

# Literary Heiresses and Historical Countesses in Thirteenth-Century France: Some Methodological Notes

Kathy M. Krause

MY APPROACH to the topic of women and power has been shaped by a double critical perspective, one both literary and historical. However, my initial point of contact was purely literary: a study of Old French narratives with female protagonists. Most of these texts are decidedly outside the traditional canon, although some of the heroines' names might be familiar (*Berte aus grans pieds*, for example), and a few of the romances have attracted attention from feminist scholars, such as the *Roman de Silence*.<sup>1</sup> As part of an intertextual study of the figure of the female protagonist, I looked over the entire corpus of twelfth- and thirteenth-century French narratives whose main characters were women, including both romances and *chansons de geste*, as well as some shorter narratives such as *contes* and miracle tales.<sup>2</sup> This broad view

---

1. See, for example, the studies in the two special issues of *Arthuriana* edited by F. Regina Psaki: *Arthuriana* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1997), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/127869249>, and 12, no. 1 (Spring 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/127870407>.

2. There can be no definitive list of Old French literary texts with female protagonists as the definition of a "protagonist" is fluid: should one include, for example, Jean Renart's *Roman de la Rose*, which focuses initially on the Emperor Conrad, and then on the exploits of a knight, Guillaume de Dole, but whose heroine, Liénor, certainly plays the most active role in the romance's dénouement? Similarly, should we include the double protagonists of Jean Renart's *Escoufle* or of *Guillaume de Palerne*? A minimal list including only those texts where the heroine is the sole protagonist would include, in addition to *Silence*, Philippe de Beaumanoir's *Roman de la Manekine* and related later romances such as the *Comte d'Anjou*, the *chansons de geste* of *Berte aus grans pieds*, *Florence de Rome*, *Aye d'Avignon*, and *Parise la duchesse* (and even here, Parise's son shares the narrative spotlight), the *Fille du Comte de Pontbieu*, and a number of miracle tales of falsely accused women, such as Gautier de Coinci's *Miracle*

brought to light the fact that in every case, the protagonist was heir to her father's estate(s), whether they were a simple fief, as in the *Roman de Silence*, or the entire "Roman Empire" in the *Chanson de Florence de Rome*. Such an unexpectedly consistent pattern led me to consider the historical context of the narratives, to ask whether there were any circumstances that might have played a role in the development of the literary phenomenon of the "heiress-protagonist."<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the narratives with female protagonists were written during the heyday of Old French narrative production: from the very late twelfth- to the mid-thirteenth centuries, and most were written in the Northern regions of France, and more specifically in Picardy, a major center of literary production and innovation at that time. As a result, it was unexpectedly easy to find a correlation between the literary works and their historical context, for almost all of the major Picard counties, as well as several key neighboring counties (e.g., Flanders, the Vermandois) were inherited by women during the period, and often by several women in succession.<sup>4</sup> Teasing out the various ramifications of this double proliferation of female lords, within and without the Old French narratives, has been a main focus of my research ever since.

One of the first ramifications of this correlation of historical and literary heiresses that needed exploring was the question of how being a female lord would have impacted the historical women in question: did they have more authority to exercise power than women who were not inheriting lords, and thus, for example, a greater chance to influence literary production? For the historical countesses in Picardy, the answer to that question is not clear cut, as circumstances varied greatly, even between neighboring counties. However, overall in thirteenth-century Picardy and more specifically in the county of Ponthieu whose records I

---

*de l'Empeiris* (with a plot very similar to that of *Florence de Rome*) or *de l'Abbesse grosse*.

3. I should like to note, in thanks, that it was Professor R. Howard Bloch, during the course of an NEH summer seminar, who strongly encouraged me to examine at the historical aspects of the topic.

4. For example, the county of Boulogne was inherited by five women in succession between 1159 and 1260, and the neighboring county of Ponthieu was inherited by a daughter three times: in 1221, 1250, and 1270.

have examined the most fully, it is clear that inheriting countesses had authority and exercised power: with very few exceptions, the inheriting countesses issued all acts and charters in their domains, usually jointly with their husband (when they were married), but not always. Conversely, their husbands almost never issued any solo acts regarding the domain.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the inheriting countesses were not simply a conduit passing comital authority from their father to their husband (as was assumed by most nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century scholars). In addition, their access to power appears to have been, again in most but not all cases, greater than that of Picard countesses who did not inherit their domains.<sup>6</sup>

If the historical coincidence of inheriting countesses in Picardy and heiress-protagonists in Old French narrative was easy to recognize, the question of what (if any) relationship there is between the power exercised by historical female lords and their depictions in narrative fiction is anything but simple; the intersection of history and fiction is always a fraught boundary to negotiate. Two aspects of medieval literary studies have particularly influenced prior efforts in this area: first, those scholars concerned to contextualize historically their readings of women in medieval literature have tended to focus on medieval intellectual history<sup>7</sup>; and second, literary scholars have tended to rely on the work of (well-known) historians for their primary understanding of the historical context. In particular, many feminist literary scholars have turned to the work of feminist historians, such as the seminal work

---

5. For more details on the *acta* of the inheriting countesses, see Kathy M. Krause, "The Charters of the Thirteenth-Century Inheriting Countesses of Ponthieu," *Haskins Society Journal* 25 (2014): 223-43.

6. Ibid. Amy Livingstone's essay in this issue argues persuasively for moving beyond trying to "prove" that women had power in the Middle Ages, accepting that the case is proven and studying how, when, and why medieval women exercised power. I have retained this paragraph of my essay, despite agreeing whole-heartedly with her assessment, because the message has not yet (fully) reached literary studies of the Middle Ages, which as I discuss in the next paragraph, are still, in large part, a scholarly "generation" behind historians in how they approach the question.

7. A fairly recent exception is Sharon Kinoshita's study *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

of Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, which had the distinct advantage of advancing a thesis that dovetails chronologically with the literary timeline. Moreover, feminist studies came of age, as it were, at the apogee of Georges Duby's influence, and his profoundly masculinist view of medieval aristocratic society offered scholars a prestigious model with which to unpack the homosocial and misogynist aspects of medieval literature. As a result of these influences, literary scholars have, until fairly recently, by and large perpetuated narratives of masculine hegemony and female disempowerment. The tide has turned, but it will take time for that influence, channeled and, in some ways even amplified, by feminist literary scholarship, to fade.<sup>8</sup>

Examining the question from the opposite direction, from the depiction of inheriting female protagonists in the literary text towards historical female lords, I first want to make a brief historiographical excursus. Elsewhere in this special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Lois Huneycutt and Amy Livingstone have presented an effective dual overview of the historiography of studies of women and power. From a literary studies perspective, however, a few more remarks are in order. The literary, and in many cases nationalistic, prejudices of the founding fathers of (French) medieval literary studies caused them to privilege not only earlier over later texts, but also the "masculine" rather than the "feminine" aspects of genre. Thus, for example, the *Chanson de Roland* became the canonical Old French epic text not only because it was the earliest known *chanson de geste*, but also because it celebrated "manly," militaristic values, thereby flattering French nationalist sympathies in the wake of the defeat of 1870.<sup>9</sup>

---

8. One current in contemporary literary research that is effectively nuancing this narrative examines women's patronage of literature and of manuscript production in the later Middle Ages. In addition to Tracy Adams's essay in this issue and her recent book *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), see Cynthia Brown's study of book production. Cynthia J. Brown, *The Queen's Library: Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany, 1477-1514* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

9. For a detailed account of the "discovery" of the *Chanson de Roland*, see Andrew Taylor, "Was There a Song of Roland?" *Speculum* 76, no. 1 (2001): 28-65, doi: 10.2307/2903705. A broader account of the invention of French philology can be found in Ursula Bähler, *Gaston Paris et la philologie romane* (Geneva: Droz, 2004).

As a corollary to the “coronation” of the *Roland*, *chansons de geste* with significant female presence were relegated to the status of “decadent” romance-contaminated works, and those with (horrors!) a female protagonist were consigned (as much as possible) to critical oblivion. Most of these have, I might add, yet to receive any significant critical attention even now. For example, the *Chanson de Florence de Rome*, generally, and very loosely, dated to the late twelfth century or very early thirteenth, has an eponymous protagonist who inherits (with no internal dissent, I might add) the entire “Roman Empire” from her father, and who is depicted “ruling” her domain while it is under attack by the Greek Emperor (who wants to marry her and thus add her empire to his). Edited in 1907 by A. Wallensköld in a Société des Anciens Textes Français edition, and so reasonably accessible, the *Chanson de Florence de Rome* barely registers in a bibliographic search: for example, “Florence de Rome” as a search term gets sixteen hits in the Modern Language Association bibliography, of which six are for the Middle English version of the tale, and only two are primarily focused on the verse epic, one of those being my 2006 article in *Exemplaria*.<sup>10</sup>

Similar, if less extreme, effects appear in romance criticism: the established canon privileges tales of chivalric prowess, where women appear primarily as prizes to be won by the best knight. Or perhaps it would be better to say that early studies of Old French romance read for the male characters and displaced the female figures to the margins, despite their central role in several of the most canonical of romances, those of Chrétien de Troyes.<sup>11</sup> In addition, it is only recently that scholars have

---

Zrinka Stahuljak’s book on the same era in French letters adds gender and sexuality to the mix of topics considered in revealing ways. Zrinka Stahuljak, *Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

10. Other articles consider issues of translation into Spanish, or into Middle French prose, or compare the epic version to that found in the miracles tales and folklore, etc. For comparison’s sake, the *Chanson de Raoul de Cambrai* has fifty-four hits in the MLA database, and the *Chanson de Roland* gets 875. (Consulted 1/4/2016)

11. Of Chrétien’s five romances, three, *Erec et Enide*, the *Chevalier au lion*, and *Cligés*, have heroines who play very significant roles in the narrative, and in the other two, the *Chevalier de la charrette* and the *Conte du Graal*, one can certainly argue that the heroine is a significant figure, even if she does not command the same amount

begun to examine seriously thirteenth-century Arthurian romances such as *Meraugis de Portlesguez* or *Escanor*, which offer a much larger and more developed role to the heroines of the romance who become, in both cases, I would argue, co-protagonists with the eponymous heroes.<sup>12</sup> In the case of allegorical narratives, the (debatably) misogynist *Roman de la Rose* was enthroned at the summit of its “genre,” leaving texts with a much stronger female presence, such as those by Guillaume de Machaut or Christine de Pizan to languish in scholarly oblivion until the very end of the twentieth century. As a result of the persistent influence of the construction of the canon, our collective view of Old French literature was skewed, and the role(s) of women within texts, not to mention outside them as patrons, authors, copyists, etc., was deformed, when not simply ignored, or even obscured.

Returning to the literary texts and their perspective on female lordship, we must note the obvious once again: the intradiagetic literary world bears little resemblance to medieval reality, even reality mediated by the historical record. Thus, for example, female protagonists in romances and *chansons de geste* are almost always alone in the world, without any family to support them, a situation rarely encountered in medieval aristocratic society.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the narratives normally do not depict the protagonists administering their domain(s); rather, the majority of

of narrative space as in the other romances. The earliest citation for a study focused on female characters in Chrétien de Troyes in the MLA bibliography is 1972, in the International Medieval Bibliography it is 1975. Although there are numerous insightful articles and book chapters, it is perhaps noteworthy that there is still no book-length study on female characters in Chrétien’s romances. There are, however, monographs on female characters in the broader Arthurian tradition, such as Morgan le Fay, and important essay collections on Arthurian women, including Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst, eds., *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries* (Dallas, TX : Scriptorium Press, 2001) and Thelma S. Fenster, ed., *Arthurian Women* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

12. On *Meraugis de Portlesguez*, see the work of Kristen Burr, in particular, Kristin L. Burr, “Defining the Courtly Lady: Gender Transgression and Transvestism in *Meraugis de Portlesguez*,” *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 53 (2001): 378–92.

13. Male romance protagonists are also often depicted as either without (close) family or far away from their family; and even those who do have family rarely call upon them for support.

the plots revolve around the difficulties experienced by the protagonist while she is exiled from her home. Even the aforementioned *Chanson de Florence de Rome* moves its eponymous heroine fairly quickly from ruling Empress to exiled and peripatetic heroine. Conversely, female heirs who are not protagonists, such as Blanche fleur in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, are generally depicted residing in their domains, which are under siege by unscrupulous lords seeking to take advantage of their lack of male family members. In other words, while the proliferation of female lords in Old French narratives in the thirteenth century clearly speaks to historical "reality" in Picardy, what it may say about medieval attitudes to those female lords, or about what kind of authority they had, is not straightforward by any means.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the one Old French literary text that provides a remarkably clear image of an inheriting countess in thirteenth-century Picardy is a lyric rather than narrative work. The poem is a *planctus* or poetic funeral lament for a countess of Boulogne,<sup>14</sup> and it is very much a political rather than a personal lament, regretting the loss of the countess *qua* countess. Although the poem does not name the specific countess whose loss it laments, codicological evidence strongly suggests that it refers to Matilda II, daughter of Ida of Boulogne and Renaud of Dammartin, as her second husband, Alfonso of Portugal, is the last name in the list of the counts of Boulogne that immediately precedes the poem in the manuscript. In addition, when she died in 1261-63, Matilda had no obvious heir, leaving the county in limbo while the *Parlement* of Paris decided among several contenders, a situation that fits well with the *planctus*'s description of a county bereft.

The poem provides a fascinating glimpse of contemporary thirteenth-century attitudes towards a reigning countess and her responsibilities. In

---

14. The *planctus* is extant (as far as we know) in only one later thirteenth-century manuscript, now in the public library in Arras: Arras, BM 163, formerly 184. It is the last item in the codex, and the only item on the last folio. It appears contemporaneous with the rest of the contents, although it is written in a different hand. For more details see Krause, "The Charters," 223-24; 42-43. In addition, I am presently preparing a more detailed examination of the *planctus* and its manuscript context, based on a paper given at the Gender and Medieval Studies Conference, Winchester, UK, in January, 2014.

particular, the *ubi sunt* anaphora of the last stanza praises the countess by decrying Boulogne's loss in terms significantly more practical and political than the courtly values typical of *planctus*, and the lyric more generally:

Qui fera mais bele feste criée?  
Qui fera mais ne joie ne baudor?  
Qui donra mais parement ne collé 40  
A chevalier novel, ne bel ator,  
Quant cele a fait de cest siècle retor  
Qui des dames estoit rubins et flor,  
Et son païs sostenoit en vigor?  
Par qui ert mais povre dame gardée 45  
Ne pucele de faire désonor?

(Who will henceforth offer fine fêtes?  
Who will henceforth cause joy or rejoicing?  
Who will henceforth give the altar clothes or the ritual blow  
to a new knight, or a fine outfit,  
when she has left this world,  
she who was the ruby and flower of ladies  
and who sustained her lands in vigor?  
By whom will henceforth poor ladies be protected  
or maidens kept from dishonor?)<sup>15</sup>

After deploring the loss of pleasures in the first two lines of the stanza, the poet turns to the more serious implications of the countess's death: first, the important function of dubbing new knights (lines 40-41), and second the protection of women and maidens, "by whom will poor women ever be protected and maidens kept from dishonor?" (lines 45-46). In between, the poet describes the countess as both "the

---

15. My lightly edited transcription from the manuscript, checked against A. de Rosny's published text, and my translation. A. de Rosny, "Poésie du Xiiiè siècle sur la mort d'une Comtesse de Boulogne," *Bulletin de la Société Académique de l'Arrondissement de Boulogne-sur-Mer* 5 (1891-99): 223-27.

ruby and flower of ladies” (line 43) and also she who “sustained her lands in vigor” (line 44).

In the poet’s experience, then, it was the countess—as lord of Boulogne—who not only provided new knights with the altar cloth for the knighting ceremony and a new set of arms, but also gave them the ritual blow, the *colée* that made them a knight; she vigorously sustained her county, and she protected poor women and maidens. Even allowing for poetic hyperbole, this is a rather remarkable statement of how the Countess, as lord of Boulogne by right of inheritance, acted in ways usually associated with masculine prerogatives, including giving the knightly *colée*, an act strongly marked as male. In other words, the author of the *planctus*, a contemporary witness to the deeds of an inheriting countess of Boulogne in the thirteenth century, depicts her ruling her county well (such that none would trade her lordship for that of Charlemagne, it tells us in lines 27–28 [“Ne cuit que nus pour bone segnorie / en liu de li volsist le roi Charlon.”]), with both authority and power.

*University of Missouri-Kansas City*