

CHAPTER V

THE PLACE OF THE QUARREL OF THE ROMAN IN
LITERARY AND CULTURAL HISTORY

The Quarrel of the Roman has suffered from being viewed in too narrow an historical context. Even the name given to this series of documents and the discussions which we can discern behind them is misleading. The assumption that the poem under discussion in these documents, the Roman de la Rose, was the principal cause of the disagreements has led scholars to neglect the fuller historical context within which this debate took place. The Quarrel does not make sense if taken simply as a disagreement over how to interpret the Roman. Such a view of the Quarrel cannot account for the acrimony, especially of Gerson's remarks; for the disagreement over the allegorical (nature) of the poem; or for the very wide interest which was evidently aroused by the debate. In fact the Roman is only the apparent focus-point of the discussion and disagreements expressed, which are really concerned with other matters, especially with humanism.

The Quarrel of the Roman does not tell us very

much about Jean de Meun's poem at all. Gerson and Christine say little about the poem beyond the obvious fact that the literal sense of the Roman is immoral. The remarks of the Roman's defenders are somewhat more revealing. Educated men did in fact read the Roman as an allegory. The defenses of allegory by other humanists show there is no reason to think the Roman's defenders were lying. This confirms the conclusions of recent Roman scholarship. But even the defenders tell us little of how they read the Roman's allegory.

The Roman serves mainly as a "peg" upon which the participants in the literary quarrel can hang their very different views concerning the study of poetry and humanist literary activity. The Quarrel is, first and mainly, an important document in the history of the development and advance of European humanism. It is linked to the history of humanism by its many fundamental similarities with literary utterances of the early European humanists which preceded it. At the same time there are certain characteristics of the debate which are less international, more exclusively French in nature. These latter characteristics are secondary, not primary. However the specifically French, and apparently anomalous, features of the Quarrel, together with scholarly disgrace heaped upon Alfred Coville,

the last historian to attempt to set the Quarrel in the context of the development of humanism, have misled scholars into viewing the Quarrel as sui generis and therefore baffling.

In this concluding chapter the results of the analysis of the Quarrel and its humanist literary context will be presented. The primary characteristics of the Quarrel, its status as a document in the development of European humanism, will be summarized first. The secondary aspects, the more strictly French and contemporary historical and cultural aspects of the Quarrel, will be treated next. These two sections basically constitute a summary of the detailed analysis of the historical-literary context carried out in the preceding chapters and in the Appendices. They will be followed by a third and concluding section which will suggest certain broader historical considerations which emerge from the study of the Quarrel.

A. The Quarrel of the Roman as an Important Episode in the History of Early European Humanism

The Quarrel of the Roman shows great similarities to earlier defenses of poetry and of humanist literary activity on the part of Italian humanists. Like them the defenders of the Roman had to confront suspicion and

insinuations that their activity--the study and admiration of works which are not Christian in a literal sense--was intrinsically immoral. They took refuge in defenses of allegorical theory and of poetic obscurity, arguments which they are careful to make as "traditional"-sounding (and thus respectable) as possible. These similarities to earlier humanist defenses of poetry are not due merely to the fact that, like earlier humanists, the Roman's defenders have recourse to the best available arguments in order to defend their positions. They also reflect the existence of a single tradition of humanist defenses of poetry and of humanist literary activity. The Roman's defenders are demonstrably aware of this tradition. They draw from it. Their defense of the Roman must now be included in this same tradition.

The Quarrel does reveal a split between professional humanists and non-humanists. The "humanists of the chanceries," the defenders of the Roman, have little or nothing in common with Gerson in concrete terms beyond a skill in classical Latin style. But even this did not last, for Gerson's encouragement of classical Latin style was tentative and relatively short-lived. His early writings must no longer blind us to the fact that he was not a proponent of humanism. Of course, the erroneous equation

"humanist = religious skeptic," "ecclesiastic = Christian"--the Burckhardtian dichotomy perpetuated by Coville--remains an incorrect formulation of the differences between defenders and attackers of the Roman and equally incorrect as a characterization of the pro- and anti-humanist forces throughout the fourteenth century.

Italian humanism was initiated and spread mainly through the conscious activities of one distinct class of men--the professional humanist whose livelihoods depended upon their literary activity and their ability to sell their skills in Latin composition. As our study of the defenders of the Roman and their arguments shows, the same thing is true for French humanism. The defenders of the Roman were part of this class of professional notaries and secretaries. This fact can be established by biographical information as well as through careful analysis of their literary activities:

1. All the early French humanists, including the defenders of the Roman (with the exception of Pierre Col, about whom little is known) were of one profession--that of secretary-notary.

2. The debates among these humanists are different in certain important respects from the Quarrel of the Roman, and give evidence of a sense of group solidarity or loyalty

among humanists (see the Appendices).

3. The humanists themselves provide the most convincing explanation of this otherwise puzzling "group-exclusive" nature of early humanism. Their enthusiasm for classical Latin style, and consequently for defending the study of literature not necessarily Christian in a literal sense, was consistent with their overall concern to advance their careers as secretary-notaries.

The study of the other literary debates which the defenders of the Roman and their friends engaged in clearly reveals the existence of a group loyalty or consciousness. As the altercations centering around the contentious personality of Ambrogio dei Migli (see Appendices 2 and 3) demonstrate even a sharp debate, when confined to the closed circle of the humanists themselves, was distinctly different in both tone and degree of antagonism expressed from the Quarrel of the Roman. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that the inter-humanist literary debates which survive were little more (how much more is impossible at present to say) than literary exercises. Terms of apparently biting abuse could be directed against close friends (e.g. by Jean de Montreuil to Gontier Col) as well as against men who may not have been intimates (e.g. by Montreuil against Ambrogio dei Migli). Apparently serious literary

altercations are repeatedly called "exercises" and referred to third-party arbiters for stylistic criticism. Dire threats are made (for example, to queer an interlocutor's reputation with his employer) but never carried out and in fact specifically retracted--unlike the Quarrel of the Roman, where Gerson's accusations of heresy cannot be mistaken as being literary exaggeration only, and in any case are not explicitly retracted.

What distinguishes the disagreements in the Quarrel of the Roman from those in the inter-humanist literary debates is the matter of principled differences. The French humanists have disagreements amongst each other. But these disagreements never exceed certain limits. Furthermore, wherever they appear to be disagreeing over whether or not classical literature is a proper object of study, it can be shown that this stance is for the sake of literary debate, and cannot have been meant seriously.

But their constant debates over the propriety of humanist study have a purpose beyond mere literary exercise. Humanism was being attacked in earnest in both Italy and France. The humanists had to be ideologically prepared to refute such attacks. And in the Quarrel of the Roman humanism was being attacked in earnest once again.

Gerson and Christine had plenty of historical

precedent for questioning the moral consequences of studying poetry in the long history of opposition to humanist activity on the part of non-humanist intellectuals in Italy. And, like "Johannes de Viguntia," Giovannino de Mantova, Simon de Brossano, Pietro da Siena, Giovanni di Samminiato, and many others, Gerson and Christine had good reason to question the sincerity of the humanists' professions of conventional piety and loyalty. All humanists made reference to ancient authority and "traditional" ideas in defending their activities. But it was obvious to their contemporaries that these "traditional" ideas were being used to disguise a phenomenon which was new--the emergence of an essentially secular concept of culture.

In their correspondence all the early French humanists gave evidence of believing that religious obligations and duties need not claim more than a certain minimum of attention. Jean de Montreuil in particular rejected his friend Gontier's suggestion that he devote more time to religious pursuits (see Appendix 2). No doubt Gontier also meant this tongue-in-cheek. In Moccia's poems, and in the very pursuit of career and fame both implicit and explicit in Jean de Montreuil's and Nicolas de Clamanges' correspondence, we see everywhere the idea that cultural activities, while necessarily moral and

connected with ethics, need not necessarily be religious in a narrower sense. No doubt this serious, ethical, yet secular spirit in pagan classical literature and particularly in Cicero accounts for much of the appeal that classical literature had for the humanist-secretaries. For their cultivation of classical style went beyond the purely linguistic to include an attraction to the content of the ideas as well. Jean de Montreuil expressed this most clearly of all the humanists (see Appendices 1 and 2). For him there simply could be no question of counterposing humanist activity and Christianity.¹ But all these writers expressed similar ideas.

In this, of course, they were following in the path of earlier Italian humanists and were even somewhat "conservative" with respect to contemporary humanists such as Francesco da Fiano in Italy, where the cultural atmosphere was friendlier.

¹Note also the debate between Laurent de Premierfait and Jean de Montreuil in which Jean defends his having the laws of Lycurgus carved over his home. Jean sees nothing contrary to Christianity in this. Laurent, while not entirely serious, still feels somewhat uneasy. In any case, it is clear that while, for the sake of debate at least, several of the more highly placed and more renowned French humanists (like Laurent and Nicolas de Clamanges) as well as some others (like Ambrogio dei Migli) criticize what might be termed more extreme "secular" notions about classical literature, Jean de Montreuil never does. See Appendix 3 below.

The Quarrel of the Roman is thus a documentary "window" through which we can see the contradictions and change in the very dynamic society of letters of the late middle ages. Humanism was a creation of the growing class of middle-class or bourgeois administrators, secretaries, and politicians. This class of occupations was itself apparently the result of the expansion of nation-states, of governmental activity, and ultimately of the economic growth of the period after 1000 A.D. By the close of the fourteenth century the humanist movement was beginning to accomplish in the field of culture what the rise of the nation-state and the political conflicts between secular princes and the Church had already brought about in the realm of politics. In culture, as earlier in politics, the claim of the Church to ultimate authority was being rejected. At the beginning, at any rate, cultural developments lagged behind political changes, which in turn trailed the economic developments which had initiated them. But by about 1400 the secular state had begun to produce a secular culture. The proponents of the domination of culture by religion, like Gerson, would not yield without a battle. But, in the long, run, they could not win.

B. The Quarrel of the Roman as a Document
in French Cultural Life

The present study has reestablished the position of the Quarrel of the Roman in the history of European humanism. However, this is not necessarily the only interesting or valuable aspect of the Quarrel to the modern cultural historian.

After all, it is clear that French humanism was at this period a pale reflection of Italian humanism. Our analysis of the literary debates of the early French humanists shows nothing at all which might be called an innovation in the area of humanist activity. In fact in every area their positions are more restrained, "conservative," traditional, and timorous of expression, than those of earlier and contemporary Italian humanists. But it is precisely in the areas in which the French humanists did differ from the Italians (usually in being less advanced or extreme) that the Quarrel of the Roman is of the most interest.

The debate between Clamanges, Pietramala, Laurent de Premierfait and Jean de Montreuil analyzed at length in Appendix 1 reveals the extent to which a kind of "cultural nationalism"--a desire to uphold French intellectual and literary achievements because they are French--

probably contributed to the Quarrel of the Roman and to the development of attitudes about humanism in general. There is some evidence which suggests that humanism was retarded in its advance in France by being associated with a new and more secular (and therefore morally suspect) conception of culture, and with a country--Italy--whose nationals were of vacillating usefulness and loyalty to the French crown.

But the cultivation of classical Latin style was only one aspect of humanism, and was in some ways not the most important aspect. For Gerson, far more accomplished in this respect than the early French humanists (with the exception of Clamanges), was no humanist at all, while the most enthusiastic patrons of the revival of classical Latin style were at the Papal courts in Rome and Avignon.

It has been pointed out many times that, as far as the revival of interest in classical Latin style is concerned, there was little unique about the humanism or "renaissance" of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²

²For a review of this question, see Wallace Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), esp. Chapter II. A more recent work which expresses this notion in a broader sense is Erwin Panovsky, Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960; English edition 1965).

True, this classical humanism became more important in the next century, as the knowledge and skills gradually acquired by the humanists and transmitted to one another began to make scientific criticism and preparation of texts possible. But it is the change in ideas, the gradual process of liberating culture from ecclesiastical domination, which set the humanist movement and "renaissance" of the fourteenth century apart from earlier "renascences."

The French humanist defenders of the Roman were also spokesmen for the relatively new cultural nationalist ideas. Their literary debates give sufficient evidence of their concern for defending French cultural institutions (e.g. the University of Paris) and French writers, even when those writers were not at all "humanists" themselves. Nicolas de Clamanges' and Jean de Montreuil's defenses of French writers and institutions are the cultural equivalent of the declarations of political independence from the Pope which French kings had already been enforcing for a century. Nicolas' negative attitude towards Petrarch shows that he began to consider Christian culture to be no longer a European, but primarily a national, phenomenon. This view is evident in his debate with Pietramala also.

The fact that here too French humanists were responding to the goad of the Italian example, specifically

to the cultural chauvinism of Petrarch in his attack upon eum qui maledixit Italiae, merely serves to make the political roots of this nationalistic view of culture apparent.³ Here again literary attitudes are related to political demands. Of course, this is not to say that such cultural nationalist views, as I have called them here, were not held with total sincerity.

The defense of the Roman was no doubt undertaken at least partially because of Jean de Meun's connections with Paris and France. In fact, the Roman may have been put forward in cultured French circles at the same time as a "French answer to Dante," already coming to be regarded as the great Italian national poet. John V. Fleming has pointed out that Laurent de Premierfait, one of the circle of early French humanists (and by no means the most extreme of them--according to modern specialists, his translations of the classics stress the purely traditional and moral values to be derived from them) chose to consider Dante's work as a derivative of Jean de Meun's!⁴

At the same time the humanist movement's associations

³For this debate, see Appendix 1.

⁴Fleming, The Roman de la Rose, pp. 18-20.

with Italy and the largely Italian court at Avignon, together with a tendency to identify the defense of humanist activity with the formal "defense" of poetry, may have contributed to anti-Roman sentiment. Jean de Montreuil complained of a dislike for "poetry" around the Royal court. In Christine de Pisan and her appeal to Isabeau de Bavière we can sense that the anti-Roman position found adherents there, too. Thus to the extent that defense of the Roman was identified with the humanists, and these with Italian "enthusiasms" in literature, a nationalistic French reaction to the Roman might just as easily have been negative (after the first subtraction of obedience to Benedict XIII in 1398) as positive (because Jean de Meun, a Frenchman, had composed a major poem not unlike Dante's).

Although this may have been the case in 1399-1402, however, it is a view that could scarcely have persisted long. Growing French cultural pride eventually came to accept the Roman as a French masterpiece. Ironically by the time this happened (in the early sixteenth century) the Roman was no longer well understood. The advance of a secular, "humanist" conception of vernacular culture and a corresponding decline in the familiarity with the allegorical method among these outside religious orders had made

the Roman almost incomprehensible to a man such as Clément Marot.

C. Conclusion: The Broader Historical
Implications of the Quarrel

Fundamental new research in the area of late medieval French humanism and the publication of newly-discovered and newly-edited texts and documents are proceeding apace. There is no reason to doubt that in the next years and decades our understanding of this period will be revolutionized again. It will be surprising if the analysis presented in this thesis is not outdated in a relatively short time, in many respects at least, by new discoveries of this kind.

However, there are other important historical questions related to the development of late medieval humanism and French culture which, it appears, are not attracting as much scholarly attention as they deserve. We are still very much in the dark about the relationship between literary developments and more general social and political developments, and the dependency, in the long run, of the former upon the latter.

1. The Origins of the Administrative-Notary Class

The literary views of the defenders of the Roman, the early French humanists, were very much related to and

dependent upon the way they gained their livelihood. This relationship is fundamental to the Quarrel of the Roman. The same kind of relationship between literary opinions and career may be seen in Gerson's case as well. A close examination of Christine de Pisan's career would perhaps reveal something similar. In general, if we are interested in accounting for differences of literary opinion, we are on far safer ground when we seek them in the concrete social activity of the men and women in question, than if we take recourse to a dubious process of psychologizing, or "psycho-history."

Although not all notary-secretaries were humanists, all humanists were notary-secretaries. The importance of this fact cannot be overstressed. Even if only one-half of known early humanists in Italy and France belonged to one profession, one should still be struck by this correlation. Since virtually all known humanists of this period were notary-secretaries, this relationship between literary activity and opinion on the one hand and economic activity on the other cries out for further investigation, and will continue to do so even if several humanists who were not notary-secretaries are uncovered in the future.

We need to know more about the origins and the activities of this administrative class. More information

about the activities of the notary-secretaries known to history is already coming to light. But the social and political origins of this class of men appear to be receiving little attention. True, a few years ago Gilbert Ouy outlined the histories of a few families of administrators and notaries.⁵ But a history of families is of secondary interest. The origins of the class of administrators and of secular notary-secretaries must be sought in the history of the development of the centralized nation-states and city states, of urban (as opposed to feudal) society and of the prince's household into an administration. For the social, economic, and political forces which produced administrations and, therefore, administrators, notaries, diplomats, et al., are indirectly responsible for the development of humanism and the "secular" culture of which it was the harbinger.

2. The Relationship Between Secular Literary Culture and the Secular State

The need for research in this direction is confirmed by what we have seen of the close connection between the defense of the Roman and the expression of support for a

⁵Ouy, "Le songe et les ambitions," pp. 358-65.

nationalist culture, firstly in conjunction with, but later in opposition to, an explicitly religious and pan-Catholic, pan-European culture. The defenders of the Roman did their best, in the debate, to assert that their interest in the Roman was "traditional" in nature. But the humanists' increasingly nationalist and secular conception of literary culture was in fact opposed to the traditional ecclesiastical culture. The opponents of the Roman correctly realized this, as had other critics of humanism before them.

Nationalism as a concept in political thought has a history older than that of literary humanism. It too is related to the development of nation-states and the assertion of the ultimate authority by the secular power, in conflict with ecclesiastical and papal authority. The literary culture of the new class of secular administrators must have been not only influenced, but even determined, by this more strictly political struggle. (In Appendix 1 I have outlined one striking example of the dependence of a literary controversy and the opinions expressed in it upon political considerations--the debate between Petrarch and his French opponents Jean de Hesdin and Ancel Choquart over the relative merits of Italian and French culture.)

In order to understand literary developments in

late fourteenth-century France we must understand much more than we do about the society which produced this literature. This study has examined some of the literary traditions within which the Quarrel of the Roman stands. But we are as yet very ignorant of the society which produced these traditions and in which they were used. So we really know much less even about these humanists' literary traditions themselves than we might at first expect.

A good example of how our relative ignorance of late fourteenth century society and its cultural history has impeded our understanding of the Quarrel of the Roman, for instance, is the question of the status of women in this society. One of the principal bones of contention in the Quarrel is the treatment of the Rose and the apparent disparagement of women in general in Jean de Meun's poem. This matter becomes somewhat secondary to the question of allegory in the Quarrel itself. None of the defenders of the Roman state that it would have been permissible for Jean de Meun to attack women. So the primary question remains that of explaining how Christine and Gerson could misread the poem.

Gerson's reasons for distrusting allegorical interpretation of works not Christian in a literal sense

has been dealt with. It would be easy--too easy--to account for Christine's lack of ability to read Gothic allegory by her obvious educational shortcomings.⁶ In fact, that no doubt played a role. But there remains the matter of Christine's impassioned "defense of women." The social (as opposed to purely personal) roots of this attitude are obscure. However, it is clear from our scanty knowledge that others besides Christine were involved in composing "defenses of women" and of women's reputations at this period. A text listed in an old library catalogue but not as yet located indicates that still other works attacking the Roman for its anti-feminism were in circulation.⁷

When Christine saw fit to send part of the Quarrel to Isabelleau de Bavière and Guillaume de Tignonville she specifically stressed her defense of women. She must have had some reason to expect her highly-placed recipients to be

⁶For a recent study that confirms this, see G. Mombello, "Quelques aspects de la pensée politique de Christine de Pisan d'après ses oeuvres publiées," in Franco Simone, ed., Culture et Politique à l'Époque de l'Humanisme et de la Renaissance (Torino: Accademia delle Scienze, 1974), 43-153.

⁷This is the "Le contre Roman de la Rose nomme le gratia dei," mentioned in Henry Harrisse, Excerpta Colombiniana (Paris: Welter, 1887), p. 80. Harrisse dates the text 1398. It is cited in Potansky, Der Streit un den Rosenroman, p. 23, n. 32.

both interested and sympathetic.

But was this interest in defending women's reputations simply the result of the great expansion of the reading public, and a corresponding decline in the ability to read thirteenth-century allegorical poetry which appears to attack women? Until we understand French society and the extra-literary culture of this period better than we presently do it is impossible to know how much weight should be given to the factor of expanded literacy. Were important changes taking place in social attitudes towards women themselves, perhaps because of the extension of education to a large group of urban bourgeois women? We do not know. But we cannot possibly hope to understand the discussion over the Roman's "anti-feminism" in our present state of ignorance about contemporary social attitudes towards women, how they were changing, and why. It might be true that one can find defenses of the female sex against literary attack at almost any age. But the consternation caused by Christine's (and no doubt others') protests shows that we cannot simply regard her attitudes as the expression of a "traditional" view.

Important as it is, then, to investigate and identify literary and intellectual traditions in order to understand phenomena such as the Quarrel of the Roman, it may

not be the most important task. The roots of these same literary traditions must be identified in the broader historical context of social and political development before we can legitimately claim to measure their true significance.