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"Qui Vauroit Bon Vers Oïr": Voice, Text, and Social Insight in *Aucassin et Nicolette*

Lonnie Tristan Renteria
Portland State University

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COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

[redacted]
Gina L. Greco, Chair

[redacted]
Linda B. Parshall

[redacted]
Hugo M. Maynard
Representative of the Office of Graduate Studies

DEPARTMENT APPROVAL:

[redacted]
Louis J. Elteto, Chair
Department of Foreign Languages and Literature

* *

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ABSTRACT

An Abstract of the thesis of Lonnie Tristan Renteria for the Master of Arts in French presented November 3, 1997.

Title: "Qui Vauroit Bon Vers Oïr": Voice, Text, and Social Insight in *Aucassin et Nicolette*.

Aucassin et Nicolette has stimulated much dialogue among scholars. Literary genres clearly express perceptions that are representative of an historical period and culture, and *Aucassin et Nicolette's* tendency to synthesize literary genres, namely poetry and prose, raises many points relative to the social sphere in which it came into existence. To best illuminate these characteristics in *Aucassin et Nicolette,* an eclectic approach to the text is in order.

The first chapter explores the manner in which the story is told, focusing on the voice as it is the artist's tool to transmit emphatic information. The poet is performer, narrator, both Aucassin and Nicolette, peasant and noble.

The second chapter explores the ideas examined in the first chapter through a textual interpretation of

Aucassin et Nicolette. This text is a hybrid of already thriving literary endeavors. Familiarity is interrupted by variation and deviation in character development and plot line. These interruptions are intentional, not forcibly in a political sense, but as a social event that the author wishes to address through humor. Humor wards off bad feelings. Anti-clerical and anti-chivalric sentiment appear frequently in the story, yet are sublimated into the performance.

The final chapter explores the significance of these sentiments and treats them as artifacts of a larger social context. Whether the author intended or not, *Aucassin et Nicolette* divulges the attitudes of a period and particular culture, a culture whose narrative influences leave much still to be explored.

"QUI VAUROIT BONS VERS OÏR": VOICE, TEXT, AND SOCIAL INSIGHT IN *AUCASSIN ET NICOLETTE*.

by

LONNIE TRISTAN RENTERIA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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in
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To My Family:

Alicia, Yvette, Jonathan and Clarissa

My Father: Pedro Renteria 1943-1974.

and to My Dedicated Partner

Brian David Young

My love and gratitude to the following people:

Brian David Young who was my moral support, my reader and largely my editor.

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"When my father died we put him in the ground
When my father died it was like a whole library had burned down." - Laurie Anderson *World Without End*

Thanks to all story tellers who borrow from the past to create the future.

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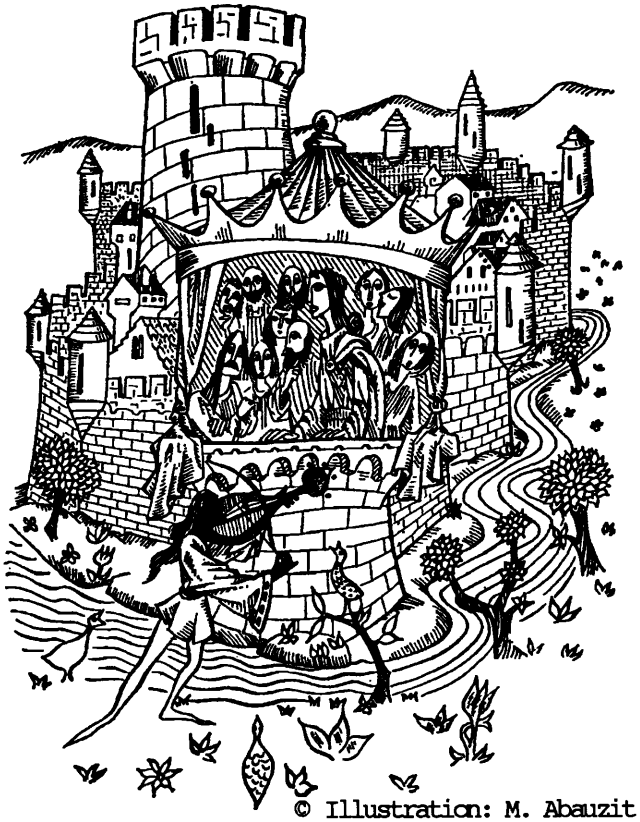

INTRODUCTION

In the Beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God. (John 1.1)

In historical time, the written word is a relatively new construction. The word serves as a signature to humanity's intellectual existence, as it is a means to express experiences and perceptions. We have expanded on the importance of the written word as we develop sophisticated ways to read between the signs. To be precise, we have come to understand text as a composite of psychological perceptions, socio-economic transactions, and cultural artifacts. These illuminations have made it possible to expand our inquiry beyond the text, allowing us to scrutinize the significance of textures, symbols and cultural signs adding to the value of the text.

Aucassin et Nicolette has stimulated much dialogue among scholars. Clearly, literary genres express perceptions that are representative of an historical period and culture, and *Aucassin et Nicolette's* tendency to synthesize literary genres, namely poetry and prose, raises many points relative to the social sphere in which it came into existence. To best illuminate these characteristics in

Aucassin et Nicolette, an eclectic approach to the text is in order.

First and foremost, *Aucassin et Nicolette* is a performance piece. Its spoken aspect mediates emotion and sign differently than the experience of the written word. Even though *Aucassin et Nicolette* exists in scripted form, its importance is manifested in the performance as a mystical entity and creation as we will see in the prologue to the story.

In content, *Aucassin et Nicolette* borrows from many well known stories in medieval lore. The juxtaposition of these stories suggests a thorough knowledge of material in both the poet and the audience since the story progresses without glossing any of its probable sources. The manner in which the stories are transmitted becomes the foundation for the oral aspect of *Aucassin et Nicolette.* In this, *Aucassin et Nicolette* both represents a thriving oral tradition and preserves a still of its period's social history and culture.

Paul Zumthor is a proponent for the inclusion of the human body and voice in the study of medieval poetics, as these were the means by which most information was transmitted. As socio-cultural entities, body and voice not only add to poetic dimensions but also serve as viable

socio-historical composites.[1] There is an immediacy in the performance that demands social astuteness, sharp wit and ease in assimilation of cultural materials. Zumthor comments to this effect:

> Performance proposes a text that, as long as it exists, can carry with it neither erasures nor regrets: a long written work may be drafted in fits and starts whereas the oral one has no rough drafts. Poetic art consists in the poet assuming this instantaneousness, integrating it into the form of his discourse. Whence comes the necessity of a specific eloquence, of an ease in diction and phrasing, of a power of suggestion: an overarching predominance of rhythms. The listener follows the thread; no going back is possible: whatever the desired effect, the message has to make itself heard from the start. Within the framework of such constraints - more than within the freedom of writing and the intention guiding its use - language tends towards an immediacy and a transparency that is less one of meaning than of

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[1] Paul Zumthor, La Poésie et la Voix dans la Civilisation Médiévale (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 9-10.

its linguistic beingness, outside of all "writable" ordering.[2]

The content of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, like many medieval works, spans generations, bridging it through the intertext. The components of *Aucassin et Nicolette* are not discreet variables, instead they represent conglomerates of quintessential medieval themes, archetypes and heroes transmitted through many venues, most notably through the voice.

Let us look at the prologue to *Aucassin et Nicolette*. At its inception into the physical world, the poet / performer echoes the author's intention to note the importance of verbalization.

Si la mélodie est douce, le texte est beau,

fin et bien composé. (43)[3]

Both the audience and the speaker are alerted to the textual spirit. "Si" introduces a condition as we would note in an 'If ...then...' construction. The lines also suggest a strict relationship in conveying meaning between

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[2] Paul Zumthor, Oral Poetry: An Introduction, trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 98.

[3] I have included an English translation taken from: Aucassin & Nicolette, and Other Mediaeval Romances and Legends, trans. Eugene Mason (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1973).

Sweet my rhyme, and full of grace,/ Fair my tale, and debonair.

text and voice. Clearly, there is little room for spontaneity as the text is already laid out for the speaker. Yet there is much more to the verbal art than the text; inflection and other non-verbal communicators come into effect. *Aucassin et Nicolette* becomes an experience facilitated by the speaker. Indeed, the prologue explores the audience's experience as a transcendence of the physical world into a quasi-metaphysical consciousness. Our author says:

> Personne n'est si abattu,
> si affligé et mal en point,
> si gravement malade
> qu'il ne recouvre, à l'entendre, santé,
> joie et vigeur,
> tant l'histoire est d'une grande douceur.(43)[4]

Music expands the textual dimension as music acts as a magical, unifying force. The prologue to *Aucassin et Nicolette* makes this assertion. Certainly the melody cannot cure the ill, yet it can deter from daily annoyances and make meaning through simple pleasure. Our author most certainly enjoyed an astuteness to the inherently phatic

---

[4] He who lists-though full of care,/ sore astonished, much amazed,/ All cast down, by men mispraised,/ sick in body, sick in soul,/ Hearing shall be glad and whole,/ So sweet the tale.

relationships involved in music and text. An engaged voice, then, is not simply utilitarian, as Stephen Nichols notes. Instead it is a connector with an added social appeal, different from the constraints of recitation.[5]

The influence of emphatic storytelling is ever present in *Aucassin et Nicolette*. The story recaps its dynamic all the way to its conclusion through different literary devices and characters. Our discussion takes us into the story's world, a unique piece from the thirteenth century comprising rich images of medieval society.

The first chapter will explore the manner in which the story is told. We take for granted that the poet is the instrument of the story, like a dancer is to the dance. His utterances represent several textual voices. The voice will be our focal point as it is the artist's tool to transmit emphatic information. The poet is narrator, both Aucassin and Nicolette, peasant and noble.

The second chapter will explore the ideas examined in the first chapter through a textual interpretation of *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Since the work is a hybrid[6] of

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[5] Stephen G. Nichols, "Voice and Writing in Augustine and in the Troubador Lyric," Vox intexta, ed. A.N Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991) 138.

[6] Kevin Brownlee, "Generic Hybrids," A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Massachusetts: Harvard U P, 1994) 88.

already thriving literary endeavors, familiarity is interrupted by variation and deviation in character development and plot line. These interruptions are intentional, not forcibly in a political sense, but as a social event that the author wishes to address through humor. Humor wards off bad feelings. Anti-clerical and anti-chivalric sentiment appear frequently in the story, yet are sublimated into the performance.

Our final chapter will explore the significance of these sentiments and treat them as artifacts of a larger social context. Whether the author intended or not, *Aucassin et Nicolette* divulges the attitudes of a period and particular culture.

CHAPTER 1: VOICE

The voice, without a doubt, offers its life-force to the written word. It is unimaginable to attend any performance where words are recited without emphatic expression. An emphatic voice confers authority to the speaker and demands attention from its audience. A performance is then rated by how well the performer conveys the meaning of the words he or she has uttered. Because *Aucassin et Nicolette*'s narration is roughly composed of a series of dialogues, the poet / performer is met with a greater challenge as already noted in the prologue. The poet breathes life into the text, animating the protagonists. In this way, the story offers a quasi-impromptu exercise in which the poet must keep his wits about him, since he is formally the representative of each character. It is an undertaking that takes skill in acting and storytelling in order to maintain continuity of structure, underlying tensions, and adversities.

By treating the voice as a tool, our discussion is speculative. Yet, all is not lost. Paul Zumthor has laid a foundation for the study of the voice in medieval culture in protest to the attitude that the question of orality is

a dead topic.[7] He agrees that it is impossible to make overarching dogmatic assertions about the transmission of information via the voice in medieval culture. In its place, he offers the notion that stories be studied as cases, foregrounding the evidence that suggests the use of the voice as purveyor of information.[8] *Aucassin et Nicolette* is such a case. As already noted in the prologue, the voice takes a strong role in the transmission of this story. In this discussion, we will explore and foreground the importance of the voice as noted in the text.

Aucassin et Nicolette alternates its chapters from poetry to prose and then prose to poetry. The alternation in both cases functions for the most part as a recapitulation of events, hinging on verbal exchanges between protagonists that are translated into narrative elements as declarative sentences. In many instances, the protagonist interrupts the narrative, engaging the attention of the audience. These interruptions serve as an extension of the performer's dialogue with the audience at the story's inception into the physical world, "Qui vauroit bon vers oïr."

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[7] Zumthor, La Poésie et la Voix dans la Civilisation Médiévale 9-10.

[8] Zumthor, La Poésie et la Voix dans la Civilisation Médiévale 37-47.

The prologue sets the mood, and with the establishing scene, the poet / performer guides the audience into the story where he establishes that Aucassin's father is at war with his neighbor. Aucassin is an heir and is expected to follow in line with his noble upbringing. His Aryan looks also make him the quintessential knight. The refusal to take arms against his neighbor defines the tension that manifests itself in the dialogue between Aucassin and his father. Their utterances take the authority of the text to a different level, in that the poet merely relates each individual's words. Moreover his primary function as narrator is the recapping and integration of details for the sake of momentum and continuity. The dialogue begins:

> - Cher fils, prends donc les armes, monte à cheval, défends ta terre, aide tes sujets. S'ils te voient au milieu d'eux, ils en défenderont mieux leurs personnes et leurs biens, ta terre et la mienne.
>
> - Père, fait Aucassin, que racontez-vous là? Que Dieu me refuse tout ce que je peux lui demander si j'accepte, une fois chevalier, de monter à cheval, de prendre ma part à des combats et à des batailles où j'échange des coups avec des chevaliers, sans que vous m'accordiez d'épouser Nicolette, ma douce amie que j'aime tant!

- Fils, reprend le père, cela ne saurait être. Renonce à Nicolette : C'est une captive, ramenée d'une terre étrangère, que le vicomte de cette ville acheta aux Sarrasins et qu'il amena ici; il l'a tenue sur les fonts baptismaux et l'a fait baptiser: elle est devenue sa filleule; bientôt, il lui donnera un époux un jeune homme qui lui gagnera honorablement de quoi manger. Cela ne te concerne pas. Mais si tu veux prendre femme, je te donnerai la fille d'un roi ou d'un compte ; il n'est pas en France d'hommes si puissant dont tu n'aies la fille si tu le désires.(47)[9]

This particular chapter comprises fifty-two lines of prose in which three distinct voices are heard, Aucassin, count and narrator. If anything, this construction is a sign of enforced agility in the poet's training.

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[9] - Son, don now thy mail, mount thy horse, keep thy land, and render aid to thy men. Should they see thee amongst them the better will the men-at-arms defend their bodies and their substance, thy fief, and mine.

- Father, said Aucassin, why speakest thou in such fashion to me? May God give me nothing of my desire if I become knight, or mount to horse, or thrust into the press to strike other or be smitten down, save only that thou give me Nicolette, my sweet friend, whom I love so well.

- Son, answered the father, this may not be. Put Nicolette from mind. For Nicolette is but a captive maid, come hither from a far country, and the viscount of this town bought her with money from the Saracens, and set her in this place. He hath nourished and baptized her, and held her at the font. On a near day he will give her to some young bachelor, who will gain her bread in all honour. With this what hast thou to do? Ask for a wife, and I will find thee the daughter of a king, or a count. Were he the richest man in France his daughter shalt thou have, if so thou wilt.

The trained poet is also capable of impromtu versification. The text illustrates this talent in the following examples. After Aucassin's father loses patience with Aucassin's refusal to renounce Nicolette, he has Aucassin imprisoned. Nicolette pays him a visit as she has decided to leave the land of Beaucaire for her safety. When Aucassin's guard senses danger, he transmits both an impromptu and encoded message to Nicolette in poetic form:

Jeune fille au cœur noble,
tu as le corps élégant et séduisant,
les cheveux blonds et charmants,
les yeux vifs et le visage riant.
Je vois bien à ton aspect
que tu viens de parler à ton ami
qui se meurt d'amour pour toi.
Sois attentive à mes propos:
méfie-toi des traîtres
qui te recherchent en ce lieu,
la lame nue sous la pèlerine;
ils se répandent contre toi en violentes menaces,
et sans tarder te cuaseront des désagréments,
si dès maintenant tu n'y prends garde.(89)[10]

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[10] In Old French, the rhyme scheme fot this passage is seven syllables with lines ending in /ã/.

Lady of the loyal mind,/ Slender, gracious, very kind,/ Gleaming head and golden hair,/ Laughing lips and eyes of vair!/ Easy, Lady, 'tis to tell / Two have speech

Nicolette bids her lover farewell and escapes into the forest.

Nicolette's entrance into the forest begins with a prayer between two prose chapters:

Père, roi de majesté,
maintenant je ne sais où aller:
si je vais dans le bois touffu,
à coup sûr je serai mangée par les loups,
les lions et les sangliers
qui y sont en grand nombre;
et si j'attends l'aube
si bien qu'on puisse me trouver ici,
on allumera un bûcher
dont le feu embrasera mon corps.
Mais, par le Dieu majesté,
je préfère encore de beaucoup
être mangée par les loups,
les lions et les sangliers
plutôt que d'aller dans la cité:
je n'irai pas.(95)[11]

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who love full well. / Yet in peril are they met,/ Set the snare, and spread the net./ Lo, the hunters draw this way,/ Cloaked, with privy knives, to slay./ Ere the huntsmen spie the chace / Let the quarry haste apace / And keep her well.

[11] Father, King of Majesty,/ Where to turn I know not, I./ So, within the woodland gloom / Wolf and boar and lion roam / Fearful things, with rav'ning maw,/ Rending tusk

In the first example, the presence of danger mediates the need to create a stylized language. It is a means to convey information among the few who know the code. This particular exercise in poetry is just the beginning of a more complex system of metaphors to be used in the text.

The second example expresses a prayer. A prayer usually involves verbalization. Prayer appears universally and is known for its power as it passes from our mouths into the physical world. The primary purpose of prayer is wish fulfillment, like a spell casting the words into the physical world in order to alter physical events and / or perceptions. From the poet to the audience, Nicolette's prayer inspires feelings of hope by its supplicant tone. Moreover, the prayer shows pagan influence in that it begins with making an appeal to the Christian god yet concludes with her own pronouncement. Its willful conclusion has a spell caster's charm "It is my will; my will be done."

As the events begin to culminate, circumstances dictate the alteration in communication. As with any code, one must be privy to the code to decode it. In language,

---

and tooth and claw./ Yet, if all adread I stay,/ Men will come at break of day,/ Treat me to their heart's desire,/ Burn my body in the fire./ But by God's dear majesty / Such a death I will not die;/ Since I die, ah, better then / Trust the boar than trust to men./ Since all's evil, men and beast,/ Chose I the least.

this would be the ability to understand the metaphor. From the experience of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the audience enjoys the privilege of understanding the code merely by being present. Universal metaphors indeed find a place in the story, but we will save the discussion for a later chapter.

Nicolette transforms her word and identity to figural representations. In the woods, Nicolette meets a group of shepherds who are also servants to the Beaucaire Estate. Since they already have ties to Aucassin, she graciously asks that they convey a message to him.

> - Au nom de Dieu, chers enfants, fit-elle, dites-lui qu'il y a une bête dans cette forêt et qu'il vienne la chasser: s'il peut la prendre, il n'en donnerait pas un seul de ses membres pour cent marcs d'or, pas même pour cinq cents, ou pour tout l'or du monde.(97)[12]

The shepherds are oblivious to the encoded message. The message does however raise suspicion in them. The more adept one responds:

> -Moi, le lui dire? fit celui qui parlait mieux que les autres. Au diable qui jamais en parlera et jamais le lui répétera! Pures rêveries que vos propos; il n'y a

[12] -So God keep you, pretty boy, said she, as you tell him that within this wood there is a fair quarry for his hunting; and if he may take her he would not part with one of her members for a golden marks, nor for five hundred, nay, nor for aught that man can give.

> pas dans cette forêt de bête si précieuse, ni cerf, ni lion, ni sanglier, dont un des membres vaille plus de deux deniers ou de trois au maximum, et vous, vous parlez d'une montagne d'or! A tous les diables qui vous croit et qui jamais le lui répétera! Vous êtes une fée, nous ne recherchons pas votre compagnie, passez plûtot votre chemin.(99)[13]

Nicolette responds:

> - Ah! mes chers enfants, reprit-elle, si, vous le ferez. La bête a une telle vertu qu'elle guérira Aucassin de sa blessure. J'ai cinq sous dans ma bourse : tenez-les, et dites-le-lui; avant trois jours, il faut qu'il se mette en chasse; s'il ne la trouve pas dans ces trois jours, jamais il ne sera guéri de sa blessure.(99)[14]

As we see here, money aids memory.

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[13] - Will I tell him? cried he who was readier of word than his companions. Woe to him who speak of it ever, or tell Aucassin what you say. You speak not truth but faery, for in all this forest there is no beast - neither stag, nor lion, nor boar - one of whose legs would be worth two pence, or three at the very best, and you talk of five hundred marks of gold. Woe betide him who believes your story, or shall spread it abroad. You are a fay, and not fit company for such as us, so pass upon your road.

[14] - Ah, fair child, answered she, yet you will do as I pray. For this beast is the only medicine that may heal Aucassin of his hurt. And I have here five sous in my purse, take them, and give him my message. For within three days must he hunt this chace, and if within three days he find not the quarry, never may he cure him of his wound.

These particular passages serve to illustrate the referentialities in oral traditions. Michael Riffaterre explains that frequently oral traditions ground themselves in memory through referents (remembering) other than memorization. This is to say that signs, whether being prominent cultural mythologies or objects with cultural significances, are well established in universal experiences. When referred to any one of these signs, the audiences understand the significances without explanation.[15] I will not deny that *Aucassin et Nicolette* appears to function in both realms of memory (referential and memorization), but this scene in particular explicitly demonstrates the relationship of reference between money and the transmission of information. The shepherds have no text to memorize. The dialogue works instead in references. If we look at the linguistic content, Nicolette seems to have a thorough understanding of referentiality. She speaks of herself as an animal graced with much worth. The fact that the shepherds misunderstand Nicolette's claim and deem it preposterous, indicates that the message was received and partly understood. The story will be remembered, the exchange of money will allow for it to be transmitted.

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[15] Michael Riffaterre, "The Mind's eye: Memory and Textuality," The New Medievalism, ed. Marina Brownlee et al. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991) 33.

The shepherds cannot hold back both their mirth and feelings of gain, as can be noted in their chant:

...Mes chers petits amis,
que Dieu aide le jeune Aucassin,
oui vraiment, c'est un bel adolescent;
et la jeune fille en corsage,
la blondinette,
au lumineux visage et à l'œil vif,
qui nous donna des deniers
avec lesquels nous achèterons des tartelettes,
des canifs avec leur gaines,
des flûteaux et des cornets,
des massues et des pipeaux,
que Dieux la sauve! (107)[16]

With every utterance the shepherds create another association to Nicolette and their task of transmitting the story to Aucassin.

In the two chapters to follow, Aucassin hears the shepherds while on his search for Nicolette. An air of trepidation seizes the moment as Aucassin approaches the few. Aucassin attempts to elicit the song he just heard. The more adept shepherd responds defensively, establishing

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[16] - ...God keep in ward / Aucassin, our brave young lord./ Keep besides the damsel fair,/ Blue of eye and gold of hair,/ Gave us witherall to buy / Cate and sheath knife presently,/ Horn and quarter staff and fruit,/ Shepherd's and country flute; God make him well.

himself as the count's servant and not Aucassin's. It is clear from this interaction, then, that any of Aucassin's requests would need to be transactional. We see this when he offers money for information. The more adept shepherd responds:

> Elle nous donna tant de sa bourse que nous lui fîmes la promesse que, si vous veniez ici, nous vous conseillerions d'aller chasser dans cette forêt: il y a une bête telle que, si vous pouviez la capturer, vous ne donneriez pas un seul de ses membres pour cinq cent marcs d'argent, ni pour tout l'or du monde. Elle a, en effet, une telle vertu que, si vous pouvez la capturer, vous seriez guéri de votre blessure; mais il faut que vous l'ayez capturée avant trois jours; sinon, vous ne la verrez jamais. Maintenant, vous êtes libre de la poursuivre ou d'y renoncer: moi, je me suis acquitté de la promesse que je lui ai faite.(111)[17]

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[17] - She gave us money, and made a bargain with us that if you came here we would tell you that you must hunt in this forest, for in it is such a quarry that if you may take her you would not part with one of her members for five hundred silver marks, nor aught that man can give. For in this quest so sweet a salve that if you take her you shall be cured of your wound; and within three days must the chace be taken, for if she be not found by then, never will you see her more.

Now go to your hunting if you will, and if you will not, let it go, for truly have I carried out my bargain with her.

Recounting the experience illustrates the venues of reference that we have been discussing. Let us note that the story is sequential in order to not corrupt any detail. Clearly, the more adept shepherd explains how he came into the knowledge of events, absolving himself from any responsibility other than to transmit this information. The sequential order illuminates a pattern of associations different from verbatim memorization. For this pattern to work, the listener must show comprehension. Aucassin's eagerness to go out to the hunt expresses the transmission's success.

The verbal relationship between both subjects, Aucassin and the adept shepherd, is at the heart of our discussion. As we have seen, the verbal relationship between protagonists compounds the relationship between the poet / performer and the audience. In this case, it demonstrates the transcendence of the verbal relationship; the poet / performer becomes equally the narrator and protagonist's voice. The text also translates this tendency when the more adept shepherd narrates his experience to Aucassin and then utters Nicolette's words verbatim. Furthermore, the representation of extemporaneous exercises of poetry in the text could very well indicate what the poet / performer himself is asked to achieve. Since there is an assumption that the poet is an astute observer of the

time, it is clear that the poet / performer chooses words carefully for specified audiences. The audience interprets the signs to the degree that it is privy to the code where both life and textual experience drive the text. Moreover, the order in which events are recounted is based on sequential associations and not solely memorization of content. All these points are readily accessible in the final chapters of *Aucassin et Nicolette.*

The author of *Aucassin et Nicolette* has prefaced his story with a happy ending. The final episodes should then be a culmination of events that lead to a happy ending. As it goes, the final chapters unveil Nicolette's true identity as a princess, the death of Aucassin's parents, the subsequent inheritance of the Beaucaire estate, and Aucassin and Nicolette's marriage.

In the final chapters, our author makes a clever transposition. In the performance, the audience enters into a dialogue with the poet / performer. The poet / performer mediates and inspires the audience through word and song. In the second to last chapter, our author offers Nicolette a role as poet / performer. She is endowed with the same gift of song and wit that is expected of the poet / performer. Nicolette returns to Beaucaire disguised as a minstrel. She perceives Aucassin sitting forlorn on a stone bench with an entourage of nobles. Nicolette approaches

them and sings. Note the similarity to the story's prologue:

Ecoutez-moi, nobles et haut seigneurs,
ceux d'en bas comme ceux d'en haut:
vous plairait-il d'entendre une chanson
sur Aucassin, un noble et haut seigneur,
et sur la vaillante Nicolette?
Ils ne cessèrent de s'aimer
si bien qu'il partit à la recherche de son amie dans
le bois profond.
Au donjon de Torelore
les païens les prirent un jour.
D'Aucassin nous ne savons rien,
mais la vaillante Nicolette
se trouve au donjon de Carthagène,
car son père l'aime beaucoup,
qui est seigneur de ce royaume-là.
On veut lui donner un époux
un roi païen rempli de félonie.
Nicolette refuse
car elle aime un jeune seigneur
jadis nommé Aucassin.
Elle jure par Dieu et son saint nom
qu'elle ne se mariera jamais
si on ne lui donne son amoureux

qu'elle désire tant.(155)[18]

A vibrant Aucassin greets the message and engages the disguised Nicolette, pleading with her to return to Carthage with a message of love and devotion for Nicolette, which results in marriage and the conclusion of the story.

The poet/ performer asserts his proper voice in the epilogue as he did in the prologue. Where the prologue functions in drawing the audience into Aucassin and Nicolette's world, the epilogue draws them back out into the real world. The epilogue summarizes the events after Nicolette returns to Beaucaire to be at Aucassin's side. The epilogue proposes a fairy tale ending, "they live happily ever after." Yet the last two lines of the epilogue deviate from the proverbial ending, "notre chantfable se termine,/ et je n'ai plus rien à dire." Two points are clear from these two lines. "Notre," a possessive adjective, establishes ownership of the story. Indeed, the audience internalizes the experience and it becomes their

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[18] - Lords and ladies, list to me,/ High and low, of what degree;/ Now I sing, for your delight,/ Aucassin, that loyal knight,/ and his fond friend, Nicolette./ Such love betwixt them set / When his kinsfolk sought her head / Fast he followed where she fled./ From their refuge in the keep / Paynims bore them o'er the deep / Nought of him I know to end./ But for Nicolette, his friend,/ Dear she is, desirable,/ For her father loves her well;/ Famous Carthage owns him king,/ Where she has sweet cherishing./ Now, as lord he seeks for her,/ Sultan, Caliph, proud Emir./ But the maid of these will none,/ For she loves a dansellon,/ Aucassin, who plighted troth./ Sworn has she some pretty oath / Ne'er shall she wife or bride,/ Never lie at baron's side / Be he denied.

own, albeit vicarious. Second, the poet/ performer establishes that all along he is the storyteller. It prompts the audience to reconsider its involvement in the story, especially its focus on the "magical," the power inherent in verbalization.

In our next chapter, we will explore the text in greater depth. It is important to illuminate the oral mode of *Aucassin et Nicolette* in that it helps to expand our interpretation of the text proper.

CHAPTER 2: TEXT

Vernacular literatures, like *Aucassin et Nicolette*, reflect oral traditional narratives. It goes without saying that the uttered word precedes the text. Vernacular narratives, as Abert B. Lord points out, are conceived and mature long before textualities. Where lexicons are mutable, stylistic practices appear to remain relatively stable.[19] Lord explains:

> Oral traditional literature is dynamic. While it preserves older stories, it also engenders new ones from old materials or by analogy with the traditional narrative elements. Tradition is always changing *within the parameters of traditional society and its traditional media*...[20]

If anything, *Aucassin et Nicolette* proposes an example of the thirteenth-century tendency towards synthesis of

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[19] Albert B. Lord, "Oral Composition and 'Oral Residue' in the Middle Ages," Oral Traditions in Medieval Literature, ed. W.F.H Nicolaisen (New York: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1995) 8. Emphasis his.

[20] Lord 16.

various literary conventions and narrative materials as we will see in the pages to follow.

Our previous chapter explored the emphasis of voice in the text. In this chapter, we will explore some textual derivatives already in existence in medieval lore embedded into the structure of *Aucassin et Nicolette*. As older material makes its way into the newer narrative, the shift in perspective unveils information about both the audience and external social realities at work in the minds of its audience. In *Aucassin et Nicolette*, the older narratives are recontextualized in service to the newer one. Rather than being neutral to extant material, *Aucassin et Nicolette* responds playfully to it.

Aucassin et Nicolette is a story about play on several levels. On a fundamental level, the author establishes his intention in the prologue. He claims to be an old man who has a story to tell, nothing serious or profound, but for enjoyment. When we look to his textual sources, it becomes apparent that our author responds to Chrétien de Troyes. Chrétien complained about frivolity in vernacular literatures in his prologue to *Erec et Enide*: "...devant des rois et des comtes, on entend d'ordinaire ceux qui content / Pour gagner leur vie en dire des morceaux sans

lien et gâter tout le récit."[21] "Ordinaire" refers to cultural received opinions that are complacent and mundane. According to Chrétien, these discursive practices were limited to their economic imperative, "pour gagner leur vie," the proverbial 'singing for one's supper.' A strong moral imperative is in order in Chrétien's work.

The time differential, about sixty years, between the composition of *Aucassin et Nicolette* and Chrétien's romances illuminates philosophical differences about the narrative. Chrétien conforms to more traditional imperatives where the patron had a strong influence on content as many of Chrétien's prologues express.[22] The prologue to *Aucassin et Nicolette,* however, is devoid of any of these obligations, other than to recount a story of impressionistic beauty.

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[21] Chrétien de Troyes, Erec et Enide, trans. René Louis (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1984) 1.

[22] Dominique Boutet, Littérature, Politique et Société dans la France du Moyen Age (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979) 70.

Boutet expresses similar tendencies in the courtly lyric:

> La lyrique courtoisie est par essence ambigue; le chant repose, thématiquement sur un certain nombre de conventions acceptées par tous, mais dont la bienséance veut généralement qu'elles ne sortent pas de leur nature conventionelle. Lorsque tel troubadour se prenait au jeu; il risquerait de se heurter à une réalité cruellement amère.

After having read and experienced the story, it is evident that the prologue contradicts the summary of the protagonists' stated roles. The verse promises an adventure "sur les tourments que souffrit celui-ci / et les exploits qu'il accomplit / pour son amie au lumineux visage"(44).[23] The author is easily forgiven because the work promises an oneiric narrative, a dialogue between author and auditor subverted into the performance.

The cultural references do not deviate much from the ideal. In example, Aucassin represents aristocratic ideals on a physical plane, since he appears to materialize from extant types:

> Beau, élégant, grand, il avait les jambes, les pieds, le corps et les bras bien faits. Ses cheveux étaient blonds et très bouclés, ses yeux vifs et rieurs, son visage lumineux et allongé, son nez haut et bien planté. Il était doué de tant de qualités qu'il n'y avait place en lui pour aucun défaut (45).[24]

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[23] How by grievous pains distraught,/ Noble deeds the varlet wrought / For his love, and her bright face!

[24] Fair he was, and pleasant to look upon, tall and shapely of body in every whit of him. His hair was golden, and curled in little rings about his head; he had grey and dancing eyes, a clear, oval face, a nose high and comely, and he was so gracious in all good graces that nought in him was found to blame, but good alone.

Interestingly enough, the flattering chivalric description encounters an opposition in the same passage. "Mais" announces the reality behind the appearance. "Amour" surpasses the chivalric identity as we see in the continuation in the prose:

> Mais Amour, le souverain maître, s'était emparé de lui à un tel point qu'il ne voulait pas être fait chevalier, ni prendre les armes, ni aller au tournoi, ni accomplir à aucun de ses devoirs (45).[25]

The contrastive element openly divulges the social principle governing Aucassin's existence. He refuses knighthood which is a common expectation and, from the text, clearly his for the taking. Outside of the text, a renunciation of one's social duty would have negative social consequences. As it stands, this scene is an adaptation from Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*. Erec is so smitten with Enide that he refuses to take arms and to engage in tournaments. Different from Aucassin, Erec's abandonment to love creates tension in his relationship. Enide overhears comments that put Erec's honor into question, connoting serious social consequences from his

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[25] But Love, that high prince, so utterly had cast him down, that he cared not to become knight, neither to bear arms, nor to tilt at tourneys, nor yet to do aught that it became his name to do.

inaction. She laments his inaction and urges him to carry on with his chivalric duties against his wishes.

Aucassin, unlike Erec is not immediately punished. Instead, Aucassin's parents engage him in a dialogue which he discredits outright. They impress on him the notion that he is renouncing what is his by birthright and inevitably his responsibility. Aucassin's parents speak in matters of property: "défends ta terre, aide tes sujets"(45).[26] His response illustrates obliviousness to his duty, perceived as merely the art of combat. Most notably, "Amour" in capital letters asks nothing of Aucassin. The struggle facing Aucassin is not an internal one as might be seen in one of Chrétien's dialogues. It is the continuation of an intentional inaction which seems to be one of Aucassin's strongest attributes. 'Amour' paralyses him. Its literary contrast is the conflict Amour / Raison in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de La Charette*. This story best illustrates the allegorical struggle in the protagonist's psyche where two strong tendencies, love and duty, the private and public, are set at odds. Lancelot is set against an internal struggle when he is asked to get into the cart. His rank as a knight would be discredited because only criminals and the dregs of humanity allowed themselves

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[26] Son, don now thy mail, mount thy horse, keep thy land, and render aid to thy men.

to be seen in public riding in a cart. Chrétien illustrates a strong recognition of the social value system to which Lancelot belongs. The tension at first seems irresolute, demonstrated by Lancelot's hesitation. Chrétien, however, resolves this tension by associating love with religious love which preserves Lancelot's honor as a knight. Although Lancelot foregoes the codes of chivalry, he does not renounce chivalry altogether.

Aucassin's situation represents an historical reality different from that of the errant knight in Arthurian literature. His situation represents familial structures in the changing age of the thirteenth century. From the text, we assume that Aucassin is an only child, and his estate is Beaucaire. According to Georges Duby, the disintegration of regal power over many lands left many land owners on their own. He remarks that there is a "genealogical awareness," an inheritance of power passed from father to son with the expressed purpose of preserving the family lineage.[27] Aucassin comes from a family devoid of regal ties. Since there is no regal defense, the land owner must make alliances and furthermore establish a means of defense. On a social level, the lineage is not to be spoiled by lower ranking blood.

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[27] Georges Duby, Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages, trans. Jane Dunnett (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) 107.

The latter example finds expression in the dialogue between Aucassin and his parents which continues to expose governing social principles. When Aucassin expresses his love for Nicolette, he is met with contempt. Nicolette is abased and brought to the level of peasant and slave : "Une captive, ramenée d'une terre étrangère, que le vicomte de cette ville acheta aux Sarrasins et qu'il amena ici"(47).[28] Nobles are not bought and sold as slaves. Aucassin reproaches his father in dignifying Nicolette with the expression that she has "une dignité elevée" and futhermore "Si elle était impératrice de Constantinople ou d'Allemagne, reine de France ou d'Angleterre, encore serait-ce trop peu pour elle, tellement elle est noble, courtoise, généreuse, doué de toutes les qualités"(47).[29] In sum, Aucassin's reactions demonstrate his rejection of stringent social norms, and a desire to choose his own partner, which is an echo of notions propounded by Marie de France exposing the sadness of the Mal Mariée, a woman who is married for lineage and appearances.

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[28] For Nicolette is but a captive maid, come hither from a far country, and the Viscount of this town bought her with money from the Saracens, and set her in this place.

[29]...what honour of all this world would not Nicolette, my very sweet friend, most richly become! Were she Empress of Byzantium or of Allemaigne, or Queen of France or England, low enough would be her degree, so noble is she, so courteous and debonair, and gracious in all good graces.

Although Nicolette figures in the text in quality and spirit, she is not presented by the author until after she is imprisoned by her father who reacts to the count's threats. As viscount, Nicolette's father is obligated to do the will of his superior. Interestingly enough, the viscount does not let rank abase him. A critical dialogue transpires between the two which is one of dual signification. The text presents Aucassin's father as the conversation's initiator, attempting to gain advantage over his servant. A comical element is introduced in that the viscount's responses are of dual signification which is best illustrated by the story's turn of phrase. The viscount repeats verbatum the speech the count made to Aucassin with regard to Nicolette. He emphasizes that he wants Nicolette to marry a man who would earn her bread honorably. From this vantage point, he demonstrates recognition of social codes. From another vantage point, he offers a comment about social codes suggesting the importance of self-suficiency in contrast to more archaic feudal hierarchies. Turning to social construction, the audience may have understood the relevance in this comment as the sign of the breakdown of aristocratic society.

When the text first introduces Nicolette, we know her as Nicole. The proper name Nicole serves to elevate her status. The sequence of signs concurs.

Nicole est imprisonnné
Dans une chambre voûtée,
habilement conçue
et ornée de merveilleuses peintures.
A la fenêtre de marbre
s'est appuyée la jeune fille:
sa chevelure est blonde,
ses sourcils bien dessinés,
son visage lumineux et fin:
vous n'avez jamais vu de plus belle (55).[30]

Authorial voice lays to rest any wrongs expressed by Aucassin's father. Our Nicolette resembles more an Yseut than a Saracen. Ironically, Aucassin holds a diminutive of a Saracen name, and the Saracen a diminutive French name.[31]

From the story's hermeneutical clues, the audience can clearly intuit the revelation that will bring Aucassin and Nicolette together. Nicolette is surrounded by luxury and refinement. To my knowledge, no courtly lyric endows a

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[30] The translation does not make the distinction Nicole/ Nicolette.

Nicolette is prisoned fast,/ In a vaulted chamber cast,/ Shaped and carven wondrous well,/ Painted as by miracle./ At the marble casement stayed / On her elbow leaned the maid;/ Golden showed her golden hair,/ Softly curved her eyebrows rare,/ Fair her face, and brightly flushed,/ Sweeter maiden never blushed.

[31] Jean Dufournet, préface, Aucassin et Nicolette, trans. Jean Dufournet, 2nd ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1984) 9.

peasant or slave with Nicolette's decorum or beauty. Eugene Vance furthers explains: "that Nicolette speaks authentically, like Aucassin, in elevated discourse of verse probably sufficed to identify her as a noble in the audience's mind, despite the seeming disgrace of her origins."[32] Moreover, there is no story without Nicolette.

Imprisoned, Nicolette is said to have complained. When she makes an utterance, the complaint explicitly denotes a rebellion. She does not resolve to remain locked up. Eugene Vance posits that her heroic action is disruptive since action is reserved for men.[33] Aucassin differs from Nicolette in assertiveness. His responses are reactive as would be typical of a juvenile spirit as the following passages illustrate.

> -Cher seigneur, répondit le vicomte, renoncez-y. Nicolette est une captive que j'ai ramenée d'une terre étrangère; de mon argent je l'ai achetée à des Sarrasins; je l'ai tenue sur les fonts baptimaux et fait baptiser : elle est devenue ma filleule; je l'ai élevée et comptais, un de ces, jours, lui donner pour époux un jeune homme qui pût honorablement lui gagner

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[32] Eugene Vance, Mervelous Signals : Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989) 163.

[33] Vance 166.

de quoi vivre : cela ne vous concerne pas. Mais épousez plutôt la fille d'un roi ou d'un comte. Surtout, quel gain vous imagineriez-vous avoir réalisé, si vous aviez fait d'elle votre maîtresse et votre concubine? C'eût été pour vous un bien piètre profit, puisque, pendant toute l'éternité, votre âme demeurerait en enfer, sans jamais entrer en paradis.

- En paradis qu'ai-je à faire? Je ne cherche pas à y entrer, à condition que j'ai avec moi Nicolette ma très douce amie que j'aime tant, car en paradis ne vont que les gens que je vais vous énumerer. Ceux qui y vont, ce sont ces vieux prêtres, ces vieux éclopés, ces manchots qui, tout le jour et toute la nuit, restent accroupis devant les autels et dans les vieilles cryptes, et ceux qui portent de vieilles capes râpées et de vieilles hardes, qui sont nus, sans souliers ni chausses, qui meurent de faim, de soif, de froid et de misère. Tels sont les gens qui vont en paradis : avec ceux-là je n'ai rien à faire. Mais c'est en enfer que vont les beaux clercs, les beaux chevaliers morts dans les tournois ou les guerres éclatantes, les valeureux hommes d'armes et les nobles : C'est avec ceux-là que je veux aller. Y vont aussi les belles dames assez courtoises pour avoir deux amis ou trois en plus de leur mari; y vont encore les

joueurs de harpe, les jongleurs, les rois de ce monde : c'est avec ceux-là que je veux aller, à condition que j'ai avec moi Nicolette ma très douce amie. (57-59)[34]

The viscount is determined to keep Aucassin from turning Nicolette into a possession, as illustrated in

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[34] -Sir Viscount, what have you done with Nicolette, my very sweet friend, the thing that most I love in all the world? Have you borne her off, or hidden her from my sight? Be sure that that should I die hereof, my blood will be required of you, as is most just, for I am slain of your two hands, since you steal from me the thing that most I love in all the world.

-Fair sire, answered the Viscount, put this from mind. Nicolette is a captive maid whom I brought here from a far country. For her price I trafficked with the Saracens, and I have bred and baptized her, and held her at the font. I have nourished her duly, and on a day will give her to some young bachelor who will gain her bread in honourable fashion. With you have nought to do; but only to wed the daughter of some count or king. Beyond this, what profit would you have, had you become her lover, and taken her to your bed? Little enough would be your gain therefrom, for your soul would lie tormented in Hell all the days of all time, so that to Paradise never should you win.

-In Paradise what have I to do? I care not to enter, but only to have Nicolette, my very sweet friend, whom I love so dearly well. For into Paradise go none but such people as I will tell you of. There go the agèd priests, and all those old cripples, and the maimed, who all day long and all night cough before the altars, and in the crypts beneath the churches; those who go in worn mantles and old tattered habits; who are naked, and barefoot, and full of sores; who are dying of hunger and of thirst, of cold and of wretchedness. Such as these enter into Paradise, and with them have I nought to do. But in Hell will I go. For to Hell go fair clerks and the the fair knights who are slain in the tourney and the great wars, and the stout archer and the loyal man. With them will I go. And there go the fair and courteous ladies, who have friends, two or three, together with their wedded lords. And there pass the gold and the silver, the ermine and all the rich furs, harpers and minstrels, and the happy of the world. With these will I go, so only that I have Nicolette, my very sweet friend, by my side.

Aucassin's own word "chose." To deter Aucassin's attention, he addresses Nicolette's origins which he knows to be incompatible with Aucassin's social rankings. The viscount further implies the social disrepute of the upper echelons. He asserts that his money bought Nicolette, which suggests the honesty in his earnings, in contrast to the barbarity of landowners whose claims to wealth are conquest, intimidation and 'rançon'(ransom), not a reasonably stable income. Indeed he states that the young man who weds Nicolette will be a man who earns an honorable means, a comment ironically made earlier by Aucassin's father. In turn, he prompts Aucassin to consider marrying a king or count's daughter, women who would definitely possess a significant dowry and whose demands would be met within the circle of the privileged. Again searching for another way to dissuade Aucassin, he proceeds along the lines of social position by stating that he has nothing to gain by making Nicolette a mistress and concubine, which signifies that marriage would be inadmissible, and certainly not recognized. The story has already established this tension. In a final effort, the viscount addresses the religious facet to "living in sin," and that is a soul damned to hell.

Aucassin's response moves into the profane. This passage denotes the incompatabilities of two social

classes. Aucassin counters the viscount's liturgical speech in a fervent critique about types who enter heaven and hell. The types he describes as being the denizens of heaven are the priests, the righteous, usually characterised by pious old women and the poor and meek. Indeed the description of heaven is negative. When he refers to those in hell, he refers to exercisers of preciosity, the gorgeous, and valorous, women who had lovers other than their husbands. Hell is not limited to individuals and hedonism. Aucassin places money in hell, namely gold and silver, which can be perceived as an attack on the self-righteous discourse of the viscount who harps on "honorable means," aligning him with hedonism. Moreover, he places minstrels and harp players in hell. Let us not forget that the fair clerks are the first in the sequence, an irony the author must have introduced to tease an already captive audience. The clerk could refer to Chrétien de Troyes who himself was a clerk in the finest of courts. Placing the clerk in hell is perhaps our author's response to Chrétien's admonition against hedonism, in which Chrétien himself may have been indulgent. The fact that references to Chrétien appear throughout the text help to ground this assertion.

On the topic of Chrétien, I have discussed the astuteness to literary currents addressed in *Aucassin et*

Nicolette. The fervent exchange between Aucassin and the viscount certainly can be abstracted as an exchange between Chrétien's principle of propriety and *Aucassin et Nicolette*'s author, who plays with and plays down this convention and foregoes the synthesis made in Chrétien's dialectic. He seems to imply that text is not synonymous with didacticism. Instead he seems to offer the alternative medium for play and exhibition of harsh social realities at everyone's expense. To assert his point, our author attempts a synthesis as we would observe in dialectic practices. The synthesis, however, seems ridiculous because, previously, a passive Aucassin confined himself to his room after the viscount dismissed his plea.

Aucassin takes up arms, a practice which he previously renounced, after his father promises him a kiss from his beloved should he demonstrate his prowess in defending his estate. This new found identity seems inappropriate, and so our author attempts to compensate for this discrepancy:

> Mon Dieu! comme lui allaient bien le bouclier qui pendait à son cou et, sur sa tête, le heaume et, sur sa hanche gauche, le baudrier de son épée! Le jeune homme était grand, fort, beau, élégant, bien bâti; le cheval qu'il montait était rapide et vif, et le jeune

homme l'avait dirigé droit par le milieu de la porte. (69)[35]

Let us take note that the text uses an interjection "Mon Dieu!" as if to show surprise. The interjection is followed by a sequence of descriptions befitting a knight. This description is incongruous with the image of the paralysed lover at the story's inception. Let us also note that Aucassin is well equipped and demonstrates skill in his knightly garb. Moreover, our passive lover is victorious in battle, bringing the warring neighbor to his knees. The common practice was to demand a "rançon," to render knights as prisoners or turn over lands and the people living on the estate. Aucassin's endeavor is certainly extraordinary, since the battle carried over for twenty years and was won by someone who just picked up a sword. Indeed, love is powerful.

Aucassin's father forsakes on his promise, which is a dishonorable deed. Furthermore, Aucassin counters with dishonor by intentionally releasing the prisoner, making him promise to continue to be a nuisance to his father for

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[35] God! how bravely showed the shield about his neck, the helmet on his head, and the fringes of the baldric upon his left thigh. The lad was tall and strong, slender and comely to look upon, and the steed he bestrode was great and speedy, and fiercly had he charged clear of the gate.

the rest of his days. In all this confusion, it appears that the only person who follows the chivalric code of honor is the warring neighbor, making an effort to comprehend the transaction. He appraises the situation as a ploy to add insult to injury. He begs Aucassin to ransom him instead. Aucassin reminds him that his defeat also signifies losing voice. The neighbor agrees, and is sent on his way escorted by Aucassin so that no harm would come to him, since his father already exposed his face of dishonor and betrayal.

Upon Aucassin's return, he is imprisoned under the auspice of not doing his duty, which ultimately spells out the intention to keep Aucassin from consummating his relationship with Nicolette. During this time, Aucassin spends his time in passive reverie, lamenting his unfulfilled desire, which Nicolette hears. At this point in the story, Nicolette is in danger for her life and decides to flee Beaucaire into the neighboring forest. Before she escapes, she pays Aucassin a visit, leaving him a lock of her hair. This scene is reminiscent of Chrétien's Lancelot who, like Aucassin, is enchanted by the lock and reveres the signification. Furthermore, as Lancelot did before, Aucassin places the lock of hair against his breast. However, the narrative differs in that Aucassin does not make any effort to save himself or Nicolette.

In a brief conversation before Nicolette's departure, Aucassin offers a few comments which are incongruous to the feelings he professes. In fact, Aucassin places little faith in Nicolette's loyality. He says:

> -Ma très douce amie, fait-il, vous ne partirez pas, car ce serait me tuer. Le premier qui vous verrait et qui en aurait la possibilité, vous enlèverait aussitôt et vous mettrait dans son lit, faisant de vous sa maîtresse. Et une fois que vous auriez couché dans le lit d'un autre homme que moi, n'allez vous imaginer que j'attendrais de trouver un couteau pour me poignarder et me tuer. Non, non, je n'attendrais pas tant, mais, d'aussi loin que je verrais un mur ou une pierre de granit, je m'élancerais et m'y heurterais la tête avec une telle violence que je me ferais sauter les yeux et jaillir toute la cervelle. Je préférerais mourir de cette horrible mort plutôt que d'apprendre que vous ayez couché dans le lit d'un autre homme que moi.(85)[36]

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[36] -Fair sweet friend, said he, this be far from thee, for then wouldst thou have slain me. And the first man who saw thee, if he so might, would take thee fothwith and carry thee to his bed, and make thee his leman. Be sure that if thou wert found in any man's bed, save it be mine, I should not need a dagger to pierce my heart and slay me. Certes, no; wait would I not for a knife; but on the first wall or the nearest stone would I cast myself, and beat out my brains altogether. Better to die so foul a death as this, than know thee to be in any man's bed, save mine.

Aucassin shows his true colors. His intentions are as juvenile as they are oblivious to social codes and immediate dangers. Aucassin states that Nicolette's leaving Beaucaire would be the equivalent of killing him. Nicolette's absence is not his concern, instead he is fearful that another man will take her to his bed and make her his mistress. According to the viscount, Nicolette would forcibly be Aucassin's mistress, a matter Aucassin readily overlooks. It appears, however, that Aucassin reacts to the images put forth in the viscount's words. He shows a juvenile understanding of sexuality, which appears only to comprise kisses. The conjugal bed signifies more a place of possession than of sexual behavior. His naiveté, or perhaps even selfishness, assures that Aucassin has no recognition of the peril Nicolette faces. She is as good as dead staying in Beaucaire.

Aucassin exhibits cowardice. He shows no sign that he believes he will be released from prison. Again, he is the passive lover, and wails the trauma that he will surely encounter should he hear that Nicolette is taken. He states that he would plunge a knife into himself as soon as he could find one for the doing. In his next utterance, he changes his mind, saying that he would go farther. Aucassin grasps onto a highly dramatized metaphor, which seems more grandiose than the reality of the knife.

Nicolette is savvy of the world's inner workings and wise to Aucassin's intention, reproaching him for not loving her as much as he professes. To add insult to injury, Aucassin states that women can never love as much as a man: "car l'amour de la femme réside dans son œil et tout au bout de son sein et tout au bout de son orteil, mais l'amour de l'homme est planté au fond de son cœur d'où il ne peut s'en aller"(86-87).[37] Aucassin's comment is not surprising in that it validates the medieval perception of sexual differences. Let us also note the physicality of woman's love in opposition to the privilege of love felt deeply in men. It also falls in line with his pronouncement of Nicolette as "chose." Ironically enough Nicolette is the impetus of their relationship.

A new phase for our protagonists occurs in the forest. A forest usually denotes an adventure filled with magic and mystery where outcomes are transcendent or transformative. It is also a place where Aucassin and Nicolette can consummate their love without peril, much like Tristan and Yseut. Nichols explains:

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[37]...for woman's love is in the glance of her eye, and the blossom of her breast, and at the tip of the toe of her foot; but the love of a man is set deep in the hold of his heart, from whence it cannot be torn away.

> In the middle ages one senses a fascination with the potential for representation, even more than with theories or modes of representation... Oneiric narratives - dream visions - can be seen from this viewpoint as an attempt to penetrate the boundaries of the known...Medieval representation was less an apanage of power than a means of affirming and describing - of reasurring - that there was a world of material reality whose boundaries (from our viewpoint) seem amazingly fluid. These boundaries may be spatial as in the cases of heroes of lay and romance who cross over from the real world to the *iréel* of the Celtic world.[38]

Aucassin and Nicolette's forest derives directly from the Celtic legend of Tristan and Yseut as we will see shortly. To begin, the forest is an object of fear, a fear of the unknown. Nicolette's fear is best represented by her class consciousness. She has no knowledge of the wood because she has never had to depend on it for survival, unlike the shepherds she will meet en route. It is an abstract world into which she needs to descend. It is the first time she faces the true vulnerablitiy of her flesh. Moreover, the

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[38] Stephen G. Nichols, "The New Medievalism: Tradition and Discontinuity in Medieval Culture," The New Medievalism, ed. Marina S. Brownlee et al.(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U P, 1991) 2-3.

vulnerabilty manifests itself when she accidentally cuts herself the moment before she enters the forest.

When Nicolette meets the shepherds on the fringes of the forest, she is perceived to be a fairy, a quintessential figure of the forest. Much of the confusion lies in dual signification as we have seen in earlier scenes. Vance comments:

> ...the shepherd was the social type who exemplified the "low" style. However, the shepherd that the rhetoricians had in mind was not a real social being but a poetic figure whose origins lay in Virgil's *Eclogues*, and whose medieval afterlife occurred in the *pastourelle*, which was an aristocractic genre. By their answer, these shepherds reveal how remote they are from the traditions of classical pastoral and medieval aristocratic *pastourelle*.[39]

As already noted, Nicolette requests that a message be transmitted to Aucassin encoded in metaphor which has little significance in the shepherds' minds. The shepherds understand her literally. Vance explains that Nicolette's message is characteristic of the stylistic process called *"ornatus difficilis"*:

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[39] Vance 169.

> ...an abundance of tropes or "figures of thought." In Nicolette's figurative discourse, the hunt for the wild beast of nature is transformed into a conventional symbol for the erotic quest in romance (cf. the hunt for the white stag in *Erec et Enide*).

Further:

> Bearing in mind that *ornatus difficilis* is a criterion of the "serious" or noble style, we see here that the question of style pertains no longer to communicative functions of discourse but to social status of persons concerned by discourse, whether as speaker or subject.[40]

In order for the transaction to take place, Nicolette must meet the shepherds on common ground. Language is displaced with the sign "money." Vance suggests that the sign "money" defines a contract other than just purchasing power.[41] When Aucassin finds the shepherds during his search for Nicolette, money closes the contract.

In the forest, Nicolette imitates Yseut in anticipation of Aucassin's arrival. With her own hand, she creates a hut from forest raw materials and flowers. Just

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[40] Vance 169.

[41] Vance 170.

as Yseut to Tristan, Nicolette reasons that if Aucassin professes so much love for her he would understand the reference and know that this hut is made expressly for him. On his quest for Nicolette, the story draws parallels to each of the protagonists. First, Aucassin like Nicolette is cut, the difference is that he is oblivious to the wound, his thoughts so absorbed, much like Chrétien's Lancelot on his quest for Guenièvre.

Secondly, in the wood, Aucassin stumbles on the intertext. He meets a plowman, who is drawn directly from *Yvain,* one of Chrétien de Troyes' romances. In vernacular literatures, the peasant was usually attributed horrific looks and malevolent intentions. There is a contrast in *Aucassin et Nicolette* because Aucassin shows trust. Aucassin helps the peasant monetarily in exchange for solace and commiseration. As Nicolette spoke in dual signification to the shepherds, Aucassin speaks in a highly figurative language to the plowman. The plowman misunderstands while he himself attempts to convey his message about hardship and loss, an inexistant concept in Aucassin's repertoire.

The Celtic world is revisted while Aucassin continues to quest deeper into the forest. At the crossroads he reaches Nicolette's hut which is descried as having captured a moonbeam in its interior. Aucassin promptly

enters, recognizing that it is made by Nicolette's hand, and with this he falls asleep. The next day, Nicolette comes to him, recognizing that he has been wounded. She picks herbs and flowers to dress his wounds which is an allusion to Yseut who is known to have had healing powers and knowledge of herbal remedies and potions. Within seconds, Aucassin is healed, which is a significant parrallel to the *Tristan And Yseut* tradition.

At another interval, Aucassin and Nicolette escape on a boat, which comes to represent evasion. They are met with a storm which stirs the literary space and settles in a world of opposites in the kingdom of Torelore.

Torelore is an interesting place and has stirred a lot of discussion in the critical literature. The name Torelore is reminiscent of the refrain "Tu ra lu ra." From a linguistic perspective, Torelore is also comprised of liquid consonants. There is an oneiric feeling to Torelore and the refrain coupled with music seems to capture one's attention. Torelore is a place of both confrontation and refuge, where internalized social conscriptions are manifested, much like culture shock. The scene opens with Aucassin making an inquiry into the state of the land, and its ruler. Torelore is ruled by a regent who is at war with his neighbor. The language signifies much of what Aucassin understands about his own world. Yet, the reality differs

greatly. When Aucassin goes to greet the king, he finds him in bed having given birth to a child. The passage is emphasized by "Mais écoutez plutôt ses propos." The passage continues:

> Dans la chambre entre Aucassin
>
> le courtois et le noble.
>
> Parvenu au lit,
>
> à l'endroit où est couché le roi,
>
> il s'arrête devant lui
>
> et lui parle. Mais écoutez plutôt ses propos:
>
> -Allons! fou que tu es, que fais-tu ici?
>
> Le roi lui répondit : -Je suis couché, je viens d'avoir un fils.
>
> Quand mon mois sera accompli,
>
> et que je serai complètement rétabli,
>
> alors j'irai entendre la messe,
>
> comme le fit mon ancêtre,
>
> puis je reprendrai avec énergie la grande guerre
>
> que j'ai contre mes ennemis:

je ne la négligerai pas. (133)[42]

Aucassin, oblivious to Torelore's codes, proceeds with violence:

> A ces mots, Aucassin empoigna tous les draps qui recouvraient le roi et les lança à travers la chambre. Apercevant derrière lui un bâton, il alla le prendre, s'en revint et frappa : il battit le roi si dru qu'il faillit le tuer.
>
> - Ah! Ah! cher seigneur, dit le roi, que voulez-vous de moi? Avez-vous l'esprit dérangé pour me battre en ma propre maison?
>
> -Par le cœur de Dieu! répondit Aucassin, sale fils de putain, je vous tuerai, si vous ne me promettez pas que jamais plus homme de votre terre ne restera couché après la naissance d'un enfant.
>
> Le roi le lui promit. La promesse faite, -Seigneur, reprit Aucassin, menez-moi donc là où votre femme commande l'armée.(135)[43]

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[42] Hot from searching, Aucassin / Found the room and entered in;/ There before the couch he stayed / Where the King, alone, was laid,/ Marked the King, and Marked the bed,/ Marked this lyin-in, then said,/ "Fool, why doest thou this thing?"/ "I'm a mother," quoth the king:/ "when my month is gone at length,/ And I come to health and strength,/ Then shall I hear Mass once more / As my fathers did before,/ Arm me lightly. take my lance,/ Set my foe a right fair dance,/ Where horses prance.

Vance comments:

> The king of Torelore confronts Aucassin with an image of effeminacy that angers him so intently precisely because it serves as an extreme example of what he has tended, himself, to become. Indeed, the king has threatended the troping prince with an image of himself as a castrated mother, an image whose status is only confirmed by the symmetry of a very phallic queen of Torelore who is out leading the king's troops in battle while he lies sore in his maternity bed. Such perceptions by Aucassin explain why he attacks both maternity bed and the king with a violence that the sore king perceives himself as folly.[44]

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[43] When Aucassin heard the King speak thus, he took the linen from the bed, and flung it about the chamber. He saw a staff in the corner, so he seized it, returned to the bed, and beat the King so rudely therewith, that he was near to die.

- Ha , fair sire, cried the King, what do you require of me? Are you mad that you treat me thus in my own house?

- By the Sacred Heart, said Aucassin, bad son of a shameless mother (in old French it translates over as "son of a bitch"), I will strike with the sword if you do not swear to me that man shall never lie in child-bed in your realm again.

He plighted troth, and when he was thus pledged, "Sire," required Aucassin, "bring me now where your wife is with the host."

[44] Vance 179.

I agree with Vance's assessment yet I would like to add a conjecture that the king has become mirror to Aucassin's own tendencies at an even more profound level. Let us note that the king makes an appeal to custom. In his speech, the king expresses how he is following in the footsteps of his ancestors, suggesting that male childbirth is common place in Torelore. Let us consider the medieval view of gender. Men were perceived as bearing the seed of life, where women were the vessel for gestation. The story of Onan in biblical scripture certainly offers the view that sperm was the sole generator of life. A man then, who is capable of birthing, is a man who would be closely linked to the divine. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the man giving birth is king, who by virtue of being king has been dubbed supreme servant to God, named by God. Aucassin renounces God in his diatribe about his desire to go to hell. Furthermore, the birthing king adds insult to injury. He removes Aucassin from the ranks of masculinity altogether. The birthing king reminds Aucassin of his rejection to do his duty as would be the custom of his own domain. Aucassin's violent response is indicative of his single-mindedness to customs, and projection of anger with regard to his own circumstances. I venture to say that what makes this event comical is that, although only true in

Torelore, Aucassin doesn't realize that men are incapable of having children.

The war in Torelore brings more surprises. In his attempt to withstand the perceived affront, Aucassin proceeds to the battlefield in order to aid the queen. Contrary to his experiences, the war is fought with food. Food adds to the farce as can be observed later in Rabelais's *Gargantua*. Moreover, Aucassin appears ridiculous when he takes his sword and strikes down the enemy. The king asks him to cease this outrage since his subjects are not accustomed to this kind of violence.

Although Torelore appears to be a topsy turvy, quasi-utopic world, it is a world of transformation pre-empted by the descent into the forest. Aucassin and Nicolette are offered an opportunity for growth in Torelore. The text clearly indicates that Nicolette adapts to life in Torelore, whereas Aucassin's development raises questions. Aucassin's life is made easy in Torelore because he has nothing to do other than to serve Amour. When the natives request that Aucassin be ousted from the realm, Nicolette comes to his defense. It is clear from her ardent defense that she has undergone a rite of passage. Let us note that in Torelore, she is refered to as Nicole. Aucassin and she cohabitate without being married; we assume that there is carnal knowledge. Leaving Torelore would be a major loss

because all in all not much is expected of them and they live as they wish. This utopic life does not last long as they are stolen away by a band of Saracens and separated.

The story leaves us with a passive lover and focuses on Nicolette. During the interval in which she is captured, Nicolette finds out her true identity. Although she is jubilant, she laments Aucassin. Aucassin himself laments Nicolette yet unlike the quintessential knight, he renounces the quest for his lover. Instead, Nicolette is intent on returning to Aucassin. When a marriage is arranged for her, she immediately goes on a search. She finds Beaucaire, but before she reveals herself to Aucassin she puts him through a test. Disguised as a minstrel she recounts their story. If we reconsider the prologue to the story we have a *mise en abyme*, a reflection of the story in the story. Nicolette's utterance is also significant because the prologue to her story addresses both the high and the low, the story's effect is intended for the masses. Delighted, Aucassin shows interest and expresses his desire for Nicolette. Eventually the two are reunited which brings the story to its conclusion, a conclusion that takes a celebratory tone.

Let us look at temporality in the final scenes. The number three figures often. Aucassin and Nicolette spend three years in Torelore. As an alchemical symbol, three

symbolises transformation, balance and union and can be represented by three events. First, when Aucassin returns to Beaucaire, he learns that his parents have died. Their death resolves their violent opposition to their union. Second, Nicolette's real identity is revealed meaning that Aucassin is able to marry without further customary concerns. Lastly, there is peace in Beaucaire.

Aucassin et Nicolette proposes a world of incompatibilities, as they are represented in social tensions and linguistic dualisms. *Aucassin et Nicolette* resolves the tensions in by-passing the ordinary. Furthermore, the intertextual elements serve best to establish more poignant significances as they conjure universals in the audience's mind, and at times present comedic value. The introduction of the forest and Torelore helps both to resolve the literary tensions and to foreground the protagonists' perceptions and modes of thinking. They are best understood against the signified contrastive backgrounds of the forest and Torelore. Moreover, the text comes full circle, from prologue to epilogue, both proposing beauty and celebration.

Although *Aucassin et Nicolette* does not manifest any social or political agendas, it addresses topics that demonstrate historical significances. The topics range from aesthetics, as we have seen in the contrasting philosophies

of both Chrétien and our author, to hierarchical structures, religion and marriage. In the next chapter, we will only be able to scratch the surface of historical aspects in *Aucassin et Nicolette*. It would take a lifetime commitment to address so rich a work.

CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL INSIGHT

Societal narratives are no different from fictional ones. More often than not they reflect influences from our cultural surroundings and our perceptions. *Aucassin et Nicolette* is no different. In this chapter we turn to historical narratives as a way to illuminate discursive practices in *Aucassin et Nicolette*.

Significant to *Aucassin et Nicolette* is its borrowing from existing literary genres and their conventions. As we will see, *Aucassin et Nicolette* comprises influences dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, including the *chanson de geste*, the troubadour lyric and the adventure-romances. Moreover, these literary genres are founded around an elite class of people who were well practiced in telling stories. There is no denying the oral influence in these genres, but it is through the privilege of literacy that these stories transmit to future generations.

Characteristic of the *chanson de geste* is the portrayal of feudal society as a solid hierarchical structure, founded on loyalties in fulfillment or violation of vassalage.[45] Primarily a literature of Northern France,

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[45] Norman F. Cantor, The Civilisation of the Middle Ages (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1993) 347.

as Norman E. Cantor points out, it reflects rough masculinity devoid of effeminate sentimentality. Southern France, on the other hand, was not affected by this attitude. The literature to develop in the southern courts during the twelfth century emphasized sentimentality and emotion as can be seen in the troubadour lyric and adventure-romances.[46] The southern influence is represented in the prologue to *Aucassin et Nicolette*, consistent with the location of Beaucaire on the Rhône river in southern France.[47] The minstrel or troubadour influence is evident.

Aucassin et Nicolette reflects the influence of a growing favoritism for more sophisticated literary endeavors in intellectual southern circles, proscribing warrior attitudes and replacing them with introspection, refinement and mannered behavior.[48] This *courtly* literature emerged as a competitor to Latinate texts and continued to grow beside it. Moreover, the courtly lyric transformed recitation, fusing it sometimes with music, accentuating the human voice. A well noted progenitor of this new genre

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[46] Cantor 348.

[47] Friedrich Heer, The Medieval World (New York: Mentor, 1962) 88.

[48] Cantor 349.

of literature is William IX of Aquitaine. Nichols describes his work as follows:

> For the first time the singer was not lending his voice to perform a narrative but took on a poetic identity : the speaking subject was also the subject of the poem...William's songs are not concerned primarily with social or political issues. They are rather a vehicle, the first in modern European language, for showing how poetic voice, the articulated language of a speaking subject, situates itself between an inherent culture in flux and a particular unconscious, expressed in lyrics as individual consciousness finding or questioning its identity. The role of the speaking voice was also to discover or expose the relationship between the speaking subject (the "I"), nature, and the social world embodied by the *donna,* or beloved woman, a role apparent not only in the songs themselves but also the names given to the poet and to the process of composition. *Tobar,* an Old Provençal word, means "to invent by finding or discovering," thence "to compose musical verse." *Troubadour,* literally "the inventor" designates the poet-composer.[49]

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[49] Stephen G. Nichols, "The Old Provençal Lyric," A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Massachusetts: Harvard U P, 1994) 31-32.

In the discussion to follow we will see examples of how the courtly lyric exerts its influence on emerging literatures.

Aucassin et Nicolette adheres in many ways to the romance, yet it is not strictly a romance. Its lyrical passages illustrate a growing tendency in the early thirteenth century to innovate the narrative, a tendency that extends well into the fifteenth century.[50] This "lyrical insert," as Sylvia Huot has come to describe this tendency, serves to heighten the poetic experience. The experience inherent to *Aucassin et Nicolette* relates well to Huot's analysis of Jean Renart's *Roman de la Rose,* a contemporary of *Aucassin et Nicolette*'s author. She explains :

> The lyric pieces indeed contribute significantly to blurring the distinction between the poetic world and that of the audience. In a recitation of the romance, the performance of songs serves to bring the characters to life: their discourse is clearly distinguished from that of the narrator. Moreover, the songs create an aural link between the audience and the romance characters, who are joined as common

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[50] Sylvia Huot, From Song to Book : The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 106-107.

spectators of the lyric performance and as common adherents to the values enunciated in the songs.[51]

How do William IX of Aquitaine's and Jean Renart's models reflect in *Aucassin et Nicolette*?

In *Aucassin et Nicolette* the poet / performer finds himself at the center of the work by lending his voice to its transmission, adhering thus to the story as one of its subjects while representing the subjectivity of the other protagonists. The lyrical introduction and conclusion are not accidental. They erase the boundaries between the poet / performer and narrator.

On a different level, the audience stands before a work of fiction intended to be heard. In an earlier chapter I discussed the importance of the voice in relation to the text and its effect on the auditor. What is interesting to *Aucassin et Nicolette* is the manner in which the poet / performer enters into the fiction by asserting himself as "viel antif," which is the name of Roland's horse. [52]

The socio-political angle of *Aucassin et Nicolette* is addressed by the fictionalization of the text. It is important to note that the audience is indeed certain of

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[51] Huot 132.

[52] Hermann Suchier, Preface, Aucassin et Nicolette (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1936) 5.

its place in this fictitious world, whereby enunciation of particular views in the text does not necessarily make the text subversive. Joseph E. Garreau notes that "les auteurs du moyen âge mêlent une irréverance qui n'est point blashème mais salutaire exutoire."[53]

The question of the *"donna"* is addressed by story's development of Nicolette. Nicolette is an incarnation of the "beloved woman." Jean Dufournet asserts that one of Aucassin's functions in the story is the elevation of the woman.[54] Aucassin's demeanor is never stoic when he is around Nicolette, and in several scenes he is found crying for her. The most significant manifestation of Nicolette is pronounced in Aucassin's description in a retort to his father who pleads that Aucassin renounce his love for her. Even more significant, globally, Nicolette holds the reins to the story.

Let us look closer at the relationship between Aucassin and his father. From their interaction we determine two opposing mindsets, inherited duty and individuation in emotion and sense of self. Aucassin's father represents the ideals found in the *chanson de geste;*

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[53] Joseph E. Garreau "Et si *Aucassin et Nicolette* n'était qu''une histoire d'amour fort simple'?" Modern Language Studies 15.4 (1985) : 191.

[54] Dufournet, préface. Aucassin et Nicolette 29.

he is a stoic man who does not understand sentimentality, nor is he open to the possibility. Aucassin's openness to sentimentality poses a threat to vassalage and the generation to which Aucassin's father belongs. Aucassin is a man bred from the Arthurian cycle of literature. Although self-realization is not one of Aucassin's key aspirations, he finds need to revolt against authority and tradition to enliven and satisfy his individual desire and desire for individuality as is typical of the romances of the twelfth century.[55] Aucassin's father reacts to Aucassin in the only manner he knows. Since he interprets Aucassin to be in violation of his perceived role, he resorts to empty promises in hope that Aucassin's battle will stimulate Aucassin to adopt his "chivalric" perspective. Nevertheless, it is a wasted effort. The battle for duty fails to stimulate Aucassin and poses an affront to the strict feudal code by the grand gesture of releasing the warring neighbor who is an adherent to the strict feudal codes. The sentimental prevails, demonstrating that it cannot be contained.

Since Aucassin's need cannot be overpowered, his father, the count, seeks out his viscount in faith that at least he will fulfill his knightly obligations. The count

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[55] Cantor 353.

resorts to death threats to make the point. He knows that removing Nicolette from the scene siphons the impetus from the romantic turns in the story. On the other side of things, the viscount represents a marriage between the conflicting attitudes espoused by both males of the Beaucaire estate. The viscount never reproaches Nicolette, as he understands the significance of her presence. It is one reason why he imprisons Nicolette in an elevated area surrounded by lavish beauty. A tower transcends the baseness of the earth. He would never willingly harm Nicolette.

The viscount also represents a new breed of person to emerge in thirteenth-century literature. The viscount is a lower noble, yet he is a man of means. Although the story never states his profession, we can assume that he is in a merchant class, suggested in the count's pronouncement to Aucassin, "C'est une captive, ramenée d'une terre étrangère, que le vicomte de cette ville acheta aux Sarrasins et qu'il amena ici."[56] At least some form of trade and exchange is denoted by the transaction with the Saracen. Let us also not forget that Beaucaire is on the

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[56] For Nicolette is but a captive maid, come hither from a far country, and the viscount of this town bought her with money from the Saracens, and set her in this place.

Rhône, a river known to the Greeks and Romans not too far from the Mediterranean ocean.

The text clearly defines Beaucaire as a town instead of a feudal territory. The significance is that political power was distributed differently than the orders of the North. Heer explains that this southern territory had good trade relationships with its neighbors, Spain, Italy and the Islamic Mediterranean, which also served to inspire worldliness. Moreover, a merchant class was growing out of these trade relationships, and because of these exchages restlessness for intellectual pursuits.[57] It is a conflict similar to that a century earlier between the secular and the clergy. Georges Duby explains that the clergy elevated itself above the aristocratic warrior class as it perceived spiritual power to be far superior to the intellectualism of the aristocratic warrior class in that "they were further from the spiritual realm and because the circumstances of their lives inevitably involved them more in the sensual."[58] Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, in example, helps to resolve this tension by representing the aristocratic warrior class as beings capable of being

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[57] Heer 83.

[58] Georges Duby, France in the Middle Ages 987-1460 (Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991) 9.

spiritual. *Aucassin et Nicolette,* in its reflection of a thirteenth-century sensibility, represents a positive image of this merchant class, where the "bourgeois" class was purposely neglected generations before.[59] The viscount, then, comes to signify the lucid merchant, savvy in the art of chivalry, self-sufficiency and sentimentality.

These qualities are best expressed in the viscount when Aucassin comes to discuss his desire for Nicolette. The viscount appears to understand Aucassin's plight. There is no evidence that he would willingly deprive his daughter. Since women were both objectified and disenfranchised beings, he has no choice but to protect her because for his time, it was within the bounds of the old order to ask for Nicolette's removal. Moreover, he reiterates these codes to a recalcitrant Aucassin. From a different vantage point, the viscount positions himself as a self-sufficient man perhaps of the merchant class who seeks similar qualities in Nicolette's suitor, a man compatible with his class.

Aucassin's response exposes his position in the tradition of romance by readily defining the courtly audiences of the twelfth century as denizens of hell. Anti-clericalism and anti-chivalry are too harsh an interpretation of this scene. Instead, Aucassin's diatribes

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[59] Cantor 347.

carry a Goliardic, *Fabliaux* undertone. Cantor explains that the Goliard tradition exercises the provocative, as it features drinking bouts, carnal desires, and superficial cynicisms. Before denouncing it as subversive textuality, however, let us take note that most of the authors were in some way officials of the church.[60] The *Fabliaux,* contemporary to *Aucassin et Nicolette,* feature tendencies similar to the Goliardic poems. Charles Muscatine explains that:

> This style freely admits comic exaggeration, grotesquerie, and caricature, but its basic world is determinedly the familiar and the local...The fabliaux occasionally parody courtly style, and in doing so present some descriptions of superlative places and things. But most often their descriptions evoke the texture of ordinary life...[61]

Within the interaction between Aucassin and the viscount, caricatures abound. Furthermore the distinctions between Heaven and Hell stand to expose some of the courtly practices by the signs "Heaven" and "Hell" alone. Patrick Michael Thomas also suggests that *Aucassin et Nicolette*

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[60] Cantor 345.

[61] Charles Muscatine, "The Fabliaux," A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994) 71.

"mocks the 'great' values of the heroic age when greatness had a positive aura. Even when it concerns the 'great matter' of eternity, Aucassin expresses a negative attitude : why should he want to go to heaven when all the 'beautiful' people are in hell."[62] Although we cannot be certain how the medieval audience received Aucassin's pronouncement, it can be assumed that it was not in itself a spiteful vindication of the clergy or the nobility in that Aucassin does not continue his discourse on the matter. Instead, Aucassin's pronouncement has an impish appeal; the mischief seems forgivable since Aucassin is perceived in the diminutive.

The descent into the forest seems to be the dividing line in the story. The terrors in the forest are insignificant to the consumption of the individual in the "old order," as can be observed in Nicolette's prayer. The forest allows for the young lovers to maintain their romance but it is not a safe haven. It is not a coincidence that they find themselves in Torelore. Moreover, Torelore is a place in which to explore identities as we have seen in Aucassin's incongruous actions. In Torelore, we see two significant events take place, the transformation of

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[62] Patrick Michael Thomas, "The diminutive world of *Aucassin et Nicolette*," Language and Literature 16 (1991): 56.

Nicolette's name to its proper form Nicole, and the thriving love affair between the young lovers.

The diminutive appellation of Nicole connotes smallness, daintiness, and endearment. Contrarily, Nicolette's behavior throughout the story expresses perceptions of the world through adult eyes. She exhibits the understanding of human nature and possesses the resourcefulness necessary for survival. Furthermore, assertion of her proper name from the long-standing diminutive signifies a severance with the society from whence she came. Her adulation by Aucassin and the people of Torelore serve to foreshadow her true identity as a princess.

The thriving relationship in Torelore raises questions about perceptions of marriage and amorous relations in medieval circles. It seems as if Nicolette fulfills the pronouncement of her father, the viscount, as being Aucassin's concubine, yet her situation reflects both more true to life conventions and complexities in the institution of marriage than are at first evident. Let us first look at their treatment in courtly literature. Cantor summarizes nicely the conceptualization of the code of courtly love.

> The code was based on the principle of romantic love, that is, love involving a man and a woman of the

> aristocracy who are not married and never can or even want to be, for love is presumed to exist only outside marriage. The romantically entwined go through elaborate rituals of exchanging encouraging messages, vows, and tokens. The woman becomes for the nobleman the ideal who symbolizes for him all virtue and beauty and in whose name he performs valorous and other worthy deeds.[63]

The notion of courtly love continues to inspire interpretations about its significance. One thing is clear, it was a literary tradition impressed on the medieval writer's mind, in that it was popularized in *De Amore* by Andrew the Chaplain as an apology for feudal custom and ecclesiastical precept.[64]

In addition to the literary realms, Nichols presents a socio-historical picture of marriage in "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage in the Middle Ages." He sets out to explore the paradoxical role played by women as both crucial to cultural developments yet lacking in autonomy and political power. He affirms that "Marriage, like literature, was mimetic, a symbolic representation of the

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[63] Cantor 349.

[64] Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 122-123.

political order".[65] In order to perpetuate itself, the political order borrowed heavily from religious assertion, which served to perpetuate the disenfranchisement of women. Not everyone was complacent with this attitude. In fact two voices emerge in opposition.

Marie de France expressed an interest in social questions of her time. Having been part of the aristocratic courts, she was familiar with the courtly ethic. Marie's brand of love is based on mutual commitment and support. Joan M. Ferrante explains:

> Secular society is portrayed with many defects in the *lais,* both in the political sphere and in the familial: families marry their daughters to inappropriate husbands, husbands abuse their wives, wives betray good husbands, a mother rejects her daughter, a father destroys his. But this is not to say that Marie rejects secular society -quite the contrary- or that she presents the religious life as a better way.[66]

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[65] Stephen G. Nichols, "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage in the Middle Ages," The New Medievalism, ed. Marina S. Brownlee et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 70.

[66] Joan E. Ferrante, "Marie de France," A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994) 55.

Marie's work then, "can offer to women relief from the suffering of bad marriages, to men a satisfaction that worldly pursuits do not. But it cannot be self-indulgent or irresponsible."[67]

Heloise proposes yet another outlook on marriage in her correspondences with Abelard. Although the authenticity is still in dispute, being that the text is from the thirteenth century and she and Abelard lived in the twelfth, it remains clear that not everyone was indifferent to marital codes. Heloise opposes institutional constraints and in her letters points out their hypocritical nature. Nichols explains that the institutions were incompatible with "the logic of the senses," where:

> The link between spirit (animus) and body (corpus) as a human bond rather than a principle of gender encouraging subjugation allows Heloise to construct a social model for lovers that remains constant across a whole range of interactions from the most intimate to the most public. Heloise will voluntarily associate herself with Abelard's will, on condition that their bond be of one mind and body joined. That is her

[67] Ferrante, "Marie de France," A New History of French Literature 53.

definition of love (amor) and the social bond (amicitia) predicated on it.[68]

Where Nicolette is concerned, we see a drive to be with the lover she chooses. In desiring Aucassin, she renounces her father's wishes that she marry someone of her class; she renounces the order to which Aucassin's father ascribes; and she even renounces the more favorable order in Carthage. It is all too clear that the marriage between *Aucassin et Nicolette* is fated. The prologue hints at it, and the story resolves the tension in returning Aucassin to Beaucaire minus his parents and viscount, thus releasing him from his social obligations. To further the comment the town folk acquiesce to the once forbidden marriage. Much like Marie de France's work, *Aucassin et Nicolette* critiques the social institutions but does not altogether renounce them. Perhaps if Nicolette had been a commoner we might see a stronger social commentary. Instead, the author, in a conventional vein, elevates Nicolette to the aristocratic class. The difference in this story is that it expands its audience. As Nicolette demonstrates in her account when disguised as a minstrel.

Even though *Aucassin et Nicolette* maintains its aristocratic nature, it is gentle. It would seem that

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[68] Nichols, "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage in the Middle Ages," The New Medivalism 86-87.

Aucassin et Nicolette espouses the romantic attitudes of both Marie de France and Heloise. The marriage that ends the story best represents the notion that one should marry for love than for convenience. The abrupt ending to *Aucassin et Nicolette* would seem to validate this simple yet profound moral, "Maintenant qu'Aucassin et Nicolette / ont trouvé le bonheur, / notre chantfable se termine, / et je n'ai plus rien à dire."(163).[69]

Throughout this discussion we have explored many literary and historical possibilities to *Aucassin et Nicolette*. *Aucassin et Nicolette* may only relfect a small faction of its society, but it remains a significant artifact linking us to its audience. *Aucassin et Nicolette* stands as another example of the intertextality among texts and the views espoused therein. If *Aucassin et Nicolette* indeed provides of glimpse of its society, it demonstrates an awareness of its institutions and their governing principles, and furthermore that they did not feel any inhibition in representing themselves in a jocular manner.

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[69] Length of days and joy did win,/ Nicolette and Aucassin,/ Endeth song and tale I tell / With Marriage bell.

CONCLUSION

Much of the critical literature that discusses *Aucassin et Nicolette* centers around intentionality. This is not an unusual circumstance. When faced with universal symbols and intertextual elements it is a natural consequence of our training to seek out the answers to questions raised around the text. Judging from the work around this chameleon, *Aucassin et Nicolette* opens more questions than it offers resolutions to its critics and would be critics. As we have already seen, *Aucassin et Nicolette* borrows extensively from extant vernacular materials, yet separates itself from them with its own classification as *"cante-fable."*

A plethora of categorical interpretations of *Aucassin et Nicolette* grace the pages of many academic journals. Rudy S. Spraycar has reviewed the many views propounded by leading scholars, yet he has determined that although most interpretations are plausible, *Aucassin et Nicolette* lends itself more often than not to exceptions.[70]

Joseph E. Garreau, as Spraycar, surveys the more recent critical literature responding with an emphatic,

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[70] Rudy S. Spraycar "Genre and Convention in Aucassin et Nicolette" Romanic Review 76 : 1 (1985) 115.

"Que les temps sont changés! Et avec eux la vue simple des choses."[71] Garreau refers to the often tedious and vitriolic scholarship to enter into the stream in the comprehension of *Aucassin et Nicolette*. It could not be any more clear that Garreau protests the extreme interpretations of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, many of which he feels serve personal and political agendas. In this, Garreau creates a boundary between intellectualism and reception. He concludes, "...Nous croyons fermement qu'il s'agit, pour le public du XIIIème siècle comme cela devrait l'être également pour nous aujourd'hui, d'une œuvre essentiellement faite pour distraire, et qu'à chaque ligne l'humour de l'auteur l'emporte sur son didactisme."[72]

Seperation from the medieval audience makes it difficult to ascertain the audience's reactions to the work. Knowledge of influence and derivative works in *Aucassin et Nicolette* allows us to create a space in our own imagination as a medieval spectator. After all, we can safely assume that the texts we spend our days studying are commonplace in the mind of our medieval person.

This study is far from complete. Every elucidation raises more questions than could possibly be treated in one

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[71] Garreau 184.

[72] Garreau 191.

work. The more pressing one addresses the Saracen influence. In many medieval works, the Saracen is perceived as the other, the non-christian, treacherous and evil as we see in *The Song of Roland*. *Aucassin et Nicolette* suggests that they are slave traders, Nicolette herself being bought by the viscount. Furthermore, *Aucassin et Nicolette* reflects the period's dichotomy of good and evil, represented by Christendom and Islam respectively. Nicolette is baptized a Christian and when she utters her prayer it is to the Christian god. Her heritage is lost until she is taken to Carthage. Even then she flees to be with Aucassin in Beaucaire, resolved only as having aristocratic lineage. The grand irony to *Aucassin et Nicolette* is the possible influence of Arabic romances. To this effect, Glyn S. Burgess in her introduction to her translation of *Aucassin et Nicolette* makes note of the evidence:

> ...the form (the mingling of verse and prose is found in Arabic romances), the plot, the appearance of unusual words, the name of the hero (al-Kâsim was a moorish king of Cordova in the early eleventh century), the performance of the text, and the music that accompanies it.[73]

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[73] Glyn S. Burgess, introduction, Aucassin et Nicolette, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, vol 47. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988) 103.

The Arabic world, historically, has been the originator of many concepts. Conversely, I have observed that Arabic influences are either invisible or addressed vaguely. I am not suggesting prejudice, although I cannot rule it out. I can only speculate that the reason why the Arabic influence has not been addressed is because of invisible disciplinary boundaries. My sense is that many scholars have delved little into the Arabic world, not on their own volition but by the constraints of the western literary canon that has a strong precedent.

The late medievalist Georges Duby set out a challenge to modern scholars, that is, to incorporate more information from historical accounts into our research.[74] I feel that the historic is not enough. Instead, we stand to gain more information by incorporating interdisciplinary models into our research. *Aucassin et Nicolette* is proud of its complexity and multidimensionality and we do it a service when we see it in the manner in which it tells itself. Any further research will show that *Aucassin et Nicolette* will not allow itself to be contained.

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[74] Georges Duby, Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages 194-216.

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