

Deflection/Reflection
In the Lyric Poetry Of
Charles d'Orléans
Rouben Charles Cholakian



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Scripta humanistica

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A Psychosemiotic Reading

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Publisher and Distributor:
SCRIPTA HUMANISTICA
1383 Kersey Lane
Potomac, Maryland 20854 U.S.A.

The first chapter of this study appeared in modified form in
Fifteenth Century Studies vol 6 (1983).

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-051949
International Standard Book Number 0-9163-79-21-3

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

Ambiguities

Et je, Charles, duc d'Orlians, rimer
Voulu ces vers
(Complainte I, 82–83)

It has been a critical commonplace to cite the name of François Villon as the single most important fifteenth century poet to contribute to the rise of lyric poetry in Europe. But if the comprehensive definition of "lyric" includes poetic preoccupation with self, then one must recognize the equally significant role of the poet-aristocrat, — contemporary of the more glamorous poet-vagabond Villon, — Charles, Duke of Orléans, whose work in recent years has deservedly come into greater prominence.

Working from opposite ends of the socio-economic hierarchy, and from distinctly different aesthetic and philosophical perspectives, each poet practices self analysis in order to forge a poetic persona, however one might choose to relate that "persona" to its creator. But because of the obliqueness of the allegorical mode, Charles' delineations render his persona more remote, more inaccessible, if not more unreal to the reader.

At one level of analysis, a highly conscious "moi" pointedly engages in the most obvious onomastic identification of self.

Aux excellens et puissans en noblesse,
Dieu Cupido et venus la deesse.

Supplie presentement,
Humblement,
Charles, le duc d'Orlians,

.
Escript ce jour troisieme, vers le soir,
En novembre, ou lieu de Nonchaloir,
Le bien vostre, Charles, duc d'Orlians,
Qui jadis fut l'un de voz vrais servans.
(Songe en complainte, 177–183; 547–545)¹

While N. L. Goodrich sees in this bombastic self-identification “a general current perceivable throughout the century and linked to a growing realization in art of the individual *per se*,” she also notes significantly that Charles “suffered from the handicap of being the son of a world-famous father who had been the regent and actual ruler of France.”² She thus hints at the potential psychological implications of this need to name oneself, suggesting that the issue is perhaps more complex than is at first apparent.

Indeed, even the most desultory reading of the Charles d'Orléans text gives evidence of a basic and unmistakable contradiction in the persona's self-image. On the one hand, an analytical “moi” devotes inordinate energies to defining his emotions:

Que voulez vous que je vous die?
Je suis pour ung asnyer tenu,
Banny de Bonne Compaignie,
et de Nonchaloir retenu (Ballade, 117)

Yet, on the other, that same “moi” frequently speaks of withdrawal:

Tout a part moy, en mon penser m'enclos,
Et fais chasteaulz en Espagne et en France;
Oultre lez montz forge mainte ordonnance,
Chascun jour j'ay plus de mille propos,
En mez pais, quant me treuve a repos. (Rondeau, 54)

¹ All references are to the Pierre Champion edition, *Charles d'Orléans: Poésies*, 2 vols (1923–27; reprinted, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1975).

² *Charles d'Orléans: A Study of Themes in His French and in His English Poetry* (Geneva: Droz, 1967), p. 35. In her own analysis of the question, Alice Planche views the onomastic tendency as the self-awareness of both artist and aristocrat. *Charles d'Orléans ou à la recherche d'un langage*. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1975), p. 680.

Charles creates an ambiguous persona whose poetic vision is turned both inwards and outwards, a "moi" for whom *écriture* is both identification and mask, self-definition and subterfuge, *reflection* and *deflection*. As Alice Planche puts it, " 'Je' n'est ni fidèle à lui-même, ni simple."³

This dialectic of deflection/reflection becomes, moreover, a fundamental key to interpreting the message of a persona who defines, conceals and even, on occasion, plays at being self. The Charles d'Orléans poetry, in brief, is prototypical of text in general, where poetic discourse is always both mystery and clarification: "L'oeuvre est tout ensemble une fermeture et un accès, un secret et la clé de son secret."⁴

Traditional psychocritical examination of text deals with such ambiguities by an analytical process which tries to search for the creative persona not only in the more transparent descriptions of "moi" but in the reality which lies buried beneath the textual signs, both conscious and unconscious:

Dès l'instant où nous admettons que toute personnalité comporte un inconscient, celui de l'écrivain doit être compté comme source hautement probable de l'oeuvre.⁵

Although Sigmund Freud himself did not personally devote a major part of his psychoanalytical energies to literary criticism, his interest in the language of the unconscious inevitably led him to conjecture that one could deal with the manifest content of the creative expression in much the same way he dealt with the apparent message of the dream sequence:

... les rêves inventés par un écrivain sont susceptibles des mêmes interprétations que les rêves réels, donc que, dans l'activité créatrice du poète, les mêmes mécanismes de l'inconscient du rêve entrent en jeu qui nous sont déjà connus par le travail d'élaboration du rêve.⁶

³ Charles d'Orléans ou à la recherche d'un langage, p. 678.

⁴ Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification* (Paris: José Corti, 1962), p. ii.

⁵ Charles Mauron, *Des Métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel* (Paris: José Corti, 1964), p. 31.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Ma Vie et la psychanalyse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 81.

Freud engendered, thus, a whole new attitude toward the created word. Since his time, literary theorizing has given an important place to the "subtext," to the latent content of what is being said, to the underlying language spoken by the unconscious, to the text as the "véhicule d'une parole, en tant qu'elle constitue une émergence nouvelle de la vérité."⁷

Most studies of this type, however, tend to focus almost exclusively upon thematic elements to the neglect of the syntagm. They limit themselves to the signifiers but do not examine their syntactical relationships. And yet, if one does accept the fundamental premise that unconscious reality exists, it should follow logically that any serious psychosemiotic interpretation must deal as much with the syntagm as with the lexeme of the poetic discourse, for the "significance" of the text is by definition all-encompassing:

From the standpoint of meaning the text is a string of successive information units. From the standpoint of significance the text is one semantic unit. Any sign within that text will therefore be relevant. . . .⁸

Consequently, two principles guide the present study:

1. Textual signs communicate more than the manifest denotative message.
2. Syntagm and lexeme are inseparable constituents of the same semiotic unit.

With this therefore as a general statement of methodology, we shall proceed to examine the lyrical works of Charles d'Orléans, first the ballades, and then the rondeaux.⁹ We shall in each case

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 197), p. 381. For reviews of the history of both psychological and psychoanalytical influences on critical methods, one can profitably consult: Joseph P. Strelka, ed., *Literary Criticism and Psychology* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); J. Le Galliot, *Psychanalyse et langages littéraires: théorie et pratique* (Paris: F. Nathan, 1977); and Pamela Tytell, *La Plume sur le divan: psychanalyse et littérature en France* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982).

⁸ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1978), p. 3.

⁹ We shall not attempt to deal here with the so-called "English poetry" sometimes attributed to Charles d'Orléans, inasmuch as its authenticity continues to be in doubt. Speaking of these poems, David Fein has written recently: "Much