

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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MEDIEVAL FRENCH LITERATURE

Overview

Though the deep origins of both the people and the language of France must be traced as far back as the tribe of the Galli, a tribal group living on the borders of the declining Roman Empire, and ultimately destined to build their Gallo-Roman dialect into what we call Old French, the language form in which we find the first authentic texts of French literature, is found in the 11th century.

From the outset, the creative output of this culture devolved about a variety of kinds of expression: religious poetry, *chansons de gestes*, 'songs of heroic deeds,' and epic style romances.

Four short works, chiefly of linguistic interest, were written in the tenth century. In the eleventh century, The importance of the Church and of feudalism are indicated by the three types of literary productions: saints' lives, neo-Latin religious works; and *chansons de geste*, poems concerning the mighty deeds of heroes. Both the large number and the excellence of *chansons de gestes*, poetic romances, and lyrics written during the twelfth century, have led critics to call this the Golden Age of mediaeval French literature. This poetry shows an increase in polish, in sophistication, and in social consciousness over that of preceding centuries.

The thirteenth century is noteworthy for its prose romances, its drama, its satire, its lyrics, and its allegory. Much of the literature of this century reflects the rise of the bourgeoisie. It shows an increasing tendency toward rationalism, realism, and cynicism. The literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows the disastrous effects of the Hundred Years' War. There was at that time little opportunity or inspiration for imaginative works. A few narrative poems, a few prose chronicles, and a few lyrics were written, but as a whole the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were literarily sterile.

Discussion questions

Christine de Pisan has become an object of attention among Feminist critics. Do you see why? Is she a proto Feminist in her writing? What attitude did her culture tend to have, toward the place of women in society?

Is there a meeting point between the sacred and the criminal, in the work and thought of Francois Villon? Is that a meeting point which you can identify in other parts of mediaeval French culture? Architecture? Sculpture? Music?

What is the meaning of the 'grail' in *Perceval*? Does that epic centrally concern religious ritual, or is it primarily a simple Bildungsroman quest narrative?

What kind of devotion of the Virgin Mary quickens in the *Roman de la Rose*? Is this a literary or a devotional text?

Does Roland die a hero in the *Chanson de Roland*? Or was he a fool not to call Charlemagne to his military aid?