A FAIRY TROUBADOUR? MEDIEVAL MATTER
AND THE ‘BON VIEUX TEMPS’ IN
WOMEN’S FAIRY TALES (1730–1750)

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The use and image of medieval matter in French fairy tales evolved significantly during the years 1730–1750. This evolution also reflects the parallel development of a more scholarly and professional interest in the past.\(^1\) Medieval Studies then became a field in its own right and entered the debate on the role of antiquités gauloises in national literary history. When women’s fairy tales were enjoying a second high point circa 1730,\(^2\) they focussed on a few commonplace themes borrowed from the Middle Ages – often implicitly understood at the time as a period extending to the Renaissance – and operas from the time of the conteuses, which centred on the figure of the enchantress. At first glance, these movements based on a return to the Middle Ages proceeded from a scholarly point of view or called for an adherence to the imagination and the larger nostalgia for distant times: ‘Scholarship and entertainment took turns keeping alive public interest’.\(^3\) How exactly did this process work and how was it manifested in fairy texts? Those tales, because they enjoyed a liberating minor genre status – anything was possible in such stories – worked as an aesthetic laboratory at the time. Therefore, choosing them to study the alternation between scholarly and imaginative motivations allows us to show an unofficial yet widespread evolution in readers’ and writers’ visions of the past. We would like to explore their ‘fairy troubadour’ aesthetic, which antedates and announces the ‘style troubadour’ of the 1780s.


\(^2\) The first one taking place c. 1690–1715.

The two worlds — scholarship an imagination — appear to be on virtually opposite sides of a clear divide between two kinds of Middle Ages, the first one being collected as the subject matter of history, and the other received as the crucible of memory. A brief look shows that, unlike those scholars seeking to find in it a body of proofs, medieval literature, among the heralds of imagination, is called upon and cherished because of the temporal depth it then brings to modern writing. This divide raises one major difficulty.

On the one hand, is it even possible to compare rereadings of the past in scholarly works, popularisations, anthologies and fairy tales? On the other hand, when drawing such lines between genres, one runs the risk of a sterile ‘traditional approach, above all generic’. Jelle Koopmans uses that expression to distinguish between the contents of the *chanson de geste*, chivalric romances and their adaptations; however the expression also shows the danger of studying the eighteenth-century fascination with the Middle Ages in an overly compartmentalised fashion. Despite the various degrees of scholarship in literary works, and the more or less ornamental role of medieval matter in fiction, it is difficult to imagine the ‘belles-lettres’ connoisseur of the 1750s as a reader torn between two approaches. Thanks to works like those of Helvi Blom, we know that copies of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, Gothic editions, medieval manuscripts, historical works and more modern novels could all be found side by side on the same library shelves.

I wish to argue, therefore, that the aforementioned divide has more to do with diverse aesthetic viewpoints than with historical references of varying accuracy, since the notion of *authenticity* in the eighteenth century is far removed from our contemporary notion. Although what

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4 Jean-Marc Chatelain uses that distinction about the eighteenth century, particularly with reference to the etymologist Gilles Ménage as well as La Fontaine when he praises the ‘vieux langage’. That distinction still appeared valid during the first half of the eighteenth century. See Chatelain J.-M., “De l’errance à la hantise: la survivance des chevaliers aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles”, in Diu – Parinet – Vielliard, *Mémoire des chevaliers* 36.

