Who is telling the story?
Problems of narrative voice in late-medieval catalogues of women

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Abstract: Narrative voices proliferate in catalogue-of-women poems in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. This article takes as a case study Jehan Du Pré’s Le Palais des nobles dames ([1534]) to consider the most fruitful and appropriate approach to such proliferation in a manner that tries to avoid imposing upon the medieval text anachronistic notions of coherence or of narrative voice as a unitary human consciousness. Drawing on A. C. Spearing’s Textual Subjectivity and linguistic distinctions between énonciateur, locuteur, and énoncé, I examine the status of women’s voices in the poem: the relationship between speaker and utterance, and whether it is, indeed, possible identify these speaking subjects specifically as voices. Analysis is also extended to include the work’s paratextual features, the status of the author, and the role of the audience in telling the stories of noble ladies.

Résumé: Les voix narratives foisonnent dans des catalogues poétiques écrits pour la défense des femmes à la fin du quinzième et au début du seizième siècle. Cet article prend comme cas d’étude Le Palais des nobles dames ([1534]) de Jehan Du Pré pour identifier l’approche la plus fructueuse qui permette de comprendre un tel foisonnement, tout en tâchant d’éviter d’imposer au texte médiéval des notions anachroniques de cohérence ou de voix narrative comme conscience humaine unitaire. Faisant appel à Textual Subjectivity d’A. C. Spearing et à la distinction linguistique entre énonciateur, locuteur et énoncé, nous examinerons le statut des voix de femmes dans le poème quant aux rapports entre celles qui parlent et ce qu’elles disent ; nous nous demanderons s’il est possible de les désigner comme « voix ». L’analyse comprendra également les éléments paratextuels, le statut de l’auteur, et le rôle du lectorat lors du récit des histoires des nobles dames.

[...] elle vint par la main me saisir,  
En me disant : Or, regarde à loysir  
Ce que t’ay dist, sans vouloir riens obmettre,  
Pour enaprès en tes escriptz le metre.¹

¹ Jehan Du Pré, Le Palais des nobles dames (Lyon, 1534), ed. by B. Dunn-Lardeau, Paris, Champion, 2007, v. 132-35. Subsequent references to PND will be incorporated in the text. We know little of the author outside the anecdotal information provided in the Palais’s own narrative: he was a military man, taken prisoner at Pavia (and supported by Louise de Savoie, then regent, who supplied much-needed funds to the troops), who also accompanied Marguerite de Navarre on her journey to Madrid in 1525 to petition for the release of her ailing brother, François I. Dunn-Lardeau postulates Du Pré’s interactions with both royal ladies as triggers for his « élan chevaleresque » to pursue a pro-feminine argument (PND, p. 68). The dedication of works defending or praising women to female patrons is discussed by Cynthia J. Brown in respect of Anne de Bretagne: The Queen’s Library: Image-Making

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Narrative voices proliferate in catalogues of women from the mid-fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries. In this extract from Jehan Du Pré’s *Le Palais des nobles dames* ([1534]), Noblesse Feminine, who has appeared to the male narrator in a dream, enjoints him to look around the eponymous palace to see therein the noble ladies of whom she has already spoken so that he can then record their renown in his written account. It transpires that the scenario is actually even more imbricated, as a number of those women are not only seen, but are also heard by the narrator:

Tresfort se plaignent, de ce que son frustrées
D’immortel bruyt, lequel est tout notoire
Leur appartient par approvée histoire (*PND*, v. 86-88).

They present their stories to him both directly and indirectly. Joan of Arc interpellates him specifically as the writerly transmitter of her life story:

Si me dist lors: Je veulu x qu’en tes escriptz
Mettes l’histoire comment moy, pastourelle
Simple, benigne, de maniere nouvelle
[...] (*PND*, v. 739–41).

Whereas he overhears Archidamia (re-)enacting her speech to the Spartan senators:

En leur disant : Avant que d’icy part,
Recitez moy au long vostre conseil.
Avez vous paour du haultain appareil
Que fait Pirrhus devant ceste cite? (*PND*, v. 253-56).

In addition to speakers being contained within the narrative decasyllables, some women’s discourse is demarcated as a fixed form lyric. The narrator recounts how Kyno has pre-prepared her speech, which she will go on to deliver « en vers quatrans coronnez » and « encores en vers septains » (*PND*, p. 321):

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2 The period under consideration thus lies after the pro-feminine work of Christine de Pizan (such as her *Livre de la cité des dames* (1405)), which has already received considerable scholarly attention. Critical focus on the first-known woman author writing in defence of women has left other such texts, written by men, somewhat in the shadows and, until very recently, little-explored. The recent increase in publication of modern editions of these male-authored defences, such as Du Pré’s *Palais* or Symphorien Champier’s *La Nef des dames vertueuses* (ed. by J. Kem, Paris, Champion, 2007), both represents growing interest in a whole corpus of works pertaining to the « querelle des femmes » and enables further scholarly analysis of often innovative and imaginative literary treatments of the case for women in medieval culture. See H. J. Swift, *Gender, Writing, and Performance: Men Defending Women in Late Medieval France* (1440–1538), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.
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Within the poem, therefore, there are multiple, intersecting voices. Looking at the work as a whole, the situation is further complicated by several paratexts, including a third-person prose dedication to Marguerite de Navarre (p. 94-95), a two-stanza ABBA dialogue between « l’auteur » and « son livre » (p. 91), and an eleven-line verse conversation « par lequel Honnesteté enhorte l’auteur escrire des Dames » (p. 95).

The present article thereby seeks to identify an appropriate critical approach to the structuring of voice within the text, both as a means of pinpointing the principles ordering the Palais’s structure and as a way of interrogating what we mean by voice itself. We have so many speakers in the palace, but should we identify all speaking subjects specifically as voices? How do we define the « voice-ness » of an utterance? To what extent is our appreciation of voice predicated on a model of orality? As theoretical tools to assist our conceptual unpicking of voice, I enlist A. C. Spearing’s challenge to human consciousness-centred thinking about narrative voice in medieval texts; he encourages scholars instead to « think more flexibly about the ways subjectivity is encoded in medieval texts »4. To complement, or even inflect, Spearing’s model of textual subjectivity, I draw on elements of enunciation theory, namely distinctions between énonciateur, locuteur and énoncé. Linguistic analysis of women’s voices in these terms should enable us to look more critically at what constitutes the speaking subject as a subjectivity, and to consider carefully where we locate « voice » in the chain of communication linking the source of an utterance with its speaker and the content of that utterance. For occasional points of comparison, I shall cross-refer to another catalogue-of-women poem, Jean Bouchet’s Le Jugement poëtic de l’honneur femenin (1538), which similarly presents women’s accounts of themselves, framed in a palace of noble ladies, recounted by a male narrator (bearing Bouchet’s habitual pseudonym, Le Traverseur). Through this dialogue between theory and text, we will in effect be responding to the question in the article’s title – « who is telling the story? » – by asking further questions as to how we understand the nature of « who » and the act of « telling ».


Who can tell? Narrative voice and narrative order

The formal variety of the work, the diverse ways in which female speech is represented within each form, and the different relationships each form and each speech set up between female speaker and male narrator all contribute to the proliferation of narrative voices, in the sense of voices who guide the narrative thread and/or operate as the aural lenses through which the reader views the tale. But there is also a further, methodological complexity, in that one could break down the idea of « numerous narrative voices » into « multifarious narratives » and « plentiful voices » – and these categories may not always neatly intersect: first, a given voice is not always the subject of a narrative; second, any single voice may actually carry plural narratives. The poetic layering of the Palais as a dream retrospectively recounted by a narrator figure who stands as the author and editor of that dream’s contents seems automatically to subordinate all the women’s voices, and control of their respective histories (their narratives), to his command. Du Pré evokes this subordination through narratorial comments bespeaking discursive mastery, when he mentions the need to « abréger » (v. 1108) or speak « sommairement » (v. 873, 3746) of a woman’s claim to fame. A single woman’s voice may be seen to carry several, often heterogeneous narratives: she is not just telling her individual story, but that of several iterations of herself as she has appeared in previous incarnations in other defence-of-women catalogues. Again, Du Pré inserts cues in his narrator’s remarks to flag up this intricacy:

Hortensia, que les Romains vante
Avoir parlé de si diserte langue,
Devant les Dames prononçoit une arengue,
Que fist jadis, quand le senast voulust
Dessus les femmes imposer grant tribut (PND, v. 1279-83).

Hortensia is depicted recycling her address to the Roman Senate in a performance delivered before other residents of the palace. The temporal adverb « jadis » dexterously evokes both her legendary speech in Ancient Rome and the account of that speech in one of Du Pré’s sources, Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris.

Amidst this complexity, how does a reader begin to make sense of the poem’s organizational principles in terms of narrative voice? The Palais has been

1 See PND, p. 161, n. 8. Indeed, De mulieribus is a significant source more generally (though not unproblematically) for the late medieval French catalogue-of-women tradition. Boccaccio’s work was itself translated into French several times in the course of the fifteenth century, and its cast list of famous ladies informs the content of texts such as Christine de Pizan’s Livre de la cité des dames, Martin le Franc’s Le Champion des dames (c. 1442), Antoine Dufour’s Vies des femmes célèbres (1504). See C. J. Brown, « The ‘Famous Women’ Topos in Early Sixteenth Century France: Echoes of Christine de Pizan », « Riens ne mest seu r que la chose incertaine » : études sur l’art d’écrire au moyen âge offertes à Eric Hicks par ses élèves, collègues, amies et amis, ed. by J.-C. Muhlethaler and D. Billotte, Geneva, Slatkine, 2001, p. 149-60.
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passed off as a « disorderly » text⁶; its apparently neat division into a sequence of thematically demarcated rooms presented in the table of contents (headed « l’ordre que l’auteur tient au present livre » (p. 93)) is belied by the disparate and somewhat idiosyncratic selection of thematic groupings: warrior women, women after whom parts of the world have been named, remarkably old women, women with whom the gods fell in love, women who had an extraordinary number of children, etc. It is, in the eyes of the few critics who have considered it, a « confused »⁷ curiosity. In order to rescue it from such critical dismissal, one could be tempted to cling to the figure of the male narrator as the lynch-pin of the piece, the guiding consciousness through whose eyes and ears we see and hear reported activity in the palace’s chambers. In promoting this character as the primary storyteller, the reader would implicitly be placing the Palais in the same vein as earlier verse texts structured around an instructive journey, such as Guillaume de Deguileville’s Le Pèlerinage de vie humaine (1330, rev. 1355), which was, indeed, a significant narrative tradition of the late Middle Ages⁸. One could even conclude that Du Pré’s innovation upon the « querelle des femmes » catalogue tradition is precisely his elaboration of a more fully fledged and active narratorial subjectivity – active, for instance, in his editorial activities noted above – and that this development of the « je » role therefore focuses readerly attention on it as the poem’s directing thread:

Le narrateur n’est plus une instance omnisciente, présumée objective […] il est lui-même mis en jeu, intéressé et profondément engagé dans la transmission des histoires.⁹

However, a salutary voice of caution against any automatic privileging of a single consciousness as the source of a medieval work’s coherence has been raised by A. C. Spearing in his opposition to devotion to the « I » as the anchor of textual expression in medieval literature. He challenges a dominant strain of Chaucer criticism that fixes on, even fetishises, the narrator-persona « Geoffrey » as interpretative key. Why should literary texts be read as the expression of human consciousness? We should, he advises, resist imposing on medieval texts « the idea of the narrator as ‘unifying principle’ », and should instead adhere to an idea of « subjectless subjectivity », of narrative bristling with perspectives not necessarily

occupied by any human subject\textsuperscript{10}. Du Pré’s «je» is undoubtedly a pungent figure in the dramatic foreground of his poem; his masculinist gaze is, for example, brought out forcibly in his frissons of appreciation when viewing women’s physical beauty:

Phryne jolye monstroit ses mamelettes
Ainsi que perles, dures et rondelettes (PND, v. 3112-13).

But this does not mean that we should necessarily use him to yoke together coherent meaning of the narrative, not least because our idea of coherence may itself risk anachronism. We risk confusing making sense of the poem’s tale telling with simplifying its complexity, resolving ambiguity and thereby imposing an order on the work that is not appropriate to its design: the intermeshed threads of direct and indirect discourse described above, and the varying modalities of reported speech it exhibits, demonstrate a wilful disorder. The text’s fabric is not confused through lack of careful composition; it is not, therefore, to be opposed to an idea of logical order. It has, instead, its own sense of order, of deliberately chaotic narrative structure.

So as to avoid according automatic preeminence to the «je» narrator, I shall focus less on the relationship between speakers in the text (that is, between the male narrator and female voices he hears), and more on the women themselves, to discuss the relationship between speaker and utterance, in the sense of the relationship between énonciateur, locuteur and énoncé\textsuperscript{11}. Within the poem, each woman speaker produces an utterance (énoncé), although this utterance may be inhabited by a number of speech sources (énonciateurs – male and/or female) – of which she is but one – with whom she may be in competition or conflict in order to assert her status as the principal speaking subject responsible for the utterance (locutrice), or even as the original voice behind the utterance (énonciatrice originelle). This approach should enable us to look more critically at what constitutes the speaking subject as a subjectivity, and to consider carefully where we locate «voice» in the chain of communication linking the source of an utterance with its speaker and the content of that utterance. One might, in fact, question from the outset whether the term «voice», with any resonance of orality, is at all applicable to the women of Du Pré’s Palais, since they are, essentially, written textual voices: they are well-known textual figures, many with a long literary lineage going back to the Bible, Virgil, Ovid, or Pliny. Their existence as voices cannot be tied to a situation of oral utterance, so when their supposed orality is pointed up by Du Pré’s narrator – as when he appreciates Cibelle’s rondeau: «moult bien parla la deesse honorable» (v. 4768), one cannot speak of a re-introduction of orality, since their voice does not stem back to an originary spoken word\textsuperscript{12}. In the case of Hortensia, cited above, her

\textsuperscript{10} A. C. Spearing, op. cit., p. 2, 30.
\textsuperscript{11} See S. Marnette, Speech and Thought Presentation in French, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2005, p. 31ff. As Marnette discusses, there is no unitary theory of the distinction between these elements of enunciation theory, especially when one addresses them in the context of fictional narratives.
\textsuperscript{12} However, one alternative light in which to view, in particular, the Palais’s fixed-form lyrics, would be that of «multimedia» royal entry theatres, in which, as C. J. Brown
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reported speech act (« pronoconçoit ») gestures backwards in time (« jadis »), but to what extent does this actually refer back to her 1st Century BC action (« une arengue / que fist ») and to what extent is it more a reference to the sources that tell retrospectively, and textually, of her act (« que les Rommains vantent avoir parlé »), notably Quintilian and Valerius Maximus13? More generally, in the paratextual presentation of the poem in its extant edition, there are competing cues towards viewing the text through oral or written lenses. In its prefatory material, we encounter, alongside the dialogue poems and prose dedication, a list of writers under the heading: « les noms des auteurs, desquelz les histoires du present livre ont esté pour la pluspart tirées » (PND, p. 96). Each speaker in the text that follows is thus introduced in the context of having been extracted from an authoritative textual source, and it is the stories themselves that are foregrounded – the content of the énoncés – and not their transmitters. On the contrary, within the poem, marginal labels flag up the name of the speaker and not the source of her speech, sometimes pointing specifically to her act of speaking as well: alongside Archidamia’s verbum dicendi (« en leur disant ») appears the tag « Oraison de Archidamie » (PND, p. 114, n. 4). Simon Gaunt has interrogated medievalists’ understanding of « oral textuality » and « written textuality », and the seductive, yet flawed, idea that « an oral, primary and originary language in which the speaker is totally present » precedes written language as a dilution of that primal language14. We could, therefore, argue that we see in the main body of the Palais a form of this nostalgia, from a late medieval writer’s perspective, for « parole pleine », albeit that the narrative construction of the text itself disrupts and complicates the relationship between oral and written.

We shall return later to the question of mode of discourse, but this initial discussion of voice in the Palais has started to open up certain elements of the énonciateur, locuteur, énoncé interaction. Looking again at the wording of the rubric heading the prefatory list of authors leads us into a key component of Spearing’s documents, visual, textual and oral performances were orchestrated simultaneously. In the Parisian entry of Mary Tudor (1514), for example, a rondeau in praise of the Queen of Sheba was displayed textually on an échafaud and its essence declaimed orally by an expositeur. Evidence of this performance is furnished by Pierre Gringore’s commemorative reconstruction of it in a manuscript book; Gringore thus features in his account of proceedings as the retrospective acteur, in a role not dissimilar to that of Du Pré’s narrator in relation to the oral and visual spectacle he records. See C. J. Brown, « From Stage to Page : Royal Entry Performances in Honor of Mary Tudor (1514) », Book and Text in France, 1400-1600 : Poetry on the Page, ed. by A. Armstrong and M. Quainton, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, p. 49-72, Pierre Gringore, Les Entrées royales à Paris de Marie d’Angleterre (1514) et de Claude France (1517), ed. by C. J. Brown, Geneva, Droz, 2005.

13 Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, I.1.6, Valerius Maximus, Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem, VIII.3.3. Both writers are named in the list of authorities prefacing the Palais.

counter-theory to «a narrator theory of narrative» in the Middle Ages: against the assumption «that a human consciousness comes first, and narrative comes afterwards», he proposes «narratorless narrative», a principle supported by, he says, «the medieval premise […] that stories simply exist in their own right» and do not have to be tied to a teller: in other words, narrative precedes consciousness. Such a premise seems to obtain for the compiler of the Palais’s headings, with the list of authors’ rubric identifying «les histoires du present livre»: the narratives rather than the narrators; however, as we have seen, there is no unitary insistence in the work as a whole on the latter. Spearing’s proposition works fine, so long as we are concentrating on the matter or message of the story, its knowledge content, and not on the manner of its communication, its shaping form (such as the «oraison d’Archidamie»). This latter distinction is especially pertinent to catalogue-of-women texts. On the one hand, it is true that narrative precedes consciousness for most of the women involved: their tale is not their own, in the sense that it originates outside each particular telling of it. In a given catalogue, the locutrice is harking back to anterior énonciateurs, male or female, who may or may not be at any point identified with a specific énonciateur or originary source voice. Their énoncé is what is narrated. We saw this linguistic interaction between speaking agents in the case of Hortensia, above. A literary way of putting it is that these women are essentially intertextual: they are constituted by a passage between texts which does not look back to a specific antecedent, but exists instead in a «multiple textual space», to use Kristeva’s terms. What are the implications for voice here? Could one say that voice is already excluded from the picture because there is no single énonciateur? Or might one choose instead to re-integrate the idea of voice as being something constituted by citation, by the manner in which the énoncé is re-uttered?

The tale in the women’s telling: narrating narratives

I mentioned above that the matter of these ladies’ tales precedes each subjective utterance; in catalogues of women, the role of the utterance is not, however, to communicate knowledge – its knowledge content is already known; it is as it were redundant as a vehicle of information about the lady. It is precisely because she is already known that she, the speaking subject, is able to be developed as a voice, that is, as a shaping agent. The locutrice is rarely a transparent conduit of her tale; more usually she is a strategic modeller of the énoncé itself, which marks her claiming responsibility for it. We are not operating in a true-false dichotomy here: when one’s life – like Dido’s or Medea’s, for instance – is constituted by tales (and conflicting tales at that), whilst the diegetic speaker, Dido herself, may advance truth claims, the extradiegetic audience is aware that the énoncé has no definitive referential content to be measured against such a claim. The tale may precede the teller, but the teller obtrudes in the telling, because of how the tale is shaped, which is, in such catalogues, the point of the tale. To illustrate this elaboration of Spearing’s theory outside Du Pré’s Palais, we may consider Bouchet’s Jugement...
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poetic de l’honneur femenin, commemorating the late Louise de Savoy, in which his narrator, Le Traverseur, transcribes the first-person epitaphs of over 120 women that he finds in an effigy-filled palace\textsuperscript{18}. He plays with the relationship between the knowledge content of a woman’s tale and its teller in the palace by according some of his deceased women knowledge of their posthumous fate. Lucretia (epitaph XLVIII) is aware that she has been avenged since her suicide: «Dont grand vengeance ont depuys prins Rommains»\textsuperscript{19}. Use of the passé composé and the supplementary cue of the temporal adverb point up her unnatural awareness. In the case of Faustina (LXVI), a woman of celebrated beauty but equally infamous debauchery:

Faustine suys d’Anthoine L’empereur
Dict le piteux, espouse bien cherie :
Belle sans per en mon temps, qui par heur
Sans grand merite euz d’Auguste l’honneur,
Et fuz façonde entre tous et serie.
Et puys affin que memoyre perie
De moy ne fust par mort au laps de temps
Comme il advient, et aussi par contemps,
En pieces d’or et d’argent fut pourtraict
Ma face au vif, dont gloyre je pretends,
Puys on me feit moy morte (ainsi qu’entendz)
Honneurs divins, comme des cieux extraict (JP, v. 2186-97).

She acknowledges through parenthetical comment how she has come to learn of her reputation after death; spotlighting of her current corporeal condition through repeated personal pronouns and alliteration («me [...] moy morte») stresses the paradoxical nature of her knowledge: when and how did she hear of it? Further manipulation is evidenced in cases where the fact of a woman knowing or not knowing something is part of the received narrative of knowledge about her. Tertia Emilia (LV), Scipio’s wife, knows of her husband’s adultery, but responds as if she did not:

\textsuperscript{18} Bouchet’s female speakers are thus more univocally written than oral: their epitaphs are inscribed in sculptures.

\textsuperscript{19} Jean Bouchet, Le Jugement poetic de l’honneur femenin, ed. by A. Armstrong, Paris, Champion, 2006, v. 1973. Subsequent references to JP will be incorporated in the text. Bouchet was a practising procureur in Poitiers as well as a prolific writer, traditionally seen as a late «grand rhétoriqueur» poet. His work has received increasing attention over the past decade; see, for example, Jean Bouchet: traverseur des voies périlleuses (1476-1557), actes du colloque de Poitiers (30-31 août 2001), ed. by J. Britnell and N. Dauvois, Paris, Champion, 2003. He is not normally included in discussions of the late medieval «querelle des femmes», perhaps in part because of the Jugement’s late date. He has, however, received some attention in this light from Adrian Armstrong, editor of the Jugement, and Cynthia J. Brown: A. Armstrong, «Les Femmes et la violence dans le Jugement poetic de l’honneur femenin (1538)», Jean Bouchet, p. 209-28, C. J. Brown, «Les Louanges d’Anne de Bretagne dans la poésie de Jean Bouchet et de ses contemporains: voix de deuil masculines et féminines», Jean Bouchet, p. 32-51.
[voyant] qu’il estoit de ma serve jolye
Trop amoureux, et que d’elle abusoit :
Je feiz semblant comme cil qui muse, oyt,
De rien n’y veoir pour saulver son bon fame (JP, v. 2057-60).

Her discretion places her in a position of authority, apparently at the time in life, and certainly narratively in death. Her comment that Scipio was deceiving the maid is set off against Emilia’s own awareness: she defines herself as the only person in this ménage who is not a victim of deception. Her apparent control over proceedings is translated rhetorically in the emphasis that her declaration of discretion (v. 2059) is accorded by the delay of the first-person subject – the subject of the principal verb – until this point, eight lines into her douzain epitaph. We might also discern possible homonymic play on the phrase « sauvor son bon fame », which could be construed also as « sauver [sa bonne femme] », since Emilia’s implementation of her knowledge through her act of discretion preserves both her husband’s and her own public reputation and maintains her own private dignity. The posthumous voice of her inscription speaks out after death to reveal the silence she maintained during her life20. The teller obtrudes in the telling.

In Du Pré’s Palais, Joan of Arc, the figure whom the male narrator recruits to be his guide around the courtyard, is the first character within the palace to speak in direct discourse and to assert herself as teller. In response to his accosting her, the wiliness of Joan’s subjectivity is immediately apparent in her reply, quoted more fully above: « Si me dist lors : ’Je veux qu’en tes escriptz’ ». Her opening words mark an emphatic imposition of her will as a speaking subject, focusing on how the tale is told. The insistent articulation of a first-person perspective casts this locutrice as a potential énonciatrice originelle, conveying a sense both of authority and of possession: it is her tale, and also centres on her role in it. Veturia, mother of Coriolanus, engages in similarly marked self-imposition to highlight her active role in the shaping of her story. She appears twice in the palace21: first in the chamber housing exceptionally old women, and then in the pavilion of Felicity in the garden. When the narrator encounters Veturia for the second time, she is not a contented subject:

Verturia par semblant là eagée,
Se reputoit quasi pour outragée,
Quant de son heur ne faisoye le recit ;
Si luy priay qu’elle mesme voulsist
Dire deux motz de la felicité
Qu’elle porta à Romme la cité (PND, v. 4850-55).

His opening remark at her physical appearance reminds the reader in which room she was first housed, and his report of her outrage implies her frustration at having

20 In this respect, Bouchet’s epitaph innovates upon Boccaccio’s portrayal of Aemilia in his De mulieribus claris: Bouchet’s first-person, ventriloquised voice creates an irony of silence / speaking out that is not present in Boccaccio’s third-person presentation of the discreet wife.
21 I return to this replication phenomenon below.
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been denied the opportunity hitherto to be represented for what she feels to be her principal claim to fame: not the mere state of being, namely her old age, but her deeds in saving Rome by interceding with her son on the city’s behalf. When the narrator offers her the chance to take up the reins herself, she does so with aplomb, in the manner of an exemplary orator:

Adone, la Dame getta la veue en terre
En contemplant, puis sans faire distans,
Dist ce dessoubz, oyans les assistens (PND, v. 4859-61).

She delivers her speech in the form of a rondeau, concluding:

Lors, les Romains, de voye bien hastive,
À moy dresserent leur requeste plaintive,
Me suppliant vouloir mon filz requerre;
Je l'appaisay faisant sa grace acquerre
Et oblier par mon oraison vive
Ingratitude (PND, v. 4871-76).

This urgent underscoring of first-person rhetorical presence suggests what I have termed elsewhere a «pressure point» in the women’s accounts of themselves – a point of resistance in response to, or anticipating a counter-voice. In the Palais, this potential counter-voice is that of the male narrator, their addressee, as was brought out in Joan of Arc’s opening line. Each woman knows that her voice, her self-representation, is going to be edited and reified through his transcription of her words; when given the opportunity to «say a few words», therefore, each woman wisely pushes herself into the foreground in her account. Mammea, mother of Alexander Severus, asserts herself in precisely this fashion in order to gain a hearing:

Mist en avant en louenge notable
Disant ainsi, affin qu’on l’entendist (PND, v. 5405-6).

Pressure also derives from contrary voices within a given figure’s reputation: by saying «je», therefore, she is pronouncing against – or at least in relation to – an «on» who is not her addressee, but a third-party agent in the construction of her story. Cross-reference to the first-person epitaphs in Bouchet’s Jugement poetique is instructive here, as regards Sappho:

D’un nouveau carme ay faict l’ordre et construit
Premierement, que de mon nom l’on nomme.
C’est vers saphique, et tant l’on me renomme
Qu’à mon honneur une statue on feit:
Mais à la fin l’amour de Phaon m’assomme (JP, v. 1941-45).

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Sappho is made to create a careful distinction between her own, personal agency (« ay ») and the agency external to herself (« on ») that constructs her reputation in response to her personal achievements. However, her wordplay on the stem « nom », through polyptoton and traductio, highlights the way one’s own name (« mon nom ») and one’s reputation (« renom ») become intertwined to the extent that the latter may come to constitute the former. This is, indeed, what Sappho presents to have been the case as regards her posthumous existence: as far as she is concerned, her sense of self was destroyed by the crushing blow (« assomme ») of unrequited love when rejected by Phaon. Sappho does not see her selfhood to have endured, whereas others have made her endure through her flourishing literary legacy. We recall also the posthumous fate of Faustina, to whom « on » accorded tribute after her death (« moy morte »), while the epitaph itself reveals the voice of « on » to have been far from univocal through her allusions both to how she was deemed an unworthy wife during her life (« sans grand merite ») and to how commemoration of her beauty through coinage was contested (« par contemps »).

The most potent instance of tension between « je » and « on » is undoubtedly the epitaph of Dido (XLIII), which opens: « Des vefves suys la doctrine et l’exemple » (JP, v. 1900). Focusing here on its opening line reintroduces into this shaping of voice the issue of oral and written textuality. The double-meaning of « suys », implying either that she sets the example or that she follows it, is a self-inscription in a received tradition of moralisation; she presents herself as an exemplum. I use the term « self-inscription » here advisedly: she is evoking a written textual tradition and also, within the fiction of the Jugement, has the status of a sculpted engraving through her epitaph form. The temporality of textuality, so to speak, locates her voice transhistorically: with an ancestry and an afterlife. Is all orality lost, then? Is there no sounding voice, actual or fictive? Other women’s self-representations suggest otherwise: returning to Sappho, the legacy she evokes is precisely that of having created a song, « carme », however much she then implies that her personal sense of self has divorced from the verse form that now bears her name; for her, the verse form that actually communicates this sense of self is not, therefore, the oral carme but the inscribed epitaph of the Jugement.

Back in Du Pré’s Palais, the question of orality is very pertinent to Vetruria’s claim to fame, the pinnacle of which was the persuasive force of her speech to Coriolanus which she labels her « oraison vive », as if promoting the vibrancy of her words as something still resonating, something not confined to the single present moment of utterance; she is also, of course, redeploying her rhetorical skill to secure the transmission of her voice by the narrator. The orality of voice, and the role of each character as active narrator of her tale — putative énonciatrice originelle, is also highlighted in the didaskales-like comments that Du Pré’s narrator appends to the women’s speeches, depicting not just what they say but how they say it:

Sempronia, aussi grecque et latine,
Motz descliquoit, menus comme farine.
Et Cibelles, tenant gestes honnestes,
Faisoit transler doucement ses sonnettes (PND, v. 1284-87).

23 For more detailed and complete discussion of Dido’s rhetorical self-presentation, see Swift, op. cit., p. 26-29.
The vibrancy of rhetorical persuasion is evoked in his evaluation of Archidamia’s performance before the Spartan court:

Archidamie, de vertueux couraige,  
L’espée traicte comme pour faire rage,  
Au parlement entroit des senateurs
[…]
Tant eust de grace et vertu susasive  
Son oraison que d’une force vive  

The women’s substance as speaking subjects, as embodied tellers and not just vehicles for tales, and as voices engaged in a communicaton situation is enhanced – one might even say created – by Du Pré’s focus on the circumstances of their speech act’s taking place.

Women’s status as tale tellers: spreading subjectivity

The women’s identities as narrators of their narratives, as shapers of their histories, seem well established by Du Pré, but are they, by the same token, subjects of their subjectivity? Do they stand as individual expressions of personality or, to quote Spearing, as elements in the rhetoric of storytelling?

The ‘I’ of most medieval narratives does not represent a speaking individual, real or fictional, but is merely one element in the rhetoric of storytelling.  

Whilst we have just seen how Du Pré may be seen to individualise certain speakers by detailing their mode of enunciation, one could equally say that he is emphasizing thereby the speech act rather than its locutor. That Du Pré in fact conceives of subjectivity as something that does not have a single subject-consciousness as its starting point can be deduced from the way he repeats women between rooms. This reduplication phenomenon seems especially to apply to female characters whose accrued narrative threads are multiple and diverse. Figures like Medusa and Minerva recur a number of times through the palace in its differently themed chambers – none is the authentic voice, but none is inauthentic either; none is true, none is false. There is a circulation of voice in operation. This spread subjectivity is pointed up by the narrator himself, when, somewhat perplexed, he bumps into Minerva for the fifth time, in the chamber of virgins:

Haulte deesse, je me suis mys en queste,  
Voire trop grande, affin d’avoir notice  
Du contenu en ce beau edifice:  
Mais tant plus cherche, plus me trouve confus,

24 Spearing, op. cit., p. 118.
25 One source for this multiplicity of Minervas (taking Minerva and Athena to be synonymous – see below, n. 26) is Cicero’s De natura deorum, III.23.59, where Cotta is refuting the argument that the gods exist in imagination and not in reality.
Mesmes de ce, que d‘aujourd‘huy ne fus
En nulle chambre où je n‘aye trouvée
Vostre personne de toutes gens louée. (PND, v. 1545-51).

His linear logic needs enlightening; Minerva responds:

Amy, dict elle, d‘aultant que je fus vierge
Tout mon vivant, je suis dicte consierge
Du present lieu, et par bonne raison (PND, v. 1552-54).

The narrator‘s methodological difficulty does not register as a problem with the goddess, who simply claims to have presided in the current chamber all her life, notwithstanding her equally magisterial presence when she welcomed him into the courtyard, nor her role as one of the trio of nymphs involved in the judgment of Paris in the chamber of beauty, nor her greeting of the narrator yet again in the room housing women of outstanding learning and invention as self-titled « dame de sapience » (v. 1148). Indeed, it is on this latter occasion that the conflation of Greek and Roman incarnations of the goddess is made explicit26, as the speaker identifies her name:

Quant à mon nom, Pallas suis appellée,
Tritonnia, Bellona et Minerve (PND, v. 1145-46)27.

Medusa’s circulation could be seen to create contradiction: Du Pré’s narrator inserts « la Gorgone, nommée Medusa » (v. 3137) without further commentary into the chamber of beautiful women despite having already described her « teste treshorrible » (v. 145) decorating the shield of Pallas in the courtyard of warrior women. In this same courtyard, however, Medusa also appears in person as well as in the form of an emblem, when the narrator delights in watching « […] le singulier combat / De Perseus et Dame Medusa » (v. 701-2). Thereafter, she features alongside her fellow gorgons « jouuans d‘espee » (v. 1093) with the Amazons in the room of women after whom parts of the world were named, and her final performance is in the chamber of ladies desired by Classical deities, where her duel with Perseus is apparently resolved since the narrator recounts the latter’s deed of « grant prouesse » in decapitating her, to the detriment of « Medusa / Tant venimeuse » (v. 3552-53), now punished by Minerva for sexual relations with Neptune in her temple. A single source can be ascribed to every aspect of her story mentioned in the Palais, namely the fourth book of Ovid’s Metamorphoses: her beauty as a maiden and her rape by Neptune before Minerva exacted vengeance by transforming her hair into serpents, and before the goddess then assisted Perseus in beheading her, hence her head’s new position affixed to Minerva’s shield as a weapon to turn her enemies to stone. However, the dividing up of her biography

27 For the other names accorded here, see PND, p. 155, n. 3-4.
across the work confuses its order, implying a flattening out of chronology, synchrony rather than diachrony, such that Medusa appears at once beautiful and ugly, both a token to help defend women against men – for such would seem to be her significance of Minerva’s shield in the context of the pro-feminine palace – and a woman whose attack by Perseus is commended rather than reproved. But interpretative problems with ontology and chronology only arise if one insists on an idea of narrative logic that respects a real-life sense of temporal order and a notion of coherence defined by consistency – both of which would assume a practice of continuous, linear reading that may not necessarily have obtained in the defence-of-women catalogue form.

However one construes this reduplication in respect of Medusa’s subjectivity – as spreading, fragmentation, or disruptive excess – what Du Pré’s use of multiple narrative instances precludes is judgment of her character; unlike in other catalogues, there is no moralising conclusion defining her as either positive or negative exemplum of femininity. Is the effect to increase the sense of her as an individual personality, who is thus not subordinated to a gloss as mere illustration of a general lesson as the moral of the tale, a status that would make her part of «the rhetoric of storytelling» understood as a persuasive tool? Or does it de-individualise her by dint of her plural appearances as different versions of a woman? Framing the question in this fashion, though, as either/or, would be to misinterpret the thrust of Spearing’s helpful proposition of «subjectless subjectivity». The phrase’s very formulation jams the machinery of conventional thinking about narrative voice: we should not ask «does it have a subject or lack a subject?»; we should rather consider how what we have is neither one nor the other. In the case of Medusa, we have versions that are themselves constitutive: they do not, and are not intended to add up to a whole; they are not versions «of her», as there is no originary «her». «She» is one example of the proliferating narratives I evoked at the opening of this essay, and, as we have seen from her example, the very nature of narrative requires qualification as a story that does not necessarily present itself as orderly, sequential, reasoned and consistent.

**Conclusion: who is telling the story?**

The principle of narrative order underpinning the *Palais* is not classifiable as one of coherence or incoherence in modern terms; it functions differently, in a way that can be enlightened by Spearing’s rejection of the narrator as unifying principle, but can also, in turn, elaborate our understanding of his reflection. The voices of the

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29 One might also consider the role played by tables of contents, chapter headings and marginal «indexing» labels in facilitating, or even promoting, a discontinuous, selective reading experience.

30 For example, Antoine Dufour’s *Vies des femmes célèbres* (1504) holds that Medusa deserves her abduction by Perseus and his stealing of her booty since it is her own avarice that first drew her to him when he landed on her island (ed. by G. Jeanneau, Geneva, Droz, 1970, p. 44).
palace’s women may be construed as subjectless subjectivities, but this does not deny them a status as agents laying claim to the stories they tell; they are not narratorless narratives. Their narratives (their énoncés) do precede their consciousnesses, but they are inflected by the subject position of locutrice, or even énonciatrice originelle, that many women wrest for themselves, at least within the fiction. A woman’s narrative does not exist independently from the voice that shapes it, a voice which often resists surrendering both its authority and its orality. So who is telling the story? I noted that Du Pré’s female speakers strive for the status of énonciatrice originelle, but this position will always elude them as «they» are fictionalised instances created by the overall teller, «l’auteur», Du Pré himself. That said, however, could we not also apply to him elements of Spearing’s challenge to narrator-centred reading: the narratives – the female biographies – he cites precede his own consciousness, and, one might also say, exceed it, in the sense that he is not presenting comprehensive or definitive renderings of their tales. His own existence as subject, in relation to his book, is not as an individual personality: as my discussion of paratextual items revealed, there is no unitary voice at the authorial level of organisation, in part, we may deduce, because coherence was not a compositional objective\(^{31}\), though also because there is, we believe, no single human consciousness behind the textual production and material compilation of the book; it was a plural enterprise\(^{32}\). Spearing’s challenges to received critical wisdom prompt us to think differently, to stretch both our thinking about and our formulation of the operations of narrative voice in medieval texts. In response, we may use texts such as the Palais to help develop these new channels of reflection – «exerciter [notre] dur entendement» (PND, v. 48), as Noblesse Feminine exhorts Du Pré’s narrator – since it is, in the final analysis, we as critics who are telling the story of narrative voice in late medieval literature.

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\(^{32}\) The multiple agencies involved in early printed book production are discussed, for example, by C. J. Brown, Poets, Patrons, and Printers : Crisis in Authority in Late Medieval France, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995.