
Didier Lechat’s book, Dire par fiction: Métamorphoses du “je” chez Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart et Christine de Pizan, sets forth to examine these authors’ rewritings of mythological, biblical, and historical stories (the fictions of the title) within the fluid, poetic genre of the dit as a metadiscursive means to construct the authors’ poetic selves and their art and to define themselves as clerks within the courtly tradition. (The dit is a loosely defined genre of narrative poems in the first person.) Often argued by critics to be mere narrative digressions, Lechat resituates these fictions as integral to our understanding of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century poetry and authorship.

Lechat begins his study with a chapter in which he asks “why is it preferable to express a truth through a fiction?” as he analyzes fourteenth- and fifteenth-century treatises on the poetic arts, including Machaut’s Prologue, Eustache Deschamps’ L’art de dictier, the anonymous Règles de la second rhétorique, and Jacques Legrand’s Archiloge Sophie. This question is another way of asking how late medieval poets legitimize their poetic creations which Lechat will argue cannot be dissociated from the creative act itself. Thus, Machaut, Froissart, and de Pizan include reflections on the creative act within their poetry, linking their work to these treatises. In this introductory chapter, Lechat also looks at the use of fictions in Le Roman de la Rose as an influence on later poets—a move that he links to the body of the book but which melds poorly with the rest of this chapter.

The longest section of the book focuses on Machaut and his dits. Lechat’s analysis traces the poet’s use of the je [I] in his last four poems. Lechat sees an evolution in Machaut’s use of exempla that culminates in these later poems. Machaut no longer uses the exempla primarily as narrative tools, but rather employs them
more subtly as metadiscursive devices which serve to construct the “je” of both the poet and the narrator through the use of examples such as Pygmalion, Narcissus, and Paris. Lechat’s thesis holds that Machaut’s innovative and multivalent use of mythological stories influences Froissart and de Pizan.

This chapter has some problems. Lechat uses “poet,” “Machaut,” and “Guillaume” interchangeably with many references to the “je-poet” and the “je-narrator” without clearly defining those terms. The connection Lechat is drawing between the exempla and the je is not always explicit, and it sometimes seems as if Lechat is merely reanalyzing the exempla as critics before him have done. At times, the chapter on Machaut seems like a continuation of the introductory material and perhaps should have been shortened as the chapters on Froissart and de Pizan are both stronger and more innovative.

In the chapter on Froissart, Lechat draws connections between Froissart and Machaut that go beyond emulation of poetic form and theme to include the metadiscursive and narrative use of allegory and mythology. In a further advance from Machaut that will also be seen with de Pizan, Lechat demonstrates that Froissart focuses not only on the stories and authors of earlier texts but also on the act of reading and the material artifact of the book itself, thus linking reading and writing to the creative act. In doing so, Froissart draws further attention to himself as a professional writer and focuses his poems outside of the narrative and the narrator to himself, thus giving his works a more autobiographical (albeit often pseudo-autobiographical) edge than Machaut did. Lechat argues that Froissart’s poems slip from tales about love to tales about the act of writing through the examples he chooses and their focus on books, reading, and writing. These examples allow Froissart to comment on the position of the clerk and the poet in society.

In the final, and most compelling, chapter of the book, Lechat analyzes de Pizan’s construction of herself through her use of these fictions.
Unfortunately, the connection with the introduction and the chapters on Machaut and Froissart is sometimes murky. The rest of the book focuses on the genre of the dit and the poetic arts with an emphasis on the narrative je as a pseudo-autobiographical character. (The introduction and the blurb on the back of the book lead the reader to believe that the dit will be the primary focus of the book.) With de Pizan, although Lechat does analyze some of her dits, he quickly switches from an analysis of poetics to an analysis of the autobiographical traits of de Pizan’s historical, moral, and political works. Moreover, the organization of this chapter deviates from that of the previous ones. Lechat focuses on themes within all of de Pizan’s works rather than proceeding on a poem-by-poem basis as he did with Machaut and Froissart, perhaps purposefully in order to demonstrate de Pizan’s more complete mastery of this literary device. However, that is not made clear.

That said, Lechat’s study of de Pizan’s use of exempla is innovative and thoughtful, and, although Lechat does not make the connection explicit enough, one can see the path from Machaut through Froissart to de Pizan through his analysis, especially in regard to the exempla as a metaphor for the author and for the act of reading and writing. As did Machaut and Froissart, de Pizan rewrites myths to suit her purposes, and those rewritings reflect her focus on herself and the condition of women, for example, her use of the myths of Medea and Dido as positive examples for women.

At times, however, Lechat does seem to be rehashing old arguments about de Pizan’s focus on the role of women. It no longer seems necessary to point out that “Christine underlines the role of women” (409) in her historical works, as Lechat does. Lechat’s originality comes when he turns his focus to the relationship between rewriting and subjectivity in de Pizan’s work. His analysis demonstrates that de Pizan’s compilations of mythological and historical examples mix her personal experiences with those fictions to create an intentionally fragmented autoportrait of the author. At the end of the chapter on de
Pizan, Lechat does attempt to bring his thesis back together. Lechat’s argument sheds further light on the shifting notion of subjectivity across the literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in particular by demonstrating, somewhat obliquely, that de Pizan reemploys and shifts the narrative devices of Machaut and Froissart’s poems to define herself as a female author in a world of clerks. The question is whether Lechat succeeds in showing that de Pizan’s use of mythological, biblical, and historical fictions derives from the example of the dits of Machaut and Froissart or whether it comes from examples in works such as *Le Roman de la Rose* and *l’Ovide moralisé*. The inherent intertextuality of the works studied is at the crux of this question, and Lechat acknowledges this difficulty. He concludes that the fictions are a sort of laboratory for the texts where the reader can observe the aesthetic choices of the author.

Lechat’s book is well-researched and includes a comprehensive bibliography of sources and previous critical studies. Because of the independent nature of the sections of the book, the chapters on the separate authors can be read individually, especially the chapter on de Pizan.

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