

such as that produced by animals? The nightingale is, notably, a bird that sings and is a figure of interest to medieval thinkers across disciplines. Medieval grammatical and musical treatises take great pains to distinguish human voice from animal voice, and especially from birdsong.⁴ However, more than a heuristic for distinguishing between animal and human, voice might be seen as that which “connects human and nonhuman animals.”⁵ Sarah Kay explores how voice in troubadour lyric “crosses over between human and nonhuman”;⁶ as such, voice at once posits and troubles a boundary and ultimately enables “escape beyond the restrictive soundscape of the human, courtly world.”⁷ Thus, as grammatical texts, musical treatises, learned commentaries, and encyclopedias struggled to establish what constituted voice, song, and the human—and what did not—literature was actively contesting these boundaries, exploring their productive limits and transgression, and seeking new ways of thinking about humanity, its faculties, and its expression. More important, then, than establishing essential distinctions between animal and human song, the intense interest in these distinctions reveals voice as foundational for thinking about what it means to be human.⁸

In fact, as this brief tale suggests, medieval ideologies placed voice at the very core of humanity. Its capacity for semantic and subjective expression constituted a key distinction between humans and animals, with voice endowing humankind with a soul, along with the capacity for meaningful communication and spiritual transcendence. Contemporary scholarship too has acknowledged voice as an essential aspect of human expressions and experiences, variously exploring its nature and meaning from the perspectives of philosophy, sociology, literature, musicology, sound studies, and phenomenology. In common conception, we perhaps most readily equate voice with sound or with speech, and voice does indeed entail informative and expressive utterance—often in embodied, demonstrated, or sounded forms—as Sarah Kay, Irit Kleiman, and Mary Franklin-Brown have argued.⁹ But it also assumes many additional, often overlapping, manifestations. Voice proves variously an abstract idea, an entity tied to the corporeal body, a physiological or phenomenological experience, an aspect of music or language, a written or acoustic event, and a fundamental component of selfhood, with its attendant implications for agency, authority, and action: voice is a stand-in for participation in political, cultural, and domestic spheres.

This volume posits voice as a multivalent and multimedia phenom-

enon in medieval France and Occitania, one that enacts aspects of communication, exposes individual and communal emotions and beliefs, negotiates gender and class relationships, and asserts an authorial, social, or rhetorical power. As discussed further below, literary and musical works of medieval France offer a unique repository for examining how voice is crafted, verbalized, and vocalized in a variety of genres, including romances, sermons, histories, and lyric, as we consider here. Many of these genres entail speaking or singing voices in performance. Among these, we find the first-person and monophonically set lyrics (poetry with a single musical line) of troubadour and trouvère songs; performed sermons; oral and written histories and fictions; and the polyphonic aggregates of French motets, complex compositions in which various poetic-musical lines contend with one another. In the oral-written cultures of medieval France, voice exerted a material presence—in its sound, its textuality, its accompanying action, and often combined across all of these modalities.¹⁰

Drawing on multidisciplinary contemporary scholarship, we consider voice from the perspectives of subjectivity, power, language, polyphony, quotation, and reinterpretation. As detailed in the next section, we consider how voice serves to construct, articulate, reinforce, or challenge social conventions and beliefs about gender. In doing so, we trace how voice acts for and upon subjects, systems, and institutions and demonstrate how voice defines the creativity, individuality, and social dynamics of medieval French cultures.

Aspects of Voice in the Middle Ages

How did medieval people understand voice? It is a sound, but what kind of sound? How could it be distinguished from sounds produced by animals, those occurring in the natural world, those produced by inanimate objects, those produced by people or by animals operating inanimate objects? Voice possesses an inherent duality: it is produced by the body, it can represent a body, and yet it is not exactly bodily; it is also intangible, ephemeral, a means of representation that, once uttered, survives largely in representation.¹¹ Despite or perhaps because of its multivalent status, voice holds an undeniable place in the learning and cultural imagination of the West, at once a central means of expression and representation and a subject of centuries-long intellectual investigation.

In “Circulating Air: Inspiration, Voice, and Soul in Poetry and Song,”

Sarah Kay traces a genealogy, of sorts, of voice that begins with Aristotle. She locates “echoes” of his ideas on voice in the Latin grammatical tradition in classical Rome and extending to the Middle Ages.¹² Aristotle describes voice in two ways that leave a lasting legacy for medieval thinking. First, voice symbolizes affections in the soul: “Spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all.”¹³ This characterization emphasizes the representative function of voice—it is a symbol, it is a sign—and most important, how it represents a specifically human interiority. Voice, for Aristotle, seems to possess the capacity to represent to others that which is exclusively human. Moreover, voice is privileged over writing in the immediacy of its representation: it is most proximate to this interiority, a universal that transcends the particularities of language and writing.¹⁴

However, Aristotle also describes voice as impact, focusing on its materiality and physical production. Here voice is a subcategory of sound, defined as what results from objects striking each other and the air: “What is required for the production of sound is an impact of two solids against one another and against the air. . . . It must be struck with a sudden sharp blow, if it is to sound.”¹⁵ This duality, at once representation and phenomenon, is what makes voice so tricky to define. It also makes it such a tremendous resource, for to exercise voice is to make representations, to access status as representable, and to engage in a bodily practice that physically resounds and quite literally matters in the world. This materiality grounds voice in the physical plane, complicating efforts to theorize voice and challenging the exclusiveness of humanity’s claim to it.

Aristotle’s thinking on voice proved enduring. More than two centuries later, Varro also defines voice in terms of sound and its physical production and of the notion of air being struck;¹⁶ notably, he also classifies voice into its varieties. Later medieval grammarians followed suit: Donatus writes of a twofold division of utterances (those that can be written and those that cannot); Priscian describes a fourfold division (each of the two distinctions further divided between those that are intentionally meaningful and those that are not).¹⁷ As only humans can be ascertained to engage in deliberately meaningful action, these proliferating distinctions seem to privilege sounds produced by the human voice and even to locate voice at the center of human identity. Medieval approaches to the

phenomenon of voice demonstrate that its enigmatic nature, suggested by its inspiration of increasingly complex definitions, was central to many important ways of thinking about the human; indeed, David Lawton proposes “voice” as encompassing what scholars have come to understand as subjectivity.¹⁸

As Martin Irvine points out, voice is the first topic discussed in medieval grammar texts.¹⁹ This sets the stage, according to Elizabeth Eva Leach, for the close connection between music theory and grammatical texts, as “‘grammatica and cantus’ represented the twin subjects of basic study and shared the same fundamental material: *vox*.”²⁰ Grammarians of the fourth and fifth centuries “tend to use *vox* in a fairly loose sense to mean sound”;²¹ similarly, in the sixth century, Priscian writes that voice is sound, referring to them synonymously.²² However, Isidore of Seville’s influential seventh-century *Etymologies* identifies voice as a subset of sound, with important implications for music theory. By the thirteenth century, music theorists were distinguishing between sound and voice, designating voice as produced by living beings.²³ Here, too, resound echoes of Aristotle:

Voice then is the impact of the inbreathed air against the windpipe, and the agent that produces the impact is the soul resident in these parts of the body. Not every sound . . . made by an animal is voice (even with the tongue we may merely make a sound which is not voice, or without the tongue as in coughing); what produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for voice is a sound with a meaning and is not the result of any impact of the breath as in coughing.²⁴

Aristotle identifies the soul as the agent in creating voice, by investing vocal sound with meaning; voice is elevated above mere sound for it has meaning endowed by an act of imagination, which can be created and imparted only by the soul.²⁵ Along similar lines, Augustine distinguishes human song from birdsong on the basis of understanding—that is, the possession of cognitive faculties involved in its production; notably, he elaborates this distinction in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and a student, employing voice to both reveal and bring about this understanding.²⁶ A preoccupation with this distinction, then, shows how medieval understandings of the human emerge through comparison.²⁷ Indeed, voice helps define the human’s others—angels, demons, divinity, as well as animals and even plants.²⁸