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Introduction

Allegory and the Poetic Self: First-Person Narration in Late Medieval Literature

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The present collection of essays addresses a phenomenon of great importance in medieval and early modern vernacular literature: the combination of allegory and the first-person narrative form. This combination, which would prove extremely successful as a template in the following decades, seems to have appeared for the first time shortly after 1200 in *Voie d'Enfer* (also known as *Songe d'Enfer*) and *Voie de Paradis* by Raoul de Houdenc. Not long afterward, the *Roman de la Rose* was the first text to combine the use of the vernacular, the first person, and allegoricity with courtly tropes, thus rendering the combination useful for love poetry. That text stands at the beginning of the impressive history of the “group of related texts” or “family of texts” that is the focus of this volume.¹

We are using the phrase “family of texts” to avoid the term “genre.” This is because, in our view, the texts analyzed here do not conclusively belong to one genre or another; rather, within the wide range of first-person narratives—including autobiographies in Latin, travel literature in the vernacular, the Old French *dits*, the Middle High German *Minnereden*, mystical writings, and historical ego-documents—they can be categorized as individually related groups with certain features and relatively open boundaries (Glauch and Philipowski 11). Such possible “family” characteristics or uniting features can include language, metrical/rhyming or prose formats, and the use of personifications. For the purposes of this volume, we have selected one of these groups of related texts from the wide range of medieval first-person narratives, which we are calling allegorical courtly love narratives in the first person. Texts belonging to this group, to name just a few, are the *Roman de*

la Rose, the *Roman de la Poire*, the *Livre du Chevalier errant*, the *Vita Nuova*, the *Livre du Cœur d'amour épris*, and the *Amorosa Visione*. However, despite their narrativity—which often consists only of a narrative frame—they manifest a strong tendency toward discursivity, incorporating long passages of dialogue, description, lamentation, and instruction in the present tense. In this group of related texts, these discursive passages in the present tense are often literary works in their own right such as songs, letters, and poems, which happen to be embedded in first-person narratives.²

It soon became obvious that this combination of family characteristics did not fit into the referential framework of German, French, Italian, or any individual literary tradition; instead, we had to widen our scope to European literature as a whole. Texts from other areas of Europe joined the German texts we were most familiar with, and in some cases provided an even better explanation of the structure than German texts outside our focal group. It is thus possible and necessary to refer to this text of type as crossing borders.³ But it is not always possible to trace which texts were received by whom or the interdependencies between individual works and authors; in any case, this is only one of many approaches to analyzing our family of texts. Therefore, we would like to propose a reading that focuses more on a structural approach. We will attempt to understand what made the combination of the first person, love as a topic, and allegory so popular and successful for such a long period of time, and why so many authors employed it. Based on a comparison of selected first-person narratives in different languages, we were able not only to confirm the validity of our approach but also to deepen our understanding of the inner structure and the function of the “text family” we were analyzing. By proceeding thematically from this point, we would like to present an integrated view of the results that helped us to further sharpen our knowledge of the narrative patterns and structural characteristics of this family of texts and their interdependencies.

Different Types of Allegorical First-Person Love Narratives: Debates, Dream Allegories, and Autobiographical Texts

The group of texts we have designated “first-person, courtly love, allegorical” can itself be subdivided into at least three groups or types, including texts that tend toward dialogue or debate poetry and whose main element is a dialogue, a conversation, or an argument—that is, courtly love speeches, *dits amoureux* in Middle French, and *Minnereden* in Middle High German. Jacqueline Cerquiglini has defined the following elementary characteristics of *dits*: their tendency to play with discontinuity, the first-person stance, the

use of the present tense, and their didactical orientation (“Le Dit” 87).⁴ Texts of this kind in which dialogue and instruction predominate include *Die Minneburg*, the two *Jugement* poems of Guillaume de Machaut, John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Alain Chartier’s *Livre des Quatre Dames*, and many dialogue poems by Christine de Pizan.

We can differentiate these texts from those whose narratives tend toward the autobiographical insofar as their authors claim to tell the stories of their lives, such as Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s *Frauendienst* in Middle High German, Machaut’s *Voir Dit*, Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor*, and Jean Froissart’s *Prison Amoureuse*. Still, we would not consider those texts autobiographies, because “[i]t is . . . clear that there do not exist for the Middle Ages any autobiographies in the modern sense of the term” (Schmitt 49). Or, in the words of Sonja Glauch (“Middle Ages” 700), “The Middle Ages lack not only a notion of texts retrospectively portraying the life of their authors, but also the cultural context which would have allowed for the existence of such texts as a literary genre sui generis.” But on the other hand, we must acknowledge that there is a specifically medieval form of autobiographicality (if you will), putting the emphasis not on the individuality but on the universality of personal experiences:

Most present readers do not understand them [vernacular, nonclerical “formal” autobiographies that emerge from the thirteenth century onward] as autobiographies, though. This is mainly due to their clearly noticeable stylisation and allegorical shaping which cast doubt on the protagonists of these narrations: they enter a twilight between exemplary universality and personal individuality. But it is just this universal applicability and abstraction from the individual which may be at the center of medieval autobiography: one’s own life is worth telling insofar as it can be conceived as exemplary. (ibid. 716)

Kamath says about texts like the *Rose* that they depend “upon the fragmentation of the speaking subject in creating moments of authorial identification” (34). To take this into account, Laurence de Looze suggested in a monograph from 1997 the term “pseudo-autobiographical writing,” A. C. Spearing advanced the notion “autography” in 2012, and G. B. Gybbon-Monypenny in 1973 spoke of “erotic autobiographies” (133). We would prefer to speak of “courtship autobiographies.” But in this introduction we do not want to discuss which term is most appropriate for texts like the *Frauendienst*, the *Voir Dit*, the *Vita Nuova*, or the *Libro de buen amor*, but rather to emphasize the formal and structural differences among the debates, dream allegories, and autobiographical works.

The dialogue and debate poems often have only a narrative frame, and otherwise consist mainly of monologue or dialogue. The courtship autobiographies tell of the author's own successful or unsuccessful courtship of a lady or of his love relationship with her. It is only in these cases that there can be a progression through time, a plot, or a real story; in contrast, the debate poems are situational and capture a moment in time. Like many *dits*, the *Rose* cannot be assigned to either type. It is not a debate or argument, nor is it a courtship narrative—it is both at once. Its great success may even be due precisely to this fact. Moreover, the *Rose* has another feature that constitutes the third text type: the dream trope.

Dream allegories such as the *Rose*, *Trionfi*, and *Amorosa Visione* can be placed along a spectrum between courtship autobiographies and *dits* insofar as they include more than a mere dialogue scene but less content than a courtship autobiography. Dreams and visions can combine dialogues with narrated events such as hunting, wars, pilgrimages, wanderings, and tournaments. They can be much longer than dialogues or debate poetry, which tend to be rather short, but their employment of the dream trope means that the story being narrated, unlike the courtship autobiographies, takes place in a space of unreality. In his essay, Wolfzettel writes of the dream vision in the *Amorosa Visione* that it “serves to suggest a secondary ideal space capable of showing the path that will subsequently lead to an earthly paradise” (222). But while wandering through an allegorical landscape, the dreamer can encounter personifications who instruct him in either courtly or religious matters. Dream allegories comprise an important subgroup of this text family, because some of the earliest first-person allegorical narratives (such as Raoul's *Songe d'Enfer* and Brunetto Latini's *Tesoretto*, dated circa 1263–1266) and some of the most widely transmitted texts (such as Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*) are members of this subgroup.

Literary Discourse

To mark a form of literary speech, of poetry, authors used allegories and personifications very consciously.⁵ If Boethius is talking to Lady Philosophy in his metrical *Consolatio philosophiae* instead of to a friend—as, for instance, Socrates does in the Platonic dialogues—this signals that he wishes his *Consolatio* to be understood as a poetic text and not a scholarly one, such as Macrobius's non-allegorical *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*.⁶ The same is true of Petrarch: although he made use of allegories in his *Trionfi* (which seems to have influenced the *Commedia*), he composed his *Secretum*