language that secular and pious authors used was often surpris ingly similar:

The troubadours, in fact, seem to have wanted to reintegrate into their celebra
tion of the male lover’s love for a woman the commentaries in which monastic
authors, especially unbridled with respect to allegory, had for example diverted
from their literal sense the verses of the biblical epithalamium attributed to
Solomon … the literary – and musical – corpus of the courtly song (chants cour
tois) seems henceforth to have had as its goal to render explicit the latencies and
to fill in the lacunae of the scholastic writings on human love.  

The striking linguistic similarities between religious and profane expressions of love,
thus, troubled the perceived opposition between divine and secular desire, further
underlining the central conflict in Abélard and Héloïse’s correspondence. As Baladier
goes on to demonstrate, this linguistic ambiguity became more pronounced as time
wore on for, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the vocabulary of love
invented by the troubadours and by roman authors was adopted wholesale by new
movements that sought to create modernized forms of non-monastic spirituality. These
included various kinds of mysticism, beguine practices or, in the Germanic realm, the
new doctrine of Minnymystik, “in which the soul of the contemplative beguine, the
Wife, took the place of the [troubadour] and the Husband, or his Essence, that of
[the troubadour’s Lady]”. Conversely, religious concepts were adapted to the context
of secular, literary expressions of earthly love, for example in Petrarch’s Canzoniere,
whose final invocation of the beloved lady as an avatar of the Virgin Mary was both
a critical revision of Dante’s Vita nova and a secularization of divine love. Ultimately,
Baladier suggests, this new language of love underlay many movements, both secular
and religious, that culminated in the last decades of the seventeenth century, i.e. the
period in which our own account of literary medievalism begins, with the mystic ideal
of pure love espoused by the quietist authors François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénélon
and Madame Guyon. This, then, was the conflict between earthly and heavenly forms of
love, first problematized by the letters of Abélard and Héloïse, as it came down to the early
Enlightenment through various re-elaborations, and as it was to be picked up by two of the
period’s most original medievalists, Madame de Sévigné and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Eighteenth-Century Versions of Héloïse’s Letters: The Role of the Heroide
The ambivalent or Janus-faced nature of Abélard and Héloïse’s letters was amply
reflected in early Enlightenment rewritings. From the beginning, readers attempted

15 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 207.
16 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 175.
17 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 204.
to bypass the central conflict by choosing to concentrate either on the first five letters, i.e. those that recounted the earthly love story, or on the last three, that described the rule obtaining at the Paraclete. Authors who privileged the first letters emphasized the construction of a female passionate subjectivity, portraying Héloïse as the consummate woman in love, and subsequently viewing her as the narrative’s true protagonist. In this tradition, the focus was firmly placed on the narrative of carnal desire, with its transgressive consummation of amorous passion, and on the central passage in Héloïse’s first letter that, by its adoption of the terms “concubine” and “whore”, most forcefully expressed this transgression.

In the history of the letters’ reception, this strand led from Jean de Meung’s verses about Héloïse in the Roman de la Rose through mentions by Villon and Petrarch to Bussy-Rabutin’s galant “rediscovery” of Héloïse’s letters at the end of the seventeenth century. In some accounts, notably Pierre Bayle’s four articles on the subject in his strongly anti-clerical Dictionnaire historique et critique (“Abelard”, “Foulques”, “Héloïse”, “Paraclet”), the interest was firmly – even obsessively – on Abélard’s castration, thereby underlining the carnal aspect of the love relationship described.18 In a similar spirit, Bussy-Rabutin included only translations of the first two of Héloïse’s letters, omitting all reference to the last three, which described her monastic vows and life at the Paraclete. Bussy-Rabutin’s version, more than any other, consolidated the view of Héloïse as a passionate and defiantly unrepentant woman in love, according to the famous meretrix non imperatrix formula. After him, Héloïse’s love for Abélard was further enshrined in numerous texts by lesser-known authors, including Rémont des Cours’s loose imitation of Bussy-Rabutin, Histoire d’Éloïse et d’Abélard ... accompagnée de deux Aventures galantes fort singulières (1693), Pierre François Godard de Beauchamps’s fictionalized verse Lettres d’Héloïse et d’Abailard (1714), also based on Bussy-Rabutin’s rendering of the letters, and dramatic works such as the five-act Abailard et Éloïse possibly performed in 1752, and published in the same year by Jean-Baptiste Guys.19

Most significantly in the early Enlightenment, the Héloïsian tradition of earthly eros merged with another tradition, that of the Ovidian heroïdes, or fictional letters written by seduced and abandoned women to their faithless lovers. Ovid’s twenty-one Heroïdes, in each of which a mythical heroine described at length her unrequited passion for her absent male lover, were widely read and imitated in the final decades of the seventeenth century, i.e. the same years in which literary medievalism took hold of authors’ imagination.20 Known in translation primarily through Michel de Marolles’s

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18 Eric Walter has argued that this focus on the castration, in Bayle and other authors, was a pretext to reflect on the Enlightenment intellectual’s position in society, and on the question of marriage. Should the philosophe remain celibate, or should he, in keeping with eighteenth-century notions of sociability, enter into an amorous relation like Abélard did with Héloïse? Walter, “Le complexe d’Abélard”.

19 For an overview of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century versions of the Abélard and Héloïse story, see Charrier, Héloïse dans l’histoire et dans la légende; and Anderson, “Abélard and Héloïse: Eighteenth-Century Motif”.

20 On the late seventeenth-century fashion for the heroïdes, see DeJean, Fictions of Sappho, and Chatelain, Ovide savant, Ovide galant.
1660 version, they were further translated in 1723 and, in 1732, by troubadour theorist Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier – providing a first indication of the basic affinity between the genre of the heroide and medievalist sensibility. Other echoes of the heroide genre could be heard in the major medievalist genre that was invented during these decades, the fairy tale. Thus for example, in Charles Perrault’s strongly medievalizing “Bluebeard”, the scene in which the captive heroine called out, from the top of a castle tower, for her sister Anne, offered a clear echo of Dido’s cries of desperation in Ovid’s famous heroide.\(^1\) Such reuses suggest that, from the beginning, the heroide genre was assimilated to the emerging fashion for the medieval.

Further testifying to the investment of the heroide in the medieval, the heroide came into its own as a distinct, eighteenth-century literary genre in 1717,\(^2\) when Alexander Pope composed the heroide that became the modern genre’s model, and whose theme was again a medieval one, “Eloisa to Abelard”\(^3\). Conjoining the medieval and the Ovidian epistolary genre, this text enjoyed enormous influence in France. Translated at least six times by 1760, Pope’s “Eloisa” inspired a new fashion that took hold of French letters starting in 1758, with the publication of Charles-Pierre Colardeau’s widely-read “Lettre d’Héloïse à Abailard”. This first French heroide consolidated the medievalist genealogy of the genre. Not only was it immediately followed by another heroide on a medieval topic, Colardeau’s “Armide à Renaud”, but it spawned a host of other heroides elaborating further on the theme of Héloïse’s love for Abélard. In the same year, Henri-Lambert d’Érbigny, marquis de Thibouville published a “Réponse d’Abailard à Héloïse”, and a year later Claude-Joseph Dorat followed suit with another heroide from Abélard to Héloïse. 1763 saw the publication of Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s “Epître d’Héloïse à Abailard”, based on Pope’s original, while in 1765 Sébastien-Marcellin-Mathurin Gazon Dourxigné produced a new heroide, “Héloïse à son époux”, as did Bernard-Joseph Saurin. The production of this Héloïsian-Abélardian corpus continued apace, and was complemented by the appearance of new heroides attributed to several other characters from medieval history or legend. These included heroides from Petrarch to Laura and vice-versa (Romet in 1765), exchanges between Gabrielle de Vergy, the count of Fayel and various other interlocutors (Mailhol and Villemaïn d’Abancourt in 1766, Mailhol in 1769, Milsant in 1772), Joan of Arc (Verdan in 1776) and others.\(^4\)

With the adoption of medieval subject matter, the generic term for the heroide shifted. Authors no longer referred to their productions as classicist “epistles” or “heroïdes”, but increasingly, as medievalist romances – for example, in Jean de La Harpe’s well-known Héroïdes nouvelles (1759). By the end of the eighteenth century, the association between the heroide genre and the medieval had become so commonplace that when Madame de Staël referred to one of her early literary efforts, a rewriting of

\(^{21}\) Heidmann, “La Barbe bleue palimpseste”.
\(^{22}\) Some decades earlier, Ovid’s Heroides inspired another collection of letters addressed by a nun to her former lover, Gabriel de Guilleragues’s Lettres d’une religieuse portugaise (1669), which also appeared to draw on the Héloïsian model and played a crucial role in shaping the later, eighteenth-century epistolary novel.
\(^{24}\) For a full overview, see Carocci, Les héroïdes dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle.
Ovid's heroide about Sappho, she designated it a *romance*.\(^{25}\) The *romance* had of course become, since its tentative beginnings with L'Héritier and Cheron, not only a poetic but especially a musical genre that used a succession of couplets to tell a simple love tale – thereby privileging the affective, non-rational dimension associated with the “natural” language of music. Such was the resonance of Héloïse's story, as emblematic of the medievalized heroide-*romance* genre, that Aimé Ambroise Joseph Feutry's 1751 translation of Pope's “Elisa” tellingly referred to a subject that was by that date “worn-out and hackneyed”;\(^ {26}\) while in the *Encyclopédie* article “Scholastiques”, Diderot rhetorically asked his readers: “Who does not know the story and the misfortunes of Abélard? Who has not read Héloïse's letters?”\(^ {27}\)

There were several reasons why, in rewriting Héloïse's letters, early Enlightenment authors drew on the model of the Ovidian heroide. First of all, Héloïse herself had provided a compelling example by clearly referencing and / or emulating Ovid's *Heroides* at several points in her own letters to Abélard. Her opening letter, in which she reproached Abélard for his long silence following their double assumption of monastic life, gestured towards Ovid's first heroide. Addressed by Penelope to the absent, wandering Ulysses, this opening heroide described a “tension between an idealized Penelope, who willingly accepts her role as subordinate to the ‘larger good’ that Ulysses must serve in order to be worthy to be her husband”;\(^ {28}\) much as Héloïse herself struggled to accept her changed role in her relationship with her former lover. Héloïse's shipwreck metaphor, “this shipwreck in which you are still driven about” (*fluctuos naufragii*) also referenced the Ovidian model,\(^ {29}\) just as Héloïse's famous *meretrix non imperatrix* formula echoed Phaedra's declaration, in Ovid's fourth heroide, that she would rather be Hippolytus's wife than the king of the Gods, i.e. Jupiter's.\(^ {30}\) In her initial reveling in her own sinfulness, and in the carnal nature of her love, finally, Héloïse also recalled her Ovidian predecessors, one of whose defining traits was the often transgressive, excessive nature of their passion. The deeper affinity between the Ovidian heroide and Héloïse's Christian letters is aptly summed up by Jean-Pierre Néraudau's comment that “like a confession, but without the notion of sin and God, without the aid of contrition, the [heroide narrator's] avowal of passion leads to a desperate excess that associates *amor* and *mors*.\(^ {31}\)

For it was this element of desperate excess that most fundamentally characterized the heroide genre. Love or pagan *eros*, in the Ovidian tradition, led to death and to loss of self. The passion described in the *Heroides*, despite all the rhetorical art displayed


\(^{27}\) “Qui est-ce qui ne connoit pas l'histoire & les malheurs d'Abélard? qui est-ce qui n'a pas lu les lettres d'Héloïse?” Diderot and d'Alembert, *Enyclopédie*, XIV, 771.


\(^{29}\) *Lettres d'Abélard et Héloïse*, 138.

\(^{30}\) For a possible echo (or source) in troubadour lyric, see the strophe in Arnaut Daniel's fourth Canto where he sings that “I don't want the throne of Rome / nor to be made Pope / if I can’t find refuge near her /for whom my heart burns and flares.” “No vuelt de Roma l'emperi / ni qu'om m'en fassa postoli / qu'en lieis non aia revert / per cui m'art lo cors e'm rima.” *Les Troubadours*, 238.

\(^{31}\) Néraudau, Preface to Ovid, *Lettres d'amour*, 38.
by the female writing subject, was an uncontrolled, non-intellectual, and emotionally highly charged one. In keeping with the centrality of affect, the heroide itself was in practice conceived as a lyrical and/or theatrical genre. Formally, the genre was often treated as a dramatic text, a monologue to be declaimed or sung by the narrating subject, thus reinforcing the association with the performativity characteristic of medievalism, too. Completing the genre’s theatricality, Ovid alluded to its musical nature, advising young women to please their lovers by singing (cantare) his heroïdes to them. In short, the Ovidian heroide represented the opposite of the disembodied, measured stance celebrated by the rationalist current in Enlightenment thought. It was precisely because of its gratuitous, irrational nature that the passion described in the Heroides was so easily linked, in Héloïse’s letters and in the rewritings they inspired, to the medieval as a counter-model for modern society.

**Desire as an Instrument of Religious Realization**

There was however also a second tradition of early Enlightenment rewritings of the Abélard–Héloïse correspondence, that read the lover’s exchange not primarily as a narrative of passion, but instead as a conversion narrative. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, this tradition survived primarily in ecclesiastic circles. One of the most influential examples of this religious tradition was the first seventeenth-century translation of Héloïse’s letters, included in the former monk François de Grenaille’s *Nouveau recueil des lettres des dames tant anciennes que modernes* (1642). Drawing on the model of the heroide, the collection included several dozen fictional letters addressed by “great ladies of past centuries” to their lovers, husbands or counselors. But whereas the Ovidian model emphasized pure passion, Grenaille instead sought to give the letters a morally edifying purpose. Consequently, the collection’s first part was made up of a series of “state letters” (lettres d’estat) that were all political in content, followed, in the second part, by a shorter series of “Christian letters” (lettres Chrétiennes). Only after these letters did Grenaille’s collection belatedly make room for a modest number of love letters (lettres d’amour).

The inclusion of five letters purportedly by Héloïse in the rubric of “Christian letters” and not in that of “love letters” was significant. Indeed, by partly paraphrasing Héloïse’s authentic letters, partly inventing and adding new passages, and by changing the order of the events related and of the writing of the letters, Grenaille created a new image of Héloïse as virtuous nun. Noting that “the sacred Faculty of Theology has very rightly censured the naked confession she makes of her past debaucheries, because in recounting them she does not display a great enough repentance”, Grenaille set out to “make her speak more respectably in French than she had in Latin”. In keeping with this aim, his very free translation carefully erased the original letters’ references to


33 “La sacrée faculté de Théologie a censuré fort à propos la confession nue qu’elle fait de ses dissolutions passées, pour que les racontant elle ne montre pas avoir vn repentir assez grand. On observera encor que ie n’ay pas offencé Eloize, en la faisant parler plus honnestement en François qu’elle ne parloit en Latin.” Grenaille, *Nouveau recueil des lettres des dames*, I, 334.
sexuality, for example in his bland rendering of the famous *meretrix non imperatrix* passage:

I protest even today that if an Emperor who was master of all the world resolved to take me for his wife, to submit himself to me with all the universe, I would much rather be your servant than his wife.\(^{34}\)

This new image of the pious nun was further supported by a heightened emphasis on Héloïse’s criticism of conjugal life, with Héloïse now writing that “one must to some extent cease to be wise in order to start being married”,\(^{35}\) and that the state of celibacy was to be preferred above all. True to the ethic of the *femme forte* that Grenaille proclaimed elsewhere,\(^{36}\) virginity was presented as a source of moral strength and purity, and the pious Héloïse was made possible only by her emphatic rejection of marriage. But most significantly perhaps, in the final letter of the sequence, fabricated entirely by Grenaille, Héloïse embraced a new condition when, abandoning empty book-learning and worldly pride, she reached true wisdom through “an ignorant simplicity”\(^{37}\) – an ignorance and simplicity that, finally, led to the silencing of Abélard’s and perhaps ultimately her own voice:

Leave scholastic Theology to practice instead Morality, and take more note of that Mysticism that teaches us everything in silence, than that which makes a lot of noise and has little effect.\(^{38}\)

In other words, in Grenaille’s version the rechristianization of Héloïse was made possible only by ignoring or covering over her problematic exhibition of erotic excess, and by finally making the protagonists withdraw into a stance of silence.

Such selective readings also underlay the memory of Héloïse kept alive by the tradition of monastic historiography, within which the original twelfth-century letters may themselves have been conceived.\(^{39}\) In this tradition, their true subject was considered Abélard and Héloïse’s historical role as founders of the Paraclete, for which they were still remembered at the abbey in the eighteenth century. “In 1767”, writes Cecilia Feilla, “an English visitor to the convent noted with surprise that apart from the abbess, the nuns of the Paraclete knew nothing of the ‘affecting part’ of the story of Abelard and Heloise. The sisters knew the pair in terms of their institutional roles in the abbey as its

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\(^{34}\) “Je proteste même aujourd’hui que si vn Empereur qui fust maistre de tout le monde se resoluoit à me prendre à femme, pour se soumettre à moy aucecue tout l’univers, j’aymerois beaucoup mieux estre vostre servante que son espouse.” Grenaille, *Nouveau recueil des lettres des dames*, I, 317.

\(^{35}\) Grenaille, *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames*, I, 284.

\(^{36}\) On the *femme forte* theme, see especially MacLean, *Woman Triumphant*.


\(^{38}\) “Quittez la Theologie scholastique pour pratiquer la Morale, & faites plus d’estat de la Mystique qui nous apprend tout dans le silence, que de celle qui fait beaucoup de bruit & peu d’effet.” Grenaille, *Nouveau recueil de lettres des dames*, I, 370.

\(^{39}\) Powell, “Listening to Heloise at the Paraclete”, 256.
founder and first abbess, but not as lovers." This alternative, monastic version of the story was best exemplified by the former Trappist monk François Armand Gervaisé’s meticulously documented, two-volume *Vie de Pierre Abeillard, abbé de S. Gildas de Ruis, ordre de S. Benoist; et celle d’Héloïse son épouse, première abbéesse du Paraclet*. First published in 1720, and followed three years later by a bilingual edition of the original twelfth-century letters, this biography was dedicated to the present-day abbess of the Paraclete, Héloïse’s historical successor, Marie de Roye de Roucy de la Rochefoucauld. Running to over 500 pages, Gervaisé’s *Vie de Pierre Abeillard* sought to resituate Abélard’s career within the broader framework of ecclesiastic historiography. By focusing not on Abélard the lover, but on the man of faith, it contested both the secular accounts of Bussy-Rabutin and his emulators, as well as Pierre Bayle’s more scabrous account, which according to Gervaisé betrayed “the venom he hides in his heart against Roman Catholics, above all to those in religious orders”.

Gervaisé’s text and subsequent edition of the letters was thus a consciously polemic one. Yet because of its polemic nature, it effectively foregrounded the central conflict between pagan *eros* and Christian *agape*, inscribing itself into a tradition of Enlightenment rewritings of the Abélard and Héloïse story, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s in his *Nouvelle Héloïse*, that revisited anew the original medieval “equilibrium in tension” between the two.

In his *Vie de Pierre Abeillard*, Gervaisé pointedly insisted on the element of conversion, which he opposed to previous *galant* accounts that had instead focused on Abélard’s role as lover:

> It is a surprising thing that for so many centuries, no-one has thought of giving us a true history of the famous Abélard, and that authors have stopped only before the least edifying part of his life, to compose gallant pieces (*pieces galantes*) suitable only to nourish an impure flame, while they have left in oblivion his conversion, which does so much honour to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Supporting his stated, edifying purpose, Gervaisé’s biography and translation softened the allusions to carnal love, notably by pointing out that the key *meretrix non imperatrix* passage referred to Héloïse’s feelings “before her conversion”, and by insisting that, in her immodest display of her passion, “she spoke of these things only to humiliate

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40 Feilla, “From ‘Sainted Maid’ to ‘Wife in All her Grandeur’”, 10.
41 The original Latin letters were available in a 1616 French edition (Paris, Nicolas Buon), as well as a more recent English one (London, E. Curril and W. Taylor, 1718).
42 “La mauvaise foi de Baile paroit ici dans tout son jour, & il ne peut s’empêcher de découvrir le venin qu’il cache dans son cœur contre les Catholiques Romains, sur-tout contre les personnes Religieuses.” Gervaisé, *Vie de Pierre Abeillard*, II, 28 note.
43 “C’est une chose surprenante que depuis tant de siècles, personne n’ait pensé à nous donner une véritable histoire du fameux Abéillard, & qu’on ne se soit arrêté qu’à l’endroit de ses jours le moins édifiant, pour composer des pieces galantes uniquement propres à nourrir une flûme impure, tandis qu’on a laissé dans l’oubli sa conversion qui fait tant d’honneur à la grace de Jesus-Christ.” Gervaisé, *Vie de Pierre Abeillard*, I, no pagination.
herself, and to ask [Abélard] for his help in turning to God”. Further recalling the difficulties of feminizing the Ciceroonian terms *amicus* and *amicitia*, which in their female variant were often understood as “mistress”, Gervaise emphasized the friendship between the two lovers, for example when Héloïse pleaded “that I may always be your friend, and never your wife”. In short, by foregrounding the story’s moral lessons and the necessity to turn one’s back on earthly love in order to make possible Christian *agape*, Gervaise’s account unabashedly sought to reinscribe the story within a religious tradition of monastic historiography still well alive during the early Enlightenment.

**Sevigné: The Mother as Lover**

The central tension between earthly and heavenly love that came to the fore in Héloïse’s and Abélard’s letters, and that most authors left unresolved, was frontally addressed in two medievalist texts produced and read during the Enlightenment: Madame de Sévigné’s letters to her daughter in Provence, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s enormously successful epistolary novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. While the relation to Héloïse was made explicit in the second of these texts, whose very title referenced the medieval correspondence, in Madame de Sévigné’s letters the link was a less direct one, perhaps based as much on generic conventions and portrayals of motherhood as on direct knowledge of the medieval text. As I previously noted, it was probably only in 1687, when her cousin Bussy-Rabutin sent her his new translation of Héloïse’s love letters, that Madame de Sévigné first read them – although, in the absence of an authentic reaction from her part, it remains impossible to determine whether she had prior knowledge of them. Nonetheless, I argue, the memory of Héloïse’s passion permeated Madame de Sévigné’s correspondence much as it did other eighteenth-century “Héloïsian” texts, studied by Peggy Kamuf, “suggesting both that the history of Heloise and Abelard is not a model for these later texts … and that something remains, nevertheless, from one work to the next as a souvenir of Heloise’s persevering desire for Abelard … the residue of a woman’s excessive desire.”

The absence in Sévigné’s correspondence of explicit references to Héloïse’s letters before 1687 was compensated by several references to the other major model for medievalist portrayals of amorous passion, Ovid’s *Heroides*. Madame de Sévigné was certainly familiar with Ovid’s writings, and referred both to his *Metamorphoses* and to his *Art of Love* in her letters. Specifically, she recalled the story of Niobe, whose pride in her children Ovid had recounted in one of the *Metamorphoses*, and which she likened to her own excessive love for her daughter, thereby intertextually legitimizing her feelings early on in the correspondence. Sévigné referenced the *Heroides* most clearly, however, by theatrically imitating some of the events portrayed in them, in the same

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44 “Elle ne parle de ces choses que pour s’humilier, & lui demander des secours auprès de Dieu”. Gervaise, *Vie de Pierre Abeillard*, II, 28 note, 35.
45 On this semantic difficulty, see Powell, “Listening to Heloise”, 261.
46 “Que je sois toujours vôtre amie, & jamais vôtre épouse”. Gervaise, *Vie de Pierre Abeillard*, I, 68.
spirit as she did in living her life like a chivalric novel. Recalling her absent daughter, at one point she described how, walking through the woods at her country estate of Les Rochers, her thoughts led her to inscribe on the tree trunks a verse from Tasso, that gave physical form to her own longing:

Yesterday I was in a little alley, to the left of the mall, that was very dark; I found it beautiful. I ordered to be written on a tree:

\[E\text{ di mezzo l'horrore esce il diletto.}\]

This passage, and other similar tree-writing episodes, is revealing of the double nature of Sévigné’s conceptualization of desire, that drew on classical as well as medieval models, amalgamating them into a new, distinctly modern lover’s discourse. By inscribing verses on a tree, Madame de Sévigné was on one level imitating the gesture of Paris recounted by Oenone in one of Ovid’s heroides, and later reworked in medievalist fiction, most notably the pastoral interlude in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso in which the lovers Angelica and Medoro’s inscription of the verses in the growing trees became a symbol of their accomplished love. Reinforcing this medievalization of the classical theme, the verse Sévigné cited was not a classical one, but one drawn from Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata. Madame de Sévigné thus evoked Ovid and the medieval in order to better assume the role of lover vis-à-vis her absent daughter. For in a reference intelligible only to her daughter, the verse gestured back to a previous letter in which she had quoted the same verse, transforming the citation into a kind of secret lover’s language. The medievalist verses, with their evocation of a longed-for past and the absent daughter, were integrated into a new, performative context. The tree trunks were then imagined, as in Ovid’s conceit, slowly growing and Tasso’s verse physically expanding along with them, like Sévigné’s love, thereby making a medievalized Ovid very literally come alive again.

Sévigné’s evocation of Ovid manifested itself most forcefully in her choice of tropes when describing her feelings for her daughter. Critics have noted, right from their first publication in 1751, that Sévigné’s vocabulary seemed to recall not a mother’s love for a daughter, but the erotic longing of a male lover for his mistress – or, as in the Heroides, the abandoned woman’s passion for her unfaithful lover. Sévigné’s evocative description of a love for which she suffered intensely, and to which she dedicated her life – “the single passion of my heart, the pleasure and suffering of my life” – served to build a new image of the loving mother, or a self-conscious “performance of motherhood” that took on distinctly erotic undertones. What was new here – and shockingly new, to some readers – was the replacement of the Ovidian subject of desire, the abandoned

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49 “J’étais hier dans une petite allée, à main gauche du mail, très obscure; je la trouvai belle. Je fis écrire sur un arbre: \[E\text{ di mezzo l’horrore esce il diletto.}\]” Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 164. This is an approximate citation of two verses of Tasso, “Bello in si bella vista anco è l’orrore, / e di mezzo la tema esce il diletto.” “Amid the beauty even horror is / beautiful, and with fear comes a delight”. Tasso, Jerusalem Delivered, 391.

50 On early modern reworkings of this theme, see Lee, Names on Trees.

51 “Adieu, ma chère enfant, l’unique passion de mon cœur, le plaisir et la douleur de ma vie.” Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 154.

52 Longino Farrell, Performing Motherhood.
woman, by a new one, the writing mother. Explicitly adapting the Ovidian language of the abandoned mistress, Sévigné made an exhibition of her own grief at the departure of her beloved daughter for Provence, in famous passages such as the one at the beginning of the correspondence where she first described the effects of her absence:

My grief would be quite middling if I could describe it to you, so I will not attempt to do so. For all that I seek my dear daughter, I no longer find her, and every step she takes carries her farther away from me. I therefore went to Sainte-Marie, still crying and still dying. It seemed to me as if my heart and soul were being ripped out, and indeed, what a rude separation! … But upon entering [my house], dear God! Do you understand what I felt in climbing the steps? This room I always entered, alas! I found the doors open, but I saw it all unfurnished, all upset, and your poor little daughter who was the image of my own. Can you understand everything I suffered? My awakenings in the night were dark, and in the morning I had not advanced one step for the repose of my spirit.

The central subject of Madame de Sévigné's correspondence was, then, her burning desire for her absent daughter, and her efforts to re-establish a textual bond with her to make up for the physical distance now separating them. In fact, as her biographers have demonstrated, the periods during which Sévigné and her daughter were separated were greatly outnumbered by the periods during which the two women were together — indicating that the fiction of separation and absence was often just that: a fiction or literary construct, that drew on Ovidian and medievalist models for its significance as much as on lived experience. In going through the motions of love and loss, in this letter and in the hundreds of subsequent letters she wrote to her, Madame de Sévigné was textually performing worldly eros, and textually constituting herself as the Ovidian-medievalist desiring subject.

Sévigné further recalled the Ovidian heroide by foregrounding the excessive, irrational nature of the love she experienced. This was a passion that could potentially lead the loving subject to a state of madness, as in the early letters where, describing the scene of her daughter's departure, she envisaged throwing herself to her death. Not only did this passage make explicit the relation between pagan eros and physical death. It also took up one of the defining tropes of women authors' coming into writing, i.e. the reference to the ultimate female ancestor-figure, Sappho, who was, precisely, described as throwing herself to her death in Ovid's famous concluding heroide:

Every part of your room is killing me, I have had a partition put right in the middle, to somewhat break the view of a window on that step where I saw you get into d'Hacqueville's carriage, and through which I called you back. I frighten

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53 Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 149–50.
54 Roger Duchêne has calculated that during the twenty-five years between the first and last of Sévigné's letters to her daughter, the various periods during which they were physically separated amounted to only eight years, i.e. a third of the total. Duchêne, Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour, 186.
55 On French women writers' systematic use of the Sappho trope, see DeJean, Fictions of Sappho. DeJean does not, however, mention Sévigné in her book.
myself when I think of how capable I was then of throwing myself out the window, because I am crazed sometimes.\textsuperscript{56}

The implicit reference to Sappho was all the more significant for the fact that both women, as some critics have pointed out, seem to have experienced the same “burning maternity”.\textsuperscript{57} Sévigné’s choice of words, while drawing on established epistolary convention, was nonetheless exceptionally forceful, for the reader was left wondering whether this love that “killed” her or “drove her mad” did so only metaphorically, or also to some extent, literally, by physically making her ill and unable to find repose. The letters’ poignancy arose in part out of their reinvestment of conventional metaphor with new meaning, in such passages in which Sévigné recounted how excessive love, as in the heroide, brought the lover close to physical death, ametor again meeting mors.

\textbf{Motherhood and Agape: From Héloïse to Sévigné’s Conversion}

The excessive nature of Sévigné’s love for her daughter drew on linguistic conventions that, since their invention by the troubadours and their subsequent adoption in religious discourse, remained also in her own day heavily invested in the divine. The use of a quasi-religious language to describe secular, “private” feelings struck some readers, in fact, as blasphemous. Thus Sévigné’s Dutch editor in 1726 wrote that:

\begin{quote}
She was on this footing in the world, and on this footing, everyone knew her as a tender and idolatrous mother, and this character went so far as to reach a uniqueness, which nonetheless did not make her appear ridiculous.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Similarly, another reader noted that Sévigné’s love for her daughter was a true “cult” accompanied “by some amount of choreography around the altar”.\textsuperscript{59} These were perceptive remarks. For Sévigné herself was aware that she was using a religious language of love or agape, that by its divine nature was boundless, to describe her human love for her daughter. Subsequently, Sévigné was torn by what she perceived as a conflict between her excessive maternal love, which in its very self-indulgence came close to being a form of self-love (amour-propre), and the love she properly owed God. Recalling a conversation with her friend and adviser Robert Arnauld d’Andilly, who had criticized her love for her daughter as idolatrous, she thus confided, only half-jokingly:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{"Toute votre chambre me tue; j’y ai fait mettre un paravent tout au milieu, pour rompre un peu la vue d’une fenêtre sur ce degré par où je vous vis monter dans le carrosse de d’Hacqueville, et par où je vous rappelai. Je me fais peur quand je pense combien alors j’étais capable de me jeter par la fenêtre, car je suis folle quelquefois."} Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 175.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} “Toute votre chambre me tue; j’y ai fait mettre un paravent tout au milieu, pour rompre un peu la vue d’une fenêtre sur ce degré par où je vous vis monter dans le carrosse de d’Hacqueville, et par où je vous rappelai. Je me fais peur quand je pense combien alors j’étais capable de me jeter par la fenêtre, car je suis folle quelquefois.” Sévigné, Correspondance, I, 175.

\textsuperscript{57} Meunier, Sappho, Anacréon, 49.

\textsuperscript{58} “Elle étoit sur ce pié-là dans le monde, et sur ce pié, chacun la connoissoit mere tendre et idolâtre, et ce caractère alloit jusqu’à une singularité, qui néanmoins ne lui donnoit aucun ridicule.” Cited in Duchêne, Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d’amour, 207, my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{59} Cited in Duchêne, Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d’amour, 239.
He told me that I was crazy to not think of converting; that I was a fine pagan; that I was making of you an idol in my heart; that this kind of idolatry was as dangerous as any other, even though it seemed to me less forbidden, in short that I should think of myself.  

This was the same conflict that had been at the heart of the Abélard-Héloïse correspondence. Was earthly love compatible with divine love, or were the two, rather, inevitably in conflict? In addressing this apparent conflict between earthly and celestial love, Sévigné appeared, finally, to adopt a way out that was suggested already in Héloïse's letters, in which physical and spiritual desire came together at certain moments, around a crucial question: that of defining a new, Christian practice of motherhood. In the very first words she wrote to Abélard, Héloïse hesitated on how to address him, showcasing the different roles she had assumed during the course of their relationship:

To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother, [from] his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather, sister, to Abélard, Héloïse.

Modern commentators have remarked on Héloïse's original and sophisticated play with the conventions of the epistolary salutation, as did Gervaise in the eighteenth century. Héloïse's onomastic hesitation was part of a more general theme in Abélard and Héloïse's letters revolving around the choice between different societal roles. In the context of this debate, the role of mother was consistently foregrounded, for example when the correspondents contrasted the mother figure to the more conventional image of the nun as sister. The stress laid on metaphorical motherhood, whereby Héloïse was attributed the role of abbess or mother superior, was one of the crucial rhetorical strategies used by Abélard. From his fifth letter onwards, having put behind him the memory of their former loves, Abélard insistently designated Héloïse, in metaphoric terms, both as his monastic sister (soror) and mother (mater) of her nuns. Significantly, this metaphorical designation denied Héloïse's former role as Abélard's lover, as well as the legitimacy of the product of that union, their living son Astrolabe, i.e. the sign of Héloïse's real, physical motherhood. Thus Juanita Feros Ruys has argued that the letters can actually be read as the site of an ideological struggle between the two correspondents, over the meaning and place of motherhood in a Christian context. In condemning “carnal delights” (carnalium voluptatum) in his letters to Héloïse, Abélard was referring not only to their sexual union, but also to “excessive maternal love and enjoyment of a child”, viewed as a form of earthly love or eros fundamentally at odds with the ideal of Christian agape. Héloïse for her part countered this move by invoking

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60 “Il me dit que j’étais folle de ne point songer à me convertir; que j’étais une jolie païenne; que je faisais de vous une idole dans mon cœur; que cette sorte d’idolâtrie était aussi dangereuse qu’une autre, quoiqu’elle me paraît moins criminelle; qu’enfin je songeasse à moi.” Sévigné. Correspondance, I, 238.
61 “DOMINO SUO, immo patri; conjugi suo, immo fratri; ancilla sua, immo filia; ipsius uxor, immo soror; Abaelardo Heloysa.” Lettres d’Abélard et Héloïse, 136.
62 Mews, “Philosophical Themes in the Epistolae duorum amantium”.
63 Gervaise, Vie de Pierre Abeillard, II, 26–8.
64 Feros Ruys, “Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae”, 327.
images referring to her own female body, basing her arguments in the personal and experiential, and "consistently representing herself as the biological mother of a living child." In this struggle, argues Feros Ruys, Héloïse was finally able to bring Abélard around to her own position, as demonstrated by his rueful evocation, towards the end of his life, of the memory of their son Astrolabe.

Feros Ruys also suggests that ultimately, Abélard and Héloïse's struggle over motherhood can be linked to a larger ideological struggle, which also took place in the twelfth century, over women's roles. Privileging the figure of the Virgin Mary as maternal martyr – of whose new cult, incidentally, Abélard's opponent Bernard of Clairvaux was one of the major architects – the new view strengthened perceptions of the supposed incompatibility between earthly and heavenly forms of love, and condemned excessive parental affection in particular. By citing the Biblical passages traditionally invoked in this debate, Abélard evoked a strand of medieval scholastic theology that directed criticism at earthly forms of love, or "pagan" eros, in which there was a disparity between the intensity of the love felt and the intrinsic value of the object of desire. “In casuistry, one of the best examples through which this situation was illustrated was that of a mother who cherished her child with an extreme love and who seemed unable to behave the same way towards God, whom she should however love with all her heart and above all.” This tension between earthly and heavenly love, as it manifested itself through parental love, traversed theological debate right until the seventeenth century, as Baladier demonstrates, until it was revisited again by Madame de Sévigné in her own letters.

Madame de Sévigné experienced the conflict between motherlove and religious devotion all the more sharply for the fact that, besides her engagement with medievalist fiction, she was also an avid reader of texts by religious authors including Pascal, Saint Augustine and especially, her contemporary Pierre Nicole. Her Jansenist sympathies in particular troubled her, heightening the perceived conflict between her love for her daughter and her duty towards God. “In the Jansenist perspective”, noted Roger Duchêne, “Madame de Sévigné’s feelings were to be condemned, because the love of an earthly creature, in turning her away from the thought of God, was an obstacle to salvation. Sévigné, who had read Pascal, knew that all love that was related to self-love (amour-propre) was sinful, and she had no difficulty admitting that her maternal affection, completely centred on herself, was contrary to true charity.”

The tension between earthly and divine love could only be resolved, in Madame de Sévigné’s as in Héloïse’s case, through an act of conversion – although in both cases, significantly, the conversion did not entail a wholesale rejection of earthly love. As Roger Duchêne continued, “finally, submitting herself to the will of Providence, Madame de Sévigné calmed her passion by subordinating it to the orders of her God.

65 Feros Ruys, "Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae", 323.
66 Feros Ruys, "Quae Maternae Immemor Naturae", 326.
67 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 59.
68 Cartmill, "Madame de Sévigné, lectrice de Pierre Nicole".
69 Duchêne, Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d’amour, 215.
She *converted*, in the profound sense of the term.”\(^{70}\) Duchène dated this conversion to her stay at Les Rochers in 1680, for after this date, her declarations of maternal love became less anguished, increasingly reflecting a state of inner peace. The conversion was reflected, too, in Madame de Sévigné’s choice of reading matter. While, in her earlier letters, she consistently referenced chivalric narratives, increasingly she turned now to religious authors. During the last years of her correspondence, she began to draw a new contrast between the pagan tenets espoused by medievalist romance, from which she now distanced herself, and the truer morality preached by religious authors. In one typical passage, she referred to her rereading of these chivalric romances as “old sins, that should be forgiven in consideration of the profit I gain from rereading several times, too, the finest books in the world, the Abbadie, Pascal, Nicole, Arnauld.”\(^{71}\) In a letter written in 1689, she declared even more explicitly that “it is very certain, very true that Monsieur Nicole is worth more” than the romances (*romans*) she used to enjoy reading.\(^{72}\) Having turned her back on medievalist romance, the (medievalized) heroide genre and the model of excessive (self-)love (*amour-propre*) they espoused, she now found a new, inner repose that allowed her to reformulate her earthly love for her daughter as a legitimate form of love for God, because she practiced it now in a new, disinterested form, paradoxically not entirely unrelated to the doctrine of pure love (*pur amour*) espoused by her more mystical, quietist contemporaries, Fénélon and Madame Guyon.

But whereas quietist forms of love potentially veered towards another excess, entailing a radical rejection of the world and consequently drawing official Church criticism, the defining feature of Madame de Sévigné’s new attitude was its balanced character, or its lack of Ovidian excess. This measured character was in keeping with notions of Christian love that emphasized its circumscribed aspect (*amor discretus*), human love by definition being incapable of the boundlessness of divine *agape*, and that associated it with the notion of Christian charity (*caritas*). In the decades in which Abélard and Héloïse composed their letters, scholasticism, following Origen and Augustine, developed the notion of “ordered” Christian charity (*caritas ordinata*) as a kind of synthesis between the tenets of pagan *eros*, i.e. carnal passion that moved upwards from the lover to the object of his love, and Christian *agape*, that moved downwards from God to humankind. Introducing charity, or the Christian notion of love, as a kind of human participation in divine *agape* that, however, worked through worldly love or pagan *eros*, this powerful synthesis continued to find expression in Sévigné’s time in the theological reflections of Leibniz and Malebranche, among others. Crucially, charity added to the pure affect or uncontrolled passion of Ovidian or classical love a new notion of

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\(^{71}\) “Vous dites que j’ai relu trois fois les mêmes romans; cela est offensant. Ce sont de vieux péchés, qui doivent être pardonnés en considération du profit qui me revient de pouvoir relire aussi plusieurs fois les plus beaux livres du monde, les Abbadie, Pascal, Nicole, Arnauld, les plus belles histoires, etc.” Sévigné, *Correspondance*, III, 833.

\(^{72}\) “Il y a des exemples des bons et des mauvais effets de ces sortes de lectures [*romans*]. Vous ne les aimez pas; vous avez fort bien réussi. Je les aimais; je n’ai pas trop mal couru ma carrière … Cependant il est très assuré, très vrai, très certain que M. Nicole vaut mieux.” Sévigné, *Correspondance*, III, 757.
order, or the order of charity (ordo caritatis). In this view, the degree of love should always be in conformity with the intrinsic value of the object of affection, for true love without knowledge of the nature of the loved one was impossible. This led naturally then to the second feature of the measured Christian love that Sévigné adopted towards her daughter after her conversion. This was a sense that, having acceded to a new state of disinterested love, i.e. love that was directed towards the other and not towards her own fulfilment, she had now truly come to know the object of her love, so that what had once been hidden was now revealed:

I had believed, on certain occasions, that you were cruelly hiding from me all these treasures; but, my dear child, you have revealed them to me: I know your heart in its entire perfection, entirely full of tenderness and friendship for me; it is a consolation at the end of my life, which would make me happy without your absence; but, my daughter, this fund will not dry up, and the absence will come to an end.

This new sense of knowing, or the revelation of truths heretofore hidden, was another one of the defining traits of Christian agape in medieval theological discussion. In recognizing the radical alterity of the object of love, the lover participated in God's love, which loved humankind not in a movement of fusion or annihilation of human bodiliness (as in mystic traditions), but in full acceptance of humankind's imperfect otherness. Recognizing the loved one's otherness, in turn, required the distance of intellectual understanding. Thus in the early thirteenth century, William of Auxerre in his scholastic opus Summa aurea elaborated a notion of love whose major trait was its intellectual character. According to Baladier, Auxerre “seemed to consider love, because it is entirely penetrated by discernment, as belonging more to the intellectus than to the affectus and, as such, constituting delectation, which is, according to the author's very definition of this point, the possession of the truth of the loved object.”

If, as I have argued, medievalism offered a uniquely non-rationalistic and non-objective, embodied way of understanding the past, that was a genuine form of understanding nonetheless, in a similar way, by privileging medieval notions of love-as-charity, early Enlightenment medievalist authors were also foregrounding ways of understanding that worked through an initial movement of emotional investment, yet reached new forms of knowing through this affective engagement.

Although the reference to Abélard and Héloïse’s correspondence in Sévigné’s letters was not explicit, the trace of the conflict between pagan eros and Christian agape that they expressed nonetheless deeply permeated the seventeenth-century letters. Living in the world (seculum), Sévigné offered a “secularized”, distinctly early-Enlightenment

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73 This thesis, originally developed by Anders Nygren, is discussed in Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 21–2, 49–61.

74 “J'avais cru, dans certaines occasions, que vous me cachiez cruellement tous ces trésors, mais, ma chère enfant, vous me les avez découverts. Je connais votre cœur tout parfait, tout plein de tendresse et d'amitié pour moi. C' est une consolation dans la fin de ma vie, qui me rendrait heureuse sans votre absence, mais, ma fille, ce fonds ne se dissipe point, et l'absence finira.” Sévigné, Correspondance, III, 388.

75 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 80.
solution to the dilemma they proposed, achieving a new inner balance between the lived experience of maternal love, which she never forsook, and Christian devotion. She did not, finally, turn her back on the medieval or the competing models of love it offered – the earthly *eros* of the troubadours and of chivalric romance on one side, and the Christian *agape* of scholastic theology on the other – but rather, integrated their memory into a new interiority and way of living in the world that was, truly, modern. This was, then, the secular modernity that, as Charles Taylor argued, was distinguished not by a rejection of religious experience, but instead viewed religion as but one among several competing ways of understanding the world.

**Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse and the Héloïsian-Ovidian Model**

In contrast to Madame de Sévigné, who addressed the tension between worldly and heavenly love exemplified by Abélard and Héloïse’s correspondence mostly indirectly, in a handful of the hundreds of letters she wrote to her daughter between the 1660s and 1690s, in Rousseau’s epistolary novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* the reference to the twelfth-century correspondence and the conflict it expressed took centre stage. On the liminary half-title page, the shortened title *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, by its use of the adjective “new” (*nouvelle*) (originally *moderne*, and changed to *nouvelle* during the typesetting), contained an explicit allusion to the old or non-modern Héloïse, i.e. the twelfth-century nun. While Rousseau only decided on the shortened title – *La Nouvelle Héloïse* – relatively late in the novel’s writing, the overdetermination of the title-page reference cannot but be read as an explicit confirmation, after the fact, of a basic plot structure and content that were already in place, and that displayed significant similarities with their medieval model. The main plot, to begin with, followed the same general lines as the twelfth-century letters. A young philosopher-teacher, Abélard-Saint-Preux, seduced his pupil, Héloïse-Julie. The seduction was discovered, the lovers punished, and the two protagonists went on to live cloistered lives, in the newly-founded abbey of the Paraclete in the case of Héloïse, and at the country estate of Clarens, with its typical medieval *hortus clausus*, Julie’s so-called Elysée, in the case of the eighteenth-century characters. The correspondences between the characters in the two versions of the story were obvious. Saint-Preux’s relation to the scholastic philosopher Abélard was highlighted by the characters’ repeatedly referring to him as “our philosopher” (*notre philosophe*), while he alluded pointedly to himself as a “philosophy master” (*maître de philosophie*). His name – Saint-Preux, or saint valiant knight – further underlined his medieval provenance. This influence was finally suggested, too, in a parodic mode, by the passage in which Julie addressed him in mock

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77 Stewart, “Half-Title, or Julie Beheaded”, 36.

78 Stewart, “Half-Title, or Julie Beheaded”.

old-French language, emphasizing their roles as typical courtly lovers. The analogy between Julie and Héloïse, for its part, was made both by the title’s juxtaposition of their two names – Julie, or the new Héloïse – and by more explicit comparisons in the novel, that I will discuss below.

More importantly, Rousseau’s text followed the pattern of the conversion narrative adopted by the twelfth-century letters, and which Rousseau was again to practice in his Confessions. While the first part of Abélard and Héloïse’s exchange of letters told of a fall from grace, the second one told how the sinners made up again for this fall by a new sacrifice. In the twelfth-century story, the redemption was achieved by Héloïse’s separation from Abélard, her vows and subsequent leadership of an abbey. In La Nouvelle Héloïse the redemption consisted in Julie’s marriage, motherhood, and ultimately, death. Among the eighteenth-century authors who reworked the Héloïse story, Rousseau stood out as one of the few who did not avoid the central conflict expressed in the letters by focusing primarily on the love story, but instead also incorporated the second part, telling of the characters’ moral redemption after their sinful passion. Just as in the original exchange, which ended with the description of the rule to be observed by the nuns of the Paraclete, La Nouvelle Héloïse too concluded with several letters describing the precepts and way of life at Clarens, regularly punctuating the narrative with the key terms “rule” (règle) and “rule of life” (règle de vie). The garden that Julie built at Clarens, her significantly named Elysée (a partial anagram of the name Héloïse), likewise appeared to echo “this new garden that Abélard has planted, that he watered by his sermons, and that was made to bloom by grace”, i.e. the religious community of the Paraclete itself. In this sense, Rousseau’s novel too could be read as the history of the foundation of a religious community.

Apart from the letters of Abélard and Héloïse, La Nouvelle Héloïse also drew on the Ovidian model. Generically, and in keeping with the medievalization of the heroide genre, La Nouvelle Héloïse could be understood as belonging to the new genre of the romance. Not only did Rousseau comment on his novel’s “Gothic tone [that] is better suited to women than are philosophy books.” In later editions, he also added a short dialogue text in which two characters – identified by the initials N. and R. – discussed the question whether novels, as the product of modern, corrupting civilization, could have a morally edifying function. At one point, R. described the particular nature of La Nouvelle Héloïse:

These letters do not provoke interest all at once … There is no grace or ease in them, nor reason, nor wit, nor eloquence; there is sentiment, and it communicates itself to the heart by degrees, and it alone in the end makes up for everything

80 Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, I, 160. On the theme of courtly love in the novel, see L’Aminot, “L’amour courtois dans La Nouvelle Héloïse”; and Leborgne, “De Saintré à Saint-Preux”.
81 Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, II, 68, 83, 133, 152, etc.  
82 “Ce nouveau jardin qu’Abelard avoit planté, qu’il arrosoit par ses prédications, & que la grace faisoit fructifier.” Gervaise, La Vie de Pierre Abelard, I, 246.  
83 “Ce recueil avec son gothique ton convient mieux aux femmes que les livres de philosophie.” Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, I, 72.
else. It is a long romance in which the couplets taken by themselves don't have anything touching, but whose sequence in the end produces an effect.84

In his *Dictionnaire de musique*, Rousseau similarly defined the romance as “a sweet, natural melody … written in a simple, touching style, and of a slightly antique taste.”85 His use of the ambiguous adjective “antique” – which, as we have seen, could refer both to classical antiquity and to modern, i.e. medieval “antiquities” (as in Chapelain’s dialogue) – was telling, for it pointed to the easy assimilation of the classical, Ovidian model with the medieval. Most importantly, as a musical as well as a poetical genre, the romance had affinities both with lyrical and with narrative modes. Indeed, what was crucial in Rousseau’s generic reclassification of his novel was that the romance, both in its Ovidian and medievalist variety, was a sung genre.

Now music, as we have seen, held a strongly positive value for Rousseau. This was illustrated in the key episode of the grape harvest at Clarens, when Saint-Preux described how after harvesting the grapes, the female workers on the estate enjoyed a communal meal and then sang popular songs or romances:

> Sometimes the harvesters sing in chorus all together, or alternatively with one voice and with refrains. Most of these songs are old romances whose refrains are not piquant; but they have a certain antique and sweet quality that in the end is touching. The words are simple, naive, often sad; yet they are pleasing.86

*Romance*, through its association with music, was equated with a remote past, which in turn was described as naive, a time of spiritual purity. The pastoral notion of a purer, past state of human society and morality was reinforced by the central image of the vineyard. Recalling the Gospel image of the workers labouring in the vineyards of the Lord, already evoked in Héloïse’s first letter,87 the vineyard was the source of the main agricultural product harvested at Clarens. Clarens’s own name in turn, as argued by Jean Starobinski, played on notions of clarity and spiritual transparency – we are now in the second, redemptive part of the novel – replacing former obscurity.88 This association between song, moral purity and transparency was the same one presented in the conjectural history of the *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, in which before humankind could speak, it sang. Music was an archaic, purer language, and one that came closer to expressing true human feelings than later, corrupted human languages could. By

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84 “[Ces] lettres n’intéressent pas tout d’un coup … La grâce et la facilité n’y sont pas, ni la raison, ni l’esprit, ni l’éloquence; le sentiment y est, il se communique au cœur par degrés, et lui seul à la fin supplée à tout. C’est une longue romance dont les couplets pris à part n’ont rien qui touche, mais dont la suite produit à la fin son effet.” Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, II, 401.


86 “Quelquefois les vendangeuses chantent en chœur toutes ensemble, ou bien alternativement à voix seule et en refrain. La plupart de ces chansons sont de vieilles romances dont les airs ne sont pas piquants; mais ils ont je ne sais quoi d’antique et de doux qui touche à la longue. Les paroles sont simples, naïves, souvent tristes; elles plaisent pourtant.” Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, II, 240.


singing medieval romances, Rousseau’s peasants approached a state of human authen-
ticity – a state poised halfway between nature and civilization – inaccessible to his
eighteenth-century, city-dwelling contemporaries, and gave added moral weight to the
novel’s central love plot.

In addition to this recasting of the novel as a romance, i.e. a genre that embraced
both the medieval and the heroide genre, La Nouvelle Héloïse further showcased the
Ovidian model by a number of explicit allusions. The female protagonist’s name, of
course, was the same as that of Ovid’s supposed mistress, as recalled among others by
Claude Joseph Dorat’s heroide “Julie, fille d’Auguste, à Ovide” (1759) and Alexandre
Frédéric Jacques Masson de Pezay’s “Lettre d’Ovide à Julie” (1767). This identifica-
tion was given added significance by Rousseau’s own previous identification with Ovid, for
example in his Discours sur les sciences, as I noted in chapter 2, and by the biographical
resonance for Rousseau of the story, which he claimed to have written as a response
to his failed love affair with Sophie d’Houdetot, i.e. her Héloïse to his Abélard. But
the texts to which contemporary readers would have most immediately linked the
novel were, more obviously, the heroïdes penned by the likes of Colardeau and Dorat
telling of Héloïse’s undying love for Abélard. While these texts did not function as
“sources” in any deep sense, they did point to the generic similarities between the
heroide and Rousseau’s novel. Both used the letter form to tell of the unrequited
passion of a female protagonist for an absent male lover. And while Rousseau modi-
fied the original model by introducing male-authored love letters, Héloïse being the
only one who expressed her love in the letters known to eighteenth-century readers,
he reminded readers of the Ovidian theme of the lover’s absence by separating the
lovers through much of the novel. Julie sent Saint-Preux away twice for extended peri-
ods, including on a voyage around the world. The descriptions of the absence this
voyage brought about foregrounded the classic image of the ship’s vanishing sail (voile)
just as Ovid had in his amatory epistles. Other, more specific allusions also gestured
towards the classical model, as for instance the letter where Saint-Preux, remembering
the famous lovers who had thrown themselves off the Leucadian cliff, indirectly refer-
cenced Sappho’s intention to throw herself into the sea out of unrequited love for Phaon
in the famous last Heroide.

Rechristianizing Héloïse: From Ordered Love to Christian Charity
While interacting at several levels with its medieval sources, La Nouvelle Héloïse also
offered a textually precise critical rewriting of the letters of Abélard and Héloïse, in
which Rousseau sought to conciliate Ovidian eros and Christian agape through a new
celebration of marriage and motherhood. Indeed, the structural parallels actually high-
lighted important differences between the two texts. At a number of critical junctions

89 On earlier evocations of Ovid as lover of Julie, see Chatelain, Ovide savant, Ovide galant, 265–302.
90 Interestingly, Rousseau’s novel itself inspired new heroïdes, such as Vauvert’s “Lettre de Julie d’Etange
à son amant, à l’instant où elle va épouser Wolmar” (1772).
91 Berchthold, “Le voile est déchiré”.
92 Baucher, “Le modèle dérobé de Sapho”.
in the narrative, the characters referred explicitly to the medieval prototype, but only to distance themselves from it. Thus, finding himself on the brink of giving in to his lustful passion for Julie, Saint-Preux reminded himself of Abélard, whose example he did not wish to emulate:

When the letters of Héloïse and Abélard fell into your hands, you know what I told you of this reading matter and of the conduct of the Theologian. I have always felt sorry for Héloïse; she had a heart made for loving: but Abélard never seemed more to me than a wretch who deserved his fate, knowing love as little as virtue. After having judged him this way should I imitate him? Woe to he who preaches a morality that he is not willing to practice!93

Of course, and ironically, Saint-Preux would in fact end up following Abélard’s pernicious example when he, too, would seduce his young charge and show himself less able to embrace the fullness of Christian love than Julie. After Julie’s marriage to Wolmar, her cousin Claire made a second comparison:

Cousin, you were a lover like Héloïse, now you are devout like she was; may it please God that it may be more successfully!94

Claire’s words contained an implicit criticism: Héloïse was not really devout, but only thought she was, while Julie truly was devout. The major new element that Rousseau introduced into La Nouvelle Héloïse, distinguishing it both from its medieval model and, more forcefully, from other early Enlightenment versions, was the thesis that Julie and Saint-Preux’s love, in all its transgressive intensity, was a necessary step in the building of a new ideal community, uniting pagan eros and Christian agape.

Initially, the love experienced by the protagonists was similar to the medieval love ethos described by Rougemont, which privileged love for love’s own sake. “To love love more than the object of love, to love passion for itself, from the amabam amare of Augustine to modern romanticism, is to love and seek suffering.”95 This ethos, associated particularly with troubadour lyric, was mediated in La Nouvelle Héloïse by the novel’s second major medieval source, the series of love poems that Petrarch wrote over the course of several decades for his beloved Laura, and then published as his Canzoniere or Rerum vulgarium fragmenta.96 Rewriting both troubadour lyric and religious-mystical reflections on divine love, Petrarch secularized the imagery of

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93 “Quand les lettres d’Héloïse et d’Abélard tombèrent entre vos mains, vous savez ce que je vous dis de cette lecture et de la conduite du Théologien. J’ai toujours plaint Héloïse; elle avait un cœur fait pour aimer: mais Abélard ne m’a jamais paru qu’un misérable digne de son sort, et connaissant aussi peu l’amour que la vertu. Après l’avoir jugé faudra-t-il que je l’imiter? malheur à quiconque prêche une morale qu’il ne veut pas pratiquer!” Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, I, 132.
94 “Cousine, tu fus amante comme Héloïse, te voilà dévote comme elle; plaise à Dieu que ce soit avec plus de succès!” Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, II, 120.
95 Rougemont, L’Amour et l’Occident, 53.
96 Rousseau’s debt to Petrarch has not received nearly as much attention as the influence of the Abélard and Héloïse story. For a brief account, however, see among others Duperray, L’Or des mots; Rueff, "Le modèle et le nom"; and Stackelberg, “Du paysage d’amour au paysage de l’âme”.
medieval love, “animating the troubadours’ symbols for the first time with a perfectly pagan breath … The [religious] language of Love had”, in Petrarch, “finally become the rhetorics of the human heart”.97 It was in these secular trappings that the story of Petrarch and Laura was read in the early Enlightenment, as an essentially straightforward, secular love story that was frequently linked to another legendary couple of lovers, invoked already by Petrarch, Abélard and Héloïse. The revival of interest in Petrarch was made possible, in no small part, by his longstanding association with the troubadours, as postulated among others in Nostredame’s *Vies des poètes provençaux*.98 The “rediscovery” of both Petrarch and Abélard and Héloïse’s letters took place in the same years, and was mediated by the same authors, as the revival of the memory of the troubadours, and gained momentum with the early Enlightenment search for national foundations for French literary historiography. By considering Petrarch not only as the father of humanism, but also as the last great troubadour, or the poet who had carried the troubadours’ poetic traditions to a new summit of perfection, French historiographers sought to annex him to their own medieval past, thereby giving it a new respectability.99 Just as importantly, literary reworkings of Petrarch’s poetically enshrined love for Laura again associated this famous couple of lovers with the Ovidian tradition. This process included texts such as a short novel by Madeleine de Scudéry, also known as “Sappho”, *Mathilde* (1667),100 and Bernard de Fontenelle’s dialogue of the dead between Sappho and Laura (1683), among others. Authors thereby created a female protagonist and a love story that readily lent itself to fictionalization, and could indeed – like Abélard and Héloïse’s, or the Ovidian heroines’ – be seen as an archetypal figure for all love stories.

In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau directly cited Petrarch on nine occasions, making the *Canzoniere*, along with Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the second most quoted text in his book, after the Bible itself. Aside from direct citation, several passages in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* offered prosified imitations of Petrarch’s poems. In the fourteenth letter especially, after the lover’s first kiss, Saint-Preux adopted the central Petrarchan conceit of the poisonous, bitter-sweet kiss of love that simultaneously gave life and death.101 In addition, Rousseau played with many *topoi* of the Petrarchan-troubadour tradition, from the conventional birth of love in springtime to the description of the beloved lady from head to foot, according to Matthew of Vendôme’s “from head to foot” (*a capite usque ad pedes*) system.102 Equally significant, perhaps, is the fact that like *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* told the story of a romance in which a young man fell in love, experienced passion, and then endured an ultimate separation.

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98 On the eighteenth-century reception of Petrarch, see Duperray, *L’Or des mots*, and Mouret, “Pétrarque dans les ouvrages de langue française”.
99 Thus a text such as Joseph Bimard de La Bastie’s “Vie de Pétrarque”, for example, published in 1743 and 1751 in the *Mémoires de l’Académie Royale des Inscriptions*, was part of a larger series in the same periodical detailing the lives of the medieval French poets, from Christine de Pizan to Guillaume de Machaut and Charles d’Orléans.
100 On Scudéry’s identification with Sappho, see among others DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 96–115.
from his beloved one. Like the letters of Abélard and Héloïse, this story too had a two-part structure, with spiritual elevation following earthly passion. Finally, a number of details within the text of the novel, including the episode with the courtesan Laure-Laureta Pisana in the fifth book, suggested readings in which more precise parallels could be drawn between the medieval love poems for Laura-Laureta and Rousseau’s novel.103

Rousseau took from Petrarch, as he had from Ovid and from the first letters of Abélard and Héloïse’s correspondence, the focus on physical, lived love. He did so because in the tradition of classical eros and later forms of mysticism, earthly love, by exalting the lover and raising him towards the loved one, had the power to make the lover attain another, “truer” reality. The suffering of love was a necessary instrument in attaining a new kind of knowledge, that became deeper as the suffering was prolonged and the accomplishment of love delayed. Taking this movement to its extreme could, finally, entail the physical death of the lover, Petrarch’s love that killed, the annihilation of self or a liberation from material being as the crucial element enabling a true spiritual rebirth.

Yet in La Nouvelle Héloïse Rousseau departed significantly from this extreme form of amor–mors or pagan eros exemplified by Ovidian and later, mystic writings. Revealingly, he had his characters evoke the mystic Madame Guyon twice in the course of La Nouvelle Héloïse, where she was presented as a negative model to be rejected, along with her ideal of pure love as an annihilation of the self,104 and against which Julie assumed her own position of ordered faith. Rousseau’s protagonists originally chose not the way of death by love – although Julie did finally die after confessing her enduring love for Saint-Preux – but rather that of the physical accomplishment of their erotic desire. The originality of the novel in this respect cannot be overstated, for Julie and Saint-Preux did consummate their love, with Julie subsequently bearing its physical fruit – even if this fruit was later aborted by her father’s providential physical violence. Such a consciously assumed consummation of passion, initiated by the female protagonist,105 was highly exceptional in a novel of this period that did not expressly adopt a libertine tone. It was completely unheard of in a novel that – as Rousseau suggested in his musings on romance, and as he reiterated in his teasing preface – purported not really to be a novel, and by virtue of its non-novelistic nature, claimed a superior, morally edifying status:

Great cities need spectacles, and corrupted peoples need novels (Romans). I have seen the morals (mœurs) of my time, and I have published these letters … Did

103 For example the fifth sonnet in the sequence, which is constructed around the syllables LAU-RE-TA. Petrarch, Canzoniere, 6–7.

104 The relation between Rousseau’s ideas and Fénelon and Guyon’s ideal of pure love is a complex one. For another view, see Riley, “Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns.”

105 On the female protagonist’s active, initiating role, see Armenteros, “‘True Love’ and Rousseau’s Philosophy of History” and Challandes, “D’Abélard à Julie: un héritage renversé.”
I invent everything, and is the entire correspondence a fiction? People of the world, what does it matter to you? It is surely a fiction for you.106

Why, if the physical consummation of his lovers’ passion was so problematic, did Rousseau nonetheless choose to give this unexpected turn to the plot? The most prosaic answer to this question is that, in choosing a physical consummation of passion, Rousseau was following the model provided by the twelfth-century letters themselves. Just as Héloïse’s surrender to her lover’s entreaties served to better set off her later redemption, Julie sinking to the depths of depravity in the first part of the novel heightened the dramatic impact of her subsequent conversion. Secondly, there is of course also a sense in which, as Rougemont argued, it was precisely on the physical accomplishment of desire that the romance (roman) genre was predicated. According to this view, romance as a genre described not unrealized and prolonged desire, often for an idealized object that did not reciprocate the sentiment, but rather the real lovers’ physical union and ultimate consummation of love, viewed sometimes as a fall from grace. “Contrary to the Provençal troubadours, [romance authors] set out to describe the betrayals of love, instead of expressing only the impulse of passion in its mystical purity … it is clear that the description of these wanderings (errements) and their punishment required the form of a narrative, and no longer simple song.”107 Thus the element of error, in its double etymological sense, as both moral mistake and geographical wanderings – recalling the very first romance hero in history, evoked by Ovid in his opening heroide, Ulysses – lay at the heart of the roman genre.

But the most important reason why Rousseau chose to have Julie and Saint-Preux consummate their love was because Rousseau’s medievalism worked within the tradition of a Christian theology of incarnation. In keeping with medievalism’s positioning halfway between the infancy of mankind, i.e. pure music or expressivity on the one hand, and the corruption of modern society on the other, La Nouvelle Héloïse insisted on humankind’s position halfway between a mythical point of origins that had, perhaps, never existed, and the state of fully realized, corrupted human society. It was this essentially imperfect state of humankind – as reflected by Julie’s “crime”, that was not criminal in a theological sense, but only in the eyes of society – that made it necessary to pass through the flesh to attain ultimate human fulfilment. For the central, defining trait of Christianity is the Incarnation, or Jesus becoming flesh in order to make possible human salvation. The Christian agape that the Incarnation represents is the love God bears imperfect, erring humankind in this world, a love that embraces all of humankind’s present, bodily substance. This sanctification of life and of bodily flourishing became, in the second half of Rousseau’s novel, the central element unifying his moral vision and making of his text, finally, not a morally flawed roman such as he condemned, but rather a purer, musical romance.


107 Rougemont, L’Amour et l’Occident, 141.
New Ideals of Marriage
Because of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s Christocentric spirituality, in the second half of the novel the narrative swerved away from classical *eros* by introducing a critical new element that we have seen already in Madame de Sévigné’s letters, the scholastic notion of ordered love (*amor discretus*) or ordered charity (*ordo caritatis*). Christian charity manifested itself in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* principally through the sacrament of bourgeois marriage and its ensuing maternity. Commentators have regularly remarked that Julie experienced a true conversion on the altar as she entered into holy matrimony with Monsieur de Wolmar, yet have also noted the curious lack of passion in her marriage, certainly as compared to the passion she had previously experienced with her lover Saint-Preux. This is because, in keeping with scholastic and later Christian theology, the union of husband and wife was not aimed primarily at the fulfilment of carnal desire, but was a model for the soul’s union with the Church. As Baladier reminds us, “the medieval theologians of marriage base themselves on the idea that the relation between the spouses pertains, in reality, less to erotic and sentimental passion than to the love of friendship or goodwill inspired by *caritas*.”

Hence Rousseau revisited the key passage in Héloïse’s letters where she proclaimed her friendship for Abélard in Ciceronian language – that as we saw, was often read instead as denoting erotic attraction – by returning to the original context of the term *amicus*. In evoking Cicero’s *De amicitia*, where friendship (*amicitia*) referred to “disinterested love between friends united *cum benevolentia et caritate consensio* (in harmony of love and good will),” i.e. literally practicing charity (*caritas*), Rousseau was Christianizing the classical concept, just as Héloïse had done before him.

By loving the physical man Wolmar, and by doing so in a singularly disinterested way, i.e. devoid of the burning desire she had felt for Saint-Preux, and which was in essence a kind of self-love (*amour-propre*), Julie was in short participating in a movement of *agape*, or God’s love for bodily humankind, exemplified by the Incarnation. Marriage was what enabled Julie to put into practice her love for the body of Christ, no less than her cloistered, twelfth-century predecessor Héloïse had done by assuming another kind of veil, as bride of Christ. This was an explicit overturning of the stance taken by an author like Grenaille, who had instead suggested, in rewriting Héloïse’s letters, that marriage was incompatible with true Christian virtue. At the same time, Rousseau also more discreetly presented marriage as the Christian sanctification of another, more straightforward kind of bodily need. Rather than completely rejecting bodily desire or sublimating it, as she would have if remaining celibate after her affair with Saint-Preux, Julie thus embraced the body, in a movement of return to the world and full acceptance of the limitations of her earthly existence.

Christian charity, as expressed foremost through the bourgeois institution of marriage, finally made possible the combination of earthly and divine love by introducing into disordered passion a degree of measure. The concept of measure was, specifically, also a musical one. In courtly love, *mezura* crucially acted both as a safeguard preventing

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love from devolving into the Ovidian excesses of madness and self-destruction, and as a reference to the musical order that should ideally structure all human passion. As Jacques Roubaud reminds us, “it is not indifferent that measure (mesure) is also a concept of the medieval theory of rhythm, of music and of verse, metre being that which transforms into song (chant) the disordered force of language striving to express love”.110 Thus in Rousseau’s Nouvelle Héloïse, similarly, the uncontrolled expressivity of original human sentiments – the untamed eros of his novel’s first half – needed measure in order to become meaningful, a new language or a recomposed kind of romance. Medievalism, rather than representing a reactionary return to a long-lost past, represented an attempt to conceptualize another, modern state of being, somewhere midway between nature and fully developed – and corrupted – present-day society, where humankind could finally attain fulfilment.

Christian charity re-entered the flesh in another important way in La Nouvelle Héloïse, through human motherhood. By consummating her love for Saint-Preux, Rousseau’s Julie experienced for the first time her transformative, potential motherhood. In the second, redemptive part of the novel, this transformation was fully realized when she did become a real mother, but this time to the virtuous Wolmar’s children. The most significant difference between the medieval Héloïse and her eighteenth-century counterpart in La Nouvelle Héloïse was that while the medieval Héloïse, as abbess or mother superior, abandoned her son Astrolabe and played the part of mother primarily in a metaphorical sense, Julie really was a true mother. In the second half of the novel, Rousseau placed great emphasis on Julie’s devotion to her two children, whom she raised and educated herself, rather than entrusting them to the care of others as the “false” Héloïse had done, and as was contemporary aristocratic practice. To reinforce this new interpretation, Rousseau altered his citations of the medieval text. In the very first words she wrote to Abélard, as we have seen, Héloïse hesitated on whether to address him as a woman would her husband or as a mother would her child. This hesitancy was echoed in Rousseau’s text. Thus, upon consummating his love with Julie, Saint-Preux no longer knew what to call her: “Oh my charming mistress, oh my wife, my sister, my sweet friend!”111 he cried out in apparent distress. This, I contend, is a direct reference to the medieval text, as possibly mediated to Rousseau through Gervaise’s edition and French-language translation. Interestingly, the final published version left out two terms that had been present in the Rey manuscript:

Oh my charming mistress, oh my wife <my mother, my daughter>, my sister, my sweet friend!112

These were the very terms that had been foregrounded in Abélard’s letters (and Gervaise’s subsequent edition and translation), where he had juxtaposed them to the

111 “O ma charmante maîtresse, ô mon épouse, ma sœur, ma douce amie!”, Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, I, 300.
112 “O ma charmante maîtresse, ô mon épouse <ma mère, ma fille>, ma sœur, ma douce amie!” Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, I, 494.
more conventional image of the nun as sister. Rousseau therefore purposefully deleted the female protagonist's roles as monastic mother and daughter in Saint-Preux's letter, but did so only to be able to insist the more on their importance in later passages, and on Julie's own, active assumption of the mother role – as opposed to Abélard's imposition of metaphoric motherhood on an unwilling Héloïse in the original letters. Shortly thereafter, in fact, Rousseau reintroduced these monastic roles, in a context that gave them new narrative weight. Julie, in the following letter, reproached her lover by using a new term:

You have sometimes honoured me with the tender name of wife: perhaps at this moment I should bear that of mother.\(^{113}\)

And as if to insist on the transformation that his protagonist had undergone, Rousseau had Julie furthermore announce to her cousin Claire, at the start of the fourth part, inaugurating Saint-Preux's own spiritual transformation: “You have seen me successively daughter, friend, lover, wife, and mother. You know how dear all these titles have been to me!”\(^{114}\) While in Héloïse's famous letter, she had started out by underscoring the roles of spouse and mistress, only to textually assume the position of mother in her ensuing, ideological struggle with Abélard, the eighteenth-century novel picked up the narrative where Héloïse had left off, finally and definitively replacing the mistress by the mother. In other words, Rousseau's Julie realized what the real Héloïse had been unable to do, i.e. find fulfillment in the practice of real, physical motherhood, pursuing the life that Abélard had closed off by his insistence that Héloïse enter monastic orders. This was an assumption of agency on Julie's part that, as Laure Challandes has pointed out, produced an inversion of the medieval text. “The intertextual influence works through the mode of a gender reversal: Saint-Preux incarnates the voice and enunciative position of Héloïse, and Julie, that of Abélard.”\(^{115}\)

Saint-Preux the weak lover, who remained confined to the domain of earthly \(\text{ eros}\), had to watch on as Julie entered a condition of \(\text{agape}\), through Christian charity practiced in marriage and motherhood – as in François de Sales's influential view that motherhood gave access to sainthood in the home – and ultimate union with God. This progressive movement through carnal \(\text{ eros}\) to Christian \(\text{agape}\) entailed a rejection both of the excesses of the Ovidian tradition and of mystic forms of love, and was summarized in one of Saint-Preux's letters in the novel's penultimate, fifth book:

[Julie's heart] is not at all, like Saint Theresa's, a heart that is in love and that fools itself and mistakes its object; it is a truly inexhaustible heart that neither love nor friendship have been able to wear out, and that carries its overabundant affections to the only Being worthy of absorbing them. The love of God does not detach her from his creatures; it gives her neither harshness nor bitterness.

\(^{113}\) “Tu m'as honoré quelquefois du tendre nom d'épouse: peut-être en ce moment dois-je porter celui de mère.” Rousseau, \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}, I, 212–13.

\(^{114}\) “Tu m'as vue successivement fille, amie, amante, épouse, et mère. Tu sais si tous ces titres m'ont été chers!” Rousseau, \textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}, II, 8.

\(^{115}\) Challandes, “D'Abélard à Julie: un héritage renversé”, 79.
All these attachments produced by the same cause, in animating one another, become sweeter and more charming, and as for me I believe she would be less devout, if she loved her father, her husband, her children, her cousin, and myself less tenderly.\footnote{116}

The mother role Julie came to play in the novel ultimately merged into another role: that of Mary. For the third major influence on 

\textit{La Nouvelle Héloïse}, Petrarch's \textit{Canzoniere},

offered a critical rewriting of troubadour traditions of sublimated love, reworked in Dante's \textit{Vita nova} and \textit{Divina Commedia}, in which the poet was led towards God by the woman he loved, now identified with the Virgin Mary. This pilgrimage of desire leading ultimately, through the female figure, to a higher spiritual plane was made most explicit in the last poem of the \textit{Canzoniere}, where the poet's earthly desire for Laura was transformed into a religious longing for a Mary-like figure.\footnote{117} Referencing this tradition, on the main title page of his novel, Rousseau’s long title – \textit{Lettres de deux amans, Habitans d'une petite Ville au pied des Alpes} – was followed by an epigraph taken from the concluding section of Petrarch's \textit{Canzoniere}, in which Petrarch evoked the memory of his beloved Laura after her death:

\begin{quote}
The world did not know her while she was here; 
I knew her, I who am left here to weep. \footnote{118}
\end{quote}

The verse from Petrarch cited by Rousseau, as noted by his modern editor Henri Coulet, in turn recalled two passages from the prologue of the Gospel according to John: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not” \footnote{117} (I: 10), and; “And I knew him not, but that he may be made manifest in Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water” \footnote{117} (I: 31). The same verse had already been echoed in Bussy-Rabutin's translation of the first of the historical Héloïse's letters, in which, in Bussy-Rabutin's version, she declared her “resolve to publish our disgraces in all languages, in order to shame the unjust century that did not know you”.\footnote{119} Rousseau's protagonist Julie, as underlined by this Biblical reference, evolved through marriage and motherhood into a Christ-like figure, who found fulfilment in sacrificing herself for the good of others. Significantly, her death, in a deathbed scene that drew out the Christic connotations of her role at some length, resulted from the...
pneumonia she contracted after saving her son from drowning. This was not only an immersion with obvious parallels to the Christian ritual of purification by water, but her illness – pneumonia – also suggested a rapport with the notion of divine breath / inspiration or *pneuma*, a term that Rousseau borrowed from medieval musicology and to which he gave a new religious meaning, elucidated by Jacques Derrida in his *Of Grammatology*:

Such a breath [i.e. Rousseau’s *pneuma*] cannot have a human origin and a human destination. It is no longer on the way to humanity like the language of the child, but is rather on the way to superhumanity. Its principle and its end are theological, as the voice and providence of nature. It is on this onto-theological model that Rousseau regulates his repetitions of origin … it is the neume: pure vocalization, form of an inarticulate song without speech, whose name means breath, which is inspired in us by God and may address only Him.\(^\text{120}\)

As Rousseau had written elsewhere, what attracted him in Petrarch was the musicality of his verses, and in imitating him, it was this musicality – more expressive and purer than corrupted human language – that he was seeking to approach. Conjugating Petrarchan tradition and the *pneuma* he ascribed to his heroine Julie, he was attempting to recreate an ideal state – metaphorically associated with the medieval, as the infancy of mankind – in which the inexpressible could be expressed, i.e. the greatness of the ineffable Being whose divine *agape* Julie had momentarily channelled. As Bruce Holsinger writes, concluding his discussion of Rousseau’s medievalist concept of *pneuma*, “even as the Middle Ages drew speech and song inexorably asunder, the era embodies the most idealized form of pure musical speech in its doxological performances.”\(^\text{11}\)

At the end of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, the beloved Laura – who was by then dead – was identified with the Virgin Mary, transforming the poet’s sexual desire into a purer striving for grace. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse* too, as in Petrarch’s poetic sequence, the male protagonist finally surpassed physical pleasure, and attained a more mystical union with a Mary-like figure. As in the medieval *fin’amors* tradition of the high-born lady courted by a lowly troubadour, love elevated the lover to a higher spiritual plane.\(^\text{12}\) Earthly desire was, in other words, given a religious meaning – even if, for Saint-Preux, it was closer to a neo-Platonic sublimation, fundamentally anchored in pagan *eros*, than was the Christian charity attained by Julie. If, according to Northrop Frye, romance’s structure made of it a kind of “secular scripture”,\(^\text{13}\) then in the eighteenth century, in a reverse movement, Rousseau reinvested the romance structure and musical romance genre with new religious meanings.

Reflecting back on this pilgrimage of desire, towards the end of the novel Saint-Preux described his own spiritual growth during the course of the events narrated.

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\(^\text{120}\) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 249.


\(^\text{13}\) Frye, *The Secular Scripture*. 
Alluding to the sublimation of his erotic love for Julie, he explicitly referred to it as a sacrifice, suggesting that despite everything, he continued to struggle in his new chaste state to attain true Christian fulfilment – much as did Julie after her marriage, as she unexpectedly revealed in her dying words recalling her former passion for Saint-Preux:

If extinguished love leads the soul to depletion, love that is overcome gives the soul, along with the consciousness of its victory, a new elevation and a more living attraction for all that is great and beautiful. Would one want to lose the fruit of a sacrifice that has cost us so dearly? No, Milord, I feel that following your example my heart will put to profit all the burning sentiments it has conquered. I feel that one has to have been what I was in order to become what I want to be.\(^\text{124}\)

Recalling the Augustinian-liturgical evocation of the “fortunate fall” (felix culpa) evoked particularly during the Easter Vigil, Saint-Preux’s words suggested that his and Julie’s original sin may have ultimately brought more good to their community – reflected in the construction of an ideal new state at Clarens – than if they had never experienced passion in the first place. Thus according to Carolina Armenteros, the sexual fall initiated by Julie was the crucial first step in Rousseau’s political history of love, eventually making possible the recreation of “the ‘true youth of the world’, [which] is Rousseau’s ideal social state, the time when ‘little societies’ of families cluster together, the middle stage between nature and civilization”.\(^\text{125}\)

In thus looking back, from a stance of new knowledge, on his former love, Saint-Preux echoed the first sonnet in the Petrarchan sequence, where the poet similarly looked back on his sinful passion for Laura:

O you who hear within these scattered verses  
The sound of sighs with which I fed my heart  
In my first errant youthful days (giovenile errore) when I  
In part was not the man I am today.\(^\text{126}\)

The “errors” or Italian errore referred both to the geographic wanderings of the protagonist, in the tradition of the Dantean lost soul, or the Ovidian hero’s – Ulysses, to whom the first of the Heroides was addressed – and to the error of his youthful ways. Paradoxically, Rousseau’s engagement with the medieval in La Nouvelle Héloïse, mediated by Abélard and Héloïse’s letters and by the heroide-romance genre they engendered, therefore finally led his protagonist to partially turn away from its values,

\(^{124}\) “Si l’amour éteint jette l’âme dans l’épuisement, l’amour subjugué lui donne avec la conscience de sa victoire une élévation nouvelle, et un attrait plus vif pour tout ce qui est grand et beau. Voudrait-on perdre le fruit d’un sacrifice qui nous a coûté si cher? Non, Milord, je sens qu’à votre exemple mon cœur va mettre à profit tous les ardents sentiments qu’il a vaincus. Je sens qu’il faut avoir été ce que je fus pour devenir ce que je veux être.” Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse, II, 183.

\(^{125}\) Armenteros, “‘True Love’ and Rousseau’s Philosophy of History”.

much as Sévigné had previously turned away from chivalric romance and towards the austere Jansenism of Nicole. Youth was presented as a state of error, albeit an absolutely necessary one, which must be corrected by the wisdom of age. As Rousseau’s alter ego R. explained in the *Entretiens sur les romans*:

There is no comparison between the beginning and the end of the work [*La Nouvelle Héloïse*]. The details of domestic life erase the errors of the first age (*premier âge*): the chaste wife, the sensible woman, the dignified mother make us forget the guilty lover. But even this is a subject of criticism: the end of the collection makes the beginning all the more reprehensible.127

“The first age” (*premier âge*) clearly recalled the “middle age” or the first age of mankind, equated in eighteenth-century philosophic discourse with the medieval and, in Rousseau’s thought, with a non-existent time of pre-linguistic, musical expressivity. This first age, however, as the age of pure *eros*, had to be corrected by historical progress and by later wisdom, in order to reach a state of ordered charity, uniting youthful, truly lived passion and later, Christian *agape*. The new ideal state itself remained precariously located in a quasi-timeless middle period, neither entirely in the chaste present of the quasi-monastic “rule” adopted by Rousseau’s fictional lovers, nor in their past, during which – as purely sensual, non-socialized beings – they had not yet been fully cognizant participants in human society. Both of the century (*seculum*) and outside of it, the new order of love existed in the same uneasy state of equilibrium in tension that had marked the original debate on love framing the epistolary exchanges between the twelfth-century lovers.

**Metaphors as Floating Signifiers**

Madame de Sévigné’s and Rousseau’s rewriting of the medieval letters of Abélard and Héloïse was finally both a modernization and an archaization. They modernized the medieval text by showing how Christian charity could manifest itself in a contemporary, secular setting, i.e. in real time or the century (*seculum*) rather than divine time. But simultaneously, they returned their readers to the original story by insisting on its central subject, the fundamental Christian conflict between love of the things of the world and love of God. This double direction of Sévigné’s and Rousseau’s rewriting of the classical-medieval intertext, both forwards- and backwards-looking, was emblematic of the double nature of medievalism itself. As a moral rather than historical category, the medieval did not belong to history, but served as a polemical, epistemological counter-model, an imaginary point of origin within the larger evolution of human virtue. In this capacity, it evoked for Sévigné and Rousseau the possibility of an uneasy synthesis between earthly and spiritual forms of love, represented by physical

motherhood, i.e. the very synthesis that the twelfth-century Héloïse had struggled to reach in her polemic exchanges with her former lover Abélard.

While most early Enlightenment authors, in rewriting Héloïse and Abélard’s letters, avoided the philosophical challenge they posed by erasing those elements that did not correspond to the author’s chosen reading, Sévigné’s and Rousseau’s versions were unique in giving centre stage to the crucial conflict between earthly and heavenly varieties of love. Their rewriting operated, essentially, through various processes of literalization, metaphorization and/or extended play with the meaning of the words used by the original correspondents to denote love, as well as by the twelfth-century tradition in which their letters were embedded. For several commentators have pointed out “the power of metaphorization that attaches itself to expressions of love.”

In elaborating a new vocabulary and set of literary conventions expressing notions of courtly love, twelfth-century troubadours were taking at face value the metaphoric language used by contemporary theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux explaining the Song of Songs. And when, in the following centuries, the vocabulary developed by the troubadours was co-opted by religious authors, ranging from Catholic mystics to female beguines, a language intended literally was metaphorized anew. While earthly and divine varieties of love appeared at first sight to be different phenomena, authors used the same expressions and the same kind of language to designate them – implicitly revealing unexpected points of junction that would otherwise have remained hidden. This invites us, then, to consider this erotic vocabulary as comprising a set of floating signifiers or even cognitive metaphors, i.e. words that fundamentally structured thinking, making possible the articulation of new ideas and new concepts.

In Madame de Sévigné’s letters, a vocabulary traditionally used to designate sexual passion between two lovers was co-opted to describe motherly love, and from there, was gradually brought into line with Christian ideals of charity. In La Nouvelle Héloïse, revising Abélard’s evocation of Héloïse’s metaphorical motherhood as abbess or mother superior, Rousseau insisted on Héloïse’s literal motherhood. The medieval model of female monasticism – symbolic motherhood – was replaced by a modern vision of Christian charity: true, physical motherhood in an ostensibly secular, bourgeois setting. Whereas the twelfth-century letters had told only of a metaphorical death – Héloïse’s death to the world when she took the veil – the novel told of real physical sacrifice and ultimately, death. Indeed, Julie’s death as a consequence of her rescuing a drowning child epitomized her real-life performance of her motherly love, as a secular form of charity. Héloïse’s sexual passion, which had been so consistently highlighted in other eighteenth-century retellings of her story, was thereby replaced by another kind of passion, a truly Christ-like passion in which she finally died sacrificing herself for others. Likewise, the real mother Sévigné finally surpassed her rhetorical claims to be “dying” of love for her daughter to reach another, truer death to the world when she assumed the role of loving mother as a way of participating in divine agape, or the love that, in the Incarnation, made Christ die for mankind. Both Sévigné’s and Rousseau’s

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128 Baladier, Eros au Moyen Age, 211.
129 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By.
texts, in short, culminated not in a rejection of bodily *eros*, but in the triumph of the modern Enlightenment world they lived in, now sanctified by a uniquely modern, lived form of medievalist Christianity.
III

STUDYING THE MEDIEVAL
This chapter examines how out of the galant, aristocratic engagement with the medieval whose contours I have sketched in the previous chapters, there emerged during the first decades of the eighteenth century a new, scholarly approach to the Middle Ages. This new, academic medievalism had its institutional basis at the Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres. Originally founded by Louis XIV to compose Latin commemorative inscriptions in his honour, during the eighteenth century the Academy evolved into a full-fledged scholarly body, focusing more exclusively on historical and philological activities, and shifting its emphasis from classical to medieval subjects. This process was accelerated by a royal reform that took place in 1701, made official by lettres patentes and new statutes in 1716, and was finally consolidated by the creation of a new academic journal in which the academicians could publish their findings, the Histoire et Mémoires de l’Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, that began publication in 1717 and continued uninterrupted until the revolutionary era. After the first important papers by Abbé de Vertot starting around 1705 (but published only a decade later), medieval studies entered a decisive new phase in the 1720s and 1730s, when they were taken up by an illustrious group of scholars that included Denis François Secousse, Jean-Baptiste La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, Antoine Lancelot, Camille Falconet, and the comte de Caylus, among others.¹

Of the scholars affiliated with the eighteenth-century Académie des Inscriptions, Sainte-Palaye has traditionally been singled out and hailed as the most important medievalist, if not the actual founding father of modern medieval studies, well before the advent of the more well-known nineteenth-century French philologists such as Gaston Paris and Joseph Bédier. Sainte-Palaye’s articles, books and manuscripts run to

¹ On medievalist scholarship at the early eighteenth-century Académie des Inscriptions, the fullest overview is still Gossman, Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment. Substantially shorter, but also useful, is Voss, Das Mittelalter im historischen Denken Frankreichs, 232–52.
over a hundred volumes, and in many cases lay the foundations for vast encyclopedic undertakings that reached completion only in the nineteenth century. His most influential publication – indeed, one of the few to actually appear in print during his lifetime – was, however, clearly indebted to the non-scholarly, *mondain* medievalism of the last decades of the seventeenth century. This was a series of *Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie* that started to appear in 1746, and became one of the primary sources on medieval chivalry consulted by the first generation of romantic authors. From Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany – who admitted that the chapter “Chivalric spirit in Europe” in his *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* was entirely based on Sainte-Palaye\(^2\) – to Chateaubriand and Charles Nodier in France, and Walter Scott in the English-speaking world,\(^3\) all acknowledged their debt to Sainte-Palaye's scholarship. Thus in many histories of scholarly medievalism Sainte-Palaye is placed teleologically at the beginning of an evolution that, passing through the later academicians François-Juste-Marie Raynouard and Paulin Paris – who succeeded Raynouard at the Académie des Inscriptions in 1837 – culminated in Gaston Paris's election to the Académie in 1876, where he became the first of a new generation of medievalists to transfer his primary affiliation from the royal academy to the modern university.\(^4\)

But the emphasis usually placed on the lone figure of Sainte-Palaye, itself following in the footsteps of Lionel Gossman's *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment*, may actually obscure, rather than clarify, the development of medieval studies in France. For this development, rather than being an autonomous scholarly one, took place within a larger configuration of power relations. Within this larger configuration, Sainte-Palaye's particular approach grew out of strategies developed to distinguish academic medievalism from other, more performative and aristocratic traditions of engagement with the medieval past. Rather than being the first of his kind, Sainte-Palaye drew on the older tradition represented by the *galant* authors we have encountered in this study's previous chapters, and whose contribution to medieval studies, I have suggested, has not always been fully appreciated as such. In short, the Académie des Inscriptions became the crucial locus of an ideological struggle between two competing models of medievalism: an older, aristocratic model of amateur engagement with the medieval, and a newer, bourgeois model of professional historiography. The latter approach – which to a large extent, is still ours today – gained widespread acceptance in the second half of the century, when the rising party of the *philosophes* began to consolidate its hold on public opinion. While recent studies have begun to focus on the complex relation between historical scholarship and *mondain* literary traditions,\(^5\) they have not as yet sufficiently noted the way deeper, class allegiances also underlay the differing stances of academicians and amateurs with regards to the methods and aims of medievalism.

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\(^4\) Studies assigning this precursor role to Sainte-Palaye include Bloch and Nichols, *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* and Bernard-Griffiths, Glaudes and Vibert, *La Fabrique du moyen âge au XIXe siècle*.

\(^5\) Poulouin, “*Tensions et débats autour de l'écriture de l'histoire savante*”. 
This chapter will therefore propose, following other recent, critical reevaluations of Sainte-Palaye's role in constructing – and closing off – the field of medieval studies, that academic medievalists such as Sainte-Palaye can best be studied not in isolation, but in relation to the other figures, both scholars and amateurs, to which their work was often a response. In the following, I will address the tension between different conceptions of the medieval by focusing on three authors that I take to be representative of them. On one side I consider Sainte-Palaye as part of an emerging group of bourgeois, professional historians, who had important ideological affinities with the coterie of Enlightenment *philosophes* headed by Diderot and Voltaire. On the other side I take Anne-Claude de Tubières, comte de Caylus, like Sainte-Palaye an active member of the Académie des Inscriptions, to be representative of a looser group of men of letters associated with aristocratic connoisseurship, and whose more belleuristic approach to historical work was eventually displaced by Sainte-Palaye and his followers. Finally, I consider a much better-known, third figure, Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu because, while he did not himself belong to the Académie des Inscriptions, his work was closely linked to the tradition the Académie embodied. Montesquieu was arguably the most original of all in taking up the aristocratic tradition represented by Caylus, giving it a particular new significance in historical scholarship. For ultimately, out of this ideological struggle over the Middle Ages and in the differing responses authors offered to it, what emerges is an important episode in the larger history of how modern models of scholarship were constructed, in a process that privileged a new, bourgeois and post-Cartesian ideal of disembodied knowledge over other, embodied or performative forms of understanding.

**Sainte-Palaye and the Comte de Caylus**

If Sainte-Palaye's conception of medievalist scholarship was essentially a bourgeois one, it was so particularly in relation to other, older models that drew instead on longstanding aristocratic traditions of affective engagement with the medieval past. One of the most prominent aristocratic counterparts to Sainte-Palaye's bourgeois academicism was his colleague at the Académie des Inscriptions, the comte de Caylus, who formally entered the academicians' ranks in 1742, i.e. eighteen years after Sainte-Palaye's own election. The two men were, age-wise, near contemporaries, with Caylus merely five years older than Sainte-Palaye. Caylus's earlier death, however, meant that, unlike Sainte-Palaye, he did not live to witness the second wave of popular interest in the Middle Ages that took hold of France in the 1760s, and that was influenced, among others, by the Ossianic vogue launched in the British Isles by James Macpherson. Sainte-Palaye's longevity – he died only in 1781 – may indeed go some way in explaining why his particular kind of scholarship finally succeeded in gaining the recognition granted only to the founder of a new discipline. Just as literary sociology has established the importance of recognized heirs in safekeeping literary legacies and in contributing towards the posthumous canonization of particular authors, so too scholars who,
like Sainte-Palaye, were in a position to designate their own successors may have been more likely to see their methods and approaches adopted by others.

Although at the Académie des Inscriptions in the 1740s Sainte-Palaye and the comte de Caylus were on friendly terms with one another, their roles in the academy differed in several respects. In some instances, their works appeared to consciously complement each other. Thus Sainte-Palaye collected the extant manuscripts of Guillaume de Machaut's lyric works, while Caylus analyzed them in two “Mémoires” he read at the academy in 1747. Both authors repeatedly alluded to the same manuscripts or texts, including among others Eustache Deschamps's late medieval poetry and the extant corpus of French fabliaux. Yet there were also differences. After briefly dabbling in classical antiquity, Sainte-Palaye devoted his scholarly life entirely to the Middle Ages, producing literally thousands of pages, both published and unpublished, on the subject. Excepting a single excursion into the domain of independent, *mondain* literary creation, he tenaciously stuck to his role as scholar rather than literary author. Like Gaston Paris a century later, and incidentally demonstrating how the seemingly innovative elements of nineteenth-century academic medievalism often repeated the critical stances adopted a century earlier, “[his] philological programme explicitly took the opposite track of the rhetorical, *belle-lettriste* tradition of his day, and thus focused less on the aesthetic aspect than on the historical and social side of the texts he studied.”

Caylus, by contrast, although he presented some fifty papers at the Académie, addressed medieval topics there on only six occasions, as well as in a handful of separate publications. In his own day, Caylus was known primarily as a great collector of art and antiquities, patron of contemporary artists, and occasional artist himself. References to painting, and the language of plastic representation and colour, permeated his writings. As a scholar, his major work was a seven-volume *Recueil d’antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques, romaines et gauloises* whose importance for the development of modern archeology is only now beginning to be recognized. He contributed to the emerging field of archeology not only through his own researches, but also by sponsoring the first French translation of the works of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Finally, Caylus was also the author of dozens of mostly anonymous comedies, novels, fairy tales and other short works of fiction. In other words, while medieval studies were central to Sainte-Palaye's scholarly identity, they constituted only a small part of Caylus's enormous literary and scholarly output. While Sainte-Palaye offered an example of academic specialization familiar to us today, Caylus was by contrast a late representative of another class of multitalented, polyvalent connoisseurs. In short, to Sainte-Palaye's ideal of analytical separation and specialization of academic disciplines, Caylus opposed a view of the basic unity of the arts and scholarship.

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7 I.e. his version of the medieval *chantefable* that he published in 1752, *Aucassin et Nicolette*. On this text, see Damian-Grint, “Old French in the Eighteenth Century.”

8 Bährer, “*Chansons de geste* et *romans courtois*”, 99–100.

9 For example in the 2010 exhibition at the Louvre dedicated to eighteenth-century antiquarianism, and Marc Fumaroli’s recent publications on Caylus. For a brief introduction, see Aghion, *Caylus, mécène du roi*. For a full list of Caylus’s publications, see Peeters, “Bibliographie critique du comte de Caylus.”
More importantly, there were also significant class differences between the two men. Anne-Claude-Philippe de Tubières de Grimoard de Pestels de Lévi, comte de Caylus, as the multiple particles indicate, was a member of one of France's great aristocratic families, whose lineage went back at least to the thirteenth century. This made the study of medieval antiquity, as for many other medievalists belonging to the noblesse d'épée, part of his own genealogical identity. Long-standing aristocratic practices, as we have seen, viewed continuities between the medieval and the (early) modern, at the most basic level, in family, personal terms. Aristocratic members of the noblesse d'épée experienced the Middle Ages as a defining element of their own genealogical consciousness, for belonging to the ancient nobility – as opposed to the more recent noblesse de robe, whose ranks were rapidly growing with the expansion of the absolutist state apparatus – rested on family histories that went back to a medieval, chivalrous past. Thus, there was already in place a long, publicly recognized tradition of aristocratic nostalgia for the medieval past that helped shape Caylus's attitudes and scholarship on this period.

Sainte-Palaye's family, by contrast, had only recently risen from bourgeoisie to aristocracy, acquiring royal offices in the judiciary and thereby entering the ranks of the noblesse de robe. The Académie des Inscriptions, as Gossman has pointed out, was "the special stronghold of the robe", which may help to explain why Sainte-Palaye joined its ranks already in 1724, but Caylus did so only in 1742. Some sense of the class allegiances involved can be gained from the way one of Sainte-Palaye's opponents described him to a rival contender, during his candidacy for a seat at the Académie Française, as "someone who has neither your rank in society, nor your merit in letters". The class of jurist roblins, of course, also had its own history of interest in the medieval past. Starting with humanist historians such as Bodin, Pasquier and Fauchet in the sixteenth century, French jurists had established a tradition of studying medieval antiquity in order to trace the origins of French laws. This was primarily a scholarly, rather than familial interest. For the roblin scholars, attention to the medieval early on took the form of a patriotic, royalist engagement, rather than a personalized, aristocratic or even anti-monarchical one. The class differences between Caylus and Sainte-Palaye in turn underlay different ideological positionings. In the aftermath of the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, Sainte-Palaye aligned himself with the forward-looking Moderns and their successors the philosophes, while Caylus remained a self-proclaimed Ancient. While in a patriotic, Modern perspective, Sainte-Palaye argued that medieval manners were “as worthy of study, especially for a Frenchman, as those of the Greeks, being even superior on some counts, to the heroic times sung by Homer”, for Caylus classical Antiquity remained always his primary reference-point.

10 Gossman, Medievalism and the Ideologies, 148.
11 "Un sujet qui n'a ni votre rang dans la société, ni votre mérite dans les lettres." Cited in Gossman, Medievalism and the Ideologies, 103.
12 “Le tableau qu'il [Sainte-Palaye] nous offre est une partie intéressante & peu connue des mœurs de nos ancêtres … Mœurs à la fois grossières & respectables, aussi dignes d'être étudiées, sur-tout par un Français, que celles des Grecs et des Orientaux, comparables en bien des points, & même supérieures en quelques-uns, à celles des temps héroïques chantés par Homère.” Anon., "Avertissement sur les cinq mémoires", 595.
Finally, while Sainte-Palaye proudly wore the label of scholar-historian, Caylus self-consciously fashioned himself an aristocratic dilettante, a collectionneur or amateur antiquary rather than a serious scholar, even going so far as to explicitly satirize formal scholarship in several publications. Thus, with his friends at the dinners of the so-called Bout du banc salon – that counted among its occasional members Montesquieu, – Caylus founded several mock academies, including an Académie de ces Dames et de ces Messieurs that produced a series of facetious texts paroding the Académie des Inscriptions' more staid Mémoires. This satirical attitude was a by-product of the characteristic aristocratic idea that the writing of history, as a professional endeavour potentially associated with venality, was problematic. Distrust of academicism, in turn, went in hand with distrust of the party of the philosophes, who actively sought to take over the royal institutions capable of conferring on them a social status as recognized professionals. Diderot and Grimm denigrated Caylus's works in their highly influential periodical Correspondance littéraire, and Caylus retorted by privately and publicly expressing his dislike of the Encyclopedists, whose reformist agenda he considered a new form of sectarianism "similar to that of the Jesuits". This hostility was in essence, then, a class one: Caylus the great aristocrat, as representative of an independent, belle-lettriste conception of erudition, was anathema to the philosophes' ideal of the institutionalized, bourgeois professional.

Royalist Interest in the Medieval Past
Sainte-Palaye's and Caylus's differing class allegiances had important implications for the way in which they regarded their chosen object of study, medieval texts. Because of his ties with the robin tradition of legal history, Sainte-Palaye considered the study of medieval texts not as an end in itself, but as a tool in recovering the ancient customs of the French. Medieval philology had a very practical use in bolstering the legitimacy of the absolutist state to which the class of roblins owed their existence. Originally founded to celebrate the glories of the Sun King's reign, during the first decades of the eighteenth century the members of the royalist Académie des Inscriptions developed a new, professional interest in the medieval, as the site to which the origins of the French monarchy went back. With the reform of 1701, the number of papers dealing with medieval topics increased substantially, rising to between a quarter and a third of the total number of pages in each volume of the Histoire et Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres before 1751. The preface to the first volume thus distinguished four classes of papers or mémoires to be read by members during the academy's sessions. Among them, papers on the medieval past were for the first time singled out as a separate category:

13 By exposing aristocrats to the judgement of a socially undifferentiated, anonymous public, publication was additionally felt to threaten the social hierarchy on which their identity depended. On this tension, see Dewald, Aristocratic Experience, 174–203.
14 "Pareille à celle des Jésuites". Cited in Masseau, "Caylus, Diderot et les philosophes", 52.
15 After this date, the percentage increased even further. The prevalence of medieval subjects before 1751 is remarkable, given the common assumption that interest in the medieval was virtually nonexistent in the first half of the eighteenth century.
The fourth class of works, finally, is composed of treatises and elucidations on
different points concerning the history of the Middle Ages (moyen âge), par-
particularly concerning our Monarchy, our first poets, our old authors of novels
(Romans) and other writers.\footnote{16}{"La quatrième [classe d’ouvrages] enfin, est composée de traitez & d’éclaircissements sur divers
points de l’histoire du moyen âge, particulièrement de celle de nostre Monarchie, de nos premiers Poëtes,
de nos vieux Romanciers & d’autres auteurs.” Anon.,”Préface”, Histoire et Mémoires de l’Académie royale des
Inscriptions (1717), no pagination.}

The use of the term “middle ages” (moyen âge) was significant. Having been almost
completely absent from the works of the previous generation of historiographers,
including Charles Perrault and, more significantly, the founder of medieval diplomatics
(and honorary member of the academy), Jean Mabillon,\footnote{17}{Bruun, “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages”.}
the term was now deployed to stake out a new field of study. By transferring the methods of humanistic philol-
ogy onto French-language texts, the academicians were in part echoing the shift that
was also taking place, among aristocratic, non-professional readers such as Madame
de Sévigné, whereby works of chivalric fiction were gradually assuming the status of
modern vernacular classics. The term moyen âge reappeared with a certain regularity
in the other papers presented by the academicians, even if their periodizations of the
Middle Ages, as was the case for most authors until the end of the eighteenth century,
retained a certain chronological looseness.

In an historiographic rather than literary perspective, the academicians justified
their interest in medieval texts by pointing to their usefulness for studying various
royal origins. These included the origins of the kingdoms or territorial entities of
which present-day France was made up, the origins of the laws and customs of the
kingdom, and the tribal origins of the peoples who inhabited the present-day French
territory. Both inside and outside the Académie, scholars and laypeople debated the
ethnic provenance – Gallic or Frankish – of the French people. Thus in 1707, Abbé
de Vertot presented a paper on the origins of the French people, which he proposed
to discover by establishing anthropological parallels between French and Germanic
customs. The same question was taken up again by the young Nicolas Fréret in 1714,
when he read to the Académie a controversial paper on “the true origins of the French
(and their establishment in Gaul)”, which, interrupted by a prison term in the Bastille,
he completed in 1727 and 1728. The question of borders was also raised during the
Académie’s sessions. In 1727, Jean-Pierre de Mandajors read a paper about “the limits
of France and Gothia (la Gothie)”. The exact dating of the reigns of the first French
kings was debated in several papers, starting with the one Abbé de Vertot read in
1705 “about the epoch of the French monarchy”. An especially controversial topic, that
 gained new urgency with the publication of Henri, comte de Boulainvilliers’s violently
anti-monarchical writings on the origins of the feudal French state, was the role of
election and heredity in founding monarchic legitimacy. Thus in July 1717, responding
to another paper read by Fréret, Vertot examined “whether the Kingdom of France,
since the establishment of the monarchy, has been an hereditary or an elective state”.

\footnote{16}{Bruun, “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages”.}
He was followed in this by Etienne de Foncemagne, who in December 1724 read to his colleagues a *mémoire* “to establish that the Kingdom of France was successive-hereditary during the first race”, i.e. under the Merovingian dynasty. And in April 1732 Foncemagne, now taking aim at the recently published, posthumous * Mémoires historiques* by Boulainvilliers, presented a “critical examination of the ancient government of France”.

The monarchy, rather than the nation, furnished the explicit ideological context framing the work of the scholars working at the eighteenth-century Académie des Inscriptions, even in those rare cases where the academicians covertly criticized it, or came close to doing so.

Nonetheless, in some instances the academicians’ ideas also appeared to announce later, nineteenth-century reflections on the nation-state, with its characteristic emphasis on the political, military element. There are sometimes striking parallels between the academicians’ arguments and those used over a century later by Gaston Paris, whose well-known inaugural lecture at the Collège de France bore the programmatic title “La Chanson de Roland and the French nationality”. Referring to the “circle of steel that the German armies have formed around us” as he was delivering his inaugural lecture in December 1870, at the height of the Franco-Prussian war, Paris insisted on France’s identity as a true “soldier of God” (*soldat de Dieu*), a nation “charged with a Christian and bellicose mission: to combat under its king to defend and propagate religion”. In this inaugural lecture, the *Chanson de Roland* functioned as a central, foundational text, crystallizing this new, nationalistic vision of France. But over a century earlier already, in a very different context, Vertot had included, in the middle of his paper on Germanic customs, a description of “these French soldiers … in battle formation, marching into combat [and exciting] their valour by military songs”. Significantly, the military song these prototypical French soldiers were singing was none other than the original, vernacular *Chanson de Roland*, of whose existence the academicians were well aware, even if they themselves had access only to its Latin version.

The comparison between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideological uses of the medieval brings to the fore another defining tension, that between male- and female-gendered values. As Ursula Bährer noted about Gaston Paris, “in describing the *chansons de geste*, he obviously emphasized the warrior and masculine aspect of this poetry, as a ‘philologist-man’ of the nineteenth century, for as a member of a society dominated by men and male values, it was completely natural that he appreciate this aspect of the genre”. Foregrounding a militaristic spirit, both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars betrayed a wish to create an image of the Middle Ages in

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18 On these debates, see Nicolet, *La fabrique d’une nation*. On Boulainvilliers’s role, see Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy*.


21 Bährer, “‘Chansons de geste’ et ‘romans courtois’”, 101.
which masculine ideals, contrasted to the effeminate luxury of later ages, were the very source of national character. Thus the royalist Vertot focused attention on a militaristic ethos that the French had supposedly inherited from their Germanic ancestors, by privileging the description of combats and providing highly flattering descriptions of the *mœurs* or customs of this proto-French society:

A German dare not appear in public without his arms ... the father of a young man or his closest relative gives him his first arms publicly. This is his virile dress, this is his entry into his duties ... Before this military ceremony he was part of a private household, now he becomes a member of the state.  

Vertot’s royalism was, in fact, somewhat ambiguous, perhaps due to his own position as an academician member of the noblesse d’*épée*. While he expressly supported the royalist aims of the academy in publications that, among others, contested the historical basis of Breton and other particularist rights, he also took up some ideas that were more controversial. These included the idea that royal power was originally limited by the assembly representing the nation, and that it was the people who named the maire du palais in charge of the army. Equally ambivalent was his praise for the military values of the Frankish peoples, whose origins he decisively situated in Germany, and who were increasingly being adopted by aristocratic historians, most notably Boulainvilliers, as the true, morally elevated ancestors of the present-day French aristocracy. The Académie des Inscription’s royalist mission, in other words, was broad enough to accommodate diverging views of the national past.

Within the royalist perspective, which justified medieval studies by their usefulness in uncovering various historical origins, the academicians viewed medieval texts in utilitarian rather than aesthetic terms, and were consequently quick to condemn their literary qualities. The reference in the Académie’s new programme to the “first Poets” (*premiers Poëtes*) and to “our old romance authors” (*nos vieux Romanciers*) was misleading to the extent that in practice, the academicians displayed no interest at all in such texts as works of literature. It is indeed surprising to note the frequency with which they cited texts by well-known authors today such as Christine de Pizan, Charles d’Orléans or the Latin version of the *Chanson de Roland* – many of them supposedly unknown to the Enlightenment – but only as historical documents capable of furnishing details concerning the medieval past. Sainte-Palaye made this approach explicit in his 1743 “Memoir on the reading of ancient chivalric romances” (*Romans de Chevalerie*),

when he wrote that “historians and genealogists will find in the old romances (*Romans*) material that will lift various doubts, clear up difficulties, and extend their knowledge. As for geographers and antiquarians, I dare affirm that they

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23 Volpilhac-Auger, “Mon siège est fait”.

will learn there a host of curious and important details.”25 Significantly, despite the fact that the title and content foregrounded the paper’s relation to Chapelain’s much earlier Lecture, Sainte-Palaye denied having any previous knowledge of it, describing its author as a “learned academician, whose name would be more respected today, if he had restricted himself to the glory that was due his vast and singular erudition.”26 In other words, in this disclaimer Sainte-Palaye skilfully distanced himself both from the author of La Pucelle, who had erroneously sought to combine literary and academic activities, and from his rehabilitation in La Lecture of the aristocratic values represented by medieval romance.

Refusing to follow Chapelain’s example, the royal academicians on the contrary vigourously condemned the literary aesthetics of medieval texts, thereby demonstrating their continuing adherence to the rules of classicism. Thus for example, in an “Apology for that part of Frédégaire’s works concerning the history of France” that he read to his fellow academicians in 1708, Abbé de Vertot opined that the historical writings of the supposed Frédégaire (i.e. the monk Hunibalde) were no better that “a pitiful romance (roman) stuffed with fables, in which verisimilitude (vraisemblance) is completely lacking.”27 The contrast he drew between classicist verisimilitude on the one hand, and the roman genre on the other, left no doubt as to the academicians’ basic sympathies with the classicist doctrine crystallized in Boileau’s Art poétique. Using the terms traditionally associated with the romance and fairy tale genres, Vertot further explained that Frédégaire / Hunibalde had written only:

adventures (aventures) so surprising, that they could only be fitting to romance heroes (des héros de roman). They are popular tales (contes) that our old chroniclers took pleasure in inventing for themselves. Perhaps they were even their first authors, and placed them in their works, less as certain facts than as ornaments, and to relieve the dull uniformity found in those old chronicles. No-one was duped by this, for it was the sublime of those days.28

The recognition that the Middle Ages had also had their own form of the sublime did not excuse medieval authors, in the eyes of the academicians, from having produced
faulty, overly romanesque works. Vertot’s paper was far from being the only one attrib-
uting to medieval historians a concern with romance or fiction rather than with fact.
Just like the English scholars studied by John Ganim, the French academicians too
drew on a larger tradition that, independently of any knowledge of real medieval texts,
propagated the idea of an essentially romance-like Middle Ages. The academicians
imagined the Middle Ages themselves as a romance, and this preconception funda-
mentally conditioned their attitude towards the texts that they subsequently began to
study in a more orderly fashion.29

In the academicians’ view, medieval texts were characterized by an excessive love
of ornamentation – “a long display of superfluous words and phrases” –30 and a lack
of order (désordre) that contravened the classicist ideal of unity.31 Most disturbing of
all was medieval authors’ tendency to prefer the decorative detail to the significant
one, the contingent to the essential. While according to prevalent, classicist notions
of literary idealism, good works of literature were supposed to carry universal mean-
ings, Sainte-Palaye noted with disdain the tendency of medieval authors to linger on
descriptions of particulars. The Cartesian ideal of disembodied, abstract knowledge,
that provided the philosophical framework for classicist doctrine, contributed in large
part to this aesthetic ideal of abstract universalism. In a paper on Froissart that Sainte-
Palaye delivered at the Académie des Inscriptions in 1738, he elaborated on this critique
of detail by establishing a parallel between medieval literature and painting. Perhaps
significantly, painting was also one of the art forms with which his fellow academician
and ideological counterpart Caylus was most often associated:

Painters emerging from the greatest barbarism, seized in detail all the little
objects with which nature presented them, attached themselves to the insects,
flowers, birds, decorated them with the most vivid colours, drew them with an
exactitude that we admire still in the vignettes and miniatures of medieval man-
uscripts …

The poets, as sterile as the painters, speak only of a fine springtime, of the
green in the countryside, of the tint of the meadows, the feathers of a thousand
different types of birds … they cannot imagine anything beyond this, incapable
for the rest of giving any order or connection to their ideas.32

29 Ganim, Medievalism and Orientalism, 18.
30 “Le stile de l’histoire des trois Maries, répond aux ornements dont l’Auteur a enrichi son sujet. La
Poésie n’y diffère de la Prose la plus commune, que par un long étalage de mots & de phrases superflues.”
Sainte-Palaye, “Mémoire concernant la Vie de Jean de Venette”, 527.
32 “Les Peintres au sortir de la plus grossière barbarie, saisissant d’abord en détail tous les petits objets
que la nature leur présentoit, s’attachèrent aux insectes, aux fleurs, aux oiseaux, les parerent des couleurs
les plus vives, les dessinèrent avec une exactitude que nous admirons encore dans les vignettes & dans les
miniatures des Manuscrits … Les Poètes aussi stériles que les Peintres ne sçavent guères parler que d’un
beau printems, de la verdure des campagnes, de l’émail des prairies, du ramage de mille espèces d’oiseaux …
ils n’imaginent rien au delà, incapables d’ailleurs de donner de la suite & de la liaison à leurs idées.” Sainte-
As a good classicist, Sainte-Palaye was appalled by the particularist tendencies of medi-

eval texts, which were further and irrevocably disqualified from any serious aesthetic

consideration by their lack of order and composition. The parallel with the art of paint-
ing was especially revealing. The vivid colours that Sainte-Palaye noted in miniatures

suggested a link with another critical commonplace regularly applied to medieval or

medievalist texts, namely that their brilliance was only false brilliance (faux brillant),
capable of dazzling rather than producing true light. As Boileau had proclaimed in

condemning Tasso, only “fools of quality” (sots de qualité) preferred “the brightness of

Tasso to all of Virgil’s gold.”

At the same time as he reused the Enlightenment cliché of false light, Sainte-Palaye’s
description also tended to implicitly feminize medieval literature. His rejection of the

medieval drew on the same stock criticisms applied during these years also to what

was commonly considered women’s literature, i.e. the romans and galant literary pro-
ductions that, while widely read, were yet excluded from the classicist canon. Criticism

was directed, especially, at these texts’ focus on details, that supposedly revealed their

authors’ fundamental inability to develop a more sweeping, general view. As Naomi
Schor argued, discussing eighteenth-century aesthetics, “the censure of the particular

is one of the enabling gestures of neo-classicism”, creating an implicit contrast between

female-gendered and male-gendered aesthetic domains. Detail, as a literary figure of

style, participated according to her “in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one

side by the ornamental, with its traditional connotation of effeminacy and decadence,

and on the other, by the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere

of social life presided over by women.” “The detail,” was Schor’s conclusion, “does not

occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered

doubly gendered as female.” Medieval authors, incapable like women of grasping

universal truths and limited to insignificant details whose value was at most simply
decorative, were thus condemned to assume the status of timeless Other legitimating,

by implication, the work of the modern-day academicians who had deigned to devote

their precious time to them.

The decorative, picturesque detail finally had no value for Sainte-Palaye not only

because of its association with the female, but also because it was of limited interest in

recording or reconstructing political-historical events. In his bourgeois valorization

of his own work and the painstaking labour of scholarship, social usefulness prevailed

above all else, a stance that contrasted markedly with the traditional aristocratic, galant

aesthetics of negligence (négligence), of non-utilitarian style as an end in itself. Sainte-

Palaye repeatedly stressed the sheer tedium of his scholarly activities, in a stance that

was reminiscent of the philosophes’ bourgeois rehabilitation of manual labour, most

famously in Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie, above frivolous aristocratic amuse-
ments. Sainte-Palaye described himself, the prototypical scholar, in a traditional pose

akin to that of Saint Jerome, bent over his manuscripts in his solitary cell:

33 “Le clinquant du Tasse à tout l’or de Virgile.” Boileau, Satires, Epîtres, Art poétique, 111.
34 Schor, Reading in Detail, xlii.
People will surely be astonished at the time I employed to read such a work in which, in close to four thousand verses, not even two can be found that are acceptable. I was the first to be astonished, but the continuous hope of discovering some particularity concerning an author that, as an historian of France, I wanted to read, made me pass over all the disgust, and sustained me to the end of an endeavour capable of repelling the most patient reader … One can provide no more useful service to men of letters (gens de lettres) than to free them from the necessity of undertaking an infinity of readings, from which scrupulous authors feel they cannot exempt themselves, and from which they often draw no other advantage than to realize their entire uselessness. By doing so, one would save a lot of good minds not only a lot of tedium, but also much time that they could employ more agreeably and more usefully, and whose fruit would then spread over all literature.\(^35\)

In thus underscoring the painstaking, rebarbative nature of his own work, Sainte-Palaye was doing more than describing his daily activities. He was, most obviously, drawing on an old humanist commonplace that established a meaningful parallel between the harshness of scholarly work and that of the Middle Ages themselves.\(^36\) Sainte-Palaye's lingering on the supposed barbarism of the medieval period, labelled a period of inaccessible darkness, underscored by contrast his own merit in shining the light of scientific reason on these hidden recesses. And by referencing the foundational rhetorics of the Enlightenment, Sainte-Palaye was taking an ideological stance, like Diderot, Voltaire and the Encyclopedists adopting the Modern, progressivist view of history reflected in the metaphor of present-day light contrasted to medieval darkness. But, by defining scholarship itself as a process of more or less hard, at times outright unpleasant, labour, he was also placing it within the framework of a work ethic that was increasingly associated, in the early Enlightenment, with a particular social group: the bourgeoisie and related professional groups, that included, not coincidentally, also royal bureaucrats and state-funded academicians such as himself.

**From Details to a Materialist Approach**

Caylus's stance as an academician appeared, at least at first sight, to be similar to Sainte-Palaye's. Thus he concurred with his opinion that “the way to give a kind of value and

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\(^35\) "On sera sans doute étonné du temps que j'ay employé à la lecture d'un pareil ouvrage, où, dans près de quarante mille vers, on n'en trouve pas deux qui soient passables. J'en ay esté moy-même étonné le premier: mais l'espérance continue d'y trouver quelque particularité concernant un Auteur, que sa qualité d'Historien de France me faisoit souhaiter de connoître, m'a fait passer sur tous les dégoûts, & m'a soutenu jusqu'au bout d'une carrière capable de rebuter le lecteur le plus patient. … On ne sauroit rien faire de plus utile aux gens de lettres, que de les afranchir de la nécessité de faire une infinité de lectures, dont les Écrivains exacts ne croyent pas pouvoir se dispenser, & dont ils ne tirent souvent d'autre avantage que d'en bien connoître toute l'inutilité. Par-là, outre beaucoup d'ennui, on épargneroit à plusieurs bons esprits un temps qu'ils employeroient plus agréablement & plus utilement, & dont le fruit se répendroit sur toute la Littérature." Sainte-Palaye, "Mémoire concernant la vie de Jean de Venette," 527.

\(^36\) Maas, "Covered in the Thickest Darkness of Forgetfulness".
to attract some consideration to our old poets, is in my opinion, to collect all the historical facts that their works contain. The authors who wrote in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, so known for their ignorance, become more interesting by this.”

Like Sainte-Palaye and his fellow academicians, he claimed to value medieval texts for their historical rather than artistic merits. His stated aesthetic ideals also appeared similar for, on the whole, he condemned medieval texts as being unworthy of serious literary consideration.

Yet despite these seemingly similar views, in Caylus’s writings on medieval authors there was room for exceptions, and for another discourse that on the contrary valued at least some medieval texts on their own, aesthetic terms. This was the case most notably for the fabliau, a genre that Caylus unabashedly enjoyed and defended in a “Mémoire sur les fabliaux”, read in July 1746 before his fellow academicians. This text is truly exceptional within the larger corpus of academicians’ writings, and indeed within the history of medieval philology more generally. While at the beginning of the paper Caylus emitted the standard rejection of decorative detail, this position changed as his argument progressed. Somewhat later in the mémoire, he came around to writing, surprisingly now, that “portraits and images are the most essential parts of poetry and make it the sister of painting.” Because fabliaux excelled in such portraits and images, i.e. because they possessed properly painterly qualities, they became for Caylus, the recognized connoisseur of eighteenth-century painting and painters, no less than the measure of all medieval poetry. Delivered six years after Sainte-Palaye’s unfavourable comparison of medieval painters and poets, Caylus’s paper appeared then to offer a critical riposte to his colleague’s more narrow view. What was perhaps also at issue here, more profoundly, was an opposition between a strictly analytic approach, that valued the separation of art forms, and a more holistic, organicist ideal in which art forms could mutually influence one another.

Caylus’s unusual, non-scholarly appreciation of detail betrayed a deeper affinity that can be linked to his own practice both as an author and collector of antiquities. As a collector, he preferred the utilitarian or everyday object to the great works of art. In his literary writings, likewise, he paid remarkable attention to the specific, the detail, and the material. Caylus helped shape a new literary genre, that of poissard (literally: fishmongers’) literature, whose defining characteristic was its use of characters and language drawn from the urban lower classes – i.e., a focus on detail and local colour that was practically inexistent within the context of eighteenth-century classicism. Where Sainte-Palaye had categorically condemned the nature descriptions in medieval poetry for their attention to the specific, Caylus homed in on precisely

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37 “Le moyen de donner une sorte de valeur & d’attirer quelque considération à nos anciens Poëtes, c’est, à mon avis, de recueillir tous les faits historiques que leurs ouvrages renferment. Les auteurs qui ont écrit dans les XIV.e & XV.e siècles si connus par leur ignorance, deviennent en cela plus intéressans.” Caylus, “Premier Mémoire sur Guillaume de Machaut,” 399.

38 For an analysis, see Peeters, “La redécouverte littéraire du fabliau”.

these elements, but assigned to them a new aesthetic value. Describing a codex that contained mostly fabliaux, he referred briefly to the rest of its contents:

In the romances (romans) in this codex [i.e. Florence & Blancheflor, Partenopex de Blois & Blanchardin] there are paintings of springtime, and other interruptions so agreeable that they can be compared with everything that is best of this sort. I think I have reported enough examples to prove what natural spirit and taste can achieve without the aid of artifice. What surprises me, I admit, is that with such models, our poetry and our understanding should have reverted again to barbarism …

I have shown how in that time ideas were regulated, the language was finished, and in short simplicity and naïveté, which will always be the basis of true taste, and from which writers depart too much today, were well known.40

This passage is doubly illuminating. Not only did it offer a reply to Sainte-Palaye’s earlier, negative assessment of medieval nature descriptions, but it also offered a reevaluation of medieval literature, prized now for its painterly qualities. The crucial terms, here, were “simplicity and naïveté” (simplicité & naïveté), both characteristics that had already been ascribed to the medieval era by previous authors. But whereas Sainte-Palaye used the topos of medieval naïveté in a neutral fashion, Caylus gave it a distinctly aesthetic – and moral – dimension. The naïveté of the Middle Ages rendered medieval literature closer to nature than modern literary works, making the medi evals potentially morally superior to the moderns. It was reminiscent of another view that was emerging during these same decades, that increasingly valued supposedly primitive, Homeric epic above its more refined Latin counterparts – a reevaluation that, significantly, laid the aesthetic groundwork for the rediscovery of medieval literature and its recreation through the works of, among others, James Macpherson’s Ossian. The contrast Caylus established between present-day literary corruption and medieval simplicity thus implied, also, a characteristically aristocratic, Ancient take on history. History did not, as in the bourgeois valorization of (technological) progress, move forwards, making the present invariably superior to the past, but rather, it moved cyclically, with periods of decay following periods of achievement. Caylus drew on the crucial notion, in Ancient aesthetic sensibility, of a past Golden Age, which the noblesse d’épée equated with the medieval because therein lay the source of their own class identity. Paradoxically therefore, while the progressivism of the Moderns and the bourgeois ideals of the philosophes did sometimes enable an historicist attitude

40 “Dans les romans de ce recueil … il y a des peintures du printemps, et d’autres interruptions si agréables qu’elles peuvent aller de pair avec tout ce qu’on connaît de meilleur en ce genre. Je crois avoir assez rapporté de traits pour prouver ce que peuvent l’esprit & le goût naturels sans le secours de l’art. Ce qui me surprend, je l’avoue, c’est qu’avec de tels modèles, notre poésie & nos connoissances soient retombées dans la barbarie où elles ont été fort peu de temps après … Il me suffit d’avoir exposé que dès ce temps-là les idées étoient réglées, que la langue étoit faite, & qu’enfin on y connoissoit pleinement la simplicité & la naïveté, qui seront toujours la base du goût vrai, & dont il semble qu’on s’écarte un peu trop aujourd’hui.” Caylus, “Mémoires sur les fabliaux”, 254–5.
conducive to medieval studies, in Caylus's case, it was his Ancient stance that made possible an aesthetic appreciation of at least some medieval literary productions.

Caylus's literary works, finally, suggested also a more personal engagement with the medieval that differed markedly from Sainte-Palaye's stance of scholarly detachment. Moving beyond his theoretical “Mémoire sur les fabliaux”, Caylus published a modern edition of one of the manuscript *fabliaux* he had studied in the Bibliothèque du Roi, the twelfth-century “Cor mantel”, which he presented not as a work of erudition, but as one of several more or less frivolous tales he inserted into a curious collection of texts all dealing with overcoats, *Les manteaux*. Continuing in this vein of dilettante authorship, he further wrote several original *fabliaux*, short tales and fairy tales of his own, that he again published in various collections, under the cover of a characteristically aristocratic anonymity downplaying the value of his own work. Like their medieval models, many of these texts emphasized their evanescent, oral rather than literate status. Emanating from salon games, their authorship in many cases was diffuse and collective, inscribing them in a larger context of aristocratic social performance, and placing Caylus's literary productions at the Bout du Banc salon in the direct lineage of L'Héritier’s earlier recreations of medieval song.

But Caylus's most important literary work was arguably his modern adaptation of the fifteenth-century Catalan chivalric novel *Tirant lo Blanch*, published in 1737, which he based on one of the two extant copies of its later, Spanish translation. In fact, despite – or actually because of – the great liberties he took with the text, his adaptation worked surprisingly well as an elegant example of an eighteenth-century medievalist novel, and was appreciated as such by the likes of Rousseau, Catherine the Great and Walter Scott. Reprinted several times, later in the century an abridged version was included in Tressan's *Bibliothèque universelle des romans*, the organ of the late-eighteenth-century so-called troubadour genre (genre troubadour) in literature. Caylus's *Tirant le Blanc*, as he called his own version, offered a picture of the institution of medieval chivalry, told from the perspective of the eponymous protagonist, that had lasting appeal for many readers. Underlining his basic allegiance to literature rather than scholarship, in his preface to the work Caylus announced that what most mattered to him was not erudite knowledge, but the pleasure of reading:

> The translator, who doubtless did not think his public would care to see the literal translation of an ancient Spanish romance (roman) with all the defects that would have prevented him from amusing himself in its reading (in which hardly anything else could be sought but amusement) has taken in this regard all the liberties he thought necessary … There is even room to fear that readers in love with literal exactitude may accuse him of abusing the freedom granted the translator of a frivolous work.41

41 "Le traducteur, qui sans doute n’a pas cru que le public se souciera de voir la version littérale d’un ancien roman Espagnol avec tous les défauts qui l’auraient empêché de s’amuser à une lecture (dans laquelle on ne peut guère chercher autre chose que l’amusement) a pris à cet égard toutes les libertés qu’il a cru nécessaires … Il a même lieu de craindre que les lecteurs amoureux de l’exactitude littérale ne l’accusent d’avoir abusé de la liberté accordée au traducteur d’un ouvrage frivole." Caylus, *Histoire du Vaillant Chevalier Tirant le Blanc*, 43–4.
Contrasting the “literal exactitude” of a scholarly translation to the liberties associated with literature written for entertainment, Caylus inscribed his own adaptation of the medieval romance into the literary traditions of his day. Yet at the same time, the scholarly value of this adaptation should not be underrated. For over a century, this was the only version of *Tirant lo Blanch* available to the reading public. When the first Spanish philologists started to study the text in the nineteenth century, it was to Caylus’s version that they turned, at least until the Catalan original was made available again in 1873.

In keeping with his aristocratic stance of literary négligence, Caylus did not comment at length on his own principles as a medievalist scholar-author. Nonetheless, some interesting clues can be gleaned from his magnum opus, the *Recueil d’antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques et grecques* that he started publishing in 1752. This work was groundbreaking in that it favoured an archeological approach to the past, whereby material objects, properly contextualized, took precedence over literary or textual evidence. Caylus’s attention to detail and to the material aspects of culture set him apart from the philosophes’ explicitly moralistic, text-based conception of historiography that, supported by their ideal of philosophical history (*histoire philosophique*), continued to dominate scholarship at the Académie des Inscriptions, too. Steadily enlarging the scope of this materialist approach to scholarship, when he arrived at volume 3, Caylus decided to include also Gallic antiquities in his field of study. As if taking stock of the importance of this decision, he reformulated his own beliefs as an antiquarian in the preface to the new volume, writing that antiquarians should, as a matter of principle, personally familiarize themselves with the material practice of the arts they studied in order to better understand them:

One cannot expect of an Antiquarian, that he wield the pencil with elegance, nor that he compose like an Artist; these talents would be useless to him; I ask only that he be experienced enough in this type of work, to have acquired the precision of eye, and the ability to embrace an object sufficiently to seize its perfections, or its defects … the basis and the foundation of everything that is called *connoisseurship* [is] established on that which we know in painting as *style* (*Manière*).

Caylus explicitly lay claim here to the status of antiquarian, as opposed to the more prestigious label of historian. Rather than attempting to distill general moral or political lessons from his scholarly activities, i.e. to make them socially useful, he was content

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42 Indeed, this version remains widely available today, through a recent edition published in 1997 by Jean Marie Barberà, that constituted the first version of the Catalan classic to become available to the modern French reading public.

43 Mérida Jiménez, *La aventura de Tirant lo Blanch y de Tirante el Blanco*.

44 “On ne peut exiger d’un Antiquaire, de manier le crayon avec élegance, ni de composer comme un Artiste; ces talens lui seroient inutiles; je demande seulement qu’il ait assez travaillé dans ce genre, pour avoir acquis la justesse de l’œil, & la facilité d’embrasser un objet, à un degré suffisant, pour saisir ses perfections, ou ses défauts … la base & le fondement de tout ce qu’on appelle Connoissance, [est] établi sur ce que l’on connoît dans la peinture sous le nom de Manière.” Caylus, *Recueil d’antiquités*, III, xix–xx.
as a self-styled aristocratic dilettante to simply collect and creatively reconstruct the past. Caylus's stance as an antiquarian, more importantly, suggests also a revealing parallel with his work as a literary historian. Just as, according to him, art historians should acquire the basics of draftsmanship in order to be able to evaluate artistic style (Manière), so literary historians too should acquire the basics of literary composition in order to be able to properly understand works of literature from past ages. Theory and practice, in other words, were inseparable, making Caylus's own work as an author an essential part of his scholarship.

Through his literary works, Caylus the aristocratic homme de lettres positioned himself within the longer tradition of creative authors and adapters, rather than scholars in the strictest sense, that went all the way back to the Middle Ages themselves. Rejecting the model of the single “authentic”, fixed (and dead) text, his own practice foregrounded textual mouvance, making of medieval literature through his own successful adaptations and recreations a still-living organism. Implicitly defending his own literary practices, in the “Mémoire sur les fabliaux” Caylus argued that other modern authors such as François Rabelais and Jean de La Fontaine had also drawn on medieval sources when composing their famous works. There was, in other words, an unbroken line uniting the medieval past with the post-Renaissance present. Just as importantly, this continuity could be inscribed into Ancient ideals too, for according to Caylus the line extended equally all the way back to classical Antiquity. As he wrote in a paper on classical mythology, “from the ancient Greek authors to our first romances (romans), a chain extends that is more or less taut, but that was never broken, and the ideas of the former, albeit altered and bastardized, still reached the latter.” Not only because of the genealogical value of the medieval for aristocrats such as Caylus, but also because of the Middle Ages’ chronological nearness to the Ancients, medieval literary productions could in some cases be judged aesthetically and morally superior to modern ones. Caylus’s medievalist scholarship, in short, was characteristically aristocratic in that it was defined not by the sense of a break with the past but by a sense of continuity, not objective distance but personal proximity to his object of study.

**Scholarly Detachment versus Engagement**

Contesting the personal engagement with the medieval exemplified by Caylus, Sainte-Palaye and his fellow academicians sought to define instead a new, autonomous role for the medievalist scholar. Their most effective instrument in this effort was, paradoxically, their very refusal to acknowledge any aesthetic merits in medieval literature, for this refusal demonstrated their own critical detachment. Disdain for medieval literature, furthermore, served to establish their legitimacy as guardians of the classicist tradition associated with royal patronage, and thus as royal academicians worthy of the name. By rejecting the aesthetic values associated with the medieval – its supposed excessive

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45 “Ainsi depuis les anciens auteurs de la Grèce jusqu'à nos premiers romans, s'étend une chaîne plus ou moins serrée, mais qui n'est jamais interrompue; & les idées des premiers, altérées à la vérite & abâtardies, sont pourtant parvenues jusqu'aux derniers.” Caylus, “Sur la Féerie des Anciens, comparée à celle des Modernes”, 148.
attention to detail, its lack of proportion, of disposition and of correct perspective— they were indeed rejecting an entire body of values associated with aristocratic literary productions, i.e. those identified with non-regular (and non-regulated) literature, understood as lighthearted *badinage* rather than serious work. The aesthetic argument was finally supplemented by a more decisive, ethical one for, contrary to the aristocratic celebration of the Middle Ages as a period of superior morality ruled over by the feudal nobility, Sainte-Palaye and his bourgeois fellow academicians opposed a negative, more progressivist Modern view.

The conjunction of aesthetic, ethical and historical arguments was a recurrent feature of royalist academic discourse. In tacit acknowledgement of his own filial investment in the classicist literary aesthetic, another prominent academician, Louis Racine, expressed the most extreme version of the bourgeois condemnation of the medieval. Presenting himself as the champion of the literary values embodied by the already canonical works of his deceased father, he rejected the Middle Ages primarily on moral, religious grounds. In a paper he read in 1744 on Gautier de Coincy’s *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, the younger Racine started out by underlining the superstitious beliefs described by the medieval author. Noting in his text “these monstruous absurdities that humiliate reason,” Louis Racine argued that the medievals had disfigured true piety, that—as described in his own epic poem *La Religion*—should have a rational basis. The philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment, evinced for example in Voltaire’s violently anti-medievalist *Essai sur les mœurs*, was thus in full display here. As Lionel Gossman underlined in his study of Sainte-Palaye, scholarly medievalism went hand in hand with the *philosophes*’ contestation of supposedly medieval religious superstition, equated with the darkness (*ténèbres*) of the Middle Ages contrasted to the light of the present age. Noting with irony, in the same *mémoire*, that “these centuries that are presented sometimes as the golden age of the nation, were … the reign of disorder and violence”, Louis Racine went on to discuss literature:

> Let us not pine for [the age’s] vicious simplicity. As morals greatly influence the imagination, each century is poetic in its own manner, and the poetry of those days suffers from the uncouthness that dominated then. However, among an infinity of ridiculous and bizarre traits, low and puerile stories, paintings in which indecency passes for naïveté, we encounter sometimes a few passages written with elegance, that could be cited as examples of a simple and natural style.

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Racine rejected the aristocratic, *galant* idea that the Middle Ages had been a period of moral righteousness, and linked this rejection to a new, negative judgement of medieval literature. Medieval texts were, according to him, marked both by a lack of aesthetic and ethical measure, for the two domains remained closely linked in the classicist doctrine he was defending. Thus, the only merit this age could have in his eyes was to have sometimes produced, as if by accident, a few passages (*morceaux*) in a style both simple and natural (*style simple & naturel*). These were, of course, exactly the same qualities ascribed to the literary productions of aristocratic women authors such as Madame de Sévigné in contemporary reflections on *galant* literary traditions. Medieval texts, like those penned by women authors, were not completely banned from the field of good literature, but their admission into accepted literary systems was based on the tacit acceptance of a highly gendered hierarchy of literary value, reflecting supposed differences between male and female, bourgeois and aristocratic styles of writing and views of history.

While Louis Racine was openly hostile in his condemnation of the medieval, suggesting a position completely outside the *mondain* tradition, Sainte-Palaye’s stance, as leader of the new scholarly medievalist party, was only nominally more ambivalent. Participating in current literary fashion, one of the rare texts he published during his lifetime, his edition of the medieval tale *Aucassin et Nicolette*, appeared not in the academicians’ journal but in the more frivolous society journal *Mercure galant* – which, in fact, regularly published reports of the academicians’ doings, thereby incidentally demonstrating the frequent porosity, in actual practice, of scholarly and bellettristic varieties of medievalism.49 Reissuing his *Aucassin et Nicolette* as a separate volume in 1756, Sainte-Palaye added to it a subtitle that explicitly referenced Deshoulières’s famous ballad – *On n’ aime plus comme on aimait jadis* – and that thereby implicitly recognized the existence of an older, aristocratic tradition of medievalist *galanterie* incarnated, among others, by his sometime colleague Caylus.50

The basic ambivalence of many academicians, who long continued to hesitate between bellettristic and scholarly models of medievalism, was equally visible in Sainte-Palaye’s most influential work, the *Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie*. Presented to his fellow academicians starting in November 1746, nine years after Caylus’s succesful

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49 Several academicians’ papers appeared in both periodicals. Thus in June 1725, the *Mercure* published an extract of Foncemagne’s *mémoire* “to establish that the Kingdom of France has been successive-hereditarily in the first Race”. In September and December, it reprinted Vertot’s paper “on the origin of the *privilèges* of the principality of Yvetot”, and in December part of Secousse’s “Histoire de Julius Sabinus & d’Epponina.” In other instances, the *Mercure* published articles on the same erudite topics – remarks on medieval epigraphs, questions concerning diplomatics – as were discussed in the *Mémoires* of the Académie des Inscriptions. The paper “On our first French translators, with an attempt to establish a French library” that Camille Falconet read in January 1727 at the Académie, and that was hailed by Gossman as the call to arms of the medievalist camp, was actually preceded by a “Project to establish a general catalogue of French manuscripts” by Abbé Jean Lebeuf in the *Mercure* in June 1725. And in yet other cases, the academicians responded to articles already published in the *Mercure*. Thus Mandajors’s paper “On the limits of France and Gothia”, for example, appeared to consciously echo a “Dissertation on the limits of Germanic France, with Gothic Aquitania” by Adrien Maillart, published in the June 1725 *Mercure*.

50 On his version of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, see Damian-Grint, “Old French in the Eighteenth Century”.
Tirant le Blanc and four months after his “Mémoire sur les fabliaux”, Sainte-Palaye’s series of Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie offered a sometimes contradictory response to his aristocratic colleague’s previous publications. Whereas Caylus’s Tirant le Blanc had offered readers an attractive, novelistic account of the institution of chivalry described from within, and emanating from the pen of an author whose own chivalric antecedents were indisputable, Sainte-Palaye instead offered a scholarly treatise. The full title, Memoirs on ancient chivalry, considered as a political and military institution, revealed Sainte-Palaye’s anthropological, quasi-structuralist approach. The customs or mœurs expressed by the codes and practices of chivalry, as the intellectual tradition incarnated by Pasquier, Fauchet and Chapelain had already argued, were held to possess their own, historically specific coherence, and to therefore reveal important truths about medieval society in general.

Sainte-Palaye’s Mémoires were, however, marked by an almost schizophrenic double-voiced discourse, that expressed itself in the completely different tone of the main body of text as compared to the extensive corpus of notes he added at the end. Thus, the first four mémoires reused many of the rhetorical commonplaces of the mondain discourse on the medieval, creating expectations among his readers that he was, subsequently, going to shatter spectacularly. The first Mémoire sur l’ancienne chevalerie described the education of the young pageboy as he prepared to enter the state of knighthood, and thus fit well into the contemporary fashion for novels of education, in which a central role often devolved to the young woman-initiator, and in which women’s perceived centrality to medieval society could be highlighted. Writing that “the precepts of love spread in the commerce with women those considerations and respectful courtesies that … have always been one of the distinctive characteristics of our nation”, Sainte-Palaye referenced Huet’s and Chapelain’s ideas on the distinctiveness of the French tradition of galanterie. In the same mémoire, he further admitted the existence of “traces of virtue that chivalry, without our knowing it, has left in the morals (mœurs) and the customs of our nation”. Reading such passages, it is easy to imagine the success these mémoires enjoyed among a contemporary readership well-versed in the tradition of medievalist romance and Chapelain’s rehabilitation of it.

But in the last of the four Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie, and above all in the accompanying notes, Sainte-Palaye broke radically with the idealized image he had painted in the preceding mémoires by on the contrary now distancing himself from the romance view of the medieval. The fierceness with which he did so can be explained by his increasing desire to stake out a new field of bourgeois medievalist scholarship. For Sainte-Palaye viewed scholarship as a tireless labour to unearth “the constant and impartial truth that is sought in the study of history” and this view made him

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refuse any personal engagement with his object of study in order to claim the stance of Cartesian critical disembodiment that was crucial to scholars’ new self-fashioning. This stance suggests why Sainte-Palaye saved his most trenchant condemnation of the idealized Middle Ages for the notes of his Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie – which are, in fact, considerably longer than the main text. The notes, because they remained on the margins of his principal text, assumed, like Sainte-Palaye himself, a critical remove that guaranteed proper distance and objectivity. Rather than personally engaging with the medieval, as Caylus had done before him, Sainte-Palaye instead showcased his proper distance from his object of study, proposing thereby a new, supposedly more objective approach to medieval literature.

As the Mémoires progressed, indeed, they started assuming a more critical tone, that implicitly questioned the idealized view of the medieval held by Sainte-Palaye’s non-scholarly and / or aristocratic contemporaries. Thus in the final Mémoire he ironically referred to “these lovers of the golden age of gallantry … these kinds of enthusiasts [who] prided themselves on loving only the virtues, talents and graces of their ladies, of finding there the only source of their lives’ fulfilment.” Recalling the central religious conflict, explored by Madame de Sévigné and by Rousseau, between earthly and heavenly love, he went on to muse that “since there was but one step from the superstition of our devout knights to irreligion, there was also but one step from their fanaticism in love to the greatest excesses of libertinism”. This passage led up, finally, to a complete rejection of the idea that medieval virtue could be superior to the moral corruption of the present age. “Never”, concluded Sainte-Palaye, “were morals more corrupted than in the time of the knights, and never was debauchery more universal.”

Especially striking, given the later publication history of Aucassin et Nicolette, was that in his accumulation of arguments against the Middle Ages, Sainte-Palaye ended by taking aim also at the idea expressed by Madame Deshoulières’s famous refrain that “Lovers no longer love as in olden days” (On n’aime plus comme on aimait jadis):

Let us be wary of the praises that one century bestows on the preceding one. Antique love, so tender, so constant, so pure and so celebrated, and always ascribed to our ancestors, was the model that censors of all ages proposed to their contemporaries: two or three hundred years before Marot, poets had, like him and almost in the same terms, pined for “the course of love that reigned in the good old days.”

54 Cf. the case of Pierre Bayle, another author who launched his attacks from the margins or notes, as studied by Gossman, “Marginal Writing”.
55 “Ces amans de l’âge d’or de la galanterie … ces espèces d’enthousiastes se vantoient de n’aimer que les vertus, les talens & les graces de leurs Dames, d’y trouver l’unique source du bonheur de leur vie … Comme il n’y avoit qu’un pas de la superstition de nos dévots Chevaliers à l’irréligion, ils neurent aussi qu’un pas à faire de leur fanatisme en amour aux plus grands excès de libertinage.” Sainte-Palaye, “Cinquième mémoire sur l’ancienne chevalerie”, 685.
56 “Jamais on ne vit les mœurs plus corrompues que du temps de nos Chevaliers, & jamais le règne de la débauche ne fut plus universel.” Sainte-Palaye, “Cinquième mémoire sur l’ancienne Chevalerie”, 686.
57 “Défions-nous des éloges que donne un siècle au siècle qui l’a précédé. L’amour antique, si tendre, si constant, si pur & si vanté, dont on fait toujours honneur à ses devanciers, fut le modèle que les censeurs,
In this diatribe against the widespread, galant ideal of the Middle Ages, Sainte-Palaye included a long note in which, as his clinching argument, he cited the fourteenth-century poet Eustache Deschamps lamenting in one of his ballads “the olden days in which loyalty reigned” (le temps jadis que régnoit loyauté). The idea according to which the Middle Ages had been a privileged era of lost innocence, harbouring a superior morality, turned out according to Sainte-Palaye to be false, and it was on the debris of this antiquated belief that he proposed to construct his own self-image as a scholarly enlightener, carrying the torch of a new truth. Taking a distance from the aristocratic salon culture of the age, he spearheaded a movement of scholarly emancipation proposing a more scientific and supposedly objective approach to medieval literature. This new, bourgeois and increasingly male-gendered approach aimed to replace the older, aristocratic tradition of medievalism, now relegated to women and their reactionary salon admirers. This defining opposition between a male, scholarly discourse on one hand, and a feminized and belle-lettriste discourse on the other, was suprisingly similar to the one described by David Hult in his analysis of how, a century later, Gaston Paris sought to distinguish his own scholarly work from his father Paulin’s more worldly productions. Thus according to Hult, in Gaston Paris's writings “the chain of associations is transparent: feminine, frivolous, unscientific, amateurish … The world of aristocratic culture-seekers – the ‘lettered’ class in general – all characterized as feminine, clearly has a secondary, or even tertiary, status, well below the male-oriented and newly professionalized pursuit of academic disciplines. The lines thus drawn far exceed the superficial distinction between professionalism and dilettantism: they also encode and thus perpetuate sexual and social divisions within the discipline itself.”

From Sainte-Palaye in the eighteenth century to Gaston Paris in the nineteenth, a similar desire to redefine or even appropriate the new field of medievalism can be discerned. In the final mémoire especially, Sainte-Palaye broke radically with the aristocratic, idealized image of the Middle Ages that Caylus had suggested. Medieval chivalry was an institution that, despite its noble appearance, was according to him fatally corrupt. Questioning the view of medieval morality as superior to present-day decadence, Sainte-Palaye accused medieval men instead of being sexually dissolute religious fanatics. By openly criticizing the idea of nobility (noblesse), that projected moral qualities both onto medieval knights and onto the present-day aristocrats who were their descendants, Sainte-Palaye revealed his own robin position, and the increasing acceptance in French society of bourgeois ideals of virtue through labour rather than through birth. In a significant aside, in a note commenting on the obscenity of medieval texts, his condemnation of medieval literature also took aim specifically at the genre of the fabliaux, which Caylus had previously sought to rehabilitate:

If we judge the morals of a century by the writings it has left us, we would be right to judge that our ancestors poorly observed the laws that decency and honesty
prescribed them. The most indecent modern-day poets have not surpassed our old French poets; I wouldn't dare to believe that the courts of the noblemen, for whom tales and fables had so many charms, could have listened with patience to some of our fabliaux. Few people would be able to stand reading them today, if it were not for their extreme desire to find in them some instructive details pertaining to our history and our antiquities … After that, let anyone dare to praise these centuries of ignorance and barbarism!59

By reiterating the philosophes' description of the medieval as a time of barbarism, Sainte-Palaye was responding specifically to Caylus's more positive, characteristically aristocratic stance towards the medieval. To his previous rejection of the aesthetic qualities of medieval texts, Sainte-Palaye now added a resounding rejection of their moral qualities, arguing that supposed aristocratic nobility (noblesse) was actually a sham. Essentially a form of false consciousness, he maintained, the system of chivalry served in practice to hoodwink the medievals – and especially, one supposes, the ancestors of present-day bourgeois Frenchmen such as himself – into acquiescing with a social system that granted enormous privileges to a small elite at the expense of the larger group of non-noble, hardworking men and women. In this final part of his Mémoires sur l'ancienne chevalerie, which he read to his colleagues only in August 1750, i.e. four years after he had started work on his project, Sainte-Palaye appeared to be announcing a larger mental shift. Indeed, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret has argued that around 1760 the aristocracy underwent a major transformation, whereby it increasingly accepted a work ethic and set of cultural representations hitherto associated with the bourgeois. Thus, from this moment on the class of roblins and newly ennobled bourgeois – to which Sainte-Palaye of course belonged – virtually ceased to adopt the values of the old aristocracy upon entering the ranks of the nobility and, “far from renouncing their identity, realized better than their peers the perfection of bourgeois merit” as opposed to aristocratic honour.60

Sainte-Palaye’s conscious staking out of a new, bourgeois field of scholarly medievalism, as a critical response to the older aristocratic model, was perhaps most evident in the text that functioned as a kind of preface to his Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie, his slightly earlier “Mémoire concernant la lecture des anciens Romans de Chevalerie”. The beginning of this text presented a brief overview of the medievalist scholarship that had been undertaken until the middle of the eighteenth century. Sainte-Palaye conscientiously produced a presumably exhaustive list of his precursors:

59 “Si l’on juge des mœurs d’un siècle par les écrits qui nous en sont restés, nous serons en droit de juger que nos ancêtres observèrent mal les loix qui leur prescrivirent la décence & l’honnêteté. Les poëtes les plus déréglés n’ont point été au delà de nos anciens poëtes Francois; je n’ose croire cependant que les Cours des Seigneurs, pour qui les contes & les fables avoient tant de charmes, eussent entendu patiemment quelques-uns de nos fabliaux. Peu de gens en soutiendraient aujourd’hui la lecture, sans un extrême désir d’y trouver quelques détails instructifs pour notre histoire & pour nos antiquités … Après cela qu’on ose nous vanter les siècles de l’ignorance & de la barbarie!” Sainte-Palaye, "Notes sur les cinq Mémoires sur l’ancienne Chevalerie", 824, note 16, my emphasis.

60 Chaussinand-Nogaret, La noblesse au XVIIIe siècle, 54.
Du Cange, in his Latin glossary and in his learned dissertations, du Chesne, in his genealogies, Father Ménestrier, in his diverse treatises on chivalry, the blason, nobility, tournaments, etc., Pasquier and Fauchet in their immense researches on all points of our antiquities, Favin and La Colombière, in their Théâtre d’Honneur et de Chevalerie, most of those who have written the history of particular provinces and cities, President de Valbonnais, Dom Vaissesse and Dom Calmet, all generally make use of our old romances (Romans). Auguste Galland, Catel, Caseneuve, Salvaing, and those who have written with most depth on feudal subjects, have not disdained to base themselves on the authority of our romance authors, in the greatest questions of our jurisprudence, and many have left formal testimonials on the benefit that can be gained from reading romances. Such are among others Etienne Pasquier, Président Fauchet, André Favin, Chantereau le Fèvre, and above all Jean le Laboureur.61

As a programmatic text, a kind of status questionis legitimating his own present and future research, this impressive list of authors who had studied the Middle Ages was remarkable, too, for its exclusionary nature. Even while maintaining that it was to romances (Romans) that historians should turn in their attempts to understand the medieval past, Sainte-Palaye effectively erased all reference to the actual authors of these romances, as well as to those contemporary, aristocratic writers who set out to perpetuate the literary traditions they incarnated. Not only did Sainte-Palaye omit all reference to his most obvious precursor, Chapelain, but by establishing an exclusively male, strictly scholarly genealogy, Sainte-Palaye’s text denied the possibility of any influence coming from contemporary galant reimaginings of the medieval. It was, in other words, as if authors like Sévigné, L’Héritier and their male counterparts Perrault and Caylus had never existed, and had not played any role in helping to rehabilitate medieval literary texts and traditions. Sainte-Palaye’s text provided one of the most eloquent illustrations of the way in which the construction of a new, scholarly discourse on the Middle Ages implied an erasure of aristocratic, female-gendered contributions to the appreciation of the period. Aristocrats and the authors who had adopted an aristocratic literary ethos were denied the possession of valid knowledge of the period, marked now by its distance and inaccessibility, rather than by its affective or emotional proximity. The retrograde, aristocratic period of darkness was contrasted, in this foundational act of professional medievalism, to the century of light, the Enlightenment.

Henceforth, academic medievalism would be recognized as belonging to a new intellectual field that inscribed itself more largely in the self-proclaimed modernism of the philosophes. Together with the philosophes’ celebration of the present era and their rejection of the myth of a past golden age, Sainte-Palaye thus sided with a progressivist view that polemically constructed the edifice of academic medievalism on a rejection of what this period meant, from a moral, personal and familial perspective, to a cultivated, aristocratic audience.

Montesquieu: Between Aristocratic Medievalism and Robin Scholarship

But Sainte-Palaye and the academicians at the Académie des Inscriptions did not finally come out the clear winners of the battle between galant and academic conceptions of the medieval. For the tradition represented by Caylus lived on in another one of the great medievalists of the first half of the eighteenth century, Charles de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu. Age-wise, Montesquieu was a contemporary of Caylus and Sainte-Palaye. Yet unlike them, he did not participate in the activities of the Académie des Inscriptions, even though he was on friendly terms with several of the academy’s members, including Nicolas Fréret, who became the academy’s perpetual secretary, and of course Caylus. On the whole, it appears that he preferred instead to keep a certain distance, at his country estate of La Brède, far from Parisian literary quarrels.

Critics have long noted the fact that in the final books of Montesquieu’s Esprit des Lois – essentially books 28, 30 and 31 – the medieval past played a prominent role.62 They have also, for the most part, been somewhat puzzled by the importance he gave to the medieval past, often dismissing these last books as an overgrown addendum that detracted from the overall unity of the text. I argue, however, that this focus on the Middle Ages can be considered in a different light. It represented, as Friedrich Meinecke demonstrated, an original development in eighteenth-century historical thinking, grounding a distinct new, proto-historist philosophy of history that owed much to the medievalist tradition. Yet even while stressing Montesquieu’s pivotal role in the development of an evolutionary concept of history, Meinecke also emphasized the ambivalence of his position as “a twin-headed Janus”,63 as he described him, both forwards- and backwards-looking. In the following, I tease out this ambivalence by focusing not only on what Montesquieu said about the medieval but also on how he said it, i.e. how style related to content. For Montesquieu developed his view of medieval history in the context of the struggle between sword and robe that had been played out in previous decades at the Académie des Inscriptions. Montesquieu’s originality, I argue, is that while drawing inspiration from the older, aristocratic tradition, he created a middle path between aristocratic forms of medievalism on the one hand, and the royalist medievalism of the Académie des Inscriptions on the other.

62 On Montesquieu’s medievalism, see among others Cox, Montesquieu and the History of French Laws; Ehrard, “Montesquieu et les Gaulois”; and Gembicki, “Le moyen âge de Montesquieu.”
63 Meinecke, Historism, 90.
Montesquieu’s most immediate, filial affinity was with the aristocratic tradition. Like other members of the ancient nobility, Montesquieu, living in his self-designated château gothique of La Brède, had a family history and material legacy that reminded him daily of his historical ties to a medieval past, and to medieval ancestors to whom he owed his own present-day status. Montesquieu’s aloofness with respect to the royalist Académie des Inscriptions was revealing of deeper allegiances, and so it was not among the official historiographers that he found his immediate precursors. Rather, among eighteenth-century historians Montesquieu’s greatest forerunner was perhaps Henri, comte de Boulainvilliers, whose anti-monarchical writings had already sparked several vigorous rebuttals by the members of the Académie des Inscriptions. For Boulainvilliers, as a great nobleman who sought to restore the primacy of the old aristocracy under feudalism, the medieval had multiple meanings, moral and political as well as historical. In an elegiac perspective, it was a period when aristocratic prerogatives were still universally recognized, and the state had not yet degenerated into modern absolutism. By celebrating the dark ages, Boulainvilliers was also consciously questioning the prevalent modern ideology of progress and enlightenment. Polemically reversing the light–dark metaphor, and hijacking for his own ends the topos of scholarship piercing medieval darkness, Boulainvilliers expressed his distinctly aristocratic nostalgia when he conjectured in his Essais sur la noblesse de France that “it will come to pass, perhaps … that among our children, one of them will pierce this obscurity in which we live, to give back to our name its ancient brilliance.”

Both of the traditions against which Montesquieu positioned himself, aristocratic medievalism as well as royalist scholarship, were however problematic as reflections of a true philosophy of history. Aristocratic medievalism, because of its hybrid nature, made the historicity of the medieval especially slippery. Both of history and outside of history, the medieval was often primarily, for the noblesse d’ épée, an epistemological vantage point from which to critically rethink monarchical political modernity, whether in a reactionary, Saint-Simonian vein, or in a reformist one such as Boulainvilliers’s or Fénelon’s. It was, in fact, not a historical but an ideological category. Yet the scholarship of the Académie des Inscriptions was equally problematic. Because the Academician combined the moral-aesthetic ideals of classicism with a teleological, progressivist view of history culminating in the modern, absolutist state, they were unable to appreciate medieval culture on its own terms. The contrast between Montesquieu’s Esprit des Lois and Sainte-Palaye’s Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie, read to his colleagues at the Académie des Inscriptions during the same decades in which Montesquieu published his magnum opus, is revealing. In fact, despite Sainte-Palaye’s attempt to understand chivalry as a system with its own internal coherence, chivalry made so little sense to Sainte-Palaye as a genuine system of beliefs that he ended up viewing it as an ideological discourse that served to legitimize social injustice, arbitrariness and lawlessness. Perceptions of medieval lawlessness, especially, were widespread among the philosophes and their direct classicist precursors. They were reflected, among others, in Abbé

64 “Il arrivera, peut-être, … que du nombre de nos enfants, quelqu’un percera cette obscurité où nous vivons, pour rendre à notre nom son ancien éclat.” Boulainvilliers, Essais sur la noblesse de France, 228.
Fleury’s late seventeenth-century contention that in the Middle Ages, “the French fell again into a state approaching that of the Barbarians, who do not yet have laws nor policies.” In other words, despite the outward trappings of history, the academicians’ concept of the medieval was also ultimately, like the aristocrats’, a highly ideological one.

In this debate on the meaning of medieval history, Montesquieu adopted a new, middle ground, shaping a movement of medievalist “aristocratic modernity”, and of a social fusion drawing together sword and robe into a new, proto-liberal intellectual tradition. Indeed, recent revisionist interpretations of aristocratic culture suggest the inadequacy of a model that would situate aristocrats “somewhere within the polarity between tradition and modernity”, for in actual practice, nobles like Montesquieu “combined qualities that we might [at first sight] suppose incompatible.” Montesquieu combined these contradictory elements both by giving a discrete place in his thinking to older, aristocratic definitions of the medieval, and at the same time historicizing the medieval – or the Goths, as he termed it. Acknowledging the aristocratic, Germanicist tradition, in his discussion of Salic and Ripuary laws he took up Tacitus’s idealization of Frankish mores in his Germania, praising the “admirable simplicity” (simplicité admirable) and the “original ruggedness and a spirit that had not yet been weakened by another spirit”. This was a longstanding commonplace that had been used already by Boulainvilliers, and that had even been taken up by some academicians, particularly those whose royalism, like Abbé Vertot’s, was mitigated by their aristocratic background. Thus Vertot had contrasted the virtue and egalitarianism of the Franks – from which present-day noblemen were supposedly descended – to Roman decadence, for example in a paper on “the true origins of the French”, in passages which seemed at times to announce Rousseau’s celebration of Germanic morality in his Discours sur les sciences:

Such were more or less the customs of the Germans and the French, which one may perhaps find savage and ferocious, but which for the greater part still held the seeds of great virtues. It was indeed with such simple and rough manners (mœurs) that our first French people conquered the greater part of Europe, that their successors, more polite, have since squandered through their luxury and leisure.

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65 “Les Français retombèrent dans un état approchant de celui des Barbares, qui n’ont point encore de lois ni de police.” Fleury, Histoire du droit français, 22.
66 Ellis, Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy, 6.
67 Dewald, Aristocratic Experience, 10. See also Chaussignand-Nogaret, La noblesse au XVIIIe siècle. On Montesquieu as a precursor of liberalism, see De Dijn, French Political Thought.
68 “Rudesse originale et un esprit qui n’avait point été affaibli par un autre esprit.” Montesquieu, L’esprit des Lois, II, 908.
Likewise, in an early paper entitled “De l’estime & de la considération que les anciens Germains avoient pour les femmes de leur nation”, Guillaume de Chambort had described Germanic tribesmen, “content with the laws of nature, distinguishing themselves above all by their good morals … simplicity, rectitude, virtues of temperance, and a great ignorance of the vices.”

Interestingly, the ultimate sign of their moral exemplarity was provided by the fact that in medieval society, women equalled and sometimes even surpassed men in their moral qualities. The idealization of the past provided a context for sketching a picture of ideal femininity: Germanic women participated in public affairs, yet without ever failing to neglect their household duties, and supporting their men as they went off to war. This attention to women’s contribution to a primitive version of French civilization drew on the older galant idea, formulated by Jean Chapelain in his Lecture and by Huet in his Lettre sur l’origine des romans, that the medieval esteem for women – here coded as specifically Germanic – was one of the major contributions of French culture to modern European civilization.

Further buttressing his aristocratic, Germanicist argument, Montesquieu legitimated his idealization of the medieval, Germanic past by ingeniously distinguishing between a Gothic style or manièrè on one hand, and Gothic government, properly speaking, on the other. By projecting onto the notion of Gothic style (manièrè Gothique) the negative connotations the academicians habitually associated with the Middle Ages – ignorance, crudeness, harshness, etc. – Montesquieu paid lip-service to the party of the philosophes and their humanist-Enlightenment condemnation of medieval darkness. Yet, by also writing, in his important short essay “De la manière gothique”, that “the Gothic style (manièrè) is not the style of any people in particular”,

he also deprived the term of a precise historical referent. This allowed him, cleverly, to ascribe a properly historical meaning to his other medieval notion, that he held up as a worthy political model for modern-day Frenchmen to reflect upon: that of Gothic government (gouvernement gothique).

Montesquieu’s historization of the past was thus a movement away from a nostalgic form of medievalism, towards an approach that did not negate historical evolution. The otherness of the past, as a distinct historical period separated albeit linked to the present, acquired a new prominence, creating an original sense of historical continuity or distance-in-proximity. A key role in this historization was played by relativism, a concept that he had first rehearsed in his Lettres persanes – incidentally recalling how Orientalism and medievalism, as John Ganim has demonstrated, are two facets of the same tradition. Relativism gave value to hitherto disdained cultural phenomena, viewing them as elements within a larger, coherent structure, and allowing historians to understand societies distant from their own both temporally and geographically.
In one of the final chapters of *L’Esprit des lois*, Montesquieu criticized the tendency of previous commentators to search for analogies between Roman and feudal law, often using creative etymologies to derive the latter from the former. This led him to an explicit statement of principle, which summed up his emerging historist viewpoint: “To carry over into distant centuries all the notions of the century in which you happen to live, is the most fruitful of all sources of error.”

Montesquieu’s scholarship thus again demonstrated that while the sense of the past gaining acceptance in the eighteenth century was a historical notion of general applicability, in practice, as I argued in this book’s opening chapter, it often related specifically to the medieval, as a period that particularly challenged historians by its otherness. One of the great achievements of the *Esprit des lois*, and one that contrasted markedly with Sainte-Palaye’s academic medievalism, was Montesquieu’s demonstration that during the interlude of pure feudalism before the twelfth-century Renaissance, the French were not bereft of laws, but followed a set of customs that were logical, internally consistent, and adapted to their specific social context. The idea of a spirit of the law, in the absence of the letter or written law, thus made it possible to see law and order where, previously, scholars had seen only lawlessness. This was, in short, the new historism, or understanding of the past on its own terms, that made Montesquieu in Meinecke’s eyes a major precursor of nineteenth-century German historism.

**Scholarly Self-Fashionings**

It was equally in his self-fashioning as a modern man of letters that Montesquieu trod a new path between aristocratic and bourgeois concepts of the medieval, for these competing views entailed also different ideals of scholarship. One of the cruxes of early eighteenth-century medievalism, I have suggested, was the status of writing and of abstract, analytic knowledge itself. In their performative, playfully embodied approach to the medieval, aristocratic medievalists often turned their backs on formal scholarship. Literary practices such as those of Caylus, in their most extreme form, problematized textuality and writing themselves by their systematic recourse to oral and theatrical forms of expression. Aristocratic medievalism was thus a paradox in historical writing, because it was a way of understanding the past that rejected historiographic traditions and scholarly apparatus. Extending even to conventional historical markers, it minimized chronological categories, or subordinated them to affective ones. The medieval as family genealogy appealed to subjective memory rather than to objective, scientific history. Montesquieu’s predecessor Boulainvilliers was already well aware of the problematic nature of historical scholarship and publication for aristocratic medievalists such as himself. Indeed, how could a non-analytic, even

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73 “Transporter dans des siècles reculés toutes les idées du siècle où l'on vit, c'est des sources de l'erreur celle qui est la plus féconde.” Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des lois*, II, 1066.

non-linguistic understanding of the past be expressed through the medium of writing? True to his aristocratic origins, he minimized his own scholarly aims by stressing their non-scholarly form, "contained in the simplicity of the epistolary style, that ... rejects that of great formalities, and favours the innocent expression (expression ingénue) of one's thoughts". Of course, notions of simplicity and innocence, with their echoes of untutored understanding, were central both to perceptions of the Middle Ages as a period without learning, and of aristocrats as a sword-wielding, chivalric class whose primary goal was the pursuit of glory and dynastic honour. Significantly, Boulainvilliers's aristocratic style was one of the aspects of his work that Montesquieu remarked on, writing that "his work is written without any art, and ... he speaks in it with that simplicity (ingénuité), that frankness and innocence of the ancient nobility out of which he issued". Concluding that “he had more wit than lights (lumières), more lights than knowledge”, Montesquieu implied that aristocratic medievalism, as a form of historical knowledge or savoir (as opposed to esprit) clearly had its limitations.

As Montesquieu's criticism makes evident then, attitudes of aristocratic insouciance could actually hamper historical understanding. Boulainvilliers himself was aware of this danger, for in the first of his Lettres sur les parlements he lamented that “if ... the nobility had not for so long prided itself on its ignorance, to the point of feeling itself degraded by study, it would most likely have established its rights on principles less odious than those of violence and pride, and ... it would better have guarded its memory.” Aristocratic ignorance, in other words, made possible the excesses of absolutism by depriving legitimate powerholders of their historical memory and the means to revalidate their rights. “Ignorance has been the true cause of the fall of the nobility,” added Boulainvilliers, because ignorance disqualified aristocrats from the functions increasingly assumed in the Middle Ages by professional clerics or jurists. Hence implicit in Boulainvilliers's Lettres was a plea for a redefinition or modernization of aristocratic identity that made at least some room for learning and for analytic, textual forms of knowledge.

Montesquieu's response to the paradox of aristocratic medievalism, i.e. a form of historical understanding that rejected history, and historiography that problematized writing, was double-edged. On the one hand, he fashioned himself a serious, bourgeois scholar by adopting many of the rhetorical topoi of scholarship, including the characteristic humanist and Enlightenment contrast between the light of modern scholarship and the darkness of the matter described. "I have worked to give a clear idea of those

75 “Renfermé dans la simplicité du stile épistolaire, qui ... rejette celle des grandes formalitez, & qui favorise l'expression ingenuë de sa pensée.” Boulainvilliers, Histoire des anciens Parlements de France, 10.
76 “Son ouvrage est écrit sans aucun art, et ... il y parle avec cette simplicité, cette franchise et cette ingénuité de l'ancienne noblesse dont il était sorti ... il avait plus d'esprit que de lumières, plus de lumières que de savoir.” Montesquieu, L'Esprit des Lois, II, 1052.
77 “Si ... la Noblesse ne se fût long-temps piquée d'ignorance, jusqu'au point de se croire dégradée par l'Etude, elle auroit vrai-semblablement établi ses droits sur des principes moins odieux que ceux de la violence & de la fierté; & ... elle aurroit mieux veillé à en maintenir la mémoire”. Boulainvilliers, Histoire des anciens Parlements de France, 3–4.
78 “L'Ignorance a été la véritable cause de la chute de la Noblesse.” Boulainvilliers, Histoire des anciens Parlements de France, 45.
things that, for the authors of those days, were so confused and so obscure, that in
truth taking them out of the chaos in which they lie, is the same as discovering them,”
he declared. And just as the academicians demonstrated their lack of affective con-
nection to their object of study by exhibiting their repugnance for medieval texts,
Montesquieu likewise emphasized the rebarbative character of “all these cold writings,
dry, insipid and hard [that one must] devour, just like mythology tells that Saturn
devoured the stones”. Finally, the subject matter of his magnum opus, L’Esprit des
lois, of course placed him solidly within the tradition of the magistrate historiography
practised primarily at the Académie des Inscriptions.

Yet at the same time Montesquieu also sought to move his work away from this
 scholarly context. Bypassing the academicians, he targeted a new, mondain reading
audience, whom he considered more capable of judging his argument than profes-
sional scholars. His desire to distance himself from dry, useless erudition explains why
he so virulently attacked the scholarship of one of the few contemporary historians he
did name, the royalist author abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos. The French academician Abbé
Dubos had set out, in his Histoire critique de l’établissement de la monarchie française
dans les Gaules, to refute Boulainvilliers's Germanist thesis, which had the conquering
Franks as the ancestors of the present-day French aristocracy, and to defend instead the
Romanist thesis legitimizing present-day royal absolutism. Concluding a long section
in which he had criticized several of Dubos’s claims, Montesquieu asked his reader “to
forgive me the mortal tedium that so many citations must give him. I would be briefer
if I did not find always before me Dubos’s book Etablissement de la monarchie française
dans les Gaules.” Noting Dubos’s extensive knowledge, he suggested that “an erudi-
tion without end” and “so many researches” had actually become an obstacle to true
historical understanding. And in general, while Montesquieu himself harnessed a
vast erudition, primarily of original Latin and medieval sources, he referenced con-
temporary, eighteenth-century authors surprisingly sparsely. His refusal to engage
too deeply in contemporary debate – with the notable exception of Dubos’s Romanist-
monarchist thesis – was therefore at one with his choice to practice his learning not as
a scholar fettered by royalist institutions, but in a spirit of noble independence.

All these elements associated with Montesquieu’s resistance to institutionalized,
robe erudition manifested themselves, finally, in his own writing style. As Jonathan

79 “J’ai travaillé à donner une idée claire de ces choses qui, dans les auteurs de ce temps-là, sont si
confuses et si obscures, qu’en vérité les tirer du chaos où elles sont, c’est les découvrir.” Montesquieu, L’esprit
des lois, II, 977. See also Montesquieu, L’esprit des lois, II, 917, 1042.

80 “Tous ces écrits froids, secs, insipides et durs [qu’il faut] dévorer, comme la fable dit que Saturne
dévorait les pierres.” Montesquieu, L’esprit des lois, II, 1056.

81 “Je supplie le lecteur de me pardonner l’ennui mortel que tant de citations doivent lui donner: je
serais plus court si je ne trouvais toujours devant moi le livre de l’Etablissement de la monarchie française

82 “Comme une érudition sans fin est placée, non pas dans le système, mais à côté du système, l’esprit
est distrait par des accessoires, et ne s’occupe plus du principal. D’ailleurs, tant de recherches ne permettent
pas d’imaginer qu’on n’ait rien trouvé; la longueur du voyage fait croire qu’on est enfin arrivé.” Montesquieu,
L’Esprit des lois, II, 1100.

83 Cox, Montesquieu and the History of French Laws, 46.
Dewald has pointed out, it was a critical commonplace that “writing gave immediate visibility to the distinction between robe and sword, for literary style was thought to mirror differences between the pedantic world of the university-trained lawyers and the livelier, quicker world of the court.”

Montesquieu’s style has been aptly described as the style of the new préciosité, or a late form of gallant style (style galant). His aesthetics of variety and contrast were characteristic of the playful stance of aristocratic medievalism, which itself lay claim to a medieval ancestry. In his *Essai sur le goût*, Montesquieu explained this ideal that rejected abstract theory in favour of intuitive judgement or taste (goût): “natural taste (goût) is not a knowledge of theory; it is a prompt and exquisite application of the rules one does not even know.”

Montesquieu insisted, was a faculty that worked through sentiment, yet nonetheless produced true intellectual understanding – much as aristocratic medievalism, even in rejecting the methods of conventional scholarship, could produce new insights into the medieval. Most significantly, in privileging the supposedly natural style of the aristocratic, galant tradition, Montesquieu also emphasized one of the defining elements in the emerging medievalist aesthetic, i.e. the concept of naïveté. “One of the things that pleases us most”, he wrote, “is the naïve, but it is also the hardest style to get hold of; the reason is that it is exactly between the noble and the base.”

In short, Montesquieu’s adoption of a pose of lively, at times galant engagement with his material rather than the pedantic, heavily footnoted approach of traditional scholarship was a defining element in his own, revised version of aristocratic medievalism.

**Towards a new Philosophy of History**

This tradition of aristocratic medievalism, then, helps explain the philosophical significance of sections such as Montesquieu’s very lengthy explanation, in Book 28 of *L’Esprit des Lois*, of various feudal customs that had seemed arbitrary to his contemporaries. Montesquieu sought, in particular, to explain the practice of judiciary combat, in which the parties in a dispute could be replaced by someone else in single combat, and the outcome would decide the dispute in favour of one of the contending parties. Explaining how this system could work despite the apparent injustice of individuals seeking or paying for a powerful champion, Montesquieu argued that one’s ability to engage such a champion would depend on the perceived justice of one’s cause and one’s moral standing in society, thus ensuring that despite its apparent arbitrariness, justice would be served in the end. The essential point Montesquieu was making here was that although the medievals, at this particular moment in their history, indeed lacked written law, they nonetheless had their own form of reaching social justice. Against the rationalist idealism of the robe tradition of medievalism, that saw law

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86 “Le goût naturel n’est pas une connaissance de théorie; c’est une application prompte et exquise des règles même que l’on ne connoit pas.” Montesquieu, *Essai sur le goût*, 65.
88 “Une des choses qui nous plaît le plus, c’est le naïf, mais c’est aussi le style le plus difficile à attraper; la raison en est qu’il est précisément entre le noble et le bas.” Montesquieu, *Essai sur le goût*, 95.
only where there were written legal documents to prove it, Montesquieu saw customs and practices instead as a form of embedded theory. Montesquieu’s sensitivity to the aristocratic problematic of writing made him open to alternative, non-analytical and contextualized forms of knowing, in short: to performance as a coherent form of understanding. Just as the medievals who followed the customs related to judiciary combat and the point d’honneur revealed, through their praxis, a profound understanding of the workings of their society, so Montesquieu suggested that there were other forms of historical understanding than the abstract methods of the royal academicians. Fred Dallmayr has commented on Montesquieu’s middle position, born both of his aristocratic identity and of a resistance to the academic tradition of “abstract rationalism operating deductively from first principles:”

This middle position made Montesquieu an odd figure located outside the usual battle lines of his period and certainly outside the Cartesian bifurcations of mind and matter, reason and sense experience. Several modern philosophers – including Hobbes and Spinoza – had placed history outside the pale of philosophy properly speaking, the latter seen as deductive argumentation; in response or in retaliation, empirical historians sometimes expelled philosophy from real-life history, the latter seen as a jumble of contingent data. Neither the Persian Letters nor The Spirit of Laws fits into these schemes. If Hannah Arendt was correct in saying that genuine thinking means reflecting on “what we are doing” or what is going on in concrete praxis, then Montesquieu was in Arendt’s sense an eminently practical thinker or philosopher.89

Moving beyond aristocratic performativity, Montesquieu’s view of the medieval expressed also a distinct philosophy of history. Céline Spector has proposed that this philosophy was an impure one, to the extent that it “theorized the emergence of social norms and institutions within a history of the passions and beliefs, ways of thinking and acting of a people.”90 It did not proceed analytically, in the strict sense followed by the members of the Académie des Inscriptions, but nonetheless did reach a new kind of historical understanding. By uniting the bourgeois, rational-idealist approach to medieval history on one side, and aristocratic, performative traditions on the other, Montesquieu created a new, middle path between two competing models of early Enlightenment medievalism. The aristocrat Montesquieu himself represented a personal link in a long chain connecting the medieval past to the Enlightenment present. He took from aristocratic medievalism an essential insight, namely that the past need not be understood from the viewpoint of a detached observer standing on the moon, but could implicate the modern writing subject, too. He drew both on an older tradition of aristocratic medievalism, proposing a praxis that united belles-lettres concerns and approaches, ethical judgement and historical understanding, but did not in doing so renounce the insights and insistence on erudition that were taking centre stage, during the early Enlightenment, in the work of the Académie des Inscriptions.

89 Dallmayr, "Montesquieu’s Persian Letters", 239.
90 Spector, “Il faut éclairer l’histoire par les lois et les lois par l’histoire”, 44.
Constructing the Medieval
The examples of Sainte-Palaye, Caylus and Montesquieu illustrate a contrast, if not an outright ideological opposition in the eighteenth century between two kinds of scholarship: a modern, bourgeois one that prized Cartesian disembodiment, analytic separation of fields, and social usefulness, and an older, aristocratic one that emphasized a praxis uniting appreciation and understanding. With the triumph of the new scholarly method at the Académie des Inscriptions, the newly constructed Middle Ages became emblematic for all objects of study, for they were marked by otherness, by distance and inaccessibility, rather than by affective proximity. Buttressed by the modernist agenda of the philosophes, scholarship thus constructed the medieval as the site not of aesthetic pleasure or personal engagement, but of painstaking, socially useful – and ideally, state-funded – intellectual labour. Academic scholarship systematically played down the contributions of aristocratic, performative traditions or re-enactments of the medieval. Yet in the actual practice and development of medieval studies, the two competing traditions came together in the work of Montesquieu. It was Montesquieu who proposed a new, middle path of aristocratic modernity, whose existence has however too often been obscured in intellectual history – no doubt because of his own ambivalent relation to the outward trappings of erudition. Both the supposed dilettantism of the aristocrats and the academicism of the royal scholars, as he well realized, made essential contributions to the era’s understanding of the Middle Ages. Their rich, productive interaction culminated, through him and his Esprit des Lois, in one of the major works both of the Enlightenment and of medievalism.
Conclusion: Medievalism as an Alternative Modernity

In a provocative book about “the hidden agenda of modernity”, Stephen Toulmin has argued that modernity entailed a major philosophical shift. This was a shift from the oral to the written, from the particular to the universal, from the local to the general, from the timely to the timeless, and from humanism to rationalism.1 The new modernity, whose rise Toulmin dates back to the major works of Descartes in the 1630s and 1640s, was marked by the “pursuit of mathematical exactitude and logical rigor, intellectual certainty and moral purity”.2 While earlier thinkers had questioned the value of abstract theory for concrete human experience, the new philosophy instead sought to describe the world by recourse to timeless, abstract universals. And while older traditions had taken into account the historical embeddedness and circumstantial character of particular practices, valuing the transitory for itself, the new worldview privileged structures that were perceived as unchanging, overriding historical context or situatedness. Modernity, in short, entailed the replacement of an organicist paradigm by a newer, Cartesian paradigm of rationalist idealism, analytic separation between fields, and between the observing subject and the world that was the object of his observation.

Viewed against Toulmin’s account of the making of modernity, the literary medievalism of the early Enlightenment may at first sight appear to be an expression of the older paradigm. Indeed, medievalism too privileged orality, the particular and local, the historically situated, and praxis over abstract theory. Medievalism, according to this reading, offered another path to understanding, which rejected the analytical detachment first proposed by Descartes and imitated throughout the ensuing age of Reason. Medievalism instead foregrounded organicist or contextualized understanding, performativity, affective engagement and notions of continuity, even of simultaneity between past and present. This view of medievalism as an alternative to

1 Toulmin, Cosmopolis, 30–42.
2 Toulmin, Cosmopolis, x.
Cartesian modernity was propagated in its own day. Throughout the eighteenth century, prominent authors stressed the supposed opposition between medieval obscurity and modern-day progress. To the most progressive philosophes, the medieval “Dark Ages” provided a useful foil to the modern “Age of Light”. The medieval past played an important role, most notably, in the defining Enlightenment debate about whether history progressed in a linear, cumulative fashion towards a morally superior state of civilization, or rather, degenerated or moved cyclically – as that ultimate critic of modernity, Rousseau, polemically maintained. In the foundational rhetorics of modernity, the medieval stood in for the superseded, the irrational, for the bodily and the emotive, and for the female, while the modern stood for all those values the Enlightenment philosophes held dear: historical progress, the rational, the universal, the male.

But in fact, the picture is more complicated than either Toulmin’s account or the philosophes’ own discourse suggest. Toulmin’s account, to begin with, exaggerates the hegemony of a rationalist, disembodied epistemology in the making of modernity. While rationalist idealism did play a foundational role in the new modernity, much of Enlightenment thought, from Descartes himself – the author also of the Passions de l’âme – onwards, sought to revalorize the passions that were central also to the medievalist paradigm. Similarly, the sensationist, Lockean epistemology adopted by the Encyclopédie contested the disembodiment essential to the Cartesian view. Despite the rhetorics adopted by some Enlightenment authors, many of them continued to work within a modernized version of the earlier, organicist paradigm. There is perhaps no better example of this basic ambivalence than the greatest of all “insiders on the outside”, or “autocritics” of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau has indeed played a key role in this book, as a figure who both embodied the Enlightenment’s most stridently anti-medieval rhetorics, and yet saw in the “first age of mankind”, equated with the medieval, a powerful antidote for the ills of modern, corrupted society.

The medievalism of the early Enlightenment could more productively be described, then, not as an alternative to modernity, but as an alternative form of modernity. For this medievalism was unthinkable without modernity itself, as its foremost representatives well realized, even as they struggled with the intellectual impact of Cartesian rationalism. One of the pivotal issues in the writings of another author central to this book, Madame de Sévigné, was the value to be accorded to disembodied reasoning, as she vigourously debated with her daughter the meaning of the Cartesian revolution. According to Longino Farrell, the Aristotelian Sévigné expressed profound skepticism regarding Descartes’s privileging of abstract reason. This was in conformity with her “class bias eschewing the notion of work, application, patience, purpose … all that smacked of pedantry and compromised the wit and spontaneity in which she and her circle of friends prided themselves.” She was not alone in this, for – as Roy Porter has argued, and as the present book has sought to demonstrate – the worldview of the

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3 Hulliung, The Autocritique of Enlightenment.
4 Longino Farrell, Performing Motherhood, 259.
aristocratic elites of the Enlightenment was essentially a psychosomatic rather than a Cartesian one. This was an important point of intersection between medievalism and aristocratic culture. For medieval chivalry, as the ultimate expression of nobility (noblesse), expressed itself not through analytic reflection, but through lived experience, embodied codes and ways of being-in-the-world, to use Ricoeur’s expression. The reference to the medieval thus had not only a historical dimension, but also an aesthetic and a moral one.

As revealing as Sévigné’s resistance to Descartes was the manner in which she expressed it. Drawing on a rich aristocratic tradition of embodied forms of understanding, she opposed Descartes’s ideas by contrasting her own supposedly natural, negligent style, and her own supposedly unreflective way of being-in-the-world – epitomized by her living her life as a medievalist novel – to his abstract method. To Descartes’s reliance on the “book of the world”, she opposed the truth-value of fiction, a truth-value embraced by all those aristocratic amateurs who, by performing the medieval through various literary salon games, made the past come alive again, in a series of resurrectional rituals – opera, fairy tales, romances – that continue to speak to readers today. As Longino Farrell notes, “the Descartes motif served as a vehicle for the articulation of [Sévigné’s] repeated refusal of method, coherent enough to constitute itself a system of valuation. She consistently, but always obliquely, opposed her sociability, her affectivity, her imagination and spontaneity to his reclusiveness, his intellectualness, his reason, and his cautious analyses.”

But as these exchanges also make clear, it was precisely through the confrontation with Cartesian thought, as the herald of modernity, that authors gained a clearer view of their own epistemological positioning in the world. Sévigné’s medievalism emerged most self-consciously in the 1680s and 1690s, i.e. as the legacy of Cartesianism was beginning to coalesce, and as modernity itself was becoming an inescapable reality for aristocratic amateurs such as herself. What took place during the the early Enlightenment rediscovery of the medieval, then, was not so much the forcible replacement of one paradigm by another – as the academicians working at the Académie des Inscriptions would have their readers believe – but rather, a unique confrontation between two worldviews. Medievalism did not simply oppose two epistemologies – an aristocratic, embodied one and a bourgeois, analytic one – but saw them engage in active and often spirited dialogue. In a sense, these decades saw the medieval past, represented by the aristocrats’ living, performative memory of their own glorious family histories, meet the modern present, incarnated by the figure of the progressive, philosophe-friendly scholar. Out of this encounter arose a new self-consciousness, as aristocrats became aware of their own engagement with the past – at the very same moment as, with the creation of the modern absolutist state, that past started to break irretrievably away from them.

Early Enlightenment medievalism was, therefore, a fundamentally modern phenomenon. It took the memory of the medieval, incarnated by longstanding aristocratic

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5 Porter, ““Barely Touching””, 47–9.
6 Longino Farrell, Performing Motherhood, 254.
practices and beliefs, and reintegrated it in a new historical setting. Through its decisive encounter with rationalist, Cartesian modernity, medievalism made possible a new intellectual understanding of the past where, previously, there had been only the richness of centuries-old aristocratic praxis. Modernity itself was not a monolithic condition, but a model that allowed for multiple, even contradictory interpretations of the world – justifying the increasing reference, in recent scholarship, to “multiple” or “alternative modernities”. As Charles Taylor has written, European modernity was characterized by the disintegration of a Christian, hegemonic worldview and its replacement by a model in which different ways of understanding the world, including a religious one, could coexist.\(^7\) Seen in this perspective, the coexistence of aristocratic, literary medievalism and bourgeois, rationalistic modernism was not so much a contradiction as an expression of modernity’s own defining pluralism. Such pluralism was evident, among others, in early Enlightenment reconfigurations of medieval love, that united apparently contradictory pagan *eros* and Christian *agape* in a single, heterogenous rather than synthetic model.

Medievalism, in conclusion, represented not a historical throwback or a nostalgic, reactionary longing for an earlier time, but a distinct variety of modernity. This was an alternative modernity that, rather than emphasizing its radical break with the past, attempted to integrate elements of the past into a new, organicist view of history and society. Finding meaning in the primitive language of mankind, equated with music, it privileged pure expressivity above language and textuality. Starting with Chapelain, this modernity rehabilitated the *vieux romans* that classicist doctrine had rejected as morally corrupting, helping to shape novel notions of private reading as an activity undertaken for personal pleasure, and reflecting a new, bourgeois interiority. By contesting aspects of the scholarship of the Académie des Inscriptions, it proposed an ideal of emotional engagement with a past that refused to die, or a true “touch across time”. And in positing that the bonds of affection between mothers and children, between husband and wife could become the locus of a new communion and / or transcendence, i.e. by sacralizing human erotics, it reintroduced religious meaning into an increasingly secularizing world. In short, the literary medievalism of the decades from the 1680s to the 1750s lay the bases for much of the Enlightenment’s modernity. Understanding this medievalism is crucial not only to understanding the parameters within which we have ourselves come to conceive of the medieval, but also to understanding the epistemological debates on which modernity itself was built.

\(^7\) *Taylor, A Secular Age*, 20–1.
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Index

Abbadie, Jacques 163
Abélard, Pierre 3, 18, 64, 96, 101–102, 146–181
Académie des Jeux Floraux 134
Académie française see French Academy
Académie royale des inscriptions et belles-lettres 12, 24, 138, 185–211, 224
Académie royale des sciences 33
Adhémar family 98–100, 102–103
Adhémar, Guillaume 103–105
Aleibiades 35
Alexander the Great 35, 47
Alfonso X of Castile 33
Alluis, Jacques 3, 101
Amadis 71, 76, 85, 92
Amadis de Gaula 86, 88
Literary character 3, 60
Opera by Quinault and Lully 4, 60, 88–90, 112, 118, 119, 141
Translation by Herberay des Essarts 84, 87, 93, 100–101
Translation by Marguerite de Lubert 58
Amyot, Jacques 77
Andilly, Robert Arnauld d’ 160
André de France 74
Andries, Lise 10, 82
Ankersmit, Frank 20, 110–111, 120
Apostolidès, Jean-Marie 90
Arendt, Hannah 218
Aretino, Pietro 34
Aristotle 35, 53, 77, 111, 118, 222
Armenteros, Carolina 178
Arnauld, Antoine 163
Arnoulet, Olivier 81
Arthurian romance 72, 74, 75, 82
Artus de Bretagne 80
Assmann, Jan 7
Astrée 61–62, 71, 87n.56, 93
Atucha, Íñigo 146
Aucassin et Nicolette 204, 206
Augustine, Saint 33, 43, 64, 122, 149, 162, 163, 178
Augustus 31, 34–35, 47, 148
Auneuil, Louise de Bossigny, comtesse d’ 116
Aulnoy, Marie-Catherine d’ 4, 10, 116, 130–132
Austin, J.L. 108, 112
Baculard d’Arnaud, François Thomas Marie de 57
Bähler, Ursula 192
Bakhtin, Mikhail 109, 123
Baladier, Charles 146, 149–150, 162, 164, 173
Ballard family (printers) 119
Barthes, Roland 112
Bayle, Pierre 11, 22, 78, 151, 156, 206n.54
Beauchamps, Pierre François Godard de 151
Bédier, Joseph 185
Beowulf 18
Bernard of Clairvaux 149, 162, 180
Berns, Ute 108
Bertain 74
Bible 43, 44, 84, 105, 149, 167, 170, 176
Bibliothèque bleue 10, 82, 84, 87, 97, 119
Bibliothèque du roi 138, 141, 200
Bibliothèque universelle des romans 200
Bignon, abbé Jean-Paul 141
Blacatz 141, 143
Blom, Helwi 78
Blondel de Nesle 141, 143
Bodel, Jean 76
Bodin, Jean 22, 28, 189
Boileau-Despréaux, Nicolas 24, 32, 52, 61, 77, 80–83, 85, 94, 194
Boisrobert, François Le Métiel, abbé de 50
Boivin de Villeneuve, Jean 138–140, 141
Bon vieux temps 57, 60–62, 100, 206–207
Borges, Jorge Luis 18
Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne 3
Boucher, François 79
Bouhours, Dominique 93, 94, 96
Boulainvilliers, Henri comte de 5, 58, 67, 191–193, 211, 212, 214–216
Brodeau, Victor 57, 60–61
Brueys, David Augustin 10
Burney, Charles 143
Bussy-Rabutin, Amé-Nicolas, comte de 101
Bussy-Rabutin, Roger, comte de 83, 85, 98, 101–102, 151, 156, 157, 176

Caesar, Julius 47
Calmet, dom Augustin 209
Calvy, Mr de 103
Campra, André 114
Carlyle, Thomas 18
Carolingians 37
Cartesianism 24, 47, 111, 115, 126, 187, 195, 206, 218, 219, 221–224
See also Descartes, René
Caseneuve, Pierre de 209
Cassandre 71, 78
Cassiodorus 31
Castellane, Boniface de 103, 105
Castiglione, Baldassare 88
Catel, Guillaume 209
Catherine the Great 200
Caylus, Anne-Claude-Philippe de Tubières, comte de 12, 78, 117, 185, 187–190, 195–210, 214, 219
Cervantes, Miguel de 84, 130
See also Don Quixote
Challandes, Laure 175
Chambert, Guillaume de 213
Chanson de Roland 18, 123, 192, 193
Chansons de geste 81, 84, 124
Chantreau le Fèvre, Louis 209
Chaplain, Jean 62, 73, 75, 80–82, 104, 110, 205
La Pucelle 32, 39, 51–52, 194
Sentiments sur Le Cid 53
Charlemagne 34, 76, 90, 119
Chateaubriand, François-René de 18
Chatelain, Jean-Marc 113, 131
Château de Changé, Jean-Pierre Imbert 79
Chaussinand-Nogaret, Guy 208
Cheron de Rochesources 142–143, 153

Cicero 31, 35, 157, 173
Colardeau, Charles-Pierre 152, 168
Collège de France 192
Communes, Philippe de 35, 63, 84
Compagnon, Antoine 101, 6, 40
Copeland, Rita 72
Constantinople, capture of 35, 47
Copernicus, Nicolaus 26
Corbinelli, Jean 127
Corneille, Pierre 6, 84
Coulanges, Philippe-Emmanuel de 91–92, 100–101
Coulet, Henri 176
Cours d’amour 102, 104–105, 134, 145
Cyrus the Great 66
D’Alembert, Jean Le Rond 55, 140, 196
Dallmayr, Fred 218
Danchet, Antoine 114
Dante Alighieri 77, 95, 150, 176
Damian-Grint, Peter 2
Darnton, Robert 10
DeJean, Joan 24–26
Derrida, Jacques 122, 177
Descartes, René 35, 45, 49, 221–223
Discours de la méthode 46
Meditations 46
Passions de l’âme 222
see also Cartesianism
Deschamps, Eustache 57, 188, 207
Deshoulières, Antoinette 60, 118, 125–127, 138, 140–141, 145, 204, 206
Desmarest, Henri 115
Destouches, André Cardinal 118
Dewald, Jonathan 216–217
Dictionnaire de l’Académie française 36, 39, 71
Diderot, Denis 45, 55, 140, 153, 186, 190, 196, 197
See also Encyclopédie and philosophes
Die, Alix, comtesse de 103–105, 138
Dinshaw, Carolyn 108, 110–111
Don Quixote 78, 84, 130
Dorat, Claude-Joseph 152, 168
Dubos, Jean-Baptiste 121, 216
Du Cange, Charles de Fresne, sieur 209
Duchêne, Roger 101, 162–163
Duchesne, André 209
Dufresnoy, Nicolas Lenglet see Lenglet-Dufresnoy, Nicolas
Dunois, Jean d’Orléans, comte de 51
Dupin, Louis-Elie 38
D’Urfé, Honoré 6, 44, 62, 93
See also Astrée

Eco, Umberto 50
Edelman, Nathan 2, 120
Eleanor of Aquitaine 132
Encyclopédie 28, 55, 115, 140, 153, 196
Encyclopedists 45, 61, 115, 197
Euripides 18

Fabliau genre 198–200, 207
Falconet, Camille 185, 204n.49
Fauchet, Claude 6, 22, 33, 51, 53, 67, 73, 74, 80, 133, 135, 141, 189, 205, 209
Favin, André 209
Feilla, Cecilia 155
Female authorship 127, 137–140
See also Women readers
Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe 34–35, 61, 64, 150, 163, 211
Feros Ruys, Juanita 161–162
Feutry, Aimé Ambroise Joseph 153
Fleury, Abbé Claude 37n.68, 61, 211–212
Florence et Blancheflor 199
Foncemagne, Etienne de 192, 204n.49
Fontenelle, Bernard le Bovier de 10, 11, 31, 34, 126, 127, 170
Formey, Samuel 79
Francis I 88
Franco-Prussian War 1, 192
Franks 57, 67, 73, 191, 193, 212
Frédégaire 193
Frederick I 103, 136
Frederick II, the Great 57
French Academy 23, 25, 189
French Revolution 20
Fréret, Nicolas 191, 210
Froissart, Jean 195
Frye, Northrop 177
Fuchs, Barbara 72
Fumaroli, Marc 24, 26, 57
Furetière, Antoine 36, 38
Gabrielle de Vergy 152
Galaup, Pierre de 104
Galland, Antoine 54
Galland, Auguste 209
Ganim, John 75, 105, 195, 213
Gaudefroy, Jean-François de 104
Gaul 91
Gauls 60, 62–63, 67, 73, 191
Garin le Lorrain 74
Gautier de Coincy 203
Gazon Dourxigné, Sébastien-Marcellin-Mathurin 152
Génetiott, Alain 124
Geneva 65
Gervaise, François Armand 156, 161, 174
Gibbon, Edward 45–46
Gilson, Etienne 149
Ginzburg, Carlo 54
Golden Age 19, 26–27, 44, 48, 57–58, 61, 64, 66, 68, 72, 199
Gossman, Lionel 2, 45, 186, 189, 203
Gothic narrative 118, 166
Goths 31, 37, 58, 63, 213
Goujet, abbé Claude-Pierre 63
Grand Dauphin see Monseigneur, Louis de France
Grenaille, Jean-François de 50, 101, 154–155, 173
Grétry, André-Ernest-Modeste 143
Grignan family 99, 103, 134
See also Adhémar family
Grignan, Françoise de 83, 103
Grignan, Pauline de 104
Grimm, Melchior 115, 190
Grisélidis 82
Gueulllette, Thomas-Simon 10
Gurkin Altman, Janet 83
Guyon, Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte 150, 163, 171
Guyot de Provins 33
Guys, Jean-Baptiste 151
Habermas, Jürgen 23n.22
Haines, John 142
Halbwachs, Maurice 7, 113
Harth, Erica 22
Hartley, L.P. 18
Index

Hazard, Paul 3–4, 9, 11
Héloïse 3, 12, 18, 64, 96, 101–102, 146–181
Helvétius, Claude-Adrien Schweitzer 54
Herberay des Essarts, Nicolas 84, 86, 87–92, 118
Herder, Johann Gottfried 186
Herman, Jan 104
Historia Caroli Magni 84
Historism 17, 19, 22, 199, 214
Hobbes, Thomas 58, 218
Hofer, Johannes 27
Holsinger, Bruce 122, 177
Homer 24, 27, 29, 51, 84, 94, 108, 189
See also Iliad and Odyssey
Houdetot, Sophie d’ 168
Huet, Pierre-Daniel 55, 73, 135, 205, 213
Huizinga, Johan 57, 109, 123
Hugo, Victor 6, 18
Hult, David 207
Hunibalde (monk) 194
Huns 58
Huon de Bordeaux 82
Huppert, George 21–22
Huygens, Christiaan 33
Iliad 39
Imbach, Ruedi 146
Israel, Jonathan 3–4, 9, 46

James II 86
Jaucourt, Louis de 140
Jauss, Hans Robert 29, 50
Javitch, Daniel 93
Jean de Meung 57, 151
See also Roman de la Rose
Jean de Paris 83, 84
Jeanroy, Alfred 141
Jerome, Saint 196
Jesus Christ 148, 172–173, 176, 180
Joan of Arc 152
Joinville, Jean de 117, 126
Josephus, Flavius 84

Kamuf, Peggy 157
Kelley, Donald 21–22
Kendrick, Laura 134
Kibédi Varga, Aron 53
Kintzler, Catherine 11, 118, 120
Koopmans, Jelle 123

Laborde, Jean-Benjamin de 143
La Bruyère, Jean de 115
La Calprenède, Gauthier de Costes, sieur de 84
Lacan, Jacques 146
La Colombière, Marc Vulson de 209
La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, Jean-Baptiste see Sainte-Palaye, Jean-Baptiste la Curne de
La Fontaine, Jean de 60, 126, 128, 202
La Force, Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de 117, 140, 145
La Harpe, Jean de 152
La Motte, Antoine Houdar de 118
Lamourette, Adrien 45n.6
Lancelot, Antoino 185
Lancelot (Lancelot propre) 49, 53–55, 71, 74, 75, 77, 80, 82, 107–108, 126
Literary character 50, 56
La Rochefoucauld, Marie de Roye de Roucy de 156
Laura 34, 152, 170, 171, 176–178
See also Petrarch
Lauzun, Antoine-Nompar de Caumont, duc de 86
Lebeuf, abbé Jean 2041.49
Le Chapelain, André 102
Leerssen, Joep 18
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 163
Le Laboureur, Jean 209
Le Maistre, Antoine (pseud. Lamy) 32
Lenglet-Dufresnoy, Nicolas 11, 37n.69, 62–63, 66, 76
Lepage, Yvan 141
Lesage, Alain-René 78
Levesque de la Ravallière, Antoine-Alexandre 11
L’Héritier de Villandion, Marie Jeanne 4, 104, 117, 125, 128–138, 141–143, 152, 153, 200, 209
Locke, John 222
Lombards 63
Longino Farrell, Michèle 222, 223
Lope de Vega 94
Losme de Montchesnay, Jacques de 60
Löwith, Karl 26
Louis VII, the Young 91
Louis IX, Saint 63, 90
Louis XI 35
Louis XIII 22
Index

Louis XIV  31, 33, 47, 52, 62, 83, 103, 109, 119, 190
Artistic and scholarly patronage  4, 12, 88–89, 134, 185
As absolutist ruler  97, 110
As chivalric hero  81, 90–91, 112
Military campaigns  22–24, 85
Louvart, François  88
Lubert, Marguerite de  58, 140
Lully, Jean-Baptiste  4, 60, 88–89, 94–95, 97, 114, 115, 118–120

Mabillon, Jean  22, 34, 71, 98, 191
Mably, Gabriel Bonnot, abbé de  115
Machaut, Guillaume de  188
Macpherson, James  186
See also Ossian
Mailhol, Gabriel  152
Maillart, Adrien  204n.49
Maine, Louise-Bénédicte du Charolais, duchesse du  104
Malebranche, Nicolas  163
Mandajors, Jean-Pierre de  191, 204n.49
Marcel, Guillaume  37n.70
Marie de France  116, 138
Marin, Angus  37n.70
Marin, Giambattista  48
Mary, Virgin  149, 150, 162, 176, 177
Marolles, Michel de  151
Mars, Martial d'  34, 60–61, 206
Martial d'Auvergne  10, 102
Martin, Angus  10–11
Massieu, Guillaume  136
Masson de Pezay, Alexandre Frédéric Jacques  168
Matthew of Vendôme  170
Meinecke, Friedrich  19–22, 26, 30, 210
Méa, Charles  50
Meliadus  80
Mélusine  84, 129
Ménage, Gilles  49–51, 58
Ménestrier, Claude-François  209
Mercier, Louis-Sébastien  152
Mercure galant  11, 103–104, 204
Merlin  74, 75, 80, 129
Merovingians  192
Mervesin, Joseph  136
Michelet, Jules  111–112
Moers, Ellen  118
Monseigneur, Louis de France  119
Montaigne, Michel de  34
Montalvo, Garci Rodriguez de  88
See also Amadis
Montausier, Charles de Sainte-Maure, duc de  60
Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de  5, 12, 21, 58, 73, 104, 187, 190
“De la manière gothique”  213
Essai sur le goût  217
L'Esprit des lois  19, 30, 55, 71, 107, 210–219
Lettres persanes  213, 218
Monteverdi, Claudio Giovanni Antonio  114
Moss, Ann  95
Mouvance  39, 123, 131, 144, 202
See also Zumthor, Paul
Music  120–123, 140–143, 154, 167, 177, 179
Nagel, Alexander  35, 40, 49
Napoleon Bonaparte  1
Naudé, Gabriel  79
Naudéx, Laura  115
Néraudau, Jean-Pierre  153
New Medievalism  5
Nicolai, Jean-Aymar  98–99
Nicole, Pierre  162, 163, 179
Noblesse dépée  97, 189–190, 193, 199, 211
Noblesse de robe  98, 189–190
Nodier, Charles  186
Norman, Buford  11
Normans  58
Nostredame, Michel de (Nostradamus)  74
Nygren, Anders  149
Odyssey  39
See also Homer
Ogier le Danois  81
Opera genre  114–120, 140
Origen  163
Orléans, Charles d’  193
Ossian  187, 199
See also Macpherson, James
Oudot, Jean  82
Oudot, Nicolas  82
Ovid  12
Art of Love  157
Heroides  146, 151–155, 157–159, 166–168, 170–172, 175, 178
Metamorphoses 157
Triistia 65–66

Palaprat, Jean 10
Parfaict, Claude and François 136
Paris 34n.62
Paris, Gaston 1, 185, 186, 188, 192, 207
Paris, Paulin 186
Partenopex de Blois et Blanchardin 199
Pascal, Blaise 162, 163
Pasquier, Etienne 6, 23, 36, 51, 53, 63, 67, 80, 93, 189, 205, 209
Patelin 10, 84
Pavillon, Etienne 60
Pellegrin, Simon Joseph 115
Percy, Thomas 143
Pericles 47
Perrault, Charles 4, 24, 52, 110, 191
Contes de ma mère l’Oye 33–34, 82, 116, 128–129, 131, 137, 152, 209
Critique de l’opéra 115
Le Siècle de Louis le Grand 23, 28, 50, 90, 94
Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes 24–34, 36–40, 43, 45, 67, 107
Perceforest 71, 74, 75, 80, 82, 116
Perrot d’Ablancourt, Nicolas 96
Perrissians 66
Petersen, Nils Holger 40
Petrarca, Francesco see Petrarch
Petrarch 23, 43, 150, 151, 152, 169–171, 176–178
Philip II Augustus 91, 99
Philip IV, the Fair 63
Philosophes 8, 9, 13, 45, 54, 58, 62, 64, 68, 186–190, 196, 199, 201, 203, 208, 210–211, 213, 219, 222–223
Pierre de Provence 81, 83, 85
Pithou, Pierre 36
Pizon, Christine de 138–140, 141, 193
Plato 77, 111, 146, 177
Pocock, John 45
Polexandre 71
Poliziano, Angelo 61
Pompadour, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de 79
Pope, Alexander 152
Porter, Roy 222
Préciosité movement 60, 124–126, 217
Provence 73, 74, 83, 85, 98, 102, 134, 136, 157
Quatre fils Aymon 78, 81
Québriac, Louis-Hercule de Francheville de 102–103
Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes see Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns
Quinault, Philippe 4, 60, 88–90, 94–95, 97, 114, 115, 118, 119
Rabelais, François 37–38, 84, 202
Rabutin family 98
See also Bussy-Rabutin, Roger, comte de
Rabutin, Roger de Bussy, comte de see Bussy-Rabutin, Roger, comte de
Racine, Jean 18, 61
Racine, Louis 203–204
Rambouillet, Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de 48
Rameau, Jean-Philippe 121
Rampalle, Nicolas de 50
Rancière, Jacques 111
Raynouard, François-Juste-Marie 186
Regnard, Jean François 60–61
Rémont des Cours, Nicolas 151
Renaud 119
See also Quatre fils Aymon
Renaut de Montauban see Quatre fils Aymon
Rhea 62
Richard I, the Lionheart 132–133, 136, 141–143
Richelieu, Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de 25, 50–51
Ricoeur, Paul 113–114, 223
Riley, Patrick 64
Robert, Raymonde 116
Roland 119
See also Chanson de Roland
Roman de la Rose 63, 71, 84
See also Jean de Meung
Roman de Perceval 74
Roman du Graal 74
Romance genre 142, 152–153, 167, 168, 171–172, 177
Romans 73, 212
Romanticism 20, 21, 53–54
Index

Rothstein, Marian  88
Roubaud, Jacques  174
Rougemont, Denis de 145, 147, 149, 169, 172
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 12, 44, 45, 54, 100, 111, 141, 150, 200, 206, 222
Confessions 64, 66, 78, 126, 166
Dialogues 65–66, 78
Dictionnaire de musique 167
Discours sur les sciences et les arts 46–48, 64–68, 212
Essai sur l’origine des langues 121–123, 167
La Nouvelle Héloïse 18, 64, 146, 156–157, 165–181
Les Muses galantes 115
Rêveries du promeneur solitaire 87

Sacchi, Bartolomeo  61
Saint-Aignan, François de Beauvillier, duc de 60, 98, 119
Saint-Evremond, Charles de 30
Saint Louis see Louis IX
Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin 126
Sainte-Palaye, Jean-Baptiste La Curne de 12, 21, 46, 54, 185–190, 195–199, 202–211, 219
Mémoires sur l’ancienne chevalerie 204–208, 211
Saint-Simon, Louis de Rouvroy, duc de 211
Saint-Simon, Louis de Rouvroy, duc de 175
Sapin, Jean-François 32, 49, 55
Sardière, Jean-Baptiste-Denis Guyon, seigneur de 79
Saturn 62, 216
Saurin, Bernard-Joseph 152
Schor, Naomi 196
Scott, Sir Walter 186, 200
Scudéry, Madeleine de 125, 135, 137–138, 170
Le Grand Cyrus 71
Scyths 58, 63, 65–66
Secousse, Denis François 185, 204n.49
Seneca, Lucius Annaeus 34
Sermain, Jean-Paul 116, 131
Sévigné, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de 12, 72, 108–111, 113, 116, 126, 128, 134, 222–223
As reader of medieval literature 83–87, 90–105, 191, 204, 209
On eros and agape 146, 150, 157–165, 173, 179–181, 206
Socrates 34–35
Soliès, Reimond de 74
Solomon, King 149–150, 180
Solon 30
Sorel, Charles 76
Spector, Céline 218
Spinoza, Baruch 218
Staël, Madame de 1, 152–153
Stanesco, Michel 110
Swan, Jesse 7–8
Switzerland 66

Tacitus, Publius Cornelius 66–67, 212
Tancrède 6, 114
Tasso, Torquato 2, 32, 44, 48, 52, 64, 78, 84–88, 92–94, 99, 115, 118, 122, 158, 170, 196
Tassoni, Alessandro 52
Taylor, Charles 146, 149, 165, 224
Teutons 58
Theresa of Avila, Saint 175
Thibaut de Champagne 11
Thibouville, Henri-Lambert d’Erbigny, marquis de 152
Tirant lo Blanch 78, 200–201
Tonolo, Sophie 126, 141
Toulmin, Stephen 221
Trepperel, Jehan 81
Tressan, Louis Elisabeth de la Vergne, comte de 91, 123, 143
Tristan 74, 75, 80

Vaissiette, dom Joseph 209
Valbonnais, Jean-Pierre Moret de Bourchenu, marquis de 209
Valentin et Orson 82
Valla, Lorenzo 61
Vandals 31
Vassé, marquise de 79
Vauban, Sébastien Le Prestre de 24, 39
Verrué, Jeanne Baptisté d’Albert de Luynes, comtesse de 79
Vertot, René Aubert, abbé de 185, 191, 192–193, 195, 204n.49, 212
Viala, Alain 125, 126
Vianu, Hélène 66
Viardot, Jean 79
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vignier, Nicolas</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villemain d’Abancourt, François-Jean</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villiers, Pierre de</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villon, François</td>
<td>10, 63, 77, 130, 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène Emmanuel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgil</td>
<td>50, 84, 94, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiture, Vincent</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet)</td>
<td>3, 6, 21, 26, 27, 44, 45, 114, 186, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Le Mondain”</td>
<td>61–62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siècle de Louis XIV</td>
<td>47, 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voss, Jürgen</td>
<td>2, 25, 36–37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William and Mary</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William of Auxerre</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winckelmann, Johann Joachim</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter, Jay</td>
<td>112–113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women readers</td>
<td>80, 96, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also Female authorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood, Christopher</td>
<td>35, 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wordsworth, William</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workman, Leslie</td>
<td>5, 8, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophon</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zumthor, Paul</td>
<td>123–124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>