

A MEDIEVALIST
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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GEOFFREY WILSON

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LE GRAND D'AUSSY AND THE FABLIAUX OU CONTES

by

GEOFFREY WILSON



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TO MY WIFE

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INTRODUCTION

It is a common belief that in France the study of medieval literature as literature only began to gain recognition as a valid occupation for the scholar during the nineteenth century. It is well known that historians of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries looked to the literary productions of the Middle Ages for materials useful to their researches, but it is only recently that the remarkable frequency of this reference has been appreciated and that scholars have become aware of an unbroken tradition of what might best be described as historically oriented medievalism stretching from the sixteenth century to our own. The eighteenth century has drawn the greatest number of curious to this field, for it is evident that the surprisingly extensive researches undertaken then do much to explain the progress made a century later by the most celebrated generation of medievalists. Very slowly we are coming to see the value of the contribution made by little known scholars like La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, Etienne Barbazan and the Comte de Caylus.

This appreciation marks an advance, of course, but it must be said that the credit given falls far short of that which is due. The eighteenth century has been singled out for special praise because the volume and exactitude of researches then undertaken overshadow all that had gone before. Since the sixteenth century interest in the Middle Ages had been steadily increasing and more and more experience had been gained in the techniques of historical research. The eighteenth-century medievalist has learned by the mistakes of his predecessors, his projects became much more ambitious and his results were vastly superior. He is the strongest link in the chain of that tradition handed on by Fauchet, Pasquier and Duchesne, and he merits respect as such. But he remains only a link and scholars of a much later generation were to exploit the researches he pursued.

La Curne de Sainte-Palaye and his contemporaries are thus remembered for their industry and thoroughness but denied any real originality. And yet this is where their merit chiefly resides. That this should be much ignored is perhaps no disgrace when one considers how little work has so far been carried out in this relatively new field of eighteenth-century medievalism, where we are only now beginning to see beyond a veritable ocean of source materials. The truth is that while eighteenth-century scholars followed their predecessors in studying the literary productions of the Middle Ages principally for the light these shed upon the manners, customs, laws and institutions of the period, while they whole-heartedly embraced that tradition of historically oriented medievalism passed on by Fauchet and his fellows, they did in addition significantly enrich it and can be said to have begun a gradual process of redirection from within, preparing the ground for a new enlightened appreciation of medieval literature as literature. This process of redirection is best evidenced in Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Le Grand d'Aussy's *Fabliaux ou Contes*, the first successful attempt to render medieval French literature popular with a mass reading public made little short of two centuries ago.¹

The medievalists of eighteenth-century France fall roughly into three categories. Foremost amongst the scholars was La Curne de Sainte-Palaye. To his nineteenth-century successors he bequeathed a vast fund of copies and notices of medieval literary manuscripts which bears testimony to a lifetime of the most meticulous research. No one in the France of his day knew more about the literary productions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But equally no one thought less of them as literature. Sainte-Palaye was first and foremost historian. He rarely gave more than a moment's thought to the artistic abilities of the "anciens rimeurs," never once thinking to set them against their eighteenth-century brethren. For him they simply did not bear comparison. They were worthy of recall and close study because in their works they mirrored the manners and customs of the society in which they had flourished. But Sainte-Palaye did go a little beyond Fauchet, insisting that contemporary historians treat these fictional sources with the deference hitherto reserved for chronicles and legal documents. Thus, in one way at least, he did contribute to the elevation of medieval

¹ *Fabliaux ou Contes du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle, traduits ou extraits d'après divers manuscrits du tems; avec des notes historiques et critiques, et les imitations qui ont été faites de ces Contes depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris (Eugène Onfroy) 1779, 3 vols. in-8. A fourth volume, *Contes dévots, Fables et Romans anciens*, was added in 1781.

literature, although at the same time clearly consolidating the historical tradition.

At the opposite end of the scale are those who can be said to stand outside his tradition, the "remanieurs," men like the Comte de Tressan and A. G. Contant d'Orville, who adapted the efforts of France's earliest poets to the tastes of their more enlightened age. Some, it is true, did strive for a certain degree of fidelity in their modern renderings, the Marquis de Paulmy, for example, originator of the *Bibliothèque des Romans*, whose purpose was to convey a concise and yet complete impression of the original. But Paulmy stands in almost complete isolation as one who had studied his sources well. Moreover, he was using the "anciens rimeurs" to acquaint a wide readership with medieval French society, not to gain a literary reputation for himself at their expense. His less scrupulous and more successful fellows cared little what remained of their sources, even, in extreme cases, inventing their own twelfth and thirteenth-century classics. It might at first appear that such works could serve only to lessen the status of medieval literature. And yet their value becomes clear when one considers that initially the mass of the eighteenth-century reading public had no other recourse. The learned few might turn to the scholarly papers read before the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, but the uninitiated would have continued for some time in total ignorance of a medieval literature had it not been for those most diverting publications of Tressan and his colleagues. Their contribution was to promote a wide interest in the efforts of France's earliest poets. By popularizing these pseudo-medieval texts they were in fact helping to create the atmosphere essential to a "serious" popularizer like Le Grand d'Aussy.

Le Grand stands somewhere between La Curne de Sainte-Palaye and Tressan. One might say that he is scholar turned "vulgarisateur." But this alone cannot explain his originality. There is nothing really new in Le Grand's belief that certain of the efforts of the "anciens rimeurs" remain valid as literature even when measured by the standards of his own day. The great scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all had their especial favourites amongst the romances and the fabliaux, although it would never have occurred to them to publish these for their literary value. Even so, Le Grand was not the first to combine such an appreciation with the desire to popularize. This honour must go to Etienne Barbazan who in 1756 published a three-volume collection of *Fabliaux et Contes* intended for a mass public.²

² *Fabliaux et Contes des Poètes françois des XII, XIII, XIV et XVes siècles, tirés des meilleurs auteurs*, Paris (Vincent) and Amsterdam (Arkstée and Merkus) 1756, 3 vols.

The collection can be said to have failed, Barbazan, who presented his texts in the original old French, expecting far too much of the average, non-specialist reader. Le Grand's originality resides then in a combination of three essential elements, a belief in the enduring validity of some medieval literature as literature, a desire to render the delights this affords accessible to a wide reading public and an understanding of the very real limitations of that public. This distinguishes Le Grand from all other medievalists of his day.

It must not be thought that the *Fabliaux ou Contes* represents a departure from that traditional historical bias of the scholars. Le Grand was himself a scholar, a pupil of Sainte-Palaye, and he would end his career as Keeper of Manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale. He was not so far ahead of his time as to think a collection of "fabliaux ou contes" worthy of publication on literary merit alone. Indeed, he makes it abundantly clear in his compilation that to produce evidence of the artistic abilities of the "anciens rimeurs" was the least of three major aims envisaged here. In examining this work we have devoted a separate chapter to each of these aims, preserving Le Grand's own order of priority and, after an introductory biography, beginning therefore, in Chapter I, with his concern to establish the particular historical utility of this genre, "fabliaux ou contes," and through it to convey to his readers an accurate impression of life in medieval France. Chapter II considers a second defence of the "anciens rimeurs" on historical grounds, examining Le Grand's efforts to demonstrate the importance of their contribution to the "perfection" of French literature, to ensure that they finally receive the credit due to them as the authors of a European literary renaissance. It is only in Chapter III that we begin to consider Le Grand's desire to establish the enduring validity of certain medieval tales as literature. We could not have expected Le Grand to adopt any different order of priority and it would be improper for us to tamper with this ourselves. The *Fabliaux ou Contes* did not alter the course of medieval studies overnight, but it did contribute more than any comparable eighteenth-century work to what we have previously termed a gradual process of redirection from within.

Chapter IV of this study is devoted to the sources of the *Fabliaux ou Contes*. Only once does Le Grand rely upon the printed word, the remainder of his extracts being drawn from medieval manuscripts or, more frequently, from copies of these executed for, and annotated by, his friend and benefactor Sainte-Palaye. It is important for us to ap-

preciate the nature of the gulf existing between what Le Grand was working from and what was acceptable to the public he wished to reach. The problems he confronted in his efforts to bridge this gap and the solutions he found are the subject of Chapter V, where one of the more useful extracts, with which the author thought to serve all three of his primary ends, is examined in some detail. It is hoped that this will prove the justice of the distinctions awarded to Le Grand in the final chapter of this study.

If the plan of this work can be said to have evolved naturally from the subject-matter, then it was no less obvious from this that the enquiry should centre upon the first three volumes of the *Fabliaux ou Contes* and Le Grand's own defence of these, the *Observations sur les Troubadours*, which appeared as a supplement.³ The extracts of "contes dévots," fables and romances which Le Grand was to add to his collection were meant to complete the picture and we in turn have exploited them for the added light they shed upon their author. But it was with the first three volumes of his collection, the "fabliaux ou contes" proper, that Le Grand thought to realize his three primary objectives and these are our main concern. Equally, it must be said, we have limited ourselves to Le Grand's own very loose definition of the genre with which he was concerned. While the eighteenth century did make some effort to distinguish between the fabliaux and similar "contes à rire," Le Grand himself was not greatly interested in this distinction and a detailed examination of his understanding of the term "fabliau" could thus serve little useful purpose. Nevertheless, it has been thought worthwhile to include in this study a table showing the precise number of manuscripts preserving accepted fabliaux known to Le Grand and his predecessors.

Passing mention only has hitherto been made of Part I of this work. Since the purpose of this study is in part to "rehabilitate" Le Grand d'Aussy, it was thought that rather more should be known about his life, which is his work, than can be gleaned from the few comments which biographers and bibliographers have afforded him thus far. As founder of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal the Marquis de Paulmy draws the attention of Henry Martin in his history of that famous library,⁴ Henri Jacoubet made the Comte de Tressan the subject of a

³ Paris (Eugène Onfroy) 1781, 1 vol. in-8.

⁴ *Histoire de la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal*, Paris (Plon) 1899.

⁵ *Le Comte de Tressan et les Origines du Genre Troubadour*, Paris (Imprimerie des Presses Universitaires de France) 1923.

study in 1923,⁵ and four years ago Dr. Lionel Gossman of the Johns Hopkins University published the first major work on *La Curne de Sainte-Palaye*.⁶ While it must be said that Dr. Gossman's book represents an enormous advance upon all previous studies in eighteenth-century medievalism, providing the present researcher with the ideal introduction to this area of study, yet it could not hope and indeed was not meant to cover this whole vast field. *Le Grand d'Aussy* remains in semi-oblivion.

We can perhaps never know what *Le Grand d'Aussy* looked like,⁷ but we can and should know much more of the life he led, of his ambitions and of his achievements. Given the number and value of these latter, it is nothing less than astonishing to discover that Alexandre Cioranescu should have deemed him unworthy of a separate entry in his *Bibliographie de la Littérature française du dix-huitième Siècle*.⁸ The greatest modern student of the fabliaux, Joseph Bédier, appears to have been unaware that a *Le Grand d'Aussy* ever existed.⁹ And yet the man must have had some merit when one considers that a scholar of Sir Walter Scott's calibre thought his *Fabliaux ou Contes* important enough to own two separate editions together with English translations.¹⁰ Perhaps the most significant move towards "rehabilitating" *Le Grand* has already been made with the reprinting of his collection.¹¹ It is hoped that the present study will complete the process.

⁶ *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment. The World and Work of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye*, Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins Press) 1968.

⁷ All efforts to trace some portrait have been fruitless.

⁸ Paris (Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) 1969, 3 vols.

⁹ There is no mention of him in Bédier's *Les Fabliaux*, 6th edition, Paris (Champion) 1964.

¹⁰ Cf. Sir Walter Scott, *Catalogue of the Library at Abbotsford*, Edinburgh (T. Constable) 1838, pp. 40, 118, 185 and 187. Scott also makes reference to *Le Grand's* collection and to an English translation in his *Sir Tristrem: a Metrical Romance of the Thirteenth Century*, 4th edition, Edinburgh (A. Constable) 1819, pp. 306 and 361 respectively.

¹¹ Slatkine Reprints, Geneva, 1971. All credit for this is due to Professor C. E. Pickford who first brought the work to Slatkine's attention and suggested a reprint.