

The Enigmatic Style in Twelfth-Century French Literature

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At one point in his commentary on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, after interpreting the myth of Orpheus, the twelfth-century grammarian, William of Conches (1120–1154), breaks off to comment:

No one should criticize our interpretation of this fable just because he finds another interpretation of it while reading Fulgentius, for one can come up with various interpretations of the same thing depending on how one looks at it. This variety of interpretations is a cause for rejoicing rather than concern, as long as each explanation is free from contradictions.¹

In the third quarter of the twelfth century, Marie de France wrote something similar in a much-discussed passage in the prologue to her *Lais*:

It was the custom of the old authors, as Priscian testifies, to speak somewhat obscurely in their books so that those who were to come after them and had to study their books might gloss the letters they found written there and use their own judgment to fill out the meaning. These philosophers knew, they understood from their own experience, that as time went on people's judgment would become more subtle and they would be better able to keep for themselves part of that in their works which might be lost.²

Towards the end of the century, moreover, Chrétien de Troyes began his *Story of the Grail* by writing that

¹ "[S]i aliquis legens Fulgentium aliter hanc fabulam exponi videat, idcirco hanc nostram non vituperet, quia de eadem re secundum diversam considerationem diverse inveniuntur expositiones. Sed non est curandum de diversitate expositionum, immo gaudendum, sed de contrarietate si in expositione esset" (cited in Edouard Jauneau, "L'usage de la notion d'integumentum à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge* 24 [1957]: 47). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² "Custume fu as anciens, / Ceo testimoine Preciens, / Es livres ke jadis feseient, / Assez obscurement diseient / Pur ceus ki a venir esteient / E ki aprendre les deveient, / K'i peussent gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre. / Li philosophe le saveient, / Par eus meismes l'entenceient, / Cum plus trespasseroit li tens, / Plus serreient sutil de sens / E plus se savreient garder / De ceo k'i ert a trespasser" (Marie de France, *Lais*, Prologue 9–22, ed. Jean Rychner [Paris: Champion, 1971], 1–2).

Whoever sows sparingly, reaps sparingly, but he who wishes to reap plentifully casts his seed on ground that will bear him fruit a hundredfold; for good seed withers and dies in worthless soil. Chrétien sows and casts the seed of a romance that he is beginning and sows it in such a good place that he cannot fail to profit greatly from it for he does it for the worthiest man in the Empire of Rome, that is, Count Philip of Flanders.³

As I have shown elsewhere, this passage is more complicated than it might at first seem, but the core metaphor is clear. Writing a romance is like sowing a seed and that seed grows more or less well depending on the soil—which is to say the listener or reader—in which it is sown. In a poor listener or reader, the seed will wither and die; in a good one, it will bear fruit—which is to say meaning—a hundredfold.⁴

Common to all three authors is the notion that a text's meanings are produced by hearers or readers whose capacities, interests and concerns determine what the text means to them. A text's meanings are not fixed, are not something transmitted from the author to the hearer or reader, and, in the case of a secular, poetic text, are not even subject to the blinders of orthodoxy; they are, rather, something the hearers or readers imagine while hearing or reading the text. "The word comes to the ears like whistling wind," Chrétien writes at the beginning of *The Knight with the Lion*,

³ "Qui petit seime petit quiaut / Et qui auques recoillir viaut / En tel leu sa semence espande / Que fruit a cent doble li rande. / Car en terre qui rien ne vaut / Bone semence seiche et faut. / Crestiens seime et fait semence / D'un romanz que il encomence / Et si lo seime en sin bon leu / Qu'il ne puet ester sanz grant preu. / Il le fait por lo plus prodome / Qui soit en l'empire de Rome. / C'est li cuens Felipes de Flandres" (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du graal* 1–13, ed. Charles Méla [Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990], 26; *The Story of the Grail [Perceval]*, in Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William Kibler [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991], 381 [trans. modified]).

⁴ See Jeff Rider, "Wild Oats: The Parable of the Sower in the Prologue to Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du graal*," in *Philologies Old and New: Essays in Honor of Peter Florian Dembowski*, ed. Carol Chase and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Princeton, NJ: Edward C. Armstrong Monographs, 2001), 251–66. For another reflection on these authors' use of obscurity, see Carlo Donà, "Oscurità ed enigma in Marie de France e Chrétien de Troyes," in *Obscuritas: Retorica e poetica dell'oscuro. Atti del XXVII Convegno Interuniversitario di Bressanone (12–15 luglio 2001)*, ed. Francesco Zambon and Giosué Lachin (Trento: Editrice Università degli Studi di Trento, 2004), 103–15.

but doesn't stop or linger there; instead it quickly leaves if the heart is not alert and ready to grasp it, for the heart can grasp and enclose and retain it when it comes,⁵

A second notion, which is common to both Marie and Chrétien at least—who were writers rather than interpreters—and is, indeed, illustrated in the passages cited above in which they set it forth, is that given that meaning is not communicated from the author to hearers or readers, but is instead produced by them, the best way for a writer to ensure that his or her work will continue to be read and will bear meaning a hundredfold is to write "somewhat obscurely." The "somewhat" is important. If one writes too obscurely, one will not be read. If one writes too clearly, one limits both the meaningfulness and the potential audience of one's work by binding it too closely to a single context. By writing somewhat obscurely, one gives one's work the best chance of being endlessly meaningful, of provoking meaning for many people at many times in many places.⁶

What we find reflected in these three passages is what I will call a taste for, an aesthetic of, enigma, which was a central part of the twelfth-century French literary tradition. Although the concept of enigma is pre-

⁵ "As oreilles vient le parole. / Aussi comme li vens qui vole, / Mais n'i arreste ne demore, / Ains s'en part en mout petit d'ore, / Se li cuers n'est si estilliés / C'a prendre soit appareilliés; / Que chil le puet en son venir / Prendre et endorre et retenir" (Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au lion* 158–64, ed. and French trans. David Hult [Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994], 60; *The Knight with the Lion* [Yvain], in Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, 297 [trans. modified]).

⁶ This anticipates, from a productive or rhetorical point of view, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of appropriation, which is founded on the fact that a text's reference changes as it is handed on over time. "In my view," writes Ricoeur, "the text is much more than a particular case of intersubjective communication: it is the paradigm of distanciation in communication. As such, it displays a fundamental characteristic of the very historicity of human experience, namely that it is communication in and through distance. . . . An essential characteristic of a literary work, and of a work of art in general, is that it transcends its own psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions. In short, the text must be able, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, to 'decontextualize' itself in such a way that it can be 'recontextualised' in a new situation – as accomplished, precisely, by the act of reading" ("The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Editions de la Maison de Sciences de l'Homme, 1981], 131, 139; cf. Ricoeur, "Appropriation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 182–93).

sent at the very beginning of the classical rhetorical tradition and is discussed, notably, by Aristotle and Cicero, Quintilian gives it the place it holds in all subsequent treatises on rhetoric and grammar: among the tropes, as a species of allegory. In his *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian defines a trope as "the artistic alteration of a word or a phrase from its proper meaning to another" and writes that metaphor is the most common and best of tropes. Allegory is a continuous series of metaphors which "either presents one thing in words and another in meaning, or else something absolutely opposed to the meaning of the words." He subsequently identifies this second type of allegory, where what is meant is absolutely opposed to what is said, as irony. "When, however, an allegory is too obscure," he writes, "we call it an enigma." Enigma, in other words, is a species of allegory, a continuous series of metaphors whose meaning is ambiguous and obscure.⁷

The particular value of enigma, according to Classical rhetorical treatises, is the pleasure it procures the audience by means of its metaphoric nature. The treatises agree that metaphor is an important device, perhaps an orator's most useful tool, and is a source of great pleasure for an audience. As Cicero's orator Crassus observes,

everybody derives more pleasure from words used metaphorically and not in their proper sense than from the proper names belonging to the objects. . . . even in cases where there are plenty of proper words available, words not used in their proper sense give people much more pleasure, if the metaphor is a good one.

The seductiveness of metaphor is so great, in fact, that Crassus feels obliged to admonish his interlocutors that "only such metaphors should be used as either make the meaning clearer . . . or such as better convey the whole meaning of the matter." The danger is that the pleasure procured by metaphor will become the goal of the discourse, rather than the transmission of meaning: the desire to please the audience through the use of metaphor may overcome the obligation to instruct them and this will lead to obscurity. Cicero thus recognizes both a value and a danger in the use of metaphor. "There is," he writes, "no mode of speech more effective in the case of single words, and none that adds more brilliance

⁷ "[V]erbi vel sermonis a propria significatione in aliam cum virtute mutatio . . . aut aliud verbis aliud sensu ostendit aut etiam interim contrarium. . . . Sed allegoria, quae est obscurior, aenigma dicitur" (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8.6.1, 44, 52; trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London: Heineman; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1920–22], 3: 300–01, 326–27, 330–31).

to the style," but he also realizes that the pleasure afforded by metaphor may become the only reason for its use.⁸

Cicero writes that allegory, like the metaphors of which it is made up, is "a valuable stylistic ornament." But here too there is a danger: when one uses allegory, Cicero warns, "care must be taken to avoid obscurity—and in fact it is usually the way in which what are called enigmas are made."⁹ Allegory, in other words, is a continuous use of metaphor which still serves to convey the intended meaning; in the case of enigma, the meaning is obscure and the discourse serves principally to amuse. An enigmatic discourse pleases immensely, that is, but it does not instruct insofar as its meaning is obscure. It is a sort of metaphoric inebriation, where metaphor is used principally for the pleasure it procures.

Noteworthy evidence of the entertaining pleasure provided by enigma is to be found in Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights*, where he relates that he and some fellow Roman students in Athens used to meet for dinner during the Saturnalia and spend the evening

very merrily yet temperately, not "relaxing our minds," as the saying is—for, as Musonius asserts, to relax the mind is like losing it—but diverting our minds a little and relieving them by the delights of pleasant and improving conversation:

the host would pose a series of enigmas and obscure questions (of which Gellius gives seven examples) and a guest who solved an enigma or answered a question received a prize and a laurel crown. Quintilian also testifies to the pleasure to be derived from enigma by first mentioning it, not in the part of the *Institutio* devoted to tropes, but in a discussion of "the sources from which laughter may be legitimately derived or the topics where it may be naturally employed." Pompeius similarly defines enigma as "that game which children play amongst themselves when they ask each other little questions which none can understand," while

⁸ "[E]a transferri oportet quae aut clariorem faciunt rem . . . aut quo significatur magis res tota . . . omnes translates et alienis magis delectantur verbis quam propriis et suis . . . sed in suorum verborum maxima copia tamen homines aliena multo magis, si sunt ratione translate, delectant. . . . Modus autem nullus est floridior in singulis verbis nec qui plus luminis afferat orationi" (Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.39.157–3.40.159, 3.41.166; trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London: Heineman; Cambridge: Harvard, 1942], 2: 122–25, 130–31 [trans. modified]).

⁹ "[M]agnum ornamentum orationis. In quo obscuritas fugienda est: etenim ex hoc genere fiunt ea quae dicuntur aenigmata" (*De Oratore* 3.42.167, 2: 131).

Gervase of Melkley, in the thirteenth century, writes that "enigma is any obscure proposition testing one's talent for guessing."¹⁰

The identification of enigma as obscure allegory passed from the classical textbook to the medieval textbook without interruption or significant modification, and by the middle of the fourth century the exposition of the concept had achieved the form it would retain throughout the Middle Ages. "An enigma," writes Donatus in his *Ars maior* (c. 340–360), "is an obscure proposition which is composed by means of a hidden resemblance between things."¹¹

Even Augustine's concept of enigma, which he perceives to be one of God's principal means of revelation and examples of which he finds in Scripture and the soul, is nonetheless the simple, traditional grammatical concept. In his treatise *On the Trinity*, he launches his commentary on Paul's use of the words "in enigma" by writing:

these words are altogether unintelligible to those who have never had those basic lessons in which is taught a certain doctrine concerning modes of speaking which the Greeks call tropes, which Greek word we also use in Latin. . . . There are, however, several species of this trope, that is of allegory, among which there is indeed one called enigma . . . so that every enigma is an allegory, but not every allegory is an enigma. What, therefore, is allegory if not that trope where one thing is to be understood by means of another thing Enigma, I can briefly explain, is an obscure allegory.¹²

¹⁰ "[H]ilare prorsum ac modeste, non, ut dicitur, 'remittentes animum' – nam 'remittere,' inquit Musonius, 'animum quasi amittere est' –, sed demulcentes eum paulum atque laxantes iucundis honestisque sermonum inlectionibus" (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 18.2, trans. John C. Rolfe, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1927–28], 3: 297–303:); "unde autem concilietur risus et quibus locis peti solet" (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6.3.35, 51; 2: 456–57, 464–65); "aenigma est, quo ludunt etiam parvuli inter se, quando sibi proponunt quaestiunculas, quas nullus intellet" (Pompeius, *Commentum artis Donati*, in *Grammatici latini*, vol. 5: *Artium scriptores minores*, ed. Heinrich Keil [Leipzig: Teubner, 1868], 311); "Enigma est quelibet obscura sententia probans ingenium divinandi" (Gervase of Melkley, *Ars poetica*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Gräbener, *Forschungen zur Romanischen Philologie* 17 [Münster: Aschenorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965], 149).

¹¹ "Aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum" (Aelius Donatus, *Ars maior*, ed. Louis Holtz, in Louis Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l'enseignement grammatical* [Paris: CNRS, 1981], 672).

¹² "[M]ultis hoc incognitum est qui eas litteras nesciunt, in quibus est doctrina quaedam de locutionem modus, quos Graeci tropos vocant, eoque graeco vocabulo etiam nos utimur pro latino. . . . Hujus autem tropi, id est allegoriae, plures sunt species, in quibus est etiam quod dicitur aenigma. . . . ita omne aenigma allegoria est, non omnis allegoria aenigma est. Quid ergo est allegoria, nisi tropus ubi

The examples of enigma with which Augustine illustrates the just-cited passage are all drawn from the Bible, but he also recognizes the existence of enigmas in secular texts. In his *Seven Questions Concerning the Heptateuch*, in the course of a commentary on a passage from Numbers, he explains the unusual word "enigmatists" by noting that they seem to be composing a song. He therefore concludes that

it is not incredible to think that those whom we call poets were then called enigmatists, for it is the habit and the license of poets to mix the enigmas of fables with their songs, by which they are understood to signify something. Indeed, enigmas were probably then nothing other than that tropical locution which must be broken if that which lies hidden in the enigma is to be understood.¹³

The passage shows that Augustine considered the enigmas of secular poets to be comparable to the enigmas of the divinely inspired biblical ones.

ex alio aliud intellegitur Aenigma est autem, ut breviter explicem, obscura allegoria" (Augustine, *La Trinité* 15.9.15, in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, vols. 15–16, ed. and French trans. M. Mellet and Th. Camelot [Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1955], 2:458–60). On this passage in particular and enigma in the classical and medieval rhetorical tradition in general, see Eleanor Cook, "The Figure of Enigma: Rhetoric, History, Poetry," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 19 (2001): 349–78; on the sources and treatment of obscurity in this tradition more generally, see Jan Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition," *Mediaevalia: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 19 (1996 for 1993): 101–70; and Irène Rosier-Catach, ed., *L'Ambigüité; cinq études historiques* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1988).

¹³ "[N]on incredibiliter putantur isti aenigmatistae sic tunc appellati, quos poetas nos appellamus, eo quo poetarum sit consuetudo atque licentia miscere carminibus suis aenigmata fabularum, quibus aliquid significare intellegantur. Non enim aliter essent aenigmata, nisi esset illic tropica locutio, qua discussa perveniretur ad intellectum qui in aenigmate latitaret" (Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum libri VIII* Quaest. 45, ed. J. Fraipont, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 33 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1958], 263–64). I would like to thank Tamás Visi for pointing out to me that Augustine's word "enigmatists" ("aenigmatistae") is based on the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which translates a Hebrew word meaning "those who speak parables/proverbs" as ἀειγμματαῖστας ("enigmatists"). The Hebrew word is from the same root as the Hebrew title of the book Proverbs. The phrase in which the word is used (Num. 21:27) introduces a citation from an ancient poem and many modern translators render the Hebrew phrase as "poets": modern scholars, in sum, have reached the same conclusion as Augustine. Compare Origen, *Homily XIII on Numbers*, 2.1.

The definition of enigma as an obscure allegory is repeated by essentially every grammarian in the Middle Ages. "An enigma," writes Isidore of Seville,

is an obscure question which is difficult to understand, unless it is explained . . . The difference between allegory and enigma is that the power of allegory is double and indicates one thing figuratively beneath another; enigma, however, has a meaning which is most obscure and adumbrated through certain semblances.¹⁴

"An enigma," writes Hugh of Saint Victor, copying Donatus word for word, "is an obscure proposition which is composed by means of a hidden resemblance between things."¹⁵ "An enigma," echoes Mathew of Vendôme, "is an obscurity in propositions which is hidden by a certain covering of words."¹⁶ Enigma thus had a well-defined place in the remarkably stable medieval rhetorical and grammatical tradition and was taught in the schools along with the rest of that tradition.

Within this tradition, the composition of an enigmatic text was altogether comparable to the composition of an allegorical or ironic one. As Karl F. Morrison puts it, enigma was considered "an expository strategy" or "a deliberate strategy of thought" which

locates closure, not in the text, but, if at all, in the mind of the reader or spectator . . . according to principles entirely unanticipated by the author.¹⁷

Medieval scholars, moreover, discovered enigmas in every form of discourse. Does one not read, asked Aldhelm of Malmesbury (c. 650–709), that "the poet Simphosius . . . sang the hidden propositions of enigmas, raising slight matter to the heights of playfulness?" Did not "Aristotle, the most penetrating of the philosophers, likewise produce difficult enigmas in eloquent prose as proofs?" Does one not find enigmas "inserted

¹⁴ "Aenigma est quaestio obscura quae difficile intellegitur, nisi aperiatur . . . Inter allegoriam autem et aenigma hoc interest, quod allegoriae vis gemina est et sub res aliud figuraliter indicat; aenigma vero sensus tantum obscurus est, et per quasdam imagines adumbrates" (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1911], 1.37.26).

¹⁵ "Enigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum" (Hugh of Saint Victor, *De grammatica*, ed. Jean Leclercq, in Jean Leclercq, "Le 'De grammatica' de Hugues de Saint Victor," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 14 [1943/45], 321).

¹⁶ "Aenigma est sententiarum obscuritas quodam verborum involucre occultata" (Mathew of Vendôme, *Ars Versificatoria* 3.44, ed. Edmond Faral, in Edmond Faral, *Les Arts poétiques du XIe et du XIIIe siècle* [Paris: Champion, 1924], 177).

¹⁷ Karl F. Morrison, "Hermeneutics and Enigma: Bernard of Clairvaux's *De consideratione*," *Viator* 19 (1988): 129–51.

throughout the sacred heights of literature?"¹⁸ Poetry, philosophy, Scripture: all three could be enigmatic, and enigma was used as an expository strategy by such twelfth-century writers as Abelard, Bernardus Silvestris, Gratian, Anselm of Havelberg, Gerhoch of Reichersberg and Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁹

Unlike the classical rhetoricians, however, medieval scholars did not view discursive obscurity as a fault to be avoided. The warnings against the dangers of obscurity which accompany the discussion of enigma in the classical textbooks tend to disappear from the medieval textbooks. An enigmatic discourse's fruitful ability to provoke multiple interpretations was, on the contrary, recognized and lauded throughout the Middle Ages.²⁰ Encountering an obscure passage in the Bible, for example, Augustine writes:

Perhaps it has been set down the more darkly, in order that it might generate many meanings, and that men might come away from it the more enriched, finding something enclosed that could be opened in many ways, more than if they had found it, already open, in one way only.²¹

Abelard writes similarly that

the holy prophets, too, when the Spirit speaks through them, do not understand all the meanings towards which their words are directed, but often are aware of only one meaning, even though the Spirit speaking through them

¹⁸ "Simfosius poeta . . . occultas enigmatum propositiones exili materia sumpta ludibundis apicibus . . . cecinisse . . . Aristoteles, philosophorum acerrimus, perplexa nihilominus enigmata e prosae locutionis facundia fretus argumentatur. . . in sacris litterarum apicibus insertum" (Aldhelm of Malmesbury, *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis* 6–7, in *Opera*, ed Rudolf Ewald, MGH AA 15 [Berlin: Weidmann, 1919], 75–76). Abelard likewise thought that philosophers, poets and prophets "use language in essentially the same, 'veiled' way" (Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism*, *Mittelaltliche Studien und Texte* 9 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974], 61–64).

¹⁹ See Morrison and, for Bernardus Silvestris, Dronke, *Fabula*, 134–35.

²⁰ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 255–57; Donà, "Oscurità ed enigma," 104–05; and Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity," 130–33, 138–53, all likewise draw attention to this shift in attitude towards the enigmatic between the classical period and the Middle Ages.

²¹ "Ideo enim forte obscurius positum est, ut multus intellectus generet, et ditiores discedant homines, quia clausum inuenerunt quod multis modis aperiretur, quam si uno modo apertum inuenirent" (Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CXXVI.11, ed. Egius Dekkers and J. Fraipont, 3 vols. *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 38–40 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1990], 3:1865; trans. Dronke, *Fabula*, 57 n. 2 [cont. from 56]).

foresees many meanings there, so that later he may inspire some interpretations in some interpreters and other in others.²²

Writing a deliberately enigmatic text was thus very much a possibility within the literary tradition in which Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes and other twelfth-century French authors were formed and thus part of the nascent French literature that emerged in the twelfth century. Preoccupied by legal and political concerns, Classical forensic rhetoricians were, as we have seen, wary of the inebriating pleasure that comes from such texts. One can understand, however, why twelfth-century court poets like Marie and Chrétien, who sought first and foremost to entertain their audiences, embraced the enigmatic style. I think they also did so because another of their goals was to endow the aristocratic life portrayed in their works with its own spiritual dimension, a secular aristocratic spirituality independent of contemporary mainstream Catholic spirituality. And one way to do so was to endow their works with a mysterious, quasi-allegorical aura, suggesting they had a hidden higher meaning for those who have ears to hear.²³

While enigmatic texts did not suddenly cease to be written in French in the thirteenth century, they do seem to have become less frequent and less popular from that time on. The great anti-enigmatic romance, the *Quest of the Holy Grail*, was written about 1225 and we find in it a striking exposition of a new aesthetic and hermeneutic model that would become increasingly influential in Western culture and is probably still the most influential model today. When Eve picked the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden, the author of the *Quest* writes, she broke "off as she did so a twig of the tree itself, as it often happens that the twig adheres to the gathered fruit." Eve broke off the twig when she gave the fruit to Adam, but kept it absentmindedly in her hand and indeed still had it in her hand when they were expelled from the garden. "When . . .," writes the author,

²² *Theologia Christiana* 1.117, in *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, 3 vols., Corpus Christianorum 11–13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969–87), 2:121, trans. Dronke, *Fabula*, 63–64: "et sancti prophetae, cum aliqua Spiritus Sanctus per eos loquitur, non omnes sententias ad quas se habent uerba sua intelligent; sed saepe unam tantum in eis habent, cum Spiritus ipse qui per eos loquitur multas ibi prouideat, quarum postmodum alias aliis expositoribus et alias aliis inspirat."

²³ See Jeff Rider, "Marvels and the Marvelous," in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, 2 ed. (New York: Garland, 1991), 311–13.

she saw the twig, it caught her eye because it was still as fresh and green as if it had just been picked. She knew that the tree from which it had been broken was the cause of her exile and her misery. So she said then that, in remembrance of the cruel loss she had suffered through that tree, she would keep the branch for as long as she could, where it would often be before her eyes to remind her of her great misfortune.

Then Eve bethought herself that she had neither casket nor any other box in which to house it, for no such things as yet existed. So she thrust it into the ground, so that it stood erect, saying that in this way it would often catch her eye. . . .

This branch which the first sinner brought with her out of Paradise was charged with meaning. In that she held it in her hand it betokened a great happiness, as though she were speaking to her heirs that were to follow her . . . , and saying to them through the medium of this twig:

"Be not dismayed if we are banished from our inheritance: it is not lost to us eternally; see here a sign of our return hereafter."²⁴

This twig, eternally fresh and green, charged with meaning, transmits Eve's voice and unchanging message down the centuries to her heirs. It is a promise, a legal or contractual message, and Eve's first impulse is to place it in a box or casket for safe-keeping, although she cannot do so because such things have not yet been invented. This tale evokes what I will call the box-model of hermeneutics, according to which an author puts meaning in a text, just as Eve would have liked to put the twig in a box. The author's voice survives down the centuries, eternally fresh and green, closed in a box-like text which readers must open in order to hear that voice and its message. All authority in this model belongs to the au-

²⁴ "[E]le cueilli . . . de l'arbre meismes .i. rainsel avec le fruit, si com l'avient sovent que li rains s'en vient avec le fruit com l'an le quel. . . . Lors s'aperçut et voit le rainsel bel et verdoiant come celui qui mainte[nant] avoit esté cueilli, si sot que li arbres dont li fruiz avoit esté estoit acheson de son deseritement et de sa mesaise. Lors dist Eve que en remembrance de sa grant perte qui par cel arbre li estoit avenue, garderoit elle le rainsel tant com ele le porroit plus et si le metroit en tel leu que ele le verroit sovent. Et lors s'apensa qu'ele n'avait ne huche ne autre [estui] en quoi ele le peust estoier, car encores au tens de lors n'estoit nuls tel chose. Si le ficha dedenz terre, si qu'il se tint tout droiz, et dist que ainsi le verroit ele assez sovent. . . . Ici rains que la premiere pecherresse aporta [de] paradis si fu pleins de [molt] grant senefiance. Car ainsi com ele le portoit en sa main senefioit il une grant leece, tot aussi come seele parlast a ses oirs qui encore estoient a venir . . . et li rains senefia tot aussi com s'ele lor deist: 'Ne vos esmaiez mie se nos sommes jeté hors de nostre heritaje: car nos ne l'avons mie perdu a toz jorz; vez ici les enseignes que encore i serons'" (*La Quête du Saint Graal* 11.253–54, ed. Fanni Bogdanow, French trans. Anne Berrie [Paris: Livre de Poche, 2006], 516–20; *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. P. M. Matarasso [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969], 222–23).

thor. The meaning is entirely his or hers. The reader's job, indeed the reader's obligation, is to open the textbox and hear the author's message. This is the model of promissory texts and contracts, the kind of text that was dear to the growing medieval patrician class. It is a binding, authoritarian model that banishes all obscurity—and all hints of a secular spirituality—and grounds meaning in a clear set of references.²⁵

This model is diametrically opposite to the seed-model of hermeneutics shared by Guillaume de Conches, Abelard, Marie de France and Chrétien. For them, the text is a seed that grows differently, produces different meanings, in each reader, in which each reader produces meanings appropriate to his or her capacities, interests and situation, and in which "this variety of interpretations is a cause for rejoicing rather than concern." This model—which emerged from a clerical synthesis of Classical rhetoric and biblical hermeneutics—does not bind readers, locates the authority for determining meaning in them, and welcomes some obscurity as a provocation to interpretation.²⁶

²⁵ The avowed purpose of the author of the *Quest* is "to bring to a close the adventures of the Holy Grail (a achever les aventures del [Saint] Graal)" (*La Quête* 1.11, 96; *The Quest*, 37) and he declares that "just as folly and error fled at His [Christ's] advent and truth stood revealed, even so has Our Lord chosen you [the *Quest*'s hero, Galahad] from among all other knights to ride abroad through many lands to put an end to the hazards that afflict them and make their meaning and their causes plain (tot einsi com l'error et la folie s'en foï par la venue de lui et la verité fu adonc [aparanz et] manifeste, ausi vos a Nostre Sires esleu sor toz chevaliers por envoyer par les estranges terres por abatre les greveuses aventures et a fere conoistre coment eles sont avenues)" (*La Quête* 2.43, 158; *The Quest*, 64). In more modern terms, one might say that the author of the *Quest* wanted to put an end to the obscurity surrounding the grail and the Arthurian world (and to Arthurian narratives in general) and teach his readers how to interpret what they read correctly, which is to say, in an edifying and doctrinally acceptable manner, but he falls in some very interesting ways and his story gets away from him even as he tells it. In the midst of the above-cited passage in which he sets forth the box-model of hermeneutics, for example, he tells us that when Eve stuck the twig into the ground, "it quickened and took root in the soil and grew (crut et reprist en la terre [et enracina])" (*La Quête* 11.254, 518; *The Quest*, 223). This twig eventually grew into a large white tree, then turned green and produced numerous green saplings, and then later turned red and produced numerous red saplings. Despite the author's intentions and efforts, Eve's message grows and changes with time and circumstance, recalling Chrétien's seed metaphor.

²⁶ "Augustine and other allegorizing exegetes," writes Ziolkowski, "had opened the door . . . to allegorical and obscure writing – to writing that demanded an allegorical mode of thought, to writing that encouraged readers and listeners to

When French literature emerged in the twelfth century it did so from and against a clerical, that is, ecclesiastical, learned and Latinate, background.²⁷ Its authors had been trained in clerical schools or at least in the clerical tradition and the literature they created was in some sense Latinate literature for people who did not know Latin, had not been to school, and were used to oral entertainments. It was a literature that had to please an unschooled audience but whose authors nonetheless wanted to write sophisticated literature and thus had to teach their audience to enjoy such literature as well as entertaining it.

The world had changed considerably by the time the *Quest of the Holy Grail* was composed around 1225. The clerical tradition, on the one hand, was becoming more scholastic and encyclopedic, which led it to prefer an allegorical style to an enigmatic one.²⁸ Buoyed by growing wealth, the

speculate upon its opacity. Their work led to an acceptance among a variety of authors that obscurity had a valid place even outside the Bible and that it could enable all manners of writings to attain the most sublime heights. The multiple interpretations that an obscure style could enable held the potential of elevating poetry alongside theology, and this was a potential that poets on the order of Alan of Lille and Dante [and, I would add, Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes] could ill afford to leave untried" (152–53). See also Jacqueline Cerquilligni, "Polysémie, ambiguïté et équivoque dans la théorie et la pratique poétiques du Moyen Âge français," in Rosier, ed., *L'Ambiguïté*, 167–80.

²⁷ It is still useful, in this connection, to read Edmond Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 1913). See also Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry*, 220–41.

²⁸ This new attitude is apparent in Aquinas's explanation of Aristotle's critique of Plato: "Having introduced Plato's view, Aristotle here rejects it. In this connection it is important to realize that very often, when Aristotle rejects Plato's views, he is rejecting them not with respect to Plato's intention but with respect to how his words sound. Aristotle acts in this way because Plato had a faulty manner of teaching: he says everything figuratively and teaches through symbols, intending through his words something different from how they themselves sound. (Thus he said that soul is a circle.) So, to prevent someone from falling into error on account of these words, Aristotle argues against Plato with respect to how his words sound" ("Posita opinione Platonis, hic Aristoteles reprobatur eam. Ubi notandum est quod plerumque quando reprobat opiniones Platonis, non reprobatur eas quantum ad intentionem Platonis, sed quantum ad sonum verborum eius; quod ideo facit quia Plato habuit malum modum docendi: omnia enim figurate dicit, et per simbola docet, intendens aliud per uerba quam sonent ipsa uerba, sicut quod dixit animam esse circulum; et ideo ne aliquis propter ipsa uerba incidat in errorem, Aristoteles disputat contra eum quantum ad id quod uerba eius sonant") (Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De anima* 1.8, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 45.1 [Rome: Commissio Leonina; Paris: Vrin, 1984], 38.407a2; *A Commentary on Aris-*

secular audience for literary entertainments, on the other hand, had become significantly larger and more varied and secular literature had begun to develop its own tradition, distinct from the clerical one. Anchored more clearly in secular concerns and reflecting more clearly worldly attitudes, it favored a "realistic" and often ironic style to an enigmatic one. For French literature at least, the twelfth century thus seems to me to be the heyday of the seed-model of hermeneutics and of what one might call the enigmatic style.

totle's De anima, trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 62–63). This passage was brought to my attention by reading Alessandro Zironi, "Il *Libro di Zabulon* fra astronomia e occultismo," in *Obscuritas*, ed. Zambon and Lachin, 202. On Aquinas's preference for allegory over enigma and the effect of such a preference on literary creation, see also Cook, "The Figure of Enigma," 370.



Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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SONDERBAND XXX

Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider,
and Alessandro Zironi

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