

FICTION AND THE READING PUBLIC IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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THE relationship between the reader and the work of literature, in particular fiction, during the fifteenth century underwent a great change as in that century there took place the revolution in the diffusion of literature which was to have such a profound effect, not only upon the reading habits of the literate public, but also upon writers themselves. The invention of printing was a technical advance in the production of books which made literature available to a much wider public than that which had previously had access to literature in manuscript books. This more numerous reading public, though not yet a mass audience, was far larger than anything which had been experienced before.

The invention of printing had as one immediate effect a great increase in the number of books in existence, but this is not to say that books had hitherto been extremely scarce. It is true that the making of manuscript copies was a slow, and therefore a relatively costly process; thus only comparatively wealthy persons could afford to acquire collections of any size. In the case of literary texts, the method most commonly used was for a scribe, using one text as his model, to make another copy of it. The end of such painstaking toil was occasionally marked by an expression of relief such as *Deo Gratias* or even *detur pro poena scriptori pulchra puella*.¹ This procedure of copying had the drawback that throughout the time the copy was being made neither the copy nor the source was available to other readers. In the case of books in great demand, by students in university towns for instance, it was a common practice for booksellers to divide a master copy of a text into several sections. Each of

¹ A. Lecoy de la Marche, *Les Manuscrits et la Miniature*, Paris (1884), p. 103.

these material divisions was of eight or twelve leaves. These "pieces" of book were hired out, at prescribed charges, to students who read them and, if poor, made their own copies, or, if rich, paid professional scribes to do this work for them. There have survived many manuscript books, well over one thousand, which were made in this way. In the margins notes such as *pecia decima*, indicating the ends of the different sections or "pecia" are still clearly visible. What is very striking is that all such manuscripts are university texts such as works of law, theology and medicine. This technique of manufacturing books was widespread during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a period of great expansion of the universities. No examples are to be found of a date earlier than the thirteenth century, and there are but few fifteenth-century *pecia* manuscripts.¹ What is of great importance from our present point of view is that none whatsoever are literary manuscripts in French: none contain medieval French romances, *chansons de geste*, poems and plays.

The vast majority of such literary manuscripts, and particularly those made in the fifteenth century, were produced for readers of a quite different kind. Instead of being made for the university student or scholar, literary manuscripts were made directly at the request of wealthy, often noble, patrons who clearly wished to build up collections of beautifully written and illustrated copies of what were doubtless currently popular works. Some booksellers were sufficiently astute, or of sufficient financial strength, to take the risk of having costly manuscripts made, in order to be able to sell them to noble customers who would, in this way, avoid the delay which was inevitable if a work was specially copied for them. Such a bookseller was Regnaut du Montet, who sold various books to Jean de France, duc de Berry, including, in January 1402 (n.s.) a copy, a sumptuous copy, of the arthurian romances, *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, *L'Estoire de Merlin*, *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and *La Mort le Roi Artu*, for which he charged the sum of 300 *escus d'or*.² This

¹ Jean Destrez, *La Pecia dans les manuscrits universitaires au XIIIème et au XIVème siècle*, Paris (Vautrain), 1935.

² L. Delisle, *Le Cabinet des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, iii. (Paris, 1881), 192.

volume is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale (MSS. B.N. fr. 117-20). This same bookseller also sold a copy of the prose romance of *Tristan* (which has not been identified with any extant copy) to Richard Courtenay, twice chancellor of the University of Oxford, Bishop of Norwich, and, from the year 1414 onwards, ambassador to France. As a result of this transaction, Regnaut du Montet was accused of relations with the English enemy, and had to admit that :

. . . bien est vray que par son moyen ont esté vendus au dict evesque trois livres ou rommans, l'un nommé *Tristan*, appartenant a Jehan Souris, escuier, demourant en l'ostel de la Monnoye, le pris de cent cinquante et un escu. . . .

(Archives Nationales, LL. 85, fol 10^r).

The price is a curious one, and does this action suggest that in the fifteenth century some attempt was made to control the sale of books to foreigners? Whatever may be the case, it is most interesting to notice that single copies of literary works attracted such prices and such attention on the part of eminent personages.

To examine the books formerly preserved in the libraries of one or two wealthy patrons of literature throws some light on their literary tastes and interests. A famous book collection was that of the Kings of France. It was housed in La Tour du Louvre and was frequently pillaged during the Hundred Years' War. These collections were, for the most part, brought together before the fifteenth century, and it is instructive to observe that according to the inventories drawn up in 1424 the French Royal Library, consisting principally of the books belonging to Charles V, comprised 1239 manuscripts. Of these, rather less than 200 (198 in fact), are literary works in the French language : mainly romances of chivalry, and epics, but including some thirteen volumes of lyric poetry. The rest of the library consisted of texts in Latin, Bibles, psalters, service books, lives of saints, patrology, theology, scientific works, medicine, military arts and history.¹ This collection is clearly a working library rather than the private library of a cultured monarch whose principal tastes are literary.

¹ Delisle, *Le Cabinet des Manuscrits*, iii. 115-70 : the collection comprised 113 Bibles, 5 Liturgies, 43 breviaries and hymnals, 51 Missals and Gospel Books, 21 books of ceremonial, 57 books of hours, 32 volumes of writings of Church fathers, 22 volumes of theology and sermons, 37 minor devotional works, 57 law

The contents of the library of another famous bibliophile, Jean de France, duc de Berry, are also known to us, from an inventory drawn up after the duke's death in 1416. He possessed some 297 volumes of which fifty are literary texts.¹ Presumably he read the books, for in 1378 he purchased from a certain Jean Syme

palettes d'ivoire et de bois pour tenir chandelle a lire romanz. . . .

(Koechlin, *Les Ivoires Gothiques Françaises*, i (Paris, Picard, 1924), 13).

The last item in the inventory : no. 297 : Un livre contrefait d'une piece de bois peinte en semblance d'un livre ou il n'a fueillés ne riens escript, lequel livre Pol de Limbourg et ses deux freres donnerent a mon dit seigneur aux estraines 1411 (n.s.). (£2 10s.) throws an interesting sidelight on the relations between the duke and his artists : the brothers de Limbourg were responsible for the breathtaking illumination of the superb *Très Riches Heures*.²

That royal owners of books did take volumes from their libraries, perhaps to be able to read them more comfortably and conveniently in private, is suggested by notes in the various inventories, e.g.:

un roman d'Arthur : le roi l'a pris devers soi : le roi l'a fait bailler a la roine, le 20 avril 1404

(Delisle, *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V* (Paris, Champion, 1907), no. 1081),

or

Escanor de la Montaigne : donné par le roi a la roine, le 19 aoust 1390

(Delisle, *Recherches*, no. 1106),

or even more interesting :

Les gestes du roi Peppin et de sa femme Berthe au grant pié : a la roine, le 29 aoust 1390, le roi les lui a ostés et donnés a monseigneur de Coucy.

(Delisle, *Recherches*, no. 1160).

books, 39 encyclopedias and scientific works, 64 philosophical texts, 16 mathematics books, 80 books on astronomy, 136 books on astrology and the occult sciences, 23 natural history, 58 medicine, 3 agriculture, 11 military arts, 4 books on games, 171 historical texts. The high proportion of books on astrology and the occult sciences is revealing.

¹ Delisle, *Le Cabinet des Manuscrits*, iii. 171 ff. 39 Bibles, psalters, gospels, 24 breviaries, 20 Missals, 10 other service books, 15 books of hours, 3 prayer books, 20 volumes of patrology, 11 law, 64 science and philosophy.

² For a reproduction of the illustrations in colour see *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry* (Paris, Verve, 1945).

Other works were lent to borrowers more remotely linked with the French royal family, e.g. :

Le roman de la Rose, envoyé par le roi au conte de Salisbury, par l'archevesque de Rouen,

(Delisle, *Recherches*, no. 1183),

or

Des faits de Troye, le roi le print quant il ala au Mont Saint Michel en 1393.

(Delisle, *Recherches*, no. 1211).

It seems from entries of this kind that the royal library was not a private and jealously guarded collection : it was not, however, by any means a public library, but at least the books were lent to readers, some of whom were outside the immediate royal circle.

In his youth, the last of the great dukes of Burgundy, Charles the Bold (1433-77), was an enthusiastic reader of romances of chivalry :

s'appliquoit a lire et faire lire devant luy, du commencement, en joyeux comptes et és faictz de Lancelot et de Gauvain, et retenoit ce qu'il avoit ouy mieulx qu'aulture de son eage.

(Olivier de la Marche, *Mémoires*, publiés par Henri Beaune et J. O'Arbaumont, Paris, 1884, *Société de l'Histoire de France*, ii. 217.)

The libraries of the dukes of Burgundy were famous and attracted scholars and artists to Dijon. But the collection which Jean de France, duc de Berry, kept in his castle at Mehun sur Yèvre, a small town some twenty miles north of Bourges, was the carefully guarded property of a man who kept the books for himself in what was virtually a tiny court, though a cultural centre of some importance. In fact, such collections kept in more or less isolated centres were not unusual in the fifteenth century. By the side of splendid courts of the dukes of Burgundy, in Dijon, where the copying of literary manuscripts was encouraged, and to which famous artists and writers were attracted, there existed smaller local courts and cultural centres in different parts of France.

The literary fame of the court which Charles d'Orleans held at Blois, and to which poets, among them François Villon, were welcomed, was well known. Charles' library comprised a nucleus of some ninety-one books in 1417, and before his death it had been augmented by the many volumes which he bought, borrowed, or had copied, even during his long captivity in England.

It is natural that this duke, himself a poet of no mean order, should interest himself in reading romances, epics, and of course lyric poetry.

Less well known, and perhaps even more revealing, are the reading habits, or at any rate the book collecting habits of another noble bibliophile of the fifteenth century : Jacques d'Armagnac, duc de Nemours. He had inherited some books from his ancestor, Jean de France, duc de Berry, as well as from his maternal grandfather, Jacques de Bourbon. In addition he was careful to add to these collections. Some books he purchased, some he had copied, other inherited volumes were modernized by a repainting of the miniatures (MS. B.N. fr. 117-20, the arthurian prose cycle which he had inherited from the duc de Berry, see above, pp. 424-25). It would seem that he had a well defined policy for the building up of his collections. No inventory or catalogue of his books has survived, and all the information which we have is gleaned from the extant manuscripts which can be identified as coming from his libraries. Many of his books may be recognized as they bear his signature and note of possession, e.g. :

En ce present livre du Roumant de la Rose a cent et LXXIX fueilletz, histoires XXI. Ce present volume du Roumant de la Rose est au conte de la Marche, Jaques, pour Carlat.

(MS. B.N. fr. 1559).

Occasionally he emphasizes his worldly titles, e.g. :

Jaques duc de Nemours, conte de la Marche, de Pardiac, de Castres et de Beaufort, vicomte de Carlat, de Murat et de Saint Florentin, Seigneur de Leuse, de Condé, de Montagu, roi de Secille et Per de France.

(MS. B.N. fr. 99, Romance of *Tristan* in prose).

He had two libraries, one in his castle at Carlat, the other at Castres. He made a point of having copies of what were doubtless his preferred books in each of these two libraries. He bought, or had made, duplicate copies of books so as to be able to achieve this. He had two or more copies of romances of chivalry, in particular, one for the castle at Carlat, the other for the castle at Castres. As well as the *Lancelot* inherited from the duc de Berry (MSS. B.N. fr. 117-20), he acquired a second copy (MS. B.N. fr. 113-16), and then a third (MS. B.N. fr. 112), which was made for him. He had three copies of the prose

Tristan (MS. B.N. fr. 99, MS. B.N. nouv. acq. fr. 6579 and MS. 2542 of the National Library of Vienna), and a fourth was probably commissioned by him, but he was beheaded before the manuscript was completed. This copy subsequently passed into the possession of one of his accusers (Jehan du Mas, whose coat of arms appears on MS. Chantilly Musée Condé 315-17). He had an old copy of *Guiron le Courtois* (Paris, Bibl. de l' Arsenal, MS. 3325) and a new copy (MS. Turin, L. I. 7-8-9).¹

His case is interesting for the light it throws on the reading of a great seigneur. Jacques d'Armagnac, an astute and politically ambitious man, clearly considered the stocking of the libraries at Castres and Carlat to be an indispensable aspect of the furnishing of these strongholds. He seems to have taken a personal interest in the matter. Not only did he commission famous artists such as Jehan Fouquet, who illuminated some of his books, or less well known copyists such as Micheau Gonnot, who copied texts of different kinds for him, romances of chivalry on the one hand and works of devotion on the other, but also Jacques de Nemours was careful to have recorded at the end of each of his books, the contents, numbers of leaves and miniatures. He then added his own signature and titles beneath these bibliographical details. During the life-time of the owner, such books would be accessible to very few readers indeed, being kept, as they were, in comparatively isolated strongholds.

It seems, therefore, that the link between the manuscript book and its owner, between the work of fiction and its readers, was a very personal one indeed. Wealthy and powerful patrons alone could afford to collect and purchase works of literature which in the form of illuminated manuscripts remained accessible only to a privileged minority of readers. Such patrons of literature did lend their books, but to a very limited number of people of their own rank and often of their own households. In no sense could it be said that fiction, as preserved in the fifteenth-century manuscripts, reached a wide public, nor was it in the true sense of the word, popular. Writers of prologues may well declare that the

¹ For a more complete account of this collection see C. E. Pickford, *L'Evolution du roman arthurien en prose vers la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, Nizet, 1960), pp. 272-84.

books they introduced to the reader were destined for young noblemen and ladies, e.g. "une oeuvre belle et delictable a oïr, especialement aux jeunes chevaliers et escuiers, voire aux jeunes dames et damoiselles" (MS. B.N. fr. 112, vol. ii, fol. 1a), but such books were all too often jealously guarded possessions, available only to a mere handful of readers.

This situation changed, if not overnight, at least within a generation. The application of the invention of printing to the diffusion of literary texts in the vernacular introduced a much more numerous public to this literature. The extent of the change in reading habits can be more clearly appreciated if certain facts and figures are borne in mind. Hitherto fiction and literary texts have been considered in terms of single manuscript copies, or at most a mere handful of such copies. The mechanical reproduction of books means that copies of books and readers have to be thought of not in ones and twos, but in hundreds.

It is difficult to estimate the size of early editions of books. A much needed text such as the commentary of Donatus on Terence was printed in editions numbering some three hundred copies each:¹ legal textbooks enjoyed editions of up to 1,000 copies, and in 1478, 930 copies of the Latin Bible were printed at Frankfurt by Leonard Wild. Such vast increases in the size of editions could produce a surplus of books, making sales difficult, and causing financial embarrassment to the printer. As far as literary texts are concerned, clear contemporary evidence about the size of early editions has not apparently survived, but it would seem reasonable to argue that usually editions consisted of some 300 copies. To sell such a number at a relatively modest price would enable the printer to recoup his costs, and would not saturate the market.

From the time when Gutenberg produced the first printed book of any size, the famous forty-two line Bible, the printing of which was completed before August 24, 1456, and the end of the fifteenth century, many thousands of different books were printed in Europe: some 35,000 different editions of works have survived. The proportion of incunabula—or fifteenth-century printed books—which are of a literary kind, has been estimated at about

¹ Lucien Febvre et H. J. Martin, *L'Apparition du Livre* (Paris, 1957), p. 328.

30 per cent.¹ The majority of texts were of a religious kind (45 per cent): furthermore the great majority of all books printed before 1500 are in Latin (some 77 per cent of the total). Rather less than 5 per cent of the total output was in the French language.

It is not difficult to explain this preponderance of Latin texts and religious books: printing from the start was a costly affair, requiring a vast outlay of money which could only be recovered from a rapid sale of the books. Bibles, service books, university texts, legal works, etc., were assured of a ready sale and were known by the first printers to be in great demand. A preoccupation with financial security is not to be misconstrued as greed, for the early history of the invention, and of Gutenberg in particular, is one of loans, law suits and financial disaster. Success was quite exceptional: the majority of fifteenth-century printers in fact failed in their business. Thus, although the percentage of French literary texts must at first sight seem a tiny one, none the less, such printed texts have an incalculable importance. Before a printer could embark on the venture of issuing a book, he had to be sure that the work was popular enough to sell in sufficient numbers in a short space of time. In the case of a literary text the printer took a not inconsiderable risk, even though it was known which works the noble patrons appreciated. Therefore the printers turned to them for support. One way of guaranteeing some immediate income from an edition was to print a sumptuous copy on vellum. This copy, a sort of *édition de luxe*, was then presented to a wealthy and powerful patron. This practice was adopted by the famous Parisian publisher, Antoine Vérard, who offered copies of his books to royal and other wealthy patrons. A vellum copy of his edition of the *Lancelot* published in 1494 was offered to Charles VIII of France, a vellum copy of his edition of the *Tristan*, published in 1494 also, was

¹ Our figures are taken from L. Febvre and H. J. Martin, *op. cit.* p. 396. A different estimate is given by Curt F. Bühler, *The Fifteenth-Century Book* (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 56, and 144, n. 119. He suggests some 40,000 editions and a production of about 6 million copies. Bühler indicates that his estimate is not excessively high by referring to a suggestion made by Ernst Consentius ("Die Typen und der Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke; eine Kritik", *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1932, pp. 82-87) that another 10,000 editions were produced which have been totally lost.

presented to Henry VII of England. That such gestures were not made without expectation of some financial gain is appreciated when we observe that another vellum copy of Vérard's 1494 edition of the *Tristan* (B.N. Vélins, 623), which belonged to Charles, duc d'Angoulême, is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, together with the bill which Vérard submitted! ¹

Although Vérard began by making his editions of French texts resemble in many ways the manuscripts of the fifteenth century by printing copies on vellum and decorating them with miniatures painted over the woodcut illustrations he, like all other early printers and publishers, began to make books which were more suitable for the majority of buyers and readers. The printed texts, the incunabula, are much more compact, much lighter in weight, and much more easy to handle than the manuscripts which they were beginning to replace. Furthermore, the printers and publishers, included, usually in the form of a colophon at the end of the book, information concerning the date of printing, and the place of printing, as well as valuable details concerning the place or places where the book could be bought. E.g. : The *editio princeps* of the prose *Tristan* concludes :

imprimé a Rouen en l'ostel de Jehan le Bourgoys pour Anthoine Vérard libraire demourant a Paris sur le pont Notre Dame a l'enseigne de Saint Jehan l'evangeliste et au palais ou premier pilers. (B.N. Rés. Y² 57-58).

Vérard had to move his establishment when the Pont Notre Dame was swept away by the Seine. In a later publication, the edition of the romance of *Merlin*, the colophon indicates Vérard's new address :

Cy finissent les prophecies Merlin nouvellement imprimé a Paris l'an mil iiij CCCC iiij^{xx} xviiij pour Anthoine Verart demourant devant Notre Dame de Paris a l'Ymage Saint Jehan l'evangeliste ou au palays au premier pillier devant la chappelle ou l'en chante la messe de messeigneurs de parlement. (B.N. Rés. Y² 27.)

Colophons do more than give the address of the publisher, they may even be said to represent a form of advertising, as may be clearly seen from the edition of the romance of *Perceforest* which ends thus :

avec privilege du roy nostre sire, ¶ On les vend a Paris pres le Palais a l'enseigne de la Gallee, et au premier pillier de la grant salle dudit Palais en la boutique de

¹ M.S. B.N. fr. 8815, fol. 27 v.

Galliot du Pré, libraire juré de l'université. Mil cinq cens xxviii. (B.N. Rés. Y² 33.)

Galliot du Pré no doubt purposely chose a punning sign. This flourishing publisher did not hesitate to move his shop as he felt necessary. On 16 March, 1515, he leased the house numbered 32 on the Pont Notre Dame. In 1520 he moved his stall to the third pillar of the Palais. On 27 September 1522, he moved to the rue des Marmouzets, and transferred his stall to the first pillar of the Palais, which seems to have been a position coveted by the booksellers.¹

The booksellers and publishers clearly wished to extend their activities beyond the limits of the wealthy and powerful patron. They offered their books for sale in the centre of the city, to passers by, especially in the *palais*, which was to remain a centre of the book trade for many years to follow. An actual advertisement of the English printer, William Caxton, has survived. A copy is preserved in the John Rylands Library.² It is not unimportant to notice that Caxton stresses that the works he is selling are modest in price—" he (i.e. the buyer) shall have them good chepe ". Moreover, the very fact that he printed such an advertisement implies the existence of a public which was sufficiently literate to read a poster. No similar document seems to have been preserved in France. Such booksellers lists as do exist do not unfortunately give much more information than a brief mention of the titles of works offered for sale, without indication of price, and even without real indication of the contents of the books. The phrase " et plusieurs aultres petits traictiés " is used on occasion to describe works the booksellers did not trouble to name.³ The early editions of popular French texts are small and compact, and no doubt economically produced books: examples of book production of this kind are the early editions of the poems of François Villon, or the *Farce of Maistre Pierre Pathelin*.

¹ Philippe Renouard, *Imprimeurs parisiens, libraires. . . depuis l'introduction de l'imprimerie à Paris (1470) jusqu' à la fin du XVI^{ème} siècle* (Paris, Claudin, 1898), p. 114.

² *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xliv, no. 2 (1962), 265 and frontispiece.

³ Achille Chereau, *Catalogue d'un marchand libraire du XV^{ème} siècle tenant boutique à Tours* (Paris, Académie des bibliophiles, 1868).

Certain publishers specialized in French literary texts : Pierre Levet, for instance, published the poems of François Villon in 1489 (B.N. Rés. Y° 245) and the *Farce of Maistre Pierre Pathelin* probably in the same year. In Paris Antoine Vérard, and later Michel le Noir and Philippe le Noir as well as Jean Trepperel and his widow, Galliot du Pré, Jehan Petit, and Jean Bonfons, to name but a few, published many romances of chivalry. To men such as these must be accorded the merit of making many French texts available not to single readers in isolated castles, but to hundreds of readers in the towns and cities of France.

Vérard had agents throughout France—the bookseller in Tours whose list has survived may well have been one of them. Many of the titles of the *Livres François en Impression* were issued by Vérard.¹ It is interesting to notice how rapidly works were reprinted : proving that the demand for such texts was far greater than might be suspected from any study of the ownership of manuscripts. Before the fifteenth century had come to an end, the romance of *Lancelot* had been published three times by Vérard in Paris (1488, 1494, 1494–1503). The same publisher had issued the romance of *Merlin* twice (1498, and an undated edition shortly afterwards). The prose romance of *Tristan* had enjoyed four editions, the last three by Vérard (1489, at Rouen, 1494, before 1499, and 1499). Two editions of the *Petit Artus de Bretagne* were published in Lyons, one in 1493, the other in 1496. All these are arthurian romances. Early editions of the *Chansons de geste* in fifteenth-century prose versions are even more numerous. The romance of *Baudouin de Flandre* was printed in 1478 and reprinted in 1484, 1485, 1491, and 1498. Vérard published a version of *Ogier le Danois* in 1498. At least four editions of the romance of *Cleomades* were published before 1500. Three fifteenth-century editions of the story of *Paris et Vienne* are known to have been published. Up to twelve editions of the romance of *Pierre de Provence et la Belle Maguelonne* have been recorded before the year 1500. Printed editions of the story of the *Quatre fils Aymon* and *Renaud de Montauban* were very popular : seven at least are known to have appeared in the fifteenth century. The romance of the Norman duke known as *Robert le Diable* was first

printed in 1496. It was so popular that it was reprinted twice in 1497 for two different publishers, Nicole de la Barre and Jehan Trepperel. Six different printed editions of *Les Sept Sages de Rome* appeared between 1490 and 1498. Of the *Recueil des Troyennes Histoires* by Raoul le Fèvre, no less than six editions appeared during the fifteenth century after the *editio princeps* had been given by William Caxton and Colard Mansion. Publishing of such works did not, of course, cease at the end of the Middle Ages, but continued to flourish throughout the sixteenth century.¹ This list of titles and editions represents in fact a very large number of such books which were offered for sale in the fifteenth century. But this list does not give by any means a full picture—it is a selection of surviving titles. Moreover in some instances only one copy of an edition survives. How many more must remain unknown to us, as not even one copy has been spared.

Books offered for sale in large numbers to the general, literate public, were in fact bought in large numbers, usually in the cities, but also at trade fairs. We have already noted how, in Paris, the Palais was to become a centre not for the sale of law books only, but also for literary texts of a type we should now call fiction. The reading public was no longer exclusive and mainly aristocratic: it continued to be aristocratic, but also it was, in a very large measure, composed of educated townspeople, bourgeois and included not only men, but also, to an increasing extent, women.

There was built up with surprising rapidity a reading public, large in number, which had a taste for romances of chivalry, modernized versions and prose versions of the old *chansons de geste*, chronicles, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, lyric poetry. The greatest demand for editions of French books, was for such works, without forgetting the *Roman de la Rose*, which was reprinted no less than eight times during the fifteenth century. That the publishers were sometimes requested by the reading public to launch editions of certain works is seen not only from

¹ For a more complete list of early printed editions of Old French romances see, B. Woledge, *Bibliographie des romans et nouvelles en prose française antérieurs à 1500* (Lille, Giard) and (Geneva, Droz, 1954) (*Société de Publications romanes et françaises*, no. xlii).

the frequent reprinting of certain favourite texts, but also, in England at least, from observations which the publishers themselves made. William Caxton, in the preface of his edition of Malory, points out that he has undertaken the printing of the *Morte d'Arthur* at the suggestion of "many noble and dyvers gentylnen of thys royame of Englonde" who "demanded" him "many and oftymes" to publish this work.¹ In France the publishers are not so explicit: Vérard, in the prologues to his editions of romances of chivalry, repeats the statements that the works he publishes have a didactic value especially for a noble or aristocratic reader, e.g. :

pur exciter et esmouvoir les cueurs des nobles a glorieusement et vertueusement vivre et soy conformer aux meurs des excellens et triumphaulx chevaliers qui es anciens jours ont tant milité et reflory en vertu de chevalerie, qu'ilz en ont acquis et desservé le nom de memoré perpétuelle.

Such a sentence could be taken from almost any of Vérard's prologues to editions of chronicles or of romances of chivalry: it comes in fact from the *Tristan*.² Was the aim of such a prologue to persuade a reader who was not of noble birth that he was in fact enjoying and benefiting from the reading of works of literature which had hitherto been restricted to more privileged classes? Though the phrasing may have had some such commercial slant and this of course must remain but a hypothesis, it does seem most likely that the number of copies of printed romances of chivalry available for sale was greater, far greater, than the number of potential aristocratic readers and purchasers.

It is at this point that we must attempt to interpret some of the facts of book production and readers which have been mentioned. If we are to consider fifteenth-century fiction simply in terms of percentages of books published, then it would seem that the importance of imaginative literature in the printing trade at least, was but slight. Less than 5 per cent of all extant incunabula are in the French language, and only some 30 per cent of all known incunabula are works of literature. Such statistics can be, however, quite misleading. What is important is not the

¹ Malory, *Works*, ed. E. Vinaver, I, p. cxj, lines 4-6.

² *Tristan*, pub. A. Vérard (Paris, 1499), B. N. Vélins, 623, Rés. Y² 59, sig. aj recto, col. i.

proportion of the production of early printing presses which was French fiction, but the place of fiction in fifteenth-century French society. The desire to read romances and other literary works as opposed to the need to use and consult text books and works of reference, spreads far beyond a small circle of cultured and wealthy patrons of literature. The publication and dissemination of fiction became highly organized, and it is concentrated in centres of learning and trade. It is significant that the book trade in Paris, at least the sale of fiction, flourished in the Palais, a place much frequented by nobles and bourgeois. Literary works could henceforth be discussed and criticized as well as read: authors and publishers alike had to consider the interests and tastes of a much vaster reading public. This may from some points of view be considered a serious limitation upon the freedom of the author. However writers did cease to become dependent solely on a very restricted circle of patrons. As the reading public grew, so to some extent did the writer's freedom also become greater. In some ways the fifteenth century may be thought of as an age of disorder and ferment, but it is one which saw the firm establishing of fiction as a viable literary genre. To read fiction was no longer the privilege of a wealthy few, it had become the truly popular literary genre it is today. Less than a hundred years after the invention of printing, Rabelais could say of the *Chronicque Gargantaine* :

il en a esté plus vendu par les imprimeurs en deux moys qu'il ne sera acheté de Bibles en neuf ans.¹

His claim may be grossly exaggerated, but it does reflect the new, growing and continuing importance of prose fiction as a literary genre which was enjoyed by a large number of readers.

The technical revolution in the diffusion of literature was to have an ever increasing influence and effect upon fiction. Less wealthy printers in the provinces continued to issue cheap editions of already popular works such as romances of chivalry. Fictional literature was enjoyed not only by the cultivated public of the towns, but also by a very wide cross-section of the population throughout France. The challenges and opportunities offered to

¹ Fr. Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, "Prologue de l'Auteur", éd. J. Plattard (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1946), p. 5.

writers, printers, publishers and readers during the fifteenth century are perhaps most appropriately and most keenly appreciated by our own generation. We are only too well aware of the immensity of the problems posed by the mass production of books to say nothing of the revolution in the diffusion of literature brought about by the new media of the cinema, radio and television.¹ We experience the same need to adjust our attitudes towards the new techniques of diffusion as was experienced by the men of the fifteenth century when they were confronted by the first printed books.

¹ See R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, 1957.