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Old French Narrated Inscriptions

With 6193 preserved manuscripts and 1072 identified medieval authors, Old French was the most influential vernacular language of the European Middle Ages. We use the term “Old French” to denote the linguistic varieties commonly known as *les langues d’oïl* situated north of the Croissant transition zone (including the British Isles) which separates them from the Old Occitan dialects (*les langues d’oc*) of southern France.¹ Old French was not only spoken and written in France and England, but also in Cyprus and the Holy Land, where French was the language of the ruling class for centuries. Even the Venetian Marco Polo used Old French to relate his travelogues,² which formed part of the immensely influential fourteenth-century Franco-Italian literary movement. Other vernacular European literary traditions were heavily influenced by the French corpus. The most important writers of Middle High German classicism, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach and Hartmann von Aue, for example, translated and transformed the Old French romances *Roman de Perceval ou Le conte du Graal* (c. 1180), *Erec et Enide* (c. 1170) and *Le roman d’Yvain ou du Chevalier au lion* (c. 1177), all written by Chrétien de Troyes. England’s most influential Arthurian text, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, is based on his translation of French sources.

In this chapter we will gather significant passages of Old French literature, in order to classify them and to establish a tentative typology of narrated inscriptions, their multiple functions and possible interpretations.³

¹ Due to the lack of linguistic standardisation, *Old French* refers to a number of different dialects and thus different writing traditions, such as Picard, Lorrain, Burgundian, Champenois and Walloon. Anglo-Norman, one of the most productive variants, arose after the conquest of England by the Norman William the Conqueror in 1066. From a historical viewpoint, Old French refers to the time between 842, the year of the Oaths of Strasbourg, and the mid-fourteenth century, when, through considerable linguistic changes, *Middle French* started to take shape.

² Cf. Gaunt 2013.

³ The quoted passages have been identified through a comparative approach whereby inscriptions in German and English medieval texts were compared to their French model. Furthermore, we have found passages with narrated inscriptions via dictionaries of Old French, namely the *Dictionnaire Étymologique de l’Ancien Français*, where specific lexemes can be traced back to their corresponding sources. Finally, we are grateful to Stephen Dörr for valuable hints to further references and for his helpful comments.

1 On the Difference Between Real and Narrated Inscriptions

If we look at inscriptions in literary texts, we first of all have to take into consideration the important difference between historical inscriptions and inscriptions as features of a literary text. Their function, as well as the communicative situation they establish, is markedly different. Our first example, the report *Le devisement du Monde* (c. 1305) by Marco Polo can serve to illustrate this. In his report, Marco Polo describes the Mongolian army, mentioning the inscribed golden tablets the soldiers carry with them. The inscription is cited literally.

Et en toutes ces tables y a ung commandement escript qui dit: "Par la force du grant dieu et de la grant grace qu'il a donné a nostre emperiere, le nom du Kaan soit benoist! Et tous ceux qui n'obeiront a lui soient mors et destruis!" (200, §80)

And on all of these tablets there is an inscribed order that says: "By the force of the grand Lord and Grace that he gave our emperor, the name of Khan shall be praised! And everyone who will not be obedient will die and be destroyed!"⁴

Examining these tablets called *paizas* as historical artefacts,⁵ we might ask to whom they were addressed. Whose message did they transmit? The *paiza* seems to address any enemy of the Khan, which could be a foreign soldier as well as any Chinese subject. In the first statement, where the Khan is praised, the addressee is invited to join in this praise (*le nom du Kaan soit benoit!*). In the second, the consequence of this common glorification is shown when the soldiers of the Mongolian army are declared as victors in so far as some of the addressees are threatened with death and destruction (*Et tous ceux qui n'obeiront a lui soient mors et destruis!*). Possible enemies might have felt intimidated, while the soldiers of the Mongolian army might have felt assured and united by the identity proclaimed by the inscription. With such an artefact, the written words on the tablets replace the spoken word while simultaneously perpetuating it, thereby giving it more authority. Behind this written information we can identify the Khan himself, who appropriates the soldiers as part of his army. However, presented through the written medium, the information becomes independent of the Khan's presence. On some level, every inscription performs this absent presence, and thereby sustains the power of writing itself.

Moreover, the cited inscription takes on a different function once it is embedded in Marco Polo's text. It no longer addresses military adversaries, but, on the extra-diegetic level, it also addresses the (European) readers of the Old French text. What are they supposed to understand? For them, the inscription might signal the authenticity

⁴ Unless they are listed in the bibliography, the translations are ours.

⁵ David Morgan mentions *paizas* as part of the communication system. Morgan 1986, 104–106.

of the narrative. Since Marco Polo was writing about something that the readers did not know, he generously cites the inscription in its entirety, giving his report the appearance of truth and reliability. This difference between the inter- and the extra-diegetic addressees and readers of the inscription is at the core of the opposition between narrated and real text-bearing artefacts. It is palpable also in texts that deal with entirely fictional inscriptions. Continuing in this vein, we will trace further texts that reflect this difference in various ways in order to explore the ambiguities of writing itself on the diegetic as well as on the extra-diegetic level.

2 Narrated Inscriptions: Truth and Identity

Our next example is taken from *Perceval* (c.1180). The eponymous hero receives a sword from the Fisher King, the guardian of the Castle of the Holy Grail:⁶

*Que que il parloient ensi,
Un[s] vallés entre par la por[t]e
De la maison et si aporte
Une espee a son col pendue,
Si l'a al riche home rendue.
Et il l'a bien demie traite,
Si vit bien ou ele fu faite,
Car en l'espee estoit escrit.
Et avec che encore i vit
Qu'ele estoit de si bon achier
Que ja ne porroit depechier,
Fors que par un tot seul peril
Que nus ne savoit fors que cil
Qui l'avoit forgie et tempree.
(3130–3143)*

While they were talking thus,
a boy came in through the door;
he was carrying a sword
hung round his neck,
and presented it to the nobleman.
He drew it half out of its scabbard,
and saw clearly where it was made,
for it was written on the sword.
And he also learned from the writing
that it was of such fine steel
that there was only one way
it could ever be broken,
which no-one knew except the one
who had forged and tempered it.⁷

The words of the inscription here are paraphrased. Only their content is narrated: the name of the smith and the nature of the steel. The concrete wording would not transmit further information here. In contrast to Marco Polo's tablet, the mere fact that the sword is inscribed is sufficient to connote that Perceval owns a very precious object.⁸ Comparable to a brand name, its origin stands for the remarkable quality which distinguishes the object. The specific wording is not needed.

Thanks to its inscription the sword not only creates a giver-receiver connection between the Fisher King and Perceval, but also links Perceval and the sword's forger

⁶ Anne Wilson adds to this that “the bestowal of the sword by the Fisher King may be a recognition of sonship by the king” (Wilson 1990, 134).

⁷ Wilson 1990, 119f.

⁸ Cf. also Michael R. Ott's chapter on inscribed weapons in this volume.

who, according to the text, is about to die and will never forge a sword like this again and, most importantly, is the only one who knows how the sword can be broken. Nonetheless, “[t]he reader’s expectations that the sword will be of particular significance to the future exploits of Perceval are unfortunately frustrated by the incomplete state of Chrétien’s text”.⁹ In this passage we find a first example where the inscription characterises the object as well as the possessor. This double reference can be more complex when the inscription gives more information, as we will see in our next example.

In the *Romance of Horn* (c. 1170), the intricate love story between Horn and Rigmel by an author commonly called “Thomas”, “son of immigrants from the Loire valley”,¹⁰ we encounter the following passage: *En sun poing tint le brant, ki fud clers et letrez; / Escrit i est li granz nuns de Deu de maiestez* (“in his fist he held the sword, which was lustrous and lettered, written on it was the name of the Lord the Almighty”, 3181f.). The origin of the sword remains vague. Yet, the inscription still delivers valuable information by mentioning the name of the Lord. Even though the concrete wording is omitted the inscription indirectly legitimises the deeds committed with this sword and endows it with a Christian “identity”.¹¹ The executed deeds with this weapon seem to be blessed: they have been committed “in the name of the Lord”. Within the literary context, the inscription also provides hints to the current possessor of the sword: Gudmod. The proceedings make this obvious, as Gudmod illustrates the power of the sword to a pagan by first smashing a helmet and then decollating the pagan’s head. Thus, the inscription reveals the “character” of the object as well as parts of the biography of every possessor of the sword, reaching even into the hero’s possible future. Even though Gudmod does not fight further battles in the story, the reader knows that he is destined to be a great Christian warrior.

This biographical link between the inscribed object and a fictional character’s life story can constitute an even more important part of the narrative. In Old French texts, rings are “often given to messengers as credentials, or [are] used for the same purpose as letters of introduction”.¹² This is the case in Marie de France’s Breton *Le Fresne* (c. 1165) in the passage where the mother of twins wraps one of her children in a brocade and ties an exquisite, inscribed ring to it.

*En un chief de mult bon cheinsil
envolupent l'enfant gentil
e desus un paile roé;
sis sire li ot aporté
de Costentinoble u il fu;
unques si bon n'orent veü.
A une piece d'un suen laz*

She carefully wrapped the child
in a fine piece of fabric
and a silk cloth
that she had brought
from Constantinople,
a finer one she had never seen.
To one of its laces

⁹ Kelly 1994, 518.

¹⁰ Weiss 1999, 1.

¹¹ Cf. Kopytoff 1986, 91–94.

¹² Wright 1874, 280.

*un gros anel li lie al braz.
De fin or i aveit une unce;
el chastun out une jagunce;
la verge en tur esteit letree.
La u la meschine iert trovee,
bien sacent tuit veraïement
qu'ele est nee de bone gent.
(121–134)*

she attached a large ring to her arm.
Made of one ounce of pure gold
and adorned with a hyacinth
the ring was inscribed.
Wherever the girl would be found
everybody should know
that she is of noble birth.

Here, the ring functions as the bearer of a message of goodwill to the child's new family. Its inscription establishes her noble birth no matter where she might be found. Indeed, when the baby is discovered by a porter and his daughter later on, her noble descent is simply accepted. Even as a young woman, she takes the ring and the silk with her when she leaves the abbey with Gurun, a lord who is in love with her and has impregnated her. The inscribed object functions as permanent valuable guarantee of identity.

*La meschine bien les guarda;
en un cofre les enferma.
Le cofre fist od sei porter,
nel volt laissier ne ubliër.
(313–316)*

The girl took good care of it
and locked it in a safe
that she took with her;
she did not want to leave or forget it.

In *Le Fresne* again we can observe that it is unnecessary to cite the inscription: simply mentioning it is sufficient, since the readers of the text know about the ancestry of the little child. The information transmitted by the inscription on the level of the diegesis does not have to be given in full to be comprehensible on the extra-diegetic level. But what is the information then that is transmitted to the reader of the story? To the readers of *Le Fresne*, the inscription indicates the happy end of all upcoming events. The child might well be abandoned to a foreign world and an uncertain future, but the motif of the inscription anticipates a diegetic addressee of this inscription who will be able to react appropriately to the message and save the child.

This example of a narrated inscription illustrates our claim that an inscription can replace a spoken message and can thereby be understood by analogy with the oral communication: The words of the absent Khan are replaced by the inscription on the tablet, just as the words of the mother are replaced by the inscription on the ring. Even the inscribed name of the smith on the sword can be understood as equivalent for oral message. The artisan adds his name and thereby literally describes the object. In these cases, it is possible to imagine the act of speech behind the writing. Yet, as written word, the message becomes independent of its sender who might even remain vague, as it is the case when we read the name of the Lord on Gudmod's sword.

Furthermore, the literary context provides multiple levels of meaning every narrated inscription can adopt. It does not stand for itself any longer as it is the case with any real inscription. In the context of the literary text, not only the diegetic reader is

addressed but also the extra-diegetic reader for whom the inscription might add information not present explicitly within the inscription itself, as for example the quality of authenticity of Marco Polo's report as we have shown above, or the happy ending of the story of the foundling. Thus, this level of meaning might reveal parts of the content of the story. It can also negotiate the possibilities of epigraphy as a medium, as the following examples demonstrate.

Epitaphs in particular show a concern for the power of the written word.¹³ Jan Assmann has pointed out that most of the inscriptions on tombstones, especially in ancient Egypt, can be understood as a message sent by the dead person to the world left behind.¹⁴ In this case, too, the writing directly replaces spoken word that cannot be pronounced.

In the *Histoire de la Belle Melusine ou de Lusignan* (Jean d'Arras, 1393) King Elynas is murdered by his daughters Melusine, Melior and Palestine. In the story, this scandalous event is recounted on his tombstone: *un tablel d'or ou toute l'aventure dessusdicte estoit escripte* (14). Yet, due to the circumstances of this death not the murdered King is responsible for the inscription on the tombstone, but his wife. Can the inscription nonetheless be understood like a message?:

Et aux piez de la tombe mist une ymage d'albastre de son hault et de sa figure, sibel et si riche que plus ne pavoit, et tenoit la dicte ymage un tablel d'or ou toute l'aventure dessusdicte estoit escripte.
(14)

And at the bottom of the tomb she put an alabaster image of his height and silhouette, beautiful and rich like no other, and said image held a golden tablet where the whole adventure was inscribed.

Again the inscription is only mentioned, not cited. This is possible because the readers are familiar with the story (called *aventure*) and are therefore well-informed of the content of the message. By commissioning the epitaph for her dead husband, the queen addresses the former community of the king and thereby reunites it.¹⁵ Yet obviously, on the diegetic level the inscription about the King's death has more functions: it restores the memory of the dead King, it accuses his murderers, and it also communicates his wife's mourning. This last aspect is further underlined by the image (*ymage*) of the King that his wife adds to the inscription, which emphasises the painful absence of her beloved husband. So far, the inscription functions indeed like a written message sent by the wife to every beholder of the tombstone.

Yet, within the literary context a further level of meaning is present. Since it is possible for the wife to pronounce her accusation directly, the written word does not

¹³ See also Laura Velte's chapter on tombs and epitaphs in this volume.

¹⁴ Cf. Assmann 2003, 171.

¹⁵ Assmann 2003, 171 also mentions a case like this.

replace the spoken one. We can even imagine the wife beside the tombstone repeating the epigraph, and it is precisely this parallel that makes the difference between the spoken and the written word obvious. Here, the inscription does not allow the message to cross the confines of space. It first of all serves to establish and fix specific content. The wife wants to ensure the memory of her husband, and at the same time to testify to the brutal circumstances of his death. It is in written word that these contents can be conserved, and the epitaph is the classic place to establish basic information about the deceased. Since the King is murdered by his own daughters whom the mother will punish for the deed by cursing and transforming them partly into animals the epigraphical narration of the “aventure” serves as a final statement on this familial tragedy. Here written word establishes the truth.

In a sophisticated interpretation, one might even think of the idea that the indicated narration on the tombstone (which is a repetition of the story itself) inaugurates a *mise-en-abyme*, an endless story within the story. This construction is all the more interesting as it reflects the content of Jean’s tale, where the curse of the malformed body is transmitted and thus repeated over generations. The durability of this curse might even be indicated by the circumstance that the narration of the murder is carved in stone.

The effort of linking the inscription to the idea of truth gains further weight if we look at three other inscriptions that are directed toward the future and thereby convey prophetic content. Martti Nissinen defines this foreshadowing element of inscriptions explicitly as “prophetic activity”.¹⁶ In *La Quête du Saint-Graal* (1225) when the knights take their first look at the chairs of the Round Table, they discover on the *Siege Perilleux* (88,7) the following inscription: *iiii.c.anz et .liiii.a aconpliz après la Passion Jesucrist. Au jor de Pentecoste doit ciz sieges trover son mestre* (“454 years have passed after the Passion of Jesus Christ. On Pentecost these chairs shall find its master”, 88,9–11). As the interjection of the attendees makes clear, the inscription announces a “marvellous adventure” to come (*Par foi, ci a merveilleuse aventure!*, 88,13), an agency Ott and Pantanella describe as the “narrative potential” of inscriptions.¹⁷ Later on, Gaaland, the son of Lancelot, will indeed sit on the inscribed chair whose prophetic powers are quasi-sacred. Lancelot decides to cover the text-bearing seat as long as the prophecy is not fulfilled and thereby separates it from the rest of the scene by saying: “*Et ge vodroie bien que nus ne veist mes hui cez letres devant que cil sera venuz qui ceste aventure doit achever*” (88,19–20).

¹⁶ In his book on *Ancient Prophecy*, Martti Nissinen analyzes the function of prophecy in ancient and biblical texts—also with regard to inscriptions. He justifies the significance of prophecy by its being “triggered by uncertainty, and its purpose is to become conversant with superhuman knowledge” (Nissinen 2018, 12).

¹⁷ Ott and Pantanella describe the relation between inscriptions and storyline and the effects that inscribed texts can have on the outcome of a story as “narrative potential” (Ott/Pantanella 2014, 331).

Our next example points into the same direction. It is taken from *Lancelot ou Le Chevalier de la Charrete* by Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1177), where we also encounter the topos of the epitaph. When Lancelot enters the cemetery on his way to rescue the Queen of Logres, he discovers names engraved on the tombstones; they are names of knights that will rest in those tombs once they are dead.

*El cemetire après le mainne
Antre les tres plus beles tonbes
Qu'an poïst trover jusqu'a Donbes
Ne de la jusqu'a Pampelune;
Et s'avoit letres sor chascune
Qui les nons de ces devoïoient
Qui dedanz les tonbes girroient.
Et il meïsmes tot a tire
Comança lors les nons a lire
Et trova: "Ci girra Gauvains,
Ci Looys, et ci Yvains."
(1856–1866)*

[The monk] led him through the cemetery
among the most imposing tombs
that could be found as far as Dombes
or as Pamplona, each engraved
to show for whom the tombs were saved
with writing to identify
the names of those therein to lie.
The knight himself, upon his own,
read out the names as they were shown,
discovering "here will lie Gawain,
here Lionel, and here Yvain."

Instead of testifying to the past, the inscription tells of events yet to come and marks the spots where Lancelot and each of the other knights "will lie" (*girra*). When, some verses later, Lancelot discovers the most splendid tomb of all and the monk tells him that it is impossible to see the inside, he reads its elaborate inscription:

*Et letres escrites i a
Qui dient: "Cil qui levera
Cele lanme seus par son cors
Gitera ces et celes fors
Qui sont an la terre an prison,
Don n'ist ne clers ne gentix hon
Des l'ore qu'il i est antrez;
N'ancor n'en est nus retornez.
Les estranges prisons retienent,
Et cil del païs vont et viennent
Et anz et fors a lor plaisir."
(1899–1909)*

These words are written on the stone:
"He who can raise this stone alone
with his own body's strength shall then
release the women and the men
who are imprisoned in the land
where foreign serfs and lords are banned
from leaving once they enter.
Nobody has returned to date.
In that land strangers are detained;
as prisoners they have remained,
whereas the natives come and go
at their discretion to and fro."

This inscription, too, serves to announce upcoming events since Lancelot will indeed be the one to raise the stone and to deliver the captives from Logres. Yet, the mere prophetic quality of the written word is extended here as this example adds a new quality to our collection of inscriptions. Here we have not only an inscribed object, but an inscribed place. The inscription is of course engraved into the surface of an object (the tombstone), but as the tombstone belongs to a special place, the inscription automatically characterises the place, not only the object. To the reader it becomes obvious that Lancelot stands at the border to the kingdom of the

dead.¹⁸ However, instead of entering it, the encounter declares him a future rescuer. This vicinity to the borders of life, together with the prophetic content, equips the inscription with a special allure. It takes on the features of an almost divine interjection. Furthermore, the fact that the inscription is quoted at length reinforces here the illusion of a speaking voice. Its message does not only announce the place of a future grave but it concerns and predicts Lancelot's life. Astonishingly, here the written word is endowed with the qualities of the spoken word and yet, at the same time, serves to communicate the truth. This combination only seems possible thanks to the somehow divine appearance of the inscription.

For the extra-diegetic reader, the same words might even convey more than just information about the hero. As prophecy they help to create suspense and invite the reader to anticipate how Lancelot will realise the predicted events. This aspect even is a specific aesthetic feature of prophetic inscriptions, as our next example will show.

Interestingly, the mere prophetic quality of the written word also functions if the inscription predicts the future in a negative rather than positive way—in the form of a warning. In the Romance *Merlin* (1210), attributed to Robert de Boron, the hero comes across a cemetery where he reads the following words on a cross: *Os tu, chevaliers errans qui vas querant aventures? Je te déflenc que tu n'aïlles de chi pres dou chastiel. Et sache que elles ne sont mie legieres a un chevalier* ("do you dare, erring knight, who is seeking adventures? I advise against you going to the castle; know that the adventures are not easy to complete", 2, 44).

Although the addressee is easy to identify, here again the speaker remains somehow absent. Yet, the warning does not necessarily allude to a divine speaker. Even though the words appears to be as truthful as the words on the tombstone, the inscription on the cross is either miraculous or mundane. Its provenance is ambiguous. This is all the more the case as Merlin allows himself to ignore the warning. He decides to continue on his way: *Lors se met outre la crois et s'en vait grant oirre viers le chastiel* ("he overrides the cross and walks with haste toward the castle", 2,44). At this moment the aesthetic quality of the narrated inscription becomes fully obvious: as a warning, it serves not only to create suspense but it lends to this suspense the qualities of the uncanny.

3 Narrated Inscriptions: The Lie

While in the examples cited so far, the truthfulness of the writing was central, our next example questions this claim. If inscriptions, particularly in materials like stone, are associated with statements guaranteed to be truthful, what do we make of the motif of the false grave? We encounter this motif in *Flore et Blancheflor* (c. 1160), one

¹⁸ Mario Roques comments: "Lancelot y soulève sans peine l'énorme dalle du tombeau réservé à celui qui délivrera les prisonniers (c'est-à-dire, en fait, à lui-même)" (Roques 1958, XIII).

of the most popular romances on the Middle Ages, translated from Old French into Middle High German, Middle English, Old Norse, Italian, Greek and Castilian. Via a sophisticated sepulchre, Flore's father makes his son believe that his love, Blancheflor, is dead, because he wants to hinder him from marrying her. The inscription on the tombstone is fairly expressive and central to the story:¹⁹ *Li gist la bele Blanceflor / A qui Flores ot grant amor* ("here lies the beautiful Blanceflor | whom Flores loved with all his heart", 664f.).²⁰ On the diegetic level, the reader of this inscription, Flore, is supposed to trust in the truthfulness that the inscription normally guarantees, which means accepting the death of his beloved. The extra-diegetic reader, in contrast, knows that the father is attempting to deceive the young lover. Not the person's real life data is engraved, but the reliability of the data itself is used to deceive the beholder of the grave.

In this scenario of deceit, not only the deceiver is culpable, but writing itself is put into question, since it can be used to manipulate so easily. On the extra-diegetic level, the reader might feel invited to associate the false grave with arguments against the written word common since antiquity. In *Phaidros*, Socrates explains to his friend that whoever believes that something clear and certain would come out of writing is highly foolish, since letters cannot answer questions and thereby enter into a dialogue necessary for understanding and truth.²¹

This reflection stands in direct opposition to the examples cited above, where writing assures reliable content and can even create reality with a somehow prophetic and divine power. On the one hand, then, we encounter passages where the written word seems to guarantee certainty, and on the other hand the epitaph in *Flore et Blancheflor* questions the reliability of writing itself.²² We next consider how these two assumptions can be combined into a broader observation on the role of writing based on narrated inscriptions in medieval texts.

¹⁹ According to Jutta Eming, this memorial scene should be considered as the key episode in the romance since Flore later breaks with his parents and decides for himself to go to the Orient to look for Blancheflor, cf. Eming 2006, 144.

²⁰ In the Middle High German version we read: *hie lît Blanscheflûr diu guote, / die Flôre minte in sinem muote, / und sî in ze gelficher wîs. / sî was sîn friunt, er ir âmîs* (2110–2114). In the Middle English text is says: *Here lyth swete Blaunchefloure / That Florys lovyd par amoure* (217f.).

²¹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 1998, 86, 275d–e. Cf. Ehrlich 1994, 31.

²² The example of a narrated false inscription is interesting in comparison to real false inscriptions, which also existed in the Middle Ages. Wilhelm Wattenbach mentions tablets of lead on which the legend of Saint Valentine was inscribed. Since we have no narration here that delivers a context we cannot find any reflection on the medium of text itself. The real false inscription is nothing more than the attempt to deceive the reader in reality, cf. Wattenbach 1875, 44.

4 Closing Remark: Writing as a System of Signs

Instead of seeing a contradictory opposition between the examples of narrated inscriptions cited first and the story of the false tombstone inscription in *Flore et Blancheflor* where writing communicates a lie, we would like to claim that the motif of narrated inscriptions in itself reflects on the ambiguous power of writing,²³ even though this meditation is not made explicit in the various, mostly literary texts.²⁴

This ambiguity gets even more complex when it concerns not only the medium of writing but the meaning of specific literary texts, which leads to our last example. In the case of narrated inscriptions, we can identify a further and final aspect: an inscription is also an elegant way for an author to create intertextual relations. An outstanding example can be found in one of the most prominent texts of the Middle Ages.²⁵ In *Le Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris (c. 1230) the author also mentions inscriptions. When written words are described for the first time, they appear as a commentary to images that they explain. The narrator approaches the rose garden and says:

*Quant j'oi un poi avant alé,
Si vi un vergier grant et lé,
Tot clos de haut mur bataillié,
Portret dehors e entaillié
A maintes riches escritures.*
(128–133)

When I had gone ahead thus for a little,
I saw a large and roomy garden,
entirely enclosed by a high crenelated wall,
sculptured outside and laid out
with many fine inscriptions.

In contrast to these, the main and central inscription of this romance appears without further images. When the narrator gets to the fountain in the middle of the garden he describes the following:

*Si ot desus la pierre escrites,
El bort amont lettres petites,
Qui disoient, iluec desus
Estoit morz li biaux Narcisus.*
(1433–1436)

and in the stone,
on the border of the upper side,
had cut small letters saying
that there the fair Narcissus died.

²³ In her illuminating article, Sandrine Hériché-Pradeau proposes the opposite claim when she describes the close relationship between text and image. She writes: “Envisager, comme nous l’avons fait dans ces quelques romans en prose, l’inscription dans sa dimension figurative, l’inscription auprès de l’image, l’inscription sur l’image ou l’inscription après la disparition de l’image permet le déploiement d’un faisceau de problématiques reliées entre elles, mais qui ouvrent, également, chacune à un champ de réflexion autonome, s’étendant de la valeur matérielle et iconographique de l’inscription à sa valeur transfigurative” (Hériché-Pradeau 2013, 400f.).

²⁴ Brigitte Schlieben-Lange does not mention inscriptions at all as a source for a reflection on writing in the Middle Ages: Schlieben-Lange 1994, 108.

²⁵ Strubel 2009, 138.

Even though the myth of Narcissus might well have been familiar to Guillaume's readers, the narrator adds a short moral, which tells of Echo's despised love as well as Narcissus' beauty and vanity. The narrator concludes by saying:

*Dames, cest essample aprenez,
Qui vers vos amis mesprenez;
Car, se vos les lessiez morir,
Dex le vos savra bien merir.*
(1505–1508)

You ladies who neglect your duties toward your
sweethearts, be instructed by this exemplum,
for if you let them die, God will know
how to repay you well for your fault.

This moral message is important since it alarms the diegetic reader:

*Quant li escrit m'ot fet savoir
Que ce estoit trestot por voir
La fontaine au bel Narcisus,
Je me suis trez un poi en sus;
Que dedenz n'ousai esgarder,
Ainz començai a coarder,
Quant de Narcisus me sovint,
Cui malement en mesavint;*
(1509–1516)

When the inscription had made clear to me
that this was indeed
the true fountain of the fair Narcissus,
I drew back a little,
since I dared not look within.
When I remembered
Narcissus and his evil misfortune,
I began to be afraid.

As in the other epitaphs cited above, the name of Narcissus inscribed in the stone indicates the place of the grave. This place serves to commemorate the dead, in this case, a character from classical mythology. This death is problematic since it is the result of a punishment by the gods, which prompts the narrator to cite the case of Narcissus as a negative example, useful especially to women. Nonetheless, we learn that even a man, the male narrator of Guillaume's romance, feels addressed: he hesitates with fear (*Ainz començai a coarder*) as he feels that Narcissus's destiny will be his own as soon as he looks into the fountain. He too will die of unfulfilled love. Indeed, Guillaume's narrator does fall in love with the rose without possessing this rose permanently. On the other hand, scholars have claimed that Guillaume does not fulfill the pattern of a narcissistic self-interested lover: he does not reject another love, and therefore neither loves himself nor dies of unfulfilled narcissism.²⁶ Both contradictory readings are legitimate, and the inscription opens up the debate of how to understand the relation between the myth of Narcissus and Guillaume's text. Can the antique myth be interpreted like a moral tale of the Middle Ages? Is not Guillaume's narrator who recognises himself when he reads the inscription as someone who might die of unfulfilled love exactly the opposite of Ovid's Narcissus who does not recognise himself when he sees his own reflection on the surface of the water? Thus, the inscription on the stone at the fountain opens the door to the broad field of intertextuality

²⁶ As to some of the differences and common points between the Greek myth and Guillaume's narrator cf. Lucken 2012, 124.

and so establishes a reference that is neither true nor false with regard to the diegetic world, but rather situates the text as a whole in the field of ambiguity. Thereby the inscription completes the major rhetoric element of Guillaume's text, the allegory: "La démarche allégorique est fondée sur la reprise d'éléments préexistants, familiers sinon consacrés, qui sont recomposés selon un projet nouveau, et trouvent ainsi une nouvelle profondeur de champ, la *senefiance*".²⁷

Furthermore, the name of Narcissus not only refers to another text but also to the idea of self-reflection in a mirror in general. In the scene composed by Guillaume, this mirror for self-reflection is at the same time the concrete surface of the water *and* the story of Narcissus, present through the inscription as well as through the narration of the classical myth within the medieval romance. It thus seems legitimate to raise the question to what extent the *Roman de la Rose* functions as a speculum for its readers.²⁸

For our purpose, the inscription on the stone of the fountain adds a significant quality to our understanding of the ways inscription can function in medieval narrative: the inscription establishes various links within the story itself and communicates an extra-diegetic reflection on writing as a medium to tell the truth or to spread a lie; but in Guillaume's text, the text-bearing stone is also part of a reflection on how texts function within the world of other texts, where meaning always depends on a larger context. In the *Roman de la Rose*, the inscription is already part of a semiotic system of signs with its own rules and laws.

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²⁷ Strubel 2009, 139.

²⁸ Cf. on the ideas of texts as mirrors in the Middle Ages: Bradley 1954, 100–115. Furthermore cf. *Le Roman de la rose*, 59–60.

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