

Sage and Seductress: Aristotle and Campaspe as Thirteenth-Century Archetypes

Sharyn R. Udall
University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the ancient struggle in Western history between nature and culture can be seen in visual representations of the thirteenth-century poem, *Le lai d'Aristote* by Henri d'Andely. Like other medieval *fabliaux*, the *Lai d'Aristote* reflects a double image, echoing conflicting medieval views of women (here represented by Campaspe) as daughters of both Eve the temptress and the Virgin Mary. The tale illustrates the influence of rediscovered Aristotelian texts on medieval intellectual society in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Visual representations more virulently misogynistic than the *Lai* itself reveal the still-unresolved male/female, nature/culture conflicts of the era, as Christian theology confronts a new view of nature in the Aristotelian texts.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que l'ancienne lutte entre la nature et la culture dans l'histoire occidentale peut se retrouver dans les illustrations du poème du XIII^e siècle, *Le Lai d'Aristote* par Henri d'Andely. Comme d'autres *fabliaux* du Moyen-Âge, *Le Lai d'Aristote* projette une image double, reflétant les vues contradictoires du Moyen-Âge sur les femmes (représentées ici par Campaspe) comme les filles à la fois d'Eve la tentatrice et de la Vierge Marie. Le conte illustre l'influence des textes redécouverts d'Aristote sur la société cultivée du Moyen-Âge à la fin du XII^e siècle et au début du XIII^e. Les illustrations d'une misogynie plus virulente que celle du *Lai* lui-même révèlent les conflits homme/femme, nature/culture encore non-résolus de l'époque, alors que la théologie chrétienne fait face à une nouvelle vue de la nature dans les textes aristotéliciens.

THE ABYSS BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE in the West stems from a long, problematic tradition. Roots of the dichotomy are ancient, reaching back into the Judeo-Christian patriarchal tradition, which institutionalized humanity's dominion over the earth and all its inhabitants. As that happened, the position of women changed dramatically. The Great Goddess of prehistory, identified with nature, fertility and agriculture, was replaced by the Biblical Eve, blamed for initiating the downfall of humanity in the garden. The woman in the garden—woman as seductive "nature"—was pitted against man, the bearer of "culture." As the threads of pagan and Christian stories mingled and reinforced each other,

the archetype of the dangerous seductress appeared repeatedly, with a number of memorable prototypes in Greek myth. Hesiod tells us that Zeus, enraged with Prometheus, sent Pandora (the first woman) among mortals to punish them. Beautiful, graceful, with an appearance like a chaste virgin, Pandora had nonetheless the "soul of a dog and a deceiving character." Her evil was made more dangerous because it was so attractively disguised (Hesiod, Op. 59 sq.).

When the early Christian Church set itself the task of destroying or absorbing the vestiges of older cultures, the outward forms of pagan myth took on

Christian guises. So too did ancient philosophy, especially as it was augmented and reinterpreted to coexist with Christianity in the medieval period.

This paper deals with the tension between that ancient "pagan" knowledge and a sometimes uneasy overlay of medieval Christian attitudes. The double focus of the investigation is a French fabliau titled *Le Lai d'Aristote* (the *Lay of Aristotle*), and some of its visual representations in European art. In keeping with much current art-historical practice, the poem and its pictorial expressions are here viewed as expressive of a cultural context, not as isolated productions of a writer, painter or sculptor. Thus it will also be necessary to examine certain events, attitudes and beliefs that informed the production of the literary and visual aspects of *Le Lai d'Aristote*. Furthermore, because it stems from a period of cultural crisis, in which long-established views (e.g., the conflicting medieval Christian views of woman as daughter of both Eve the temptress and Mary the Mother of God) collided with attitudes about nature ripe for reconsideration, no single interpretation can claim to reconcile its contradictions. I have chosen to let such contradictions stand, acknowledging that the cultural history of past centuries, like that of our own, resists attempts to subsume it under a single theory of development.

First the poem itself, a long comic tale which falls within the body of popular medieval literature most often described as *contes à rire en vers*. One of some 160 surviving fabliaux, the *Lai* was written in the first half of the thirteenth century by the Norman cleric Henri d'Andely. It was composed in octosyllabic couplets, the standard meter of courtly romance.

Formerly dismissed as elaborate jokes, the fabliaux have recently been reconsidered for their literary artistry and comic technique. The term "*lai*" is applied to the small number of fabliaux, like Henri's, which rise above the more licentious variety. Because of its literary qualities and its relationship to courtly love, scholars have praised Henri's *Lai*. As Robert Bossuat has written:

Les éléments de cet amiable conte ne sont pas du domaine habituel des *fabliaux*. L'élégance de la description, le charme souriant des personnages supposent chez le poète une culture littéraire qui n'était point celle des vulgaires jongleurs. (157)

The author, in fact, intended just such an elevated effect. Recorded by Eustache Langlois, Henri's professed intent was to avoid the "shameful license" which destroys the merit of works in which impurity reigns (175). In other words, he set out to eschew the indecent and the ribald in his work, to avoid the usual scathing characterizations given to cuckolded husbands, lecherous monks and the smug or socially ambitious bourgeois.

Henri's world was, in fact, removed from the low culture of his day. The circumstances surrounding the writing of the *Lai d'Aristote* are sketchy; we do not have a more precise date for its appearance than the first half of the thirteenth century. Yet in surviving documents we can learn something about Henri's career and relationships. He had been documented as a canon of Notre Dame de Rouen in 1198 and as its cantor in 1207 (Langlois, 161-177). We know of his close association with Eudes Rigaud, archbishop of Rouen, who taught at the University of Paris between 1245 and 1248. Henri was also part of the circle of Philip de Grève, chancellor at Paris around 1225. Thus Henri's world was clearly that of the high Norman and Parisian clergy, who were presumably his audience as well.

What does this tell us with respect to the poem? It may, in fact, suggest much. Henri's background and associations may provide explanations for his choice of subject and for layers of meaning belied by the poem's graceful exterior. Beneath those courtly phrases, in fact, we encounter questions about nature and culture, about women, about courtly love, about philosophy and about social change. The *Lai* also involves issues of power, representation, speech and the senses.

At first it appears deceptively simple but, upon analysis, the poem becomes a web of tangled

meanings and metaphors that mirror the complexity of the thirteenth century. Since the author deliberately distanced his work from that of the impious *jongleurs*, he thereby established the basis for a serious consideration of both form and content. Mindful of this and of the care he invested in his elegant phrases, we are encouraged to move beyond the *Lai's* consideration as mere courtly burlesque.

Here then, is a poem that demands to be experienced on several levels. Our first encounter, however, should be with its most obvious level—that of the narrative.

Alexander the Great, who has brought much of the world under Greek dominion, is camped with his armies on the banks of the Ganges in India. Aristotle, the wise old philosopher, warns his pupil Alexander about the dangers of love and convinces him to give up his beautiful mistress. (She is not named in the fabliau but later became known as Campaspe or Phyllis.) When she learns of Aristotle's admonition to Alexander, Campaspe determines to regain her lover and to seek revenge on the old philosopher. She goes out into the garden one morning, dressed in her loose chemise, long blonde hair flowing down her back. She gathers flowers, wanders through the verdant orchard, makes herself a crown of mint leaves, and sings sweetly beneath Aristotle's window. He soon forgets his own advice, descends to the garden and makes advances toward her. She promises him her favours if only he will fulfil a request: she wants to ride on his back. Alexander sees his master in this humiliating position—saddled and bridled like a horse—and is henceforth allowed his mistress. The old philosopher, desperate to salvage a shred of dignity, attempts to mask his foolishness with a display of his legendary rhetorical agility; if love (nature) can seduce an old sage, he asks, how much greater is the danger for a young prince?

So much for the narrative. To understand its impact and importance we must now focus on the exalted medieval position of Aristotle, as well as the controversy his writings generated within the thirteenth century, the time of the *Lai*. Appropriately, Aristotle's final question in the narrative is a

rhetorical one, for he was the medieval world's unrivalled master of rhetoric and logic. Excepting Christ himself, Henri d'Andely could scarcely have chosen a more esteemed target. Aristotle—philosopher, logician and scientist—had authored an intellectual system that, through the centuries, became the support and vehicle for both medieval Christian and Islamic Scholastic philosophy. Encyclopedic thinker, organizer and classifier, Aristotle's mind was the most revered of the Middle Ages. Dante would later call him "the master of those who know."

In the minds of medieval people, Aristotle's chief accomplishment was that he established the basis for logical thought; even though a pre-Christian, therefore a "pagan" philosopher, his methods were accepted everywhere as the basis for intellectual activity in Christian Europe.

Though it is unnecessary to address the broader range of Aristotle's philosophy here, several aspects of his thought are vital to an understanding of his choice and characterization in Henri's *Lai*. We can see today that Aristotle understood the power of language and of science—that they were instruments for *imposing structure upon nature*. To name, to classify and to order are strategies of subjugation and control. Through his careful study and dissection of plants and animals, Aristotle had demonstrated humanity's attempt to order nature. It would seem that, when applied later to medieval science, his methods could help science fulfil its role in the service of the faith: "to protect Christendom," as A.C. Crombie writes, "through power over nature" (54).

Synthesis and application of Aristotle's work, however, proved neither simple nor, initially, welcome. Part of the problem lay in the fact that this very aspect of Aristotle's work—his study of nature—had been "lost" to Latin scholars in Western Europe for many centuries; his scientific writings had disappeared with the decline of Antiquity. Only his work on logic, translated by Boethius, was known and taught. Then, in the last part of the twelfth century, the missing texts were "rediscovered," restored to scholars via a circuitous route.¹

First to reach Paris were the translations of the Muslim scholar Avicennes (Avicenna), whose presentation of rediscovered Aristotelian texts on philosophy and nature rocked the intellectual foundations of the university. Suddenly there was a whole body of scientific knowledge based on Aristotle's investigations of *physical* things. The Church had stood against studies of the physical world, yet here was a man more revered than most of Christianity's saints who had developed his knowledge by such investigation. The impact was tremendous. Etienne Gilson notes that, "For the first time and at one fell swoop the men of the middle ages found themselves face to face with a purely philosophical explanation of nature" (244). Aristotle emerged as a "natural philosopher"—one whose investigation of the physical world could be seen as part of the greater contemplation in which all truth was one.

Why is all this important for our discussion of *Le Lai d'Aristote*? Because it represents the medieval desire to reconcile "opposites"—theology with philosophy, passive with active, local with universal, temporary with permanent, nature with culture.

Soon the search for an accommodation between Christianity and the rediscovered texts of Aristotelian philosophy grew heated. Controversy bubbled up early in the thirteenth century and was still simmering in the years when the *Lai* was written. In 1210, the Council of Paris banned the newly discovered writings of Aristotle, branding them as subversive, and the prohibitions against them were extended by the Pope in 1215 and 1231 (van Steenberghen, 68, 71).

The tide of Aristotelianism was rising, however, and there is evidence that neither his *libri naturales* nor his *Metaphysics* was ever completely suppressed (Gilson, 245). By 1230, when the second wave of translations and commentary by Averroes reached Paris, little could be done to prevent their dissemination. Before long they were taught openly in the university.

Chief among their early exponents was Philip the Chancellor, a pioneer at incorporating the newly discovered Aristotle into his lectures and writing at the University of Paris (van Steenberghen, 115).

Philip's *Summa de Bono*, written between 1228 and 1236, quotes both Aristotle and Averroes extensively. From there the influence of the "pagan" philosophy spread into many intellectual circles in the Ile-de-France. It is fair to assume, because of his connections at Paris, that at least one of those orbits intersected that of our cleric-poet at Rouen. Clearly Henri d'Andely could hardly have missed the storm surrounding the discussions, and—also clearly—the choice of Aristotle as subject of his *Lai* was no mere coincidence.

To what extent can the content of the poem be said to mirror the events and excesses of the Aristotelian controversy? Roy Percy maintains that such controversy was "as likely to be expressed in popular narrative literature as in philosophical disputations" (169). Though disguised as narrative, the deeper meanings and significance of poetry were not lost on the thirteenth-century reader. As Denis de Rougemont has pointed out:

If we try to place ourselves in the medieval atmosphere, it becomes clear that the absence of any symbolical meaning in a poem would have been something far more offensive than it can be now. To a medieval man every thing meant some other things as in dreams, and this without any translation into concepts on his part. (93)

Thus it should come as no surprise that the thirteenth-century movement from Platonic otherworldliness to a growing Aristotelian interest in the phenomena of the physical world should be reflected in the persons, places and events of the *Lai d'Aristote*.

More puzzling than its appearance in secular poetry are the subject's representations on medieval church facades. Was it merely that Aristotle's exalted reputation made him an irresistible target for ridicule? Emile Mâle, in noting the subject's presence in cathedral sculpture, claims that its appearance there was due merely to the use made of it by contemporary preachers:

The story was in no sense intended to recall the Aristotle of history, the great master of the schoolmen. It is clear that no deep thought underlay these little stories.... (335)

How can Mâle be so sure? While the name of Aristotle was certainly invoked in church sculpture to embellish a moralistic story and to add to its efficacy, Mâle ignores the facts of history—the waves of momentous philosophical controversy raging early in the thirteenth century—when he dismisses the Aristotle/Campaspe tale as mere sermon fodder.

Mâle has also overlooked the rich complexities of Henri's text as they lend themselves to visual portrayal. Drawing on the medieval veneration for Aristotle, discussed above, the poet employs the literary devices of ironic contrast and opposition as the central tools for the comic treatment of Aristotle in the *Lai*. The difference between the philosopher's status, his stern advice to Alexander, and his own subsequent actions illustrate this technique. It is this inversion—made literal when Aristotle submits to being bridled and ridden by the damsel for whom he lusts—that cries out for visual treatment. It possesses all the succinctness and directness cherished by artists in the narrative tradition; in a single summary image we are shown the bestializing yet amusing consequences of lust. Howard Helmsinger points out another delicious simile: that the medieval relationship of man and woman was often likened to that of a male rider controlling a wilful horse (95). In reversing the sex roles, Henri creates a satiric and humorous counterpoint to the usual order of the sexes, escaping by metonym from the more ribald allusions to coital position so often described in more earthy fabliaux.²

However, this was not the first time Aristotle had been likened to a horse. An old tradition, transmitted through Petrarch, has Plato contrasting the lethargy of his student Xenocrates of Chalcedon with Aristotle's more energetic manner: "The one needs a spur, the other a bridle ... See what an ass I am training to compete with what a horse." One wonders if Henri might have known of this ancient characterization.

In any case, the Norman poet was evidently more interested in character study than in historical niceties. It is clear, for example, that by 328/327 B.C.E., when Alexander had penetrated into India, philosopher and pupil were a continent apart and

perhaps estranged as well. Any close intimacy seems to have ended by 340 with Alexander's appointment as regent for his father. Aristotle had always held a firm conviction that Greeks were superior to Asians; this he transmitted to the young prince along with instructions to dominate the barbarians and to refrain from any physical intermixture with them. Despite this advice, however, Alexander later chose a wife from the Persian nobility and encouraged his troops to do the same. Is it this defiance that Henri d'Andely treats metaphorically in the *Lai*?

If Asians were inferior to Greeks, women fared even worse in Aristotle's mind, and this is crucial to the story of the *Lai*. His well-known view was that women are physiologically and psychologically inferior beings, incomplete therefore imperfect. Such views would later be linked to St. Augustine and ultimately to Freudian principles but, in the Middle Ages, Aristotle's views fed into two other principal objections to women: (1) that through Eve they were responsible for Original Sin; and (2) that their wiles presented a potential threat to celibate life, judged superior to marriage (Menard, 138). Aristotle had also expressed in his *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 7, the notion that women's humours are more abundant, from which later commentators inferred that women's sexual appetites were greater than men's and that they were therefore the likely initiators of sexual sin. This idea was widely believed in the Middle Ages and forms the basis for many incidents in other fabliaux.³

One final note about Aristotle's perception of women: he likened the difference between free and slave as being equal to the sexual one. Like a slave, a woman is without *logos*, that is, without reason. This justified their subjection, making them objects rather than subjects of law (*Pol.* 1245b).

Thus two currents of misogyny, one ancient, the other developing in medieval times, blended in philosophy as well as popular culture. It is within this matrix of misogyny that the story of Aristotle and Campaspe was often portrayed in the visual arts. Clearly, the images are didactic ones, intended to warn men of the dangers of women's wiles.

In easily seen church facades and capitals, the intended viewers are ordinary worshippers. Given Henri d'Andely's origins at Rouen, it is hardly surprising to find Aristotle and Campaspe at that cathedral on the Portail de Calende (south transept facade). More than a century later the motif reappears in the same church, but this time in a fifteenth-century misericord from the choir stalls, where its presence must have been intended to remind clerics of the twin dangers of women and earthly passion (Figure 1). Carved between 1457 and 1469 under the direction of Philippot Viart, the lively misericord has a tiny, stylishly coiffed temptress seated sidesaddle on the philosopher's back.

From France and Germany the motif proliferated; Joachim Storost cites dozens of other visual examples, ranging from England to Poland, from Spain to the North Sea. Materials vary from stone to wood to ivory to bronze, in objects both useful and designed for decorative purposes. Paintings, tapestries, mirrors, weapons, carpets, chests, tableware, prints, playing cards—all have received the Aristotle/Campaspe subject.⁴ Most of these are benign representations of the lovely Campaspe astride a chagrined Aristotle. However, occasionally, she takes on a malevolent attitude; in the sixteenth-century choir stalls of the Augustine abbey at Montbenoit, Franche-Compte (Figure 2), Campaspe has attained amazonian size and acquired a commanding position over the feckless philosopher. Drawing back her arm, she appears ready to unleash a vicious attack with her whip. Here is a woman dangerous as much for her physical strength as her feminine wiles.

On a carved pilaster from the fifteenth-century Chateau de Gaillon (now at the Louvre), a medallion shows the bearded sage, wearing his philosopher's cap, ridden by the young seductress. The context here is significant, for the other motifs on the pilaster all deal with the ills caused by the weakness of men with regard to women. Virgil hangs suspended in his basket,⁵ Hercules lies on a brazier on Mount Oetha, Orpheus wanders in the Thracian forest seeking his lost Eurydice and—just

above Aristotle—Adam and Eve represent the first earthly weakness. Though appearing less often, the Virgil story was sometimes a pendant to Aristotle's, as seen in thirteenth-century ivory tablets reproduced in Montfaucon's *Antiquité expliquée* (Figure 3). Still another example appears in a Florentine mid-quattrocento *desco da parto*, a gift to a woman on the occasion of the birth of her child. This painted tray from the Victoria and Albert Museum also depicts the triumph of love, with Campaspe and Aristotle prominent among the images of those men ruined by love.

In a woodcut by Hans Baldung Grien (1513; Figure 4), both figures are nude. Grien places an ample, phlegmatic-looking Phyllis on the back of the philosopher, whose wrinkled face and flowing beard suggest advanced age, but whose body is that of a much younger man. In this enclosed garden it is the two trees that suggest Phyllis's (or nature's) sinister intent. Twisting, muscular, the tree on the left bears abundant fruit. The tree on the right, however, is leafless and barren, its branches distorted into grasping claws. Beneath them, in a wall niche, is a vessel whose swelling form makes a clear reference to female breasts, and also—more obliquely—to the sacred vessels associated with the Virgin. (It must be recalled here that Grien's woodcuts, like those of his contemporary Durer, include subjects of female witches during this period of fierce persecution following the publication of In-stitutor and Springer's *Malleus Maleficarum*.)

Yet the misogyny apparent in the harshest visual renderings of Aristotle and Campaspe (and so often associated with medieval theology) exaggerates the milder tone of Henri's *Lai*. In his text, the antifeminism is more a matter of unrealized identity than of offensive character. Alexander's young lover (as noted previously) is never named in the poem; the names of Campaspe and Phyllis have been borrowed from alternative versions of the tale transmitted from Eastern literature to the West.⁶ Lacking a proper name, she is never fully realized as an individual; instead, she remains a type. Thomas Cooke has commented on this common portrayal of women in the fabliaux:



Figure 1: *Le Lai d'Aristote*, misericorde from the choirstalls, Notre Dame de Rouen. By Philippot Viart and Flemish carvers. Wood, 1457–1470.



Figure 2: Humiliation of Aristotle. Choirstall of Abbey of Montbenoit (Doubs.). Wood, 1527. Photograph courtesy of Arch. Phot. Paris/SPADEM Copyright 1991 ARS N.Y./SPADEM



Figure 3: Le Lai d'Aristote. Ivory relief, 13th century. From Bernard de Monfaucon, L'Antiquité expliquée, (18th century), T.6 pl. 194.

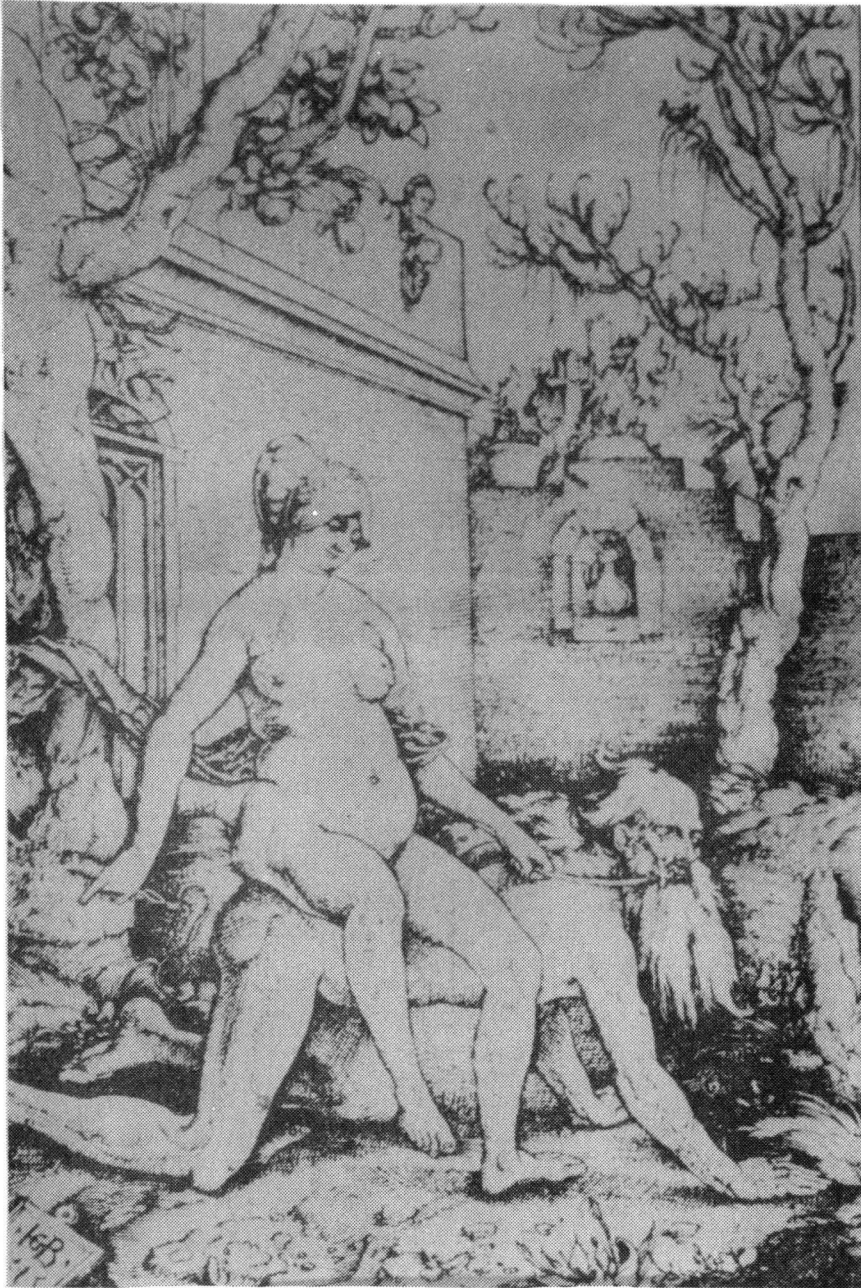


Figure 4: Hans Baldung Grien, Aristotle and Phyllis. Woodcut, 1513. Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

There are as many anonymous women as there are ones with names, and even those with names do not have defined personalities; they are not memorable for themselves but for their functions. (1974, 149)

On the other hand, the absence of fixed identity allows Campaspe to represent more than one kind of woman. Oscillating, vaporous, she veils her vengeance with an appealing innocence. In a fourteenth-century relief sculpture from the facade of St. Jean de Lyons she appears—young, pretty, smiling—seated on her makeshift horse (Figure 5). Yet, despite an innocent appearance, Campaspe is clearly in control. Bridle in one hand, braided whip in the other, she urges on the embarrassed philosopher. In the lower corners a goat and rabbit suggest the pastoral setting (if not also alluding to sexuality), while couples shown in the upper corners (one is now missing) portray Alexander in conversation with his mistress—perhaps before—and-after views?

Guilhermy has suggested that on the now-empty console above the Aristotle and Campaspe relief at Lyons, there originally stood a figure representing one of the Christian virtues, either Chastity or Christian Strength (151–2). Thus Christian virtue is seen as triumphant over the weakness of pagan philosophy, as expressed by Aristotle's humiliation. The abbé de La Rue posited the same explanation for certain sculpted nave capitals at St. Pierre de Caen, where the stories of Aristotle and Virgil appear again (Figure 6).

Clearly these later regional interpretations of the *Lai* ranged far from Henri's text. Returning to his view of the young seductress, we find that the poet skirts lightly around any negative aspects. Whether merely to underscore her powers of deception, or in an effort to liken her to the purity of nature and the Virgin, he describes Campaspe in the most positive terms. Her physical beauty is likened to nature in full flower. Her colours are of those of the lily and the rose—ubiquitous medieval emblems of the virtue of the Virgin (lines 317–18). No villainy or evil, says Henri, mars her resplendent face. Henri's description sounds very much like that of the celebrated Catholic encyclopedist Honorius d'Autun (active 1090–1120), who com-

posed a hymn to the beauty of Mary, in which Jesus praises his mother's "freshness ... her loose hair, her lovely throat, her brow ... and her sparkling teeth." Mixing voluptuous images and moral attributes, Honorius walks the oft-seen medieval line between passion and purity.

Henri's frank admiration for Campaspe's female cleverness and enterprise far outshines his gentle antifeminism. Unlike the static, passive virgins and female saints of thirteenth-century art, Campaspe is an active presence. Hair and clothing unbound, she *moves* with a degree of freedom unknown in medieval religious art. She has seized the initiative, appropriating Aristotle's vaunted powers of speech and reason until he declares that he has wasted his time too long with learning—booklearning, that is. When he succumbs to her, it is a metaphorical acknowledgement of both female charm and a changing worldview. Campaspe's is an inevitable and necessary intervention, a corrective to the hubris of culture.

Strolling under the trees, Henri's Campaspe is an aspect of the whole of nature's lure—and she knows it. She calls on the force of love and the power of nature to relieve Aristotle of his logic and his learning. Neither his dialectic nor his grammar, she vows, will protect him from her (lines 276–79). She is the quintessential seductress in the garden—like Eve or like Oiseaux in the *Roman de la rose*. Yet Campaspe's lure is not merely that of a specific woman, or even a type; it is, metaphorically, the world of nature that has lured Aristotle out of his tower of philosophical contemplation into the *vita activa* of scientific inquiry.

Who is this natural woman, this force disguised in female form? Has she become the very personification of nature herself? We are reminded of the writings a century before Henri's time at the School of Chartres. There, Bernard Sylvestris and Alain de Lille formulated, for the first time in the history of Western European philosophy and poetry, the compelling idea of "nature" as cosmic power, the goddess *Natura* ... radiant and beguiling, the demonic-divine mother of all things." In Bernard's *De Mundi Universitate* she is "the *eros* of the cosmogony, the

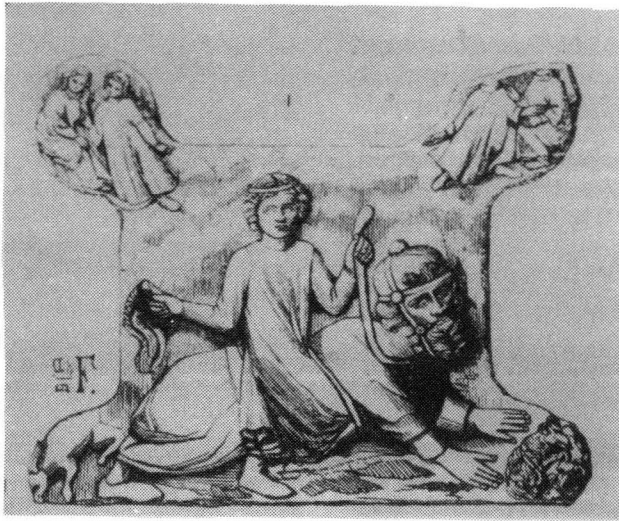


Figure 5: Aristotle and Campaspe. Bas-relief from cathedral at Lyons, 13th century.



Figure 6: Left: Aristotle and Campaspe. Bas-relief from column capital, nave. "Scenes: Littérature du moyen âge" from Caen, Église Saint-Pierre. Copyright 1991 ARS N.Y./SPADEM



Figure 7: Aristotle from Royal Portal, cathedral of Chartres, 12th century.

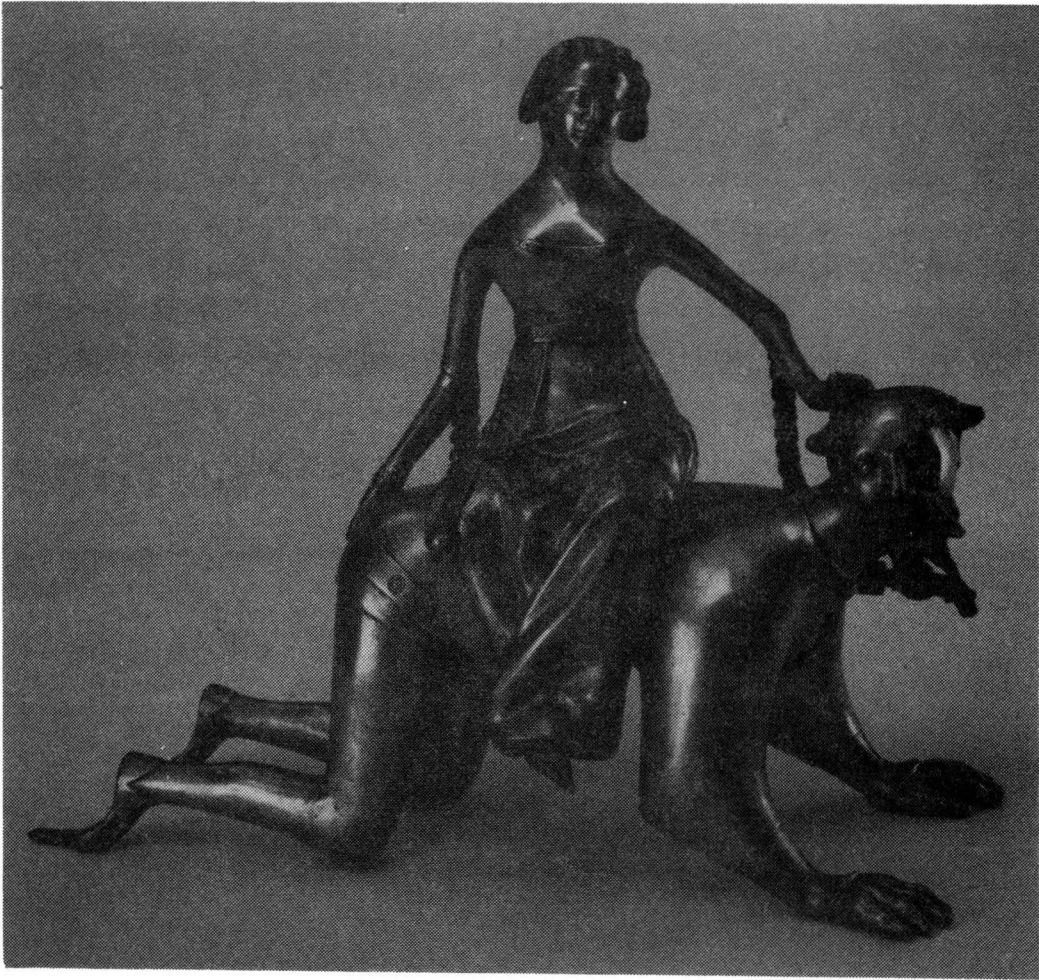


Figure 8: Phyllis and Aristotle, aquamanile, bronze, French c. 1400. H. 13–3/16 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (M5).

procreative power of the cosmos ... here celebrated under aspects and forms borrowed with little attempt at concealment from late antiquity" (Heer, 118–9). When Vincent of Beauvais incorporated these ideas into his encyclopedia *Speculum Majus* (1224), he assured their further dissemination, especially at Paris.

Nature as sensory experience is an idea given form in the persona of Campaspe. She is the perfect embodiment of a growing late-medieval fascination with the physical world. (One thinks of the brief flurry of pantheism in the work of Amaury de Bene, or the references to the four senses and the power of love in one of the Lady with the Unicorn

tapestries, *A Mon seul désir*, in the Cluny Museum.) It is precisely through his sensory perception of her that Aristotle succumbs to the new lure of sensory experience: he hears Campaspe singing, smells the fragrant flowers and mint she gathers, longs to touch her beautiful body. On the breeze we can almost hear echoes of Longinus's third century *Art of Rhetoric*. Building on Aristotle, Longinus wrote of the power of the senses as a spur to desire; they lure, delight, appetize and please. The senses are "weapons of delight and of art which is trained for persuasion."

If we see in the *Lai d'Aristote* the reflection of an immense philosophical change, we must not neglect its other sustaining idea—courtly love. Charles Muscatine has seen in Henri's *Lai* clear support for that concept: "Thus the *Lai d'Aristote*, which describes the conversion of the dour philosopher to courtly love, is a defense of the system" (1957, 67). The last lines of the poem bear out his assessment:

Veritez est, et je le di,
Au'amors vaint tout et tout vaincra
Tant com cis siecles durera.

(It is true, and I say it: that love conquers all and will conquer all so long as the centuries endure.)

Faced with the prospect of stasis and his approaching end, the wizened old sage, as we see him hunched over his writings at Chartres (Figure 7) is suddenly confronted with death's opposite, the force of eros. (The two forces, love and death, are of course intertwined in many of the greatest portrayals of romantic love.) Now, unable to resist, Aristotle invites love to awaken a long-lost part of himself:

Vieigne amors herbergier, or vieigne
En moi, ge n'en sai el que dire,
Puis que je nel puis contredire.

(lines 381-83)

This kind of courtly love, in fact, has as much to do with the lover as with its object. As Juliet Mitchell has written:

Romantic love is about the self, it is erotic, but does not have a sexual object that is ultimately different from itself. The lady of the courtly epic, Goethe's eternal feminine, Cleo the poet's muse, the feminine principle of *fin du siècle* artists, are all, in the last resort, metaphors for the lost female part of the original, psychologically bisexual self.... It is the other half of himself that the romantic lover searches for. (109, 111-112).

This description coincides with our previous hypothesis of the thirteen-century Aristotelian controversy: that just as Campaspe restores to the philosopher a forgotten part of his erotic being, so his rediscovered writings restore to wholeness the severed body of Aristotle's philosophical thought.

We see this confident, restorative presence in the splendid gilded aquamanile now in the collection of The Cloisters, New York (Figure 8). Seated on Aristotle's back, Phyllis (Campaspe) knows with a gentle certitude what the puzzled-looking philosopher has forgotten: that philosophy and art are both well served by a balance between nature and culture.

Mediating between myth and a kind of living reality, the *Lai d'Aristote* is a tale still unsure of its own intent. It recites the conventional medieval wisdom that women can threaten the established order. At the same time, however, it gently subordinates the old misogynistic thesis to a naturalistic one, in which positive change accompanies the re-discovery of nature. In summary, the *Lai* and its visual counterparts invoke powerful archetypes that reach to the very heart of changing medieval life.

On its most basic level, our consideration of this *conte courtois* and its visual counterparts re-emphasizes the interaction of poetry, philosophy and the visual arts within the cultural context of the thirteenth century. Beyond that, it adds to our understanding of the formative energies of such mythological picturings as they affect later literary, religious and aesthetic portrayals of women and men. When art inspires such contemplation, opening windows of meaning and enhancing contextual appreciation, it fulfils the highest task of image and symbol making.

NOTES

1. From their original Greek versions, Aristotle's writings had first been translated into Syriac, then into Arabic. Finally, through Muslim scholars in Spain, the lost body of Aristotle's thought was turned into medieval Latin and made available to all of Europe. Chief among these Moorish translators were Avicennes and Averroes.
2. The motif would persist well into Renaissance times in misogynist texts. In 1560, for example, the title page of *The Decyde of Women* (anonymously published) depicted a woman riding the back of her husband while beating him onward with a whip.
3. It also entered later popular culture; *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (first published in 1684) became a widely popular eighteenth-century handbook on sex, in which it was still asserted that women obtained more pleasure from sex than men.
4. Storost maintains that not all females riding males represent Aristotle and Campaspe. He interprets some as Samson and Delilah, for example, or as the topos for all men beguiled by love. He also notes that the motif was made newly popular in the nineteenth century through its reinterpretations by Victor Hugo in his *Chansons des rues et des bois*.
5. The story of Virgil's humiliation at the hands of a woman is often pendant to the Aristotle tale in late medieval art. According to the legend, Virgil accepted an assignation from a Roman woman who invited him to come to her tower window at midnight. She would lower a basket and haul him up to her chamber. The deceitful woman left him hanging halfway up the tower, to be exposed the next day to the ridicule of passersby. See Comparetti, Vol. II, 290.
6. Bedier has noted that many of the French fabliaux derive from Indian and Arabic sources. The *Lai d'Aristote* has counterparts in the *Pantchatantra* and the *Mahakatjajana*, though the philosophers and kings portrayed are of Eastern origin. If these tales had made their way from India to France by the thirteenth century, says Bedier, it was through an oral tradition; the *Pantchatantra* was not published in Europe until 1848 (132). Likewise, the elegant German tale *Aristote et Fillis*, which corresponds in nearly all details to Henri's *Lai*, is of similarly imprecise origin (211). One of the early appearances of the name Campaspe was as the title of John Lyly's Elizabethan comedy, first performed in 1584. There she is described as a celebrated Asiatic courtesan, mistress of Alexander the Great, who generously "gives" her to his court painter Apelles when painter and courtesan fall in love.

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