



Separatum from:

SPECIAL ISSUE 19

Mireille Demaules
Irene Iocca
Julia Rüthemann (eds.)

Medieval Forms of First-Person Narration: Authorship – Authorization – Authority

(Villa Vigoni Talks III)

Published December 2025.

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Senior Editors: Prof. Dr. Anja Becker (Bremen) and Prof. Dr. Albrecht Hausmann (Oldenburg).

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ISSN 2568-9967

Zitiervorschlag für diesen Beitrag:

R. Barton Palmer: The ›Historical-‹ in Guillaume de Machaut's ›Livres du Voir Dit‹, in: Mireille Demaules, Irene Iocca, Julia Rüthemann (eds.): Medieval Forms of First-Person Narration: Authorship – Authorization – Authority (Villa Vigoni Talks III – BmE Special Issue 19, online), p. 251–271.

R. Barton Palmer

The ›Historical-I‹ in Guillaume de Machaut's ›Livre du Voir Dit‹

Abstract. ›Le Livre du Voir Dit‹ (›The Book of the True Poem‹), likely composed in the early 1360s, is Guillaume de Machaut's summative work in the *dit amoureux* tradition that he had done so much to advance for more than two decades. The ›LVD‹ is a massive work, consisting of a lengthy verse narrative, a substantial portfolio of love letters exchanged between the narrator, who reveals himself as an intratextual version of the poet and a much younger woman whom he names *Toute-Belle*, a number of lyrics in the various *formes fixes* that are generated by this epistolary exchange, as well as the musical settings for many of these. This present essay addresses the most striking formal, and also referential, element of the ›LVD‹, Machaut's deployment of a historical-I, a speaking/composing voice who references his authorial activities and the real-life romance. These are presented with a wealth of detail that with some investigation reveals itself to be genuine, not fabulized. This ›I‹ narrates the story, but also connects it to his actual experiences, offering a text that, as he avers, is both true AND a *dit*. Such an ›I‹, the narrating source of the story and its subject, becomes, of course, a not uncommon feature of modern fiction, and Machaut must be counted as one, perhaps the most important of the late medieval writers who made their own experiences the subject of the stories they would tell. He is both in the text as an ›I‹ that refers obsessively and accurately to his existential self, as well as a storytelling consciousness that is equally comfortable with narrating mundane events and describing the doings of a celestial goddess who descends to earth in order to chastise Machaut's fictional alter ego for his inattention. In organizing the multi-layered pastiche that is the ›LVD‹, this ›I‹ anticipates the incorporative rhetorics of both modern and postmodern fiction.

1. Writing the anti-Romance Romance

Guillaume de Machaut's life was lived in the service of both his noble patrons and also the artistic traditions to which, as he recounts in the autobiographical ›Prologue‹, he had been summoned to serve by following a career in text-making that perpetuated established artistic forms while making them new. In fact, during his long and amazingly productive career he introduced startling innovations that proved influential on his contemporaries and those of the generation to follow. These innovations in content find their apotheosis in the ›Livre du Voir Dit‹ (»The Book of the True Poem«, c. 1362), a massive work that offers a somewhat fictionalized and complexly aestheticized version of the poet's late-in life romance with a much younger admirer, a story affirmed to be true and confirmed as such by many details in the text, which ostensibly includes a complete inventory of the correspondence and poetry that passed between them.¹

The lady in question, as the poet is informed by her two trusted messengers, is eager to learn the art of lyric composition from the man whom she has never met, but whose beautiful lyrics, filled with amorous sentiments, have caused her to fall in love with their creator. Her intentions, then, complexly involve both discipleship and romance, and they depend on her ability to submit to her master's teaching, even as in their love affair she has the right to issue commands that he must obey. As befits the connection between a would-be writer and an established author, their romance is largely epistolary and writerly, involving much reading and commenting. The text of the ›LVD‹ includes not only the letters the lady sends to the poet and he to her, but also the lyrics she composes to express her affection and demonstrate her talent, submitting them as well for the master's comment and corrections as needed. His response to those submissions is usually a work or two of his own; these express the love he has come to feel even as they offer her a constant stream of examples in the standard genres, the so-

called *formes fixes*. The ›LVD‹ makes room for several texts of his and others that do not respond to any effort on her part, as well as a series of what the narrator calls »beautiful fictions« drawn from various sources:

Car ores vient le fort et les beles et subtives fictions dont je le pense a parfaire,
par quoy vous et li autre le veés volentiers, et qu'il en soit bon memoire a tous
jours mais, et sachiez que il n'i faut mais a mettre que les lettres que vous
m'avez envoiee et je a vous puis que vous partisites.

(›LVD‹, Letter XXXV, Leech-Wilkinson/Palmer, forthcoming 2025)

»Now it's time for the difficult, the beautiful, and the subtle fictions with which
I intend to perfect it, and because of these you and others will willingly look it
over, and may it attain a worthy reputation for all days to come.«

(trans. Leech-Wilkinson/Palmer, forthcoming 2025)

These are intended to ornament the telling the romance at its center once the lady decides that their exchange of letters and lyrics be made into a book that would declare such literaricizing to be acceptable as a proper text. Interestingly, narrated in the first person, a position that belongs to Guillaume, these ›fictions‹ are a mark only of his authorship, not hers, and they bear mostly on his state of mind as he tries to think through his thoughts about her unfaithfulness, as reported to him.

To be sure, with its allegorical cadre the work gestures toward literary tradition, including the *dit amoureux*, the form of love narrative that Machaut had earlier in his career done so much to promote. But for the main part, it presents events, themes, and characters that only the poet (and sometimes the lady) can access through the peculiarity and particularity of the individual life. This aesthetic change, complexly connected to a shift toward realism, will in time result in the understanding of the literary text as property owned by its author, even as what it says often, as here, asks to be understood as in some fashion containing the truth of his experience, as the poet himself claims. He is both in the text as an ›I‹ that refers obsessively and accurately to his existential self, as well as a storytelling consciousness that is equally comfortable with narrating mundane events and describing

the doings of a celestial goddess who descends to earth in order to chastise Machaut's fictional avatar for disrespecting her.

The ›LVD‹ is best described as a carefully integrated and chronologically ordered *pastiche*, with the events, exemplified by supporting documents, of actual authorial experience re-framed in part as a traditional love allegory that features the appearance of the goddess Venus and a heavenly figure named Lady Esperence (›Hope‹) as intercessors. The experience it recounts departs in many ways from the tradition of *fin'amor* that it otherwise continues, signaling a revision of theme every bit as radical as Machaut's most important structural innovation: his development and use of what can best be called the ›historical-I‹, a first-person narrator who references his own life as both author and lover, telling a story whose truth is there to be established by a careful examination of details, but also by how this story it tells diverges radically from what literary tradition has long represented as ›romance‹ (edition, English translation and extensive commentary in Leech-Wilkinson/Palmer, forthcoming 2025).

As a musician, Machaut made important contributions to the development of the medieval polyphonic tradition. And yet, though in ways only in recent years appreciated by the critical establishment, he is equally as important in the history of literature. It would be fair to say that that his place in literary developments of *longue durée* is in many ways unrivaled. It was Machaut who opened up the narrative *dit* to the incorporation of authorial experience, and this proved to be an important early step in the shaping of the modern novel and its growing propensity to depict the ever-changing real through the screen of writerly experience. In the course of Machaut's career, the authorial self *in vivo* becomes the subject of poetry, not merely an element (i.e. first-person narration) challenging the hitherto regular focus on inherited themes and genres as presented by a non-character extradiegetic narrator. Here the twists and turns of the I as producer of powerful love texts occupies center stage.

After a dedication of the work to the poet's lady, whom he calls Toute-Belle, the ›LVD‹ opens with the narrator, soon to be revealed as Guillaume himself, reporting that a young lady he does not know has been bold enough to send him a messenger. The man presents him with a *rondel*, composed in the poet's honor. Her hope is that the famous poet will give the work two readings: judging the artistic value of her effort, but, more important, appreciating the love it offers him. The messenger describes at some length her beauty and spotless moral character, in part, it seems, as an explanation for this bold and unconventional approach, which breaks every rule of *fin'amor*. This is an affection, moreover, that has a strange origin since it attests to the power not of sight, but of the literary text and the authorship that is its ground of being. The love she has come to feel is inspired not by the true archer eye, but by the poet's reputation and the power of his art in expressing emotion. The lyrics have done seductive work even if they were not written for the lady in order to further his suit.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Guillaume immediately matches the lady's boldness and impetuosity. He tells the messenger that, after reading the *rondel* she sent in order to gain his love, he has spontaneously requited her deep feelings. He then gets down on his knees to worship the text that represents the unknown woman who is now the object of his love. He christens her Toute-Belle in tribute to beauty he has yet to gaze upon. She is referred to by this *nom d'amour* throughout the work, her name only near the end of the work to be revealed as Péronne. These conventional gestures of the true lover unfold in a strange atmosphere of deferral given the absence of the participants. As a sign of his developing passion, Guillaume composes on the spot a *rondel* of his own, proclaiming his love. A second messenger soon arrives with much the same mission. He too brims with praise for the lady even as he affirms the deep affection she feels for the poet. Her offer of love is made a second time, expressed not only in what the messenger has to say (he too is privy to her most private feelings), but in a letter she has written and yet another lyric. The poet responds with a poem of his own, composed

extempore, even as he answers the emotional confession in her letter with a heartfelt account of his own sudden experience with love. These two exchanges set the pattern for the ›LVD‹, which will be the collective work embodying their correspondence, the textual result of a relationship established and confirmed by texts whose origin is referenced metafictionally and whose compilation and refinement is detailed by Guillaume, the narrator of the frame story written to contain the documents that tell their story.²

2. Péronne as Author, Lover, and Love Object

Of course, the work actually has two authors though Guillaume, who writes the framing narrative, is granted final control over the form of what the two lovers have jointly created. His is the voice that the reader hears throughout; the words he speaks in response to her words express feelings that have their origin in the lyrics he composes. And so he rightly, and conventionally, presents the completed text to her after, in an anagram, revealing their names and thus affirming the truth of the story the book has to tell. This gift of the text containing their story responds to the opening dedication of the work to Toute-Belle, as dedication that interestingly ignores the lady's role in its fashioning. Even though Guillaume acts the author, in another overturning of convention it is the lady, not the man she convinces to be her lover, who envisions the composition of the ›LVD‹ and names it in a way that emphasizes the truth of the story it tells. To be sure, the several tasks involved in the compositional project she conceives fall to Guillaume to complete. The whole will be assembled to honor the lady as the object of love. And yet one of the most remarkable aspects of the work is that Péronne's voice is heard loud and clear in her letters and lyrics, even if as we read them we are reminded that we are able to do so because everything in the ›LVD‹, regardless of its source, has been re-voiced by Guillaume, to whom all the words in the text, even those that are hers, ultimately belong. He is the dominating, authorizing presence in the work even if, or so the

evidence compels us to think, she authored the letters and the lyrics identified as hers.

That the impulse to publicize their affair is the lady's must have struck many of the work's first readers as nothing less than remarkable. The request to the poet to make sure that their love affair in all its details be revealed to the public violates in the most extreme fashion the secrecy that love doctrine prescribes for such relationships. Guillaume is bound to honor her command, which must have precedence; and he is interested in continuing his authorship; so he agrees to do the project in order to honor the lady. All of this he explains in the framing narrative, which becomes a *mise-en-abîme* for both the narrative as story and the letters/texts, which provided evidence for the events in question. These become objects of explanation and contextualization in the revelatory framing narrative. In yet another metafictional avowal of authenticity, the twists and turns of their epistolary connection are frequently discussed in letters that refer to one another.

3. The ›Prologue‹

Celebrated and imitated by the other literary lights of the age, including Jean Froissart, Christine de Pizan, Eustache Deschamps, and Geoffrey Chaucer, Machaut was so determined to forge an artistic identity that, in the last decade or so of his life, he took great pains to commission prepare for production complete works manuscripts (**A** is one, **F-G** is the other) that provide a carefully curated and organized inventory of his poetical and musical oeuvre. For these manuscripts, Machaut composed an untitled hybrid text (part lyric and part narrative in octosyllabic couplets, designated by modern scholars as the ›Prologue‹. Connected to the first work of the *dit* section, ›Dit dou Vergier‹ (›Tale of the Orchard‹) this introduction asks the reader to understand the various works that follow as resulting from a

call to compose issued by the allegorical divinities *Sens* (»Meaning«) *Musique*, and *Rhetorique* (see Palmer 2022a for further discussion and Palmer 1993 for texts/translations of the ›Vergier‹ and ›Prologue‹).

The dramatic encounter at the center of the ›Prologue‹ invites figural readings, most obviously as a way of explaining how what modern aesthetics mystifies as the innate capacity of ›talent‹ comes to reside and then animate a creative career. Though composed at the end of that career, the ›Prologue‹ re-imagines him as a neophyte who will compose new works in honor of love and ladies, living out a creative life whose contours are determined from the outset by cultural (we might even say spiritual) forces that ›announce‹ their intention to him in an undefined moment that is represented as somehow in time (at the beginning) but not of it. The religious resonance of this encounter is unmistakable, as is its unapologetic grandiosity, which is not disguised by the fiction's attempt to make Guillaume the object rather than the subject of a universal creative impulse.

Unlike earlier medieval poets, Machaut was very much concerned to establish a ›poetic identity‹ for himself, first, by often making a fictional alter ego into a main character, whose experience becomes the subject of the work; this figure, who, as his career progresses, becomes more closely identified with the author himself is, formally speaking, a first-person narrator whose most important source seems to be Boethius, who serves as the main character, as well as the focus and source of the narration in the ›Consolation of Philosophy‹ (see Brownlee 1984; Palmer 2022b). The ›I‹ in Boethius is both a formal device (derived in terms of literary history from the dialogues of Plato) but, also like ›Plato‹ in such works as the ›Symposium‹ a textual presence that refers to and represents the author, who is thus placed in the text even as he is ›historical‹ in the sense of evoking and standing in for the existential author. The author who in this way guarantees the authenticity of the text that contains his representation *in vivo*.

Machaut thus sees himself as set apart from others by virtue of his being called to the cultural mission of helping an artistic tradition survive through

its continued appropriate practice. The ›Prologue‹ offers what in the fiction is best thought of as imagined autobiography, but in terms of the history of this ›I‹ an indisputably real set of experiences: whatever these are they led the young man to embrace a commitment to composition as part of a lifetime of self-actualization and humble service to the forces that enable and control the production of art.

By re-visiting a moment that must be counted as part of his life's trajectory, the ›Prologue‹ thus offers an indisputable historical truth, that is, expressed in the allegorical style Machaut, following tradition, adopts for his other literary works. The ›I‹ of the ›Prologue‹ references the existential poet whose actual works follow it materially in the codex that contains them all; or to put this another way, the ›Prologue‹ metafictionally imagines not only itself as a text, but *in potentia* all the other texts with which it is there materially present (in the folios that follow it in the codex the reader is presumably holding), as texts-to-be written that have in fact been written and whose inclusion will complete an interesting circuit of becoming, bridging the twin facts of textual and historical (existential) presence. In the complete works manuscripts, the ›historical-I‹ is present both textually and metatextually in ways that reference the personal impersonality of such a codex. What Guillaume has had produced is both ›a‹ book and ›his‹ book in a fashion that the Gutenberg Revolution with its promotion of impersonal, repetitive reproduction will in the next century preclude through the suppression of the original from which all copies have been made. His ›I‹ developed as a rhetorical device, and as a means for presencing himself in the *dits* he writes becomes at the end of his life a self that is ineluctably connected to the material objects that contain those texts—the products of both his authorship and his attempt—which was quite successful of course—in conferring an immortality on him.

4. Toute-Belle and Esperence

Often referred to in the letters, the lyrics exemplify the relationship of pupil to teacher, demonstrating for the reader well-versed in this tradition her evolving mastery of the complexities (in terms of content, structure, stanza length, and metrics) of a narrowly defined and thoroughly traditional practice, even as she manages to hold her literary own with a man with years of experience in the *métier* who is widely acknowledged for his ingenuity and refinement. In its presentation of authorship, the ›LVD‹ uniquely, and forcefully, configures the lady, normally by definition the receptive object of her lover's praise and admiration, as the one who initiates a relationship that both transgresses and confirms the customary gender protocols operating in love narrative. In the course of the work, she claims by virtue of her manifest abilities a place as a subject who may speak her desire in the fashion normally reserved for the lover, even as his agreement to love her in return acknowledges the persuasive power of her commitment to him. Correspondingly, Guillaume, shown initially as lacking the *matere* and the energy for further composition, is constituted by her approach as a love object, even as he finds himself inspired once again to write and thereby affirms his dedication to love as a transcendent experience that finds them sharing equally, at least to some degree, as both objects and subjects.

However, it is only Guillaume who is called upon to perform at the highest level his devotion to his craft as he is required to confect an appropriately elaborate text, a *lai*, which is the most difficult of all the standard forms to compose because of its length and demanding formal requirements. It is his ›I‹ that matters most. The *lai* connects only obliquely to the romantic intrigue at the center of the work. It comes into being instead through a significant failing of his authorship. As acknowledged in one of the work's beautiful fictions that dramatizes an artful metafictional moment, Guillaume finds himself stopped on his way back from a tryst with Toute-Belle by the allegorical personage Esperence (already introduced

into the fictional Machaldian world in the ›Remede de Fortune‹ or »Remedy for Fortune« some years before). She is yet another woman of high estate requiring Guillaume's attention and devotion, but his respect more than his love. Hope is angry that the poet/lover, so dependent on her to stave off the depredations of Desire, has failed to honor her appropriately in the work he is now composing because he has been preoccupied with Toute-Belle.

His *lai* is a worthy homage to a traditional, transcendent figure. Toute-Belle does not merit the same, nor can she be understood as having the ability to compose such a work in return were Guillaume to honor her with one. This moment then is interestingly disjunctive, as the metafictional cadre of the work requiring that Guillaume for a time serve a master different from Toute-Belle. The episode is contained between the real world concerns of the narrative that precedes and follows it, marking it off as belonging to a different ontological order, heightening its fictionality, but increasing the sense of the importance of Guillaume's ›I‹ in the view of one of the most august personages of this literary and cultural tradition, the divinity responsible for both the success of any lover's suit and that of every creative project he undertakes.

5. The Question of Truth

If the Esperence episode is playfully fictional, the positioning of revelatory anagrams toward the end of the text can be seen as a strong gesture toward the real, an unmasking of both the narrator and his beloved as characters in order to uncover, or in the case of Guillaume to confirm, their ostensible existential identities. This is not the only time that Machaut makes a similar gesture toward extratextual truth. In first section of the ›Prise d'Alixandre‹, Machaut reveals in an anagram his own name and that of the nobleman to whom the work is dedicated, and who is its main character, explaining he will repeat it at the end if he lives to complete the poem, which he so does

(›PA‹, v. 229–258). The reference is, of course, to undoubtedly real persons, the poet and Pierre II, the late king of Cyprus. The poem is true in that sense that all crusading chronicles, despite their exaggerated, chauvinistic accounts of brave accomplishments, are true.

The revelations of the anagram in the ›LVD‹ provocatively prompt the question of the story's authenticity and all that entails. The beloved previously referred to by a generalizing pseudonym suddenly is provided with a name with no reason to be considered fictional. Is the figure of profound desire and appreciation denoted by the narrator's label for her as Toute-Belle also a particular flesh and blood woman, with whom the narrator had physical intimacies he is not reluctant to recount, even if such descriptions offend against the cardinal principals of courtly love? In any event, with this unmasking conclusion, the ›LVD‹ strengthens the aura of truth that the narrator from the outset claims for his story once he affirms that in his account he will include all he did for and said to her, and all that she said and did for him:

Car celle pour qui amour veille
 Wet que je mette en ce voir dit
 Tout ce qu'ay pour li fait et dit,
 Et tout ce qu'elle a pour moy fait
 Sans riens celer qui face au fait
 (›LVD‹, v. 512–516)

Since she for whom Love is vigilant
 Wishes included in this true work
 All that I composed and wrote for her,
 And all she has written for me;
 Nothing pertaining is to be left out.

But we must emphasize that even with this teasing revelation, the story of Péronne and Guillaume is only claimed as true, not established as such even if a huge volume of correspondence and exchanged lyrics argues in favor because it is filled with a profusion of details and dates, including as if to

confirm the importance to what Roland Barthes calls *l'effet de réel* a substantial infusion of specific details, many of which are never explained or shown to be relevant (Palmer et al. 2016). This undecidable claim for Péronne as historical person fits perfectly with what in contemporary parlance we would call the truthiness that hangs over the ›LVD‹, as the poet encourages but cannot solidify the reader's belief in the referential truth he so fervently claims for it. My view is that a detailed analysis, including more evidence than can be mentioned here, establishes that this truthiness is a carefully constructed affect, the arousing of which Machaut first attempted in his debate poem, ›Jugement du roi de Navarre‹ (›The Judgment of the King of Navarre‹), composed more than a decade earlier. The contrasting forms of truthiness in the two works contribute to their metafictionality, the ways in which they manage to constitute their versions of the narrating ›I‹ as, in complex ways, an authorial presence both in the text as well as outside it. The ›Navarre‹ constructs its intense self-reflexiveness by appropriating as its subject the supposed antifeminism of an earlier Machaut work, the ›Jugement du roi de Behaingne‹ (›The Judgment of the King of Bohemia‹). The offended reader is his patroness Bonneürté (›Good Fortune‹), and nothing less than the poet's continued literary career is at stake in the debate he foolishly engages with her over the doctrinal correctness of the work. An extratextuality including the author and one of his works is thus appropriated for inclusion in yet another text, making the ›Navarre‹ a fiction of the second degree.

In the text, the previous works of the narrating ›I‹, as well as the reputation they created for him are what inspires the love of the woman he calls Toute-Belle, who has never laid eyes on him. And of course, his authorship constitutes the means through which, in both letters and further lyric production, he carries on the affair. This ›I‹ is thus both a function, in the letters, lyrics, and narrative, of the complex text, but also a constant and unignorable extratextual presence, the Guillaume de Machaut whose authorship is beyond any doubt ›true‹, because one of its effects is to inspire

admiration and even love. The first-person voice is in this sense a ›historical I‹, radically distinct from the anonymous and universalized fictional ›I‹, the *amant* of the ›Rose‹ and of most texts in the tradition it inaugurates, including some works by Machaut.

No reader of the ›LVD‹ can help noticing that the narrator is himself vexed by precisely the issue of belief when reports reach him of his lady's infidelity and indifference. The value of truth-telling and of truth itself becomes a principal theme of the ›LVD‹, not only in the ›story‹ but also in the ›beautiful‹ fictions, most prominently the fable of the raven and the crow, which is meant by its narrator to illustrate the danger involved in revealing the truth to someone who might be deeply wounded by it. In the context of this fable, the unmasking of Péronne might seem problematic indeed. But it is the vexed issue of belief, a movement of the will influenced by reason and emotion, that lies behind the effect of truth that the text produces for its readers.

Consider the dream that precedes the narrator's account of the elaborately layered dream in which the portrait of his beloved, Toute-Belle, complains of the narrator's mistreatment and sets in motion a chain of embedded narratives. The narrator affirms that the dream is fact, but then admits he does not know if the reader can believe it. Is the ›I‹ of the text here wondering if the reader or listener believes in the revelatory value of dreams? Or is the ›I‹ eager to know if the reader can invest belief in the dream as an element of the story? Or is the ›I‹ interested in learning if the reader can believe in the dream as part of the sequence of events here presented as referencing an actual experience of the historical character and author, Guillaume de Machaut?

The narrator's question is hopelessly ambivalent, but provocative in its truthiness, and thus the dilemma created for the reader. Fiction requires a limited (and self-conscious) investment of belief (not the suspension of disbelief as is commonly said). Similarly, truth-telling requires the listener to trust his informant, as the narrator muses when assessing the value of the

reports of Toute-Belle's infidelity he receives. The work offers the reader an ›I‹ that is uncertainly, liminally suspended between the extradiegetic world shared by the author with readers and the fiction in which it is a device that earns only that limited investment of provisional belief that is required by all fiction, even as it points also at an extratextual reality of a world of facts and relations beyond those made part of the diegesis.

The ›LVD‹ is not the only Machaut *dit* in which truthiness is important—this was an effect that the poet explored in depth in the earlier ›Navarre‹ (it is a carefully crafted truthiness, in fact, that distinguishes this text from its prequel, the ›Behaingne‹). It is in the ›Navarre‹ that Machaut first deploys the historical ›I‹, the ›I‹ who straddles the fiction of which he is the organizing principle and his extratextual existence as author, of which the existence of this text itself is one proof. This work traces the journey of the historical ›I‹ from the authentically realistic social space of a plague ridden 1349 France to the familiar idealized world of love narrative and personification allegory, an atopia beyond the reach of history and its discontents. In particular, the ›Navarre‹ anticipates the ways in which text production and reception (two aspects of authorship) are deployed in the ›LVD‹ to further the truthiness of the narrator.

Critics (and I am one of them) have usually followed the indications of the poet himself by linking the ›Navarre‹ with the ›Behaingne‹, to which it is a sequel of sorts. It is the extratextuality reality of that work that is incorporated into the ›Navarre‹, connecting the fictionality of that work's second section most directly to Guillaume's own history as a poet. What I now suggest is that the ›Navarre‹ is also connected interestingly to promoting a version of the historical ›I‹, the narrating self, named as Guillaume de Machaut. This ›I‹ presents himself not only as an element of the text requiring a limited investment of belief (in the manner of all fiction), but which also, in this case implicitly, claims to refer to extratextual truth, specifically to the existential author, his experiences, including those of textmaking.

Furthermore, such a connection between the two *dits* is suggested, by the fact that a major episode in the ›LVD‹, Guillaume's meeting up with the allegorical personage Lady Esperence (›LVD‹, v. 4316–4225) is a self-allusion to that earlier poem since it is obviously modeled closely on a similar encounter of Guillaume in the ›Navarre‹ with the allegorical personage lady Bonneüirté, Guillaume's offended patroness (›LVD‹, v. 545–4194). This episode is crucial because it takes the poet away from the world of everyday experience to a place of delightful fiction where this ill-sorted pair debate the doctrinal correctness of the decision rendered in the earlier judgment poem. This encounter banishes completely any realistic account of the real Guillaume and becomes the work's main focus of the ›Navarre‹, with faux humiliating consequences for the only supposedly chagrined narrator. In the ›LVD‹ the accused poet has apparently learned his lesson. This time he humbly apologizes for his failure to honor Esperence as promised. Without any debate, he begins working immediately on his penitential lyric, whose theme is the importance of hope for lovers.

In the ›Navarre‹, the encounter with his patroness breaks with the historical narrative of the poem's initial section, including its inclusion of many facts that are true beyond any dispute. This historical ›I‹ who inhabits both the world of a fictionalized story and the world itself in the ›Navarre‹ first appears in its so-called historical ›Prologue‹, which tells the story of the Black death that ends with the grateful escape of that ›I‹ into a realm of the fantasy made possible by personification. The first section of the poem is ›accepted‹ as more or less true – true enough for the English translation I published years ago to be quoted from recently in the *New York Times* as an authentic description of the disease and its aftermath. By the end of the poem, the horrific events of 1349, in which the poet was lucky to escape a miserable death, are completely forgotten, displaced in favor of a fictional realm where, perhaps paradoxically, Guillaume's real activity as a poet is detailed and debated.

This allegorical drama is further dialogized by the presence of another ›real‹ character, Charles II of Navarre, at the time one of the poet's patrons, who, fictionally, becomes part of the company of judges and advisors, just as the narrator, named as Guillaume de Machaut in that section, is ostensibly ›real‹. This is an ontologically mixed group, then, includes two patrons, one fictional (if perhaps à clef if scholars are correct in identifying her with Bonne of Luxembourg), and the other present under his true name, as well as a survivor of the epidemic just recently passed. Along with a court full of allegorical personages, the cast of characters perfectly reflects the bi-partite division of the text into two quite distinct worlds, however seamlessly connected. The ›Navarre‹ focusses on the reputation and practice of Guillaume, and so doing explores the complex meanings of the ›I‹ who moves from the sorrows and joys of this world to the court of love of familiar fantasy. This metafictional journey, with its echoes of the *aventures* of courtly romance, also evokes the imaginative passage of the writer from the world he writes in to the world he creates. This journey is the same one that carries readers along, as they are transported by fiction from a real world still suffering from the effects of massive death to a fictional space from which all such gruesome realities have been banished, and where the only serious question raised is that of authorial incompetence.

The two parts of the ›Navarre‹ thus find an unstable, liminal unity in the co-presence of the historical ›I‹, revealed (but only when history is left behind) as the poet Guillaume de Machaut, whose real work, the ›Behaingne‹, plays a role as the supposed evidence of an authorial anti-feminism of which the ›I‹ protests his innocence, but then is brought around to the position of supporting the view that men are superior in love. Guillaume is found guilty of promoting bad doctrine and of presuming to argue with this exalted personage. However, he is required by way of amends only to produce three penitential lyrics, and the text ends with his agreement to do so.

The judgment thus takes us beyond the boundaries of this work into the real world of production and, more problematically, reception since his

penance will also call for judgment. Moreover, Guillaume's charge can only be fulfilled when, as it were, he resumes his existential self; one of the poems was completed, the ›Lay de Plour‹ (›Lay of Weeping‹), becomes one of the more than twenty of such complex works in the Machaut oeuvre. In the ms tradition, this lay is sometimes linked physically to the ›Navarre‹, whose last lines serve as a kind of introductory rubric. The ›Lay de Plour‹ is the only text whose creation is imagined in the fictional world of a *dit* but then composed in the world the poet shares with his readers, a link that is strengthened by the fact that the lay is structured by a female ›I‹, a transvestite performance that signals Guillaume's contrition at having offended lady Bonneürté, or, in other words, his presence as a character of sorts in the performance. The ›Navarre‹ is thus linked to both the text that prompts it and the text that will follow. Its author is that historical ›I‹ who occupies a space within and between these other texts, as well as in the real world where they are composed and where a final judgment on the penitential appropriateness of the ›Lay de Plour‹ will be made.

Consider the truthiness of the ›Navarre‹'s conclusion, which anticipates a space beyond that of the text. The narrator says that because of his condemnation he intends without delaying to begin work on a lay about love. Guillaume as character thus hands the responsibility off to his existential self, who is, as it happens, not satisfied just to do what the court demands. It is the existential self who seems to speak when he adds a further requirement, saying: *Pour miex congnoistre mon meffait ay ce livre rime et fait* (›Navarre‹, v. 4200–4201: »in order to better acknowledge my wrongdoing I have composed and rhymed this little book«). This additional penance, imposed by the poet upon himself, shifts the level of literary contrition from the diegetic to the extradiegetic. However, this Guillaume does not claim explicitly that the story he already has composed and rhymed (he uses the *passé composé*) is in any sense true though it details what he has experienced. If the action of the ›Navarre‹ is initiated by the irritation that his patroness feels as the doctrinal content of the ›Behaingne‹, the action here

is initiated by the pleasure of another reader, who has fallen in love with Machaut's work and reputation. From these materials, so he says, he will construct the *livret* she requests, which is dedicated to her, and it is, of course, *mutatis mutandis*, the book readers hold in their hands.

The historical ›I‹, as I am understanding the term here, is the reporting/reported ›I‹ and ›me‹ that makes ›ostensible‹ reference to actual events outside the diegesis (including the act of reading) in the world that is occupied by both author and readers. It is ›we‹ the readers who are the addressees of this explanation of the genesis of the work. This referentiality, I hasten to add, is a textual effect; it is a series of events, and they constitute a resolve to create a text to contain them staked out as ›true‹ but not proved to be so despite the evident materiality and presence of precisely the text that it anticipates.

The historical ›I‹ thus suggests a continuity between the story world and the ›real‹ world. We might say then that the story can be, unstably and undecidably, ›true‹ and fictional all at once, which is perhaps what Machaut's title signifies. Within the larger history of what we now call fiction, Machaut anticipates the move toward the now prominent tradition of fictional writing that values connections established between authorial experience and its slant, oblique transformation into that customary form of novelistic writing that balances fabulation with the recasting of authorial experience.

Notes

- 1 The only complete modern edition, prepared by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, with English translation by R. Barton Palmer, art historical commentary by Dominic Leo, and musical commentary by Uri Smilansky, is currently in production at Medieval Institute Publications, in cooperation with the Medieval Text Series sponsored by the University of Rochester, and will be published in 2025 as Volume 4 (of a planned 14) of *Guillaume de Machaut: The Complete Poetry and Music*, series editors Yolanda Plumley and R. Barton Palmer.

- 2 Metafictional elements are those aspects of the diegesis that point beyond the work to its contexts of production or reception. They are frame-breaking elements. See Waugh (2010). Here the work contains an account of its own fashioning.

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