

1228 : To Presume to Make New

The monk would never sign his name. They would never know, the next hand and the next that would copy out this book, what he had done. What he had changed. It wasn't to be a very special book, the book for the comtesse. She had given land to the abbey and the monks prayed for her soul. She had asked for a story and the monk would write it. When the abbot sent him to the librarian to find a suitable text, he had known what would happen. He would select an old tale and copy it, perhaps improving the rhyme here and there, or adding a nice turn of phrase. This was a good task, useful and enjoyable and appropriate work for God's servant. He had not expected the librarian's chest to disappoint. Not all the books in the chest were old, but the stories were, copied again and again by hands like his own. Roland and Olivier, Guillaume d'Orange, Alexander, Arthur. Could he make them better than they were? Would his only contribution be in the choice? He had asked brother Gregorius to put the books away, telling him he would pray for guidance. When the abbot asked him had he started on the story yet, he said yes, he had. And realised that this was not a lie. There was a story he was thinking of, a story he had not read in an old book, a story no one had read yet, but which was in his mind. Out of nowhere, names and places and adventures filled his head. A new story. A new world that was suddenly inside and alongside the familiar one of the cloister. Yes, he had told the abbot, yes he was working on the text, see, the parchment had been prepared, and he knew exactly which story he would transcribe for the comtesse. But the parchment had remained blank for a few days more. Would he dare? To create something new, that was hubris. Creation was God's prerogative. He knew it was wrong. But as he said his confession, recounting the minor omissions and infringements of his circumscribed life, he did not mention this new sin. To presume to make new... He could do nothing else. The images had blossomed in his mind like vines, creeping and growing, yielding rich fruit. He harvested the words and savoured them, repeating the sentences silently while he should have been saying the divine offices, until their cadences were as familiar to him as the Lord's Prayer. Only when they were perfect would he write them down, on the lines faintly pricked in the parchment, leaving spaces where brother Benedict would draw the initials. No scrapings, no awkward insertions would sully his page. And when the abbot presented his tale to the comtesse, together with the romance brother Gregorius had copied, and the learned treatise of the Parisian scholar that would be bound with them, who would know? The comtesse and her daughters would be pleased with their stories. They would have the story read at this court, and trouvères would retell it at the next, and the next. The book would be copied, divided, inherited or sold, to end up in another librarian's chest of old books worthy of retelling. The monk would never be known as its author. He would leave no other mark on his parchment than that of his tidy hand, and the tiny picture of the clerk at his writing desk that brother Benedict would see fit to include. Others would transcribe his story, translate it, amend it, print it, embellish it and ruin it. Others would continue from his unresolved end. They would change his new world, study it, endorse it or reject it. They might not care who he was, or they might assign him a name. They would hunt for antecedents and origins and find none. They would praise him for being inventive and revile him for shunning tradition. They would argue – endlessly – about what he meant, and what he thought he meant. They would forget his story and always rediscover it. They who lived in worlds that exceeded the bounds of even his imagination would continue to presume to make new. The monk would continue to find words and make stories, filling the silence of the cloister with a thousand voices of parchment and ink.