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The Influence of Debate Culture on Literature

The cultural atmosphere of late medieval France was ripe for literary debate. Fostered by the ecclesiastic, judicial, and scholastic habits of engaging in and training through the practice of debate, the literary world was not inured to but instead embraced its dynamic style and capacity to present varying perspectives. Authors of literary texts found in debate a way to launch themselves and their works beyond the limits of verse. Legal and literary authors alike conspired to conceive policy through poetry and to entertain in the same pulse.

Modern scholars recognize how social factors in late medieval France influenced a network of poets to collaborate and compete to produce works that engage in a kind of intellectual writers' community. Emma Cayley, for example, through her conception of a "collaborative debating community," shows how the social community acted as a "generative body" to produce what she calls "collaborative fictions" through debate: "This community . . . derives its social coherence not only from its interpretations of text/s, but from its production of further text/s in response to those interpretations, forming a network of collaborative relations between texts and poets/authors."[1] This collaborative, competitive impulse undoubtably provoked the development of these first two literary debates over, first, *Le Roman de la Rose* and, next, *La Belle Dame sans Mercy.*

Debate as a forum for discussing important issues was a well-established tradition formulated through centuries of education. Tracing the development of debate practice in Europe, Alex Novikoff pinpoints what he terms the "essential habit of medieval thought and culture" through an examination of the writings of scholastic authors in Europe.[2] Sourced from ancient Greek origins, dialogue and disputation came to characterize the writings of many of the church fathers, including Augustine, who disputed the heresy of the Manicheans through public disputation; Anselm of Bec,

who emphasized the importance of the use of rational investigation and dialectical reasoning; and Abelard, an unrivaled rhetorician, dialectician, and classroom disputant in the twelfth century. Disputation was the primary tool of learning, persuasion, and conversion. The logical works of Aristotle, first translated by Boethius in the sixth century, were translated again in the twelfth century. Two of his texts, *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, were pivotal guides in teaching students the art of argumentative reasoning. As a newfound authority on the dialectical process of forming and refuting arguments, the "New Logic" on which scholastic disputation could be taught was promoted by the likes of Adam of Balsham and John of Salisbury in twelfth-century Paris. By the thirteenth century, the pedagogical method of disputation was institutionalized, practiced by the itinerant preachers of the Dominican order and the masters at the universities. Students of theology, law, and even medicine were trained methodically in debating methods and practiced their disputations in public settings. To develop the art, students were first required to read an authoritative text, a *lectio.* From this text came the *disputatio* consisting of several steps: a question, a response to the question, objections to the response, and finally a *determinatio* or judgment rendered by the master on the best performance.[3] The method was popularized at the university in Paris by Thomas Aquinas, who wrote voluminous tracts on the method and even conducted public quodlibetical disputations to model the practice—an exercise in which any theological question (the Latin word *quodlibet* meaning "anything at all") could be put to the master, whose task was to answer using philosophical arguments, often resulting in a spectacular battle of wits. The ordinary *disputatio*, Aquinas explained, serves to remove doubt and eliminate error; alternately, it serves as a means for the teacher to guide (or persuade) listeners to an understanding of truth. Soon enough, through widespread teaching, practice, and performance, scholarly disputation as a foundation and an ideal became enmeshed into theological treatises, poetry, and even into musical composition, becoming almost commonplace in the cultures of a newly modern Europe. Men of the chancery, those responsible for producing and presenting official documents for the king and government, were well trained in the scholastic method founded in the art of disputation. It became the common method for the exposition of essential issues of the day.

The ecclesiastic, judicial, and scholastic worlds, by their appreciation

for proficiency and agility in the practice of debate, soon influenced the literary world. Before the end of the fourteenth century, poetic debate took place in two related but separate locations: the noble courts and the chancery.[4] Not long thereafter, poets brought debate into the literary courtroom. Many of the participants of the literary debates in question here, including Jean de Montreuil, Gontier and Pierre Col, and Alain Chartier, were natural adherents in these circles—as clerics and secretaries to the king, they were not only highly literate, mastering multiple languages in addition to Latin, but it was their profession to present a point of view coherently and persuasively. Such circles, however, were exclusive to men. Christine de Pizan, on the other hand, was granted access to courtly circles through her father, Thomas de Pizan (astrologer to King Charles V), her husband, Etienne de Castel, also a royal secretary to King Charles VI, and her son, Jean de Castel, royal secretary to the dauphin Charles, who would become Charles VII. Such access to the royal court did not, however, include her own acceptance in chancery spaces. As a woman and an outsider to the clerical roles of the chancery, even if she was already a professional poet and writer of a certain fame, the fact that men would engage with her in debate is remarkable. That she held her own in the contest, arguably even besting her opponents, is an unmatched accomplishment for a woman of this time. The social space where this extraordinary breakthrough might happen was opened through the emerging genre of literary debate.

Consideration of the literary debates of *Le Roman de la Rose* and *La Belle Dame sans Mercy* should begin with Petrarch, that lion of Italian poetry whose eloquence enraptured the literary world in the fourteenth century, making him an international phenomenon.[5] In 1340, Petrarch was chosen as poet laureate of the Papal State of Rome, that is, the ancestral seat of the Roman Catholic Church. But at this time, there were two sites of the Papal seat, one in Rome and one in Avignon, France. Petrarch had to choose where to be crowned poet laureate, in Rome at the senate or at the Sorbonne in Paris by the current pope residing in Avignon. His decision, however, involved much more than place: it was essentially a choice of politics and language that he was making. He chose Rome to make a cultural and political point. In a letter to the Duke of Milan, Petrarch lauded how "Italian eloquence conquers all other languages" and dismissed the notion that France had taken on the mantle of erudition, hailed as the *translatio studii*.[6] The topos of *translatio studii*, the transfer or migration

of learning from one geographical place and time to another, had been claimed by Jean de Meun at the midpoint of *Le Roman de la Rose* and was often quoted by French writers of the period as proof of the ascendancy of the French literary tradition.[7] Petrarch, disputing this transfer, claimed as proof the superiority of Italian Latin, accusing the French of using an awkward and antiquated Latin.

So began the debate between Petrarch and the French-born Jean de Hesdin in 1367 over the quality of Latin used by French orators. Latin was still the language of intellectual currency, so it was of primary importance for all those engaged in international communication. Jean de Hesdin, a conservative theologian and dean of the Sorbonne who enjoyed reading the classics, vigorously defended the style practiced by the French. The debate, seemingly over style, devolved into one of underlying politics garbed in rhetoric. Petrarch, at the same time he was debating the superior style of Italian Latin, was attempting to coax the pope, Gregory XI, to quit Avignon and return to Rome.[8] The pope did indeed return to Rome in October 1367, much to the consternation of the French, who continued to pressure him to stay in Avignon. The dissention over papal residency was becoming a political problem. Jean de Hesdin attempted to persuade the pope to remain in France by describing Rome as a corrupt city and Avignon as a holy city of peace and prosperity, a perfect seat for the pontiff. Petrarch did not read this tract until 1373—after the pope had returned in 1370 to Avignon, where he died in October of that year—but he quickly penned a response to defend his besmirched homeland. In this letter, the last of his *invectives* (*Contra eum*), he systematically refuted, point by point, Hesdin's tract, insulting his adversary's writing as "inept and unfair," the "squawking" of a barbarous rooster.[9] The gauntlet had been thrown down.

The epistolary debate between Hesdin and Petrarch was widely read. Through the exchange, Petrarch would influence the French *intelligentsia* in two ways: first, to improve the eloquence of their Latin, and second, to imitate the procedure of refutation modeled by Petrarch in his *invective*, a pattern that would become the method of argumentation for the humanists in Italy and in France.

French writers devoted some effort to making their Latin more eloquent, more "modern," more consistent with the Italian humanistic practice lauded by Petrarch.[10] Their efforts proved successful; by 1395–1396,

a letter written by Nicolas de Clamanges, French humanist and theologian, was praised for its Latin by the Italian cardinal Galeotto Tarlati da Pietramala, who was astounded that a Frenchman could write in such elegant Latin. The compliment provoked further epistolary debate on the eloquence of the French writers, pitting Pietramala and Laurent de Premierfait, the translator of Boccaccio's *On the Fates of Famous Men* from Latin, against Jean de Montreuil and his mentor Nicolas de Clamanges, humanist, church reformer, and papal secretary in Avignon. Clamanges, by picking up the gauntlet earlier thrown down by Petrarch, again turned the debate to the political so that, not surprisingly, the quarrel became essentially a defense of French national culture. Alongside this defense of culture lay a second, more philosophical, issue: the notion of wisdom (*sapientia*) expressed with eloquence. The French accused the Italians of prioritizing how something was expressed over what was actually being expressed. They claimed that the Italians were willing to sacrifice wisdom for eloquence.[11] The French maintained that their Latin captured wisdom and eloquence together and thus "transcended the Italian tradition," proving the validity of the notion of *translatio studii*.[12] The work of Jean de Meun, cleric and author in both Latin and French, especially his long popular *Roman de la Rose*, demonstrated their point that eloquence and wisdom could reside in the same verse. Again, debate over language would assimilate deeper issues of politics and religion, soon evidenced in the Great Schism that would divide Rome and Avignon, Italian and French.

The apparent struggle over proving the dominance of the French or Italian cultures was in fact a reflection of the violent division regarding the papacy that exploded after Gregory XI, who had been convinced by Petrarch to return to Italy in 1378, died. In Rome, the cardinals elected an Italian as successor to Gregory, determined to keep the papacy in Rome. Many of the cardinals quickly regretted their choice, and the French cardinals united to elect a second pope, Robert of Geneva, who took the papal name Urban VII. He reestablished a second court in Avignon, thus creating a double papacy. Called the Great Schism (1378–1417), this moment saw two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, each demanding the obligatory religious obedience from all followers of the Christian faith. Europe was split by allegiance to either one pope or the other; both claimed legitimacy. In France, it was believed that Charles VI, monarch of France, should play a decisive role in determining which papacy was le-