

Mise en abyme in Marie de France's "Laüstic"

Susan Small

Mise en abyme, or infinite regress, is a hermeneutic device which produces meaning through the juxtaposition of analogous structures. Its use is perhaps most prevalent in literature, although it has important parallels in other disciplines, most notably that of visual arts, where replication draws the eye to the isomorphism and infinite interconnectivity of spatial configurations. The introduction of the term "*mise en abyme*" in a literary context is generally attributed to the late-nineteenth-century French writer, André Gide, who borrowed it from the field of heraldry; the notion of a "text-within-a-text" was, said Gide, similar to the relation which obtained between an object placed at the center point (the "abyme") of a heraldic shield and the shield itself; both devices operated by means of an analogy between one structure and the structure which contained it.¹ Meaning was produced through the interaction (or, more specifically, mirroring) of similar structures, each reflecting and thereby complicating and interrogating the other. Given its focus on specularity, it would seem inevitable that *mise en abyme* should emerge, some half a century later, as the *sine qua non* of the French *Nouveau Roman* [New Novel], with its focus on metafictional reflexivity. Within the kaleidoscopic detail of a text (literary or other), *mise en abyme* acts both as a filter and a catalyst, bringing into focus systems of semiotic relations whose analogous structures can be seen to reflect, and reflect upon, each other. It is in this way that it functions as a hermeneutic device, revealing intricate webs of symmetric semiosis underlying and supporting the surface of the text.

¹ Cf. Lucien Dällenbach, "André Gide's shields," in Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whitely with Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7–19, esp. 7–8. Originally *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977); and André Gide, *Journal 1889–1939* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1948), 41, cf. *Journals 1889–1949*, trans. J. O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1984), 30–31.

If the use of the term *mise en abyme* is modern, however, the concept itself is not. In his study of mirror imagery in medieval and renaissance texts, Herbert Grabes observes a parallel between similarity, analogy, and the classical principle of *imitatio*, in which the world is conceptualized throughout the period as an "increasingly complex fabric of analogies," each strand of which can be seen and, therefore, interpreted in terms of the others.² Within this world of echoes, asymmetry (and the complementary notions of absence, silence, dislocation, refraction, erasure and loss) can be seen as a rent in the "fabric of analogies." Moreover, as Lucien Dällenbach observes in *The Mirror in the Text*, the placement of one object *en abyme* in another produces a hole or lacuna at the center of the object in which it is placed, altering its identity and initiating "[a]n infinite illusion . . . or an unlimited interplay of substitutions."³

This interplay is strikingly represented in the twelfth-century lay of "Laüstic" [The Nightingale] by Marie de France, which contains a jeweled casket which contains an embroidered cloth which contains a dead nightingale: a structure that clearly replicates Dällenbach's definition of *mise en abyme* as "any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication."⁴ Moreover, the collection of lays containing "Laüstic" itself is preceded by a prologue in which Marie famously declares her writing project: to follow the ancient practice of obscuring the meaning of the text in order that it might be read and interpreted by future generations with the hermeneutic tools at their disposal:

It was the custom of the Ancients,
As Priscian testifies
That in the books that they wrote
They would say things quite obscurely
So that those who should come after them
And wish to learn from them
Might gloss the letter
And add their own understanding to them.⁵

² Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 112–13.

³ Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 111.

⁴ Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 36.

⁵ "Custume fu as anciëns, / Ceo testimoine Preciëns, / Es livres ke jadis feseient, / Assez oscrement diseient / Pur ceus ki a venir esteient / E ki aprendre les deveient, / K'i peüssent gloser la letter / E de lur sen le surplus mettre" (Marie de France, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, trans. Jean Rychner [Paris: Champion, 1983],

The object of my paper is, therefore, to elucidate the semiotic structure underlying the lay of "Laüstic" in terms of the concept of the *mise en abyme*. To this end, I will first present a plot summary of "Laüstic," followed by an analysis of its plot structure. I will argue that the lay has a bi-partite narrative structure: the first part of which is based on the principle of mirror-image symmetry, and the second on the related but more refractory concept of *mise en abyme* itself.

The story can be summarized as follows: Two knights of equal wealth and prowess, equally respected by their peers, live in neighboring houses separated only by a wall. The only apparent difference between the two knights is that one of them is married and one is not. The unmarried knight falls in love with the wife of the married knight. The two lovers engage in an intense, secret platonic love affair from their bedroom windows. One night, the lady's husband becomes suspicious and asks her why she has been spending so much time at the window. She tells him that she has been listening to the nightingale singing in the garden. The following day, her husband has the bird trapped and brought to him. He summons his wife and, telling her that the nightingale will no longer keep her awake, breaks its neck and flings its bloody body at her. Terrified that her lover will think she no longer loves him, she wraps the nightingale's body in a cloth on which she has embroidered the story of its tragic death. She gives the body to a messenger, asking him to deliver it to her lover and to tell him what has happened. Her lover, heartbroken, places the body of the nightingale in the embroidered cloth in a jeweled casket which he carries with him forever.

In *The Mirror in the Text*, Dällenbach cites the dead nightingale in "Laüstic" as a classic example of "[t]he paradigms that are used as metaphors for the locus of a metaphysical narrative"⁶; in "Laüstic," he explains,

the remains of the bird that is an emblem of love poetry are wrapped in an embroidered silk shroud covered in writing, and kept like a relic in a case which recalls other caskets in literature.⁷

"Prologue," ll. 11–19). All quotations from the *Lais* will be taken from this edition. All unattributed English translations will be my own.

⁶ Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 180.

⁷ Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 181–82. Paul Zumthor poses this same question in terms of the modalities of Greimassian semiotics (A. J. Greimas, *Du sens: Essais sémiotiques* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970], 168): "The existence of three performers (the Lady, the Lover, and the Husband) and of a single object (love) has to be taken into account; at any given moment the object is substituted by the nightingale in

In other words, the dead nightingale lies at the bottom of a textual abyss, a sort of *memento scribendi*, distilling and "deciphering" an originary meta-text.⁸ I will further argue that not only does the dead nightingale (as object) constitute the locus of a metaphysical narrative but that the nightingale's death itself (as act) is the catalyst that converts a pleasing (if somewhat predictable) love story into a profound commentary on the nature of writing and memory. In structural terms, the highly symmetrical (if mobile) mirror structure which characterizes the opening pages of "Laüstic" is fractured by the death of the nightingale, which acts as what one critic terms a "hole in the information-bearing sign system"; its death is a pivotal moment of disequilibrium, throwing the narrative into a tailspin and restructuring it as a *mise en abyme*.⁹

The story opens with a striking representation of mirror-image (or reflection) symmetry: two knights, two houses, two good men.¹⁰ Almost immediately, however, this symmetry is broken down into its component parts; the two knights become "the one" and "the other,"¹¹ and a previously undisclosed third element (the wife of "the one") is revealed, effectively transforming the initial mirror-image symmetry relation into a classic love triangle. The lady, in other words, functions as a sort of "dangerous supplement," introducing the possibility—the quasi-cer-

virtue of equivalences taken from courtly love lyric" (Paul Zumthor, *Towards a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992], 319). Peter Haidu, who proposes a distinction between the "pure sign, a sign signifying nothing but signification" and "the metonymic, contiguous serious of signs [...] that discursively explicate the solitary, polyvalent sign," observes that "[i]n 'Laüstic,' the doubled sign structure forms a *mise-en-abyme*: the small syntagm that reflects a narrative's totality." The dead bird is, for Haidu, the "sign of pure love," the embroidered shroud its "explicatory narrativization" (Haidu, *Subject Medieval / Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], 128–29).

⁸ John. J. White, "The Semiotics of the *mise-en-abyme*," in *The Motivated Sign: Iconicity in Language and Literature 2*, ed. Olga Fischer and Max Nänny (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 34, in reference to Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 181.

⁹ Margaret M. Boland locates the structural center of the collection of lays in the tombs of "Yonec," flanked by the coffins in "Deus Amans" and the reliquary in "Laüstic" (Margaret M. Boland, *Architectural Structure in the Lais of Marie de France* [New York: Peter Lang, 1995], 62).

¹⁰ "[d]ui chevalier" (l. 9), "deus forz maisuns" (l. 10), "la bunté des deus baruns" (l. 11). The Larousse *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français* defines a "maison fort" as a "manoir fortifié," a fortified dwelling.

¹¹ "The one has married a lady" ("Li uns aveit femme espusee" [l. 13]); "The other was a bachelor" ("Li autres fu uns bachelers" [l. 17]; my emphasis).

tainty—of change. Indeed, we are only twenty-three lines into the lay when Marie reveals that the bachelor knight loves the lady,¹² and, only three lines further on, tells us that the lady loves him as well.¹³ The exclusivity of this "above all else" implies both the reciprocity of the relationship between the bachelor knight and the married woman and the concomitant exclusion of the lady's husband. Moreover, if we assume (as I think we must) that Marie's initial representation of the relationship between the two knights occulted not only the presence of the lady but also the existence of an exclusive and reciprocal erotic (or at least sexual) relationship between her and her husband, then what has occurred in the first twenty-three lines of the lay is a complete, but still symmetrical, re-configuration of the original affective mirror relation.

In strictly formal terms, the "binary opposition" between the two actants is maintained; their function has simply been reassigned. The bachelor knight is now to the married lady (and she to him) what her husband was to her (and she to him) before. Any change in the affective relationship between the two knights themselves is left unmentioned and has, in any case, no effect on the formal actantial structure of the lay: two knights, two houses, two good men. The fact that the reader is initially unaware that both knights love the same lady serves only to reinforce the mirror symmetry relation between the two. Interestingly, too, Marie takes the proximity of the two knights' "two houses" and reformulates it as a sort of architectural aphrodisiac: not only do the bachelor knight and the married woman, she says, fall in love with each other "because he lived close to her,"¹⁴ but they are also able to conceal their love from her husband

For their dwellings were close
Their houses were next to each other
As were their rooms and their dorjions.¹⁵

¹² "He loved his neighbour's wife" ("La femme sun veisin ama").

¹³ "She loved him above all else" ("ele l'ama sur tute rien").

¹⁴ "pur ceo qu'il iert pres de li" (l. 28).

¹⁵ "[k]ar pres esteient lur repere: / Preceines furent lur maisuns / E lur sales e lur dunguns" (ll. 34–36). As Judith P. Shoaf notes in her online translation of this passage (<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/jshoaf/Marie/laustic.pdf> – last accessed January 8, 2013), "propinquity" figured in the "art of courtly love" in the twelfth century: "Lovers *who live near together* can cure each other of the torments that come from love, can help each other in their common sufferings, and can nourish their love by mutual exchanges and efforts" ("Amantes enim *ex propinquo* degentes poenarum, quae ex amore procedunt, alternatim sibi possunt esse remedia et in suis se compassionibus adiuuare et suum amorem mutuis vicibus ac

Despite this fortuitous contiguity, however, the first knight now appears to be entirely absent from the equation. Indeed, his physical absence from his own house is given as the occasion for several encounters between his neighbor and his wife. Of course, in his absence, his function as what the actantial model of structural semantics would term the "obstacle" is taken over by the very literal wall between the two houses: "There was no barrier or obstacle / *Except* a high wall of grey stone."¹⁶ Moreover, it is at this point in the narrative that even the strict surveillance, which denotes the *presence* of the lady's husband,¹⁷ is no obstacle to the intense reciprocity of the relationship between the lady and the other knight. There being no possibility of physical contact, however, their two facing bedchambers (with their erotically suggestive open windows) become the site of an intense exchange of sexual substitutes. The narrative continues:

From the chamber where the lady lay,
When she went to the window,
She could talk with her lover
on her part, and he to her,
And they could exchange gifts

laboribus enutrire" (my emphasis); Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1941], 98–99; Andreas Capellanus, *De amore libri tres* 1.6.G., "Loquitur nobilior nobili," Para. 359 [<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/capellanus.html>] last accessed January 8, 2013).

¹⁶ "N'i aveit bare ne devise / *Fors* un haut mur de pierre bise" (ll. 37–38); I have highlighted the word "except" because it marks, in Old French, not only exception, as here and several lines later, ("They were both very happy / *Except*..." ["Mut esteient amdui a eise, / *Fors*..." (ll. 46–47)]), but exclusion as well. It is, moreover, highly significant in terms of Derridean theory of mourning and the erotic, which opposes "introjection," in which "language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by *giving figurative shape* to presence," and "incorporation," which "creates a typography within the psyche where the beloved is kept" (quoted in Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 200, 199). See also "Fors," Jacques Derrida's foreword to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). This distinction is, as we will see, crucial in the lover's response to the dead nightingale. Paul Zumthor designates the function of "fors" in lines 47–57 of "Laüstic" as "restriction (*fors que*, 'except') of previous affirmation, producing retrospective ambiguity" (Zumthor, *Poetics*, 320).

¹⁷ "For the lady was closely guarded / When he [her husband] was in the area" ("Kar la dame ert estreit gardee / Quant cil esteit en la cuntree" [ll. 49–50]).

By tossing them back and forth to each other.¹⁸

Of course, it is the lady's husband, the "sleeping partner" in this erotic game, whose occulted presence will eventually tip the balance in favor of his marriage. For it is he who, in the dark and intimate space of the bedroom he alone shares with the lady, begins to invoke the rules of marriage against those of the game of courtly love, demanding that she account for her absences, becoming angry and asking "why she arose and where she went."¹⁹ Interestingly, the husband is, with respect to his doubts, also playing the role of the courtly lover himself, for, as Andreas Capellanus remarks in the chapter of his *Art of Courtly Love* entitled "Of the signs of mutual love" the man who notices that his lover is absent more often ("If you see that your lover is missing all sorts of opportunities to be with you") or comes up with pretexts for not being with him ("or is putting false obstacles in your path") has good reason to suspect that she is in love with another man.²⁰ Moreover, the lady in "Laüstic" does use what proves to be a highly significant pretext to explain her nightly absences to her husband ("My lord, the lady replied, / He has no joy in this world / Who does not hear the nightingale sing. / It is for that reason that I go there"),²¹ and this, too, is a sign of her desire to leave him.

It is, therefore, at this precise point—at the virtual midpoint of the narrative (ll. 7-156)—that the nightingale begins to function as the ticking time bomb at the heart of its structure. The device does not immediately explode nor does the structure implode; the duration of time implicit in both the injunction and the narrative ("He thought of one thing only: / He will trap the nightingale")²² defers the final act and allows for a final reconfiguration of the spatial coordinates involved. For, one line after the nightingale is identified as the husband's target, the house is

¹⁸ "Des chambres u la dame jut, / Quant a la fenestre s'estut, / Poeit parler a sun ami / De l'autre part, e il a li, / E lur aveirs entrechangler / E par geter e par lancer" (ll. 39-44).

¹⁹ "[p]ur quei levot e u ala" (l. 82).

²⁰ "Sed si coamantem cognoveris se ultra solitum, ut eam non videas, absentare"; "Si enim videris amantem occasiones in coamantem requirere varias vel falsa impedimenta opponere" (Andreas Capellanus, *Courtly Love*, 157; Andreas Capellanus, *De amore* ll. 5, "De notitia mutui amoris," 3, 2 [http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/capellanus/capellanus2.html] last accessed January 8, 2013).

²¹ "Sire, la dame li respunt, / Il nen ad joïe en cest mund / Ki n'ot le laüstic chanter. / Pur ceo me vois ici ester" (ll. 83-86).

²² "D'une chose se purpensa: / le laüstic enginnera" (ll. 95-96).

transformed from a dwelling into a center of command and its garden, once an idyllic *locus amoenus* ("And the garden flowered"),²³ into a mine-field ("There was not a servant in the house / Who did not make traps, snares or nets / And place them throughout the garden").²⁴ The servants follow the husband's orders to take the bird alive and deliver it to him, and suddenly we are back in the lady's bedroom. The second knight, the lover, whom we might have expected to be the silent witness of the scene that follows, is, presumably, no longer at his window; he must later be told what happened. The lady, too, is once again absent, though no longer at her window, either. It is up to the husband to set the stage and summon the final player: "My lady, he said, where are you? / Come here, speak to me!"²⁵ Ten lines later, the bird is dead ("And he killed it out of spite: / He broke its neck with his two hands").²⁶

I suggested earlier that the point in the narrative at which the husband breaks the bird's neck is the juncture at which the mirror-image symmetry of the underlying semiotic structure of "Laüstic" is shattered and refracted into the dizzying kaleidoscope image of the *mise en abyme*. Syntagms from the mirror symmetry structure are reflected in the post-apocalyptic narrative as in a distortion or funhouse rear-view mirror. But, as I noted earlier as well, it is the point at which the husband recognizes the bird as the pretext it is that it all begins to fall apart, and this, too, is reflected in layers of functional and syntagmatic distortion; the bedroom with its bedroom window changes from the simple spatial coordinate marking an architectural symmetry ("From the bedroom where the lady lay / When to the window she went")²⁷ at the beginning of the story to the spot from which the bird as target is first sighted ("She went to be at the window")²⁸ and then to the scene of its murder ("He came to the lady's room")²⁹; the husband's "My lady, he said, where are you?" (l. 105) just prior to the bird's murder is an eerie echo of his earlier "And many times he asked her . . . where she went"³⁰ just prior to its identification; the husband's injunction to "Come here, speak to me!" (l. 106) is a

²³ "E li vergier ierent fluri" (l. 59).

²⁴ "Il n'ot vallet en sa meisun / Ne face engin, reis u laçon, / Puis les mettent par le vergier" (ll. 95-97).

²⁵ "Dame, fet-il, u estes vus? / Venez avant, parlez a nus!" (ll. 105-06).

²⁶ "E il l'ocist par engresté: / Le col li rumpit a sesdeus meins" (ll. 114-15).

²⁷ "Des chambres u la dame jut / Quant a la fenestre s'estut" (ll. 39-40).

²⁸ "A la fenestre ester veneit" (l. 73).

²⁹ "As chambres a la dame vint" (l. 104).

³⁰ "Et meinteiz li demanda . . . u ala" (ll. 87-82).

perversion of the uninhibited love talk between the lady and the other knight: "But their one consolation was that / Be it night or day / They could speak to each other."³¹ The corruption in the communication system is not at this point complete, however; for if the conversations between the lady and her lover are intimate exchanges, the husband's questions to the lady, as intrusive as they might be, do not remain unanswered. It is only when the lady asks her husband to give the nightingale to her that the break is complete, for when the husband, in response, kills the bird and flings its broken body at her ("He threw the body at his wife"),³² he is staging a bloody, one-sided re-enactment of the gift exchange between his wife and the other man ("And they could exchange gifts / By tossing them back and forth to each other").³³ The resulting bloodstain on the lady's dress marks, as well, the shift from a linguistic to a brutally graphic code of communication.

The death of the nightingale marks as well the beginning of a very literal *mise en abyme*, a fall into the abyss. The clarity of the mirror-image system of relationships which operated within the lay up to the point at which the lady revealed the bird's presence has been smeared and then shattered. The song of the nightingale, the love talk, and even the threats

³¹ "Mes de tant aveient retur, / U fust par nuit u fust par jur, / Qu'ensemble poeient parler" (ll. 51–53).

³² "Sur la dame le cors geta" (l. 116; my emphasis).

³³ "E lur aveirs entrechangier / E par geter e par lancier" (ll. 43–44; my emphasis). The French edition of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, which devotes two pages to the nightingale, uses the verb "lancer" ("he throws it" ["le lance"]), to describe the way in which the nightingale emits its song (Pline L'Ancien, *Histoire naturelle*, Livre X, para 43, sec 82, ed. E. de Saint Denis [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961], 57). In French slang, the verb *lancer* (to throw) is a synonym for *éjaculer* (to ejaculate), the noun *lance* (lance) for "penis," *rompre une lance* (to break a lance) means "to have sex," as do *manier*, *manipuler* and *être aux mains* (all derived from *main* [hand]) (see Pierre Giraud, *Dictionnaire érotique* [Paris: Payot, 1978]). The nightingale of course has, since its appearance in classical Latin literature, been a metaphor for the penis. See Madeleine Jeay, "La cruauté de Philomèle: Métamorphoses médiévales du mythe ovidien," in *Violence et fiction jusqu'à la révolution*, ed. Martine Debaisieux and Gabrielle Verdier (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1998), 111–20, esp. 115. See, for example, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, Giornata Quinta, Novella Quarta (Bari: Laterza, 1927), 370. If the lady and the other man in "Laüstic" were engaging in deep erotic play through the intermediary of the nightingale in the garden, the husband, by breaking its neck with his two hands, is not only stopping their game but also playing a solitary sexual game of his own.

("It [the nightingale] will keep you awake no more")³⁴ have been silenced. The houses and gardens have shrunk to the space of a single room. The once luminous symmetry lies in ruins; the husband has walked out, the lover is nowhere to be seen and the lady is alone in her bedchamber with a dead bird. However radiant the storyline, it would seem that it has now come to an end.

And yet, this is not the end of the story, for, as Peter Haidu observes, "Marie's semiosis juxtaposes the dynamics of lithe narrative linearity with the radiating stasis of symbolism."³⁵ The lady may be alone in her bedchamber with a dead bird, but that bird is a potent symbol of love, sex and poetry, and she knows it. Like the violated and voiceless Philomena, she writes down her story and sends it by way of a messenger to the one person she is desperate to reach. Unlike Philomena (who, after a final, horrific encounter with her violator, escapes by turning into a nightingale herself), the lady in "Laüstic" has the solution near at hand: "I'll send him the nightingale," she decides; "I'll send him the story."³⁶ In so doing, she escapes the spiral vortex of despair she was pulled into by the death of the bird. She is still with her husband, of course; on a surface level, the institutions which have, from the beginning, governed the relationships in the lay remain in place. The love affair between the lady and the bachelor knight has not—has not ever—replaced her marriage; the pull of the abyss has turned its worm-eaten corpse inside out and exposed it for what it is, but it is not dead. The mangled body of the bird is the last of the gifts she can send to her lover: one last, vicarious and solitary fling. So she dresses the body of the bird as carefully as if it were a dead bride, wrapped in a fine gown embroidered with the story of its demise ("In a piece of brocade / Embroidered with words of gold / She wrapped the little bird").³⁷

It is in this move from orality to the written word that the lady, I would suggest, most closely resembles Marie de France herself, writing down the stories she had heard, collecting them, and sending them like flowers to her lord so that she (and they) might not be forgotten. Marie, who, as she explains in the prologue to her collection of lays, was herself imitating the Ancients,

³⁴ "Il ne vus esveillerat meis" (l. 110).

³⁵ Haidu, *Subject*, 125.

³⁶ "Le laüstic li trametrai" (l. 133); "L'aventure li manderai" (l. 134).

³⁷ "En une piece de samit / A or brudé e tut escrit / Ad l'oiselet envolupé" (ll. 135–37).

Who, to be remembered, made them [lays]
 About the stories they had heard,
 Who were the first to write them down
 And send them out into the world.³⁸

It is also this moment which transforms the nightingale from a songbird into a libretto, a pretext into a text; this is the relation between symbol and "explicatory narrativization" in its purest form.³⁹ That is not to say however, that the function of orality is completely displaced at this point in the lay (nor at this point in twelfth-century literature in general); the lady takes the notion of "text-within-a-text" literally, not only wrapping the "bird as text" inside the "shroud as text" but also repeating the story to a messenger along with the message to repeat it to the other man. Jakobsonian message theory *avant la lettre*! The lady's message is, of course, received. Moreover, its receiver, in a *mise en abyme* of his own, replicates the "text-within-a-text" structure of the message by sealing the bird text in the shroud text within what we might (albeit anachronistically) term a "Chinese box," itself the quintessential structural metaphor for *mise en abyme*:

He had a little casket made
 Neither of iron nor of steel
 But entirely made of very rare and very expensive
 Fine gold and precious stones;
 The cover was carefully fitted.
 He put the nightingale inside.⁴⁰

For Dällenbach, as we have seen, the figure [B] placed *en abyme* at the centre of a heraldic shield [A]

produces a lacuna within the identity of A, which is partially lost (in the abyss) through the shield that is added to it—in other words, the addition of B in fact subtracts from it.⁴¹

John H. White argues, however, that this lacuna, which he describes as "the equivalent of a hole in the information-bearing sign system," is non-functional in literary uses of *mise en abyme*.⁴² I would suggest, however, that in the case of "Laustic," it is the semiotic value of the information

³⁸ "Ke pur remembrance les firent / Des aventures k'il oïrent / Cil ki primes les comencierent / E ki avant les enveierent" (ll. 35–38).

³⁹ See above, note 6.

⁴⁰ "Un vaisselet ad fet forgier; / Unques n'i ot fer ne acier, / Tuz fu d'or fin od bones pieres, / Mut precieuses e mut chieres; / Covercle i ot tres bien assis. / Le laustic ad dedenz mis" (ll. 149–54).

⁴¹ Dällenbach, *Mirror*, 111.

⁴² White, "Semiotics," 34.

produced by *B1* (the dead bird) and *B2* (the shroud in which it is presumably still wrapped) that is compromised (or at least altered) by that of the casket [A] in which they are placed. For the narrative ends with the sealing of the casket and the *mise en place* of one final piece of information: "Then he had the casket sealed. / He carried it with him forever after."⁴³ Questions of supplementarity and hierarchisation aside, the function of a sealed casket is to conceal what lies within, to disguise the ravages of time, loss and degradation. Moreover, there being no lock, there is no key to any hermeneutic code the casket might contain. All is sealed; all is surface.

Of course, if we consider the casket itself is a metaphor for the text, the jewels which stud that surface can be read in terms of a classical rhetoric which classified tropes as ornamentation, a "dress [that] adorns the body" rather than the (now decomposed) body of the text itself.⁴⁴ It is the lover, I would suggest, who now "incorporates" the body of the dead nightingale as a final, solitary act of sexual substitution; for the Deridean psyche in mourning does indeed create

a fantastic mechanism that resurrects the lost beloved within itself in order to hold on to the intimacy which the psyche cannot, for various reasons, let go.⁴⁵

Dällenbach's claim that the body of the nightingale is the locus of a metaphor for an originary metaphysical text must, I believe, be modulated by the corollary that that locus lies forever at the bottom of an abyss, in a dark and solitary place of irremediable emptiness and irreparable loss.

⁴³ "Puis fist la chasse enseeler. / Tuz jurs l'ad fete od lui porter" (ll. 155–56).

⁴⁴ Doreen Innes, "Metaphor, Simile, and Allegory as Ornaments of Style," in *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions*, ed. GR Boys-Stones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

⁴⁵ Kavka, *Messianism*, 199.



Obscurity in Medieval Texts

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edited by
Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider,
and Alessandro Zironi

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Reviewed by
Tamás Visi
and Myriam White-Le Goff

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