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ABSTRACT

Difficulties in organizing and conducting an Old French course at the undergraduate level are commented on in this article. A section treating the basis of the difficulties focuses on content in literature and language areas. Time factors and traditional coursework accreditation are discussed. A general statement of problems mentions three areas of particular difficulty: (1) course coverage, (2) methods, and (3) student participation. The scope of the course, likely to be either linguistic, literary, or cultural, is followed by a section on methods. (RL)

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LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE  
IN THE OLD FRENCH COURSE

It will be the purpose of this paper to identify and examine some of the difficulties inherent in organizing and conducting an undergraduate Old French course, particularly those that arise from its dual linguistic - literary nature. The observations brought together here and the conclusions or proposals that derive from them have grown out of several years' association with Old French, from both sides of the classroom desk. They are offered to the Conference on the Teaching of Old French of the Modern Language Association as personal reflections qualified by a reasonable amount of experience. Not pretending to be statements of norms or inflexible pedagogical principles, they hope at most to serve as guide-lines to a systematic consideration of the problems involved in teaching Old French to undergraduates and to further discussion on this and related topics.

1. Basis of Difficulties.

The subject matter of any discipline itself helps to create whatever problems there may be in its dissemination, and Old French is no exception. As a matter of fact, Old French is particularly susceptible to the problematic effects of its own content, to a degree considerably beyond that encountered in Modern French, for instance, because it is a discipline (or rather a combination of disciplines) that must be professed usually within the limits of a single course (practically always on the undergraduate level and often on the graduate). Modern French, on the other hand, to continue our comparison, because of its status as a "living" language representative of an important political and cultural entity, enjoys a systematic dissemination -- an entire curriculum of courses --

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through which to expose gradually its content. In terms of allotted time, then, Old French is not on equal footing with Modern French, as names alone might suggest, but with the nineteenth century novel or with advanced composition or Romanticism. That is, it forms only one of a series of traditional divisions within the framework of French -- a position that is inconsistent with the bulk and variety of its content. For Old French is a cluster of studies -- linguistic, literary and cultural -- just as diverse and just as complex as the over-all field under which it is subsumed. Within the implications of its label we have a language possessing its own phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax; we have an abundant literature spanning several centuries and representing multiple genres; and we have a vigorous and influential civilization. We have, in short, everything that Modern French has -- putting aside quantitative considerations (and even quantitative inequalities [e.g., literary output] were they of primary significance, could be compensated somewhat: Modern French will not match the chronological range of Old French for another century). But all this must be compressed into the space of one course. It is essentially this imbalance that contributes to Old French its acute pedagogical problems, and anyone who has had the responsibility of organizing an Old French program will testify that the problems are practical, not theoretical. This paper has been written, then, with such a one-year or one-semester course, commonly entitled simply "Old French," in mind.

## 2. General statement of problems.

They number basically three, it would seem, and each is a more or less direct consequence of the familiar situation that has just been described, where the maximum possible Old French offerings are too numerous to crowd into its assigned space. The first concern will be for coverage, for the make-up of the course: to what degree will each of the three major areas that we recognize in the name Old French be represented? Second, what will be the general method of

presenting the material to the students? And third, what will be expected of the students? Let us take each of the questions in turn, perhaps combining the last two, and see just what is involved.

### 3. Scope of the course.

The first and most obvious problem lies here. Faced with the impossibility of being all things to all men, the instructor will be forced to make a choice between a linguistic, literary or cultural orientation. It is not likely to be within the range of competence of most instructors to offer with any degree of thoroughness all three, but then neither will the dimensions of the course permit it. The best one can hope to achieve may not be an equal division between them, thereby sacrificing depth to width of coverage, but a judicious balance between two, with as much of the third complementing it as opportunity permits. On what basis will the choice be made? In actual practice the training and interests of the instructor probably count for more than any hierarchy of values that he would be willing to assign among the three areas. One exception may be noted: for most of us Old French is primarily a reading course, and it will be assumed that there is no need to make a case for literature in its program. Remains to be seen to what advantage linguistics or civilization may serve as the second point of view. The civilization approach is, it must be stated, a strong drawing-card for students, and it has the further advantage of cutting across departmental lines. There are few disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences that cannot profit from exposing their students to the wealth of material lying within an Old French civilization survey. Moreover, it might be argued summarily that literature and civilization in the case of medieval studies are largely inseparable anyway; to the twentieth-century reader an acquaintance with such remote phenomena as the Latin tradition, feudalism, chivalry and the courtly ideal, not to mention contemporary theological and cosmological views, the role of the

schools and daily living itself, goes de pair with the literature to which they gave form and substance. Literary criticism can and does dispense with consideration of such "externals" as these, although more to its detriment when the Middle Ages are involved, and it is doubtful whether any Old French course would be conceivable entirely without them. However, it is not the main purpose of this paper to justify or oppose a civilization orientation but to probe the language question, and it is to that that we address the remainder of our remarks.

There are a number of factors that argue strongly for a combined literary-linguistic orientation. First, if any reading is to be done at all in Old French, certain language fundamentals will have to be taught. How much and in what detail are variable factors whose values will be determined by the reading itself; the extreme diversity of the material calls for a survey or anthology-type program in which shorter pieces are read in their entirety and longer ones in excerpts. There are exceptions, naturally, but we see no reason why most of the material should not be read in the original. Some treatment of the language of the texts is, at any rate, clearly indispensable. Second, note that fundamentals, as we have called them, in the case of Old French touch upon two separate disciplines, for Old French can serve not only from a synchronic point of view as an independent language (and the only true medium of its literature) but also from a diachronic point of view as an intermediate stage in the development of Modern French. It would seem grossly inefficient not to take full advantage of the dual resources present in Old French to introduce the student to the history of the language, especially when the opportunity offers itself so spontaneously alongside the treatment of Old French. In confronting any given form of the early language the student will add to his knowledge of one linguistic system as it existed at one point in time, and simultaneously he



can be led to appreciate the phenomenon of linguistic evolution as he learns to recognize the demise of an old form and the gestation of a new. Third, in the absence of a special course on the history of the language, Old French offers the most appropriate setting for such work. It is, as a matter of fact, usually the only place in the undergraduate curriculum where the subject can logically be covered, and failure to include linguistic objectives here means depriving students of information that should be essential to specialization in French. Fourth, a linguistic slant tends to attract students, many of whom make the decision to enter the Romance field on the strength of their early experience and performance in language classes. Literature comes as somewhat of a shock to some, who are delighted to re-discover within the framework of a reading course an attention to linguistic matters. Quite simply, the language fascinates them -- and the realization that they have caught it in a moment of its growth, that they can dwell on that moment and at the same time envisage the raw material from which it is emerging and the "finished" product toward which it is tending, is a revelation that has few equals in the classroom. This certainly does not imply any minimizing of the literature; on the contrary it puts to maximum use the very forms of the written language and draws upon the natural inclinations of many students. Instruction in Old French and in historical linguistics, then, can be considered a natural and a desirable concomitant of the effective Old French course.

#### 4. Methods.

The normal sequence for work in foreign language courses aimed at perfecting reading skills is language → literature rather than vice-versa (cf. studies in Classics). The opposite pattern is abnormal and illogical, yet it is to some extent what we have in Old French, at least to the extent that language instruction is frequently interlaced with reading instead of preceding it. In Modern French it would never occur to us to assign anything that could pass as literature to a class that had not been firmly grounded in the language. But this is a weekly occurrence in Old French. Be that as it may, a comparison of the

aims and methods of Old French with those of either Modern French or Classics is again not wholly valid, partly for the same reason that we invoked earlier, namely that the latter approach their objectives through a graduated series of courses. And in addition the objectives themselves, in the case of Modern French, are not the same: all modern language studies pursue much more active linguistic aims, listening, speaking and writing competing successfully with reading.

There exists then to an acute degree a methodological problem for Old French: how to bring a class to the correct reading of the texts with a minimum of language instruction, and that largely out of place. Before we let ourselves despair, we should weigh those circumstances that we have working for us. For one thing, students do not come to us entirely unprepared: they have already been exposed to a language other than their own, and their experience in gaining a second language pays off in increased efficiency when it comes to a third. They have attained a reasonable mastery over French -- the modern language -- and this related knowledge makes early reading in Old French feasible. They have presumably surveyed the panorama of French literature, at least from the twelfth century on, and are not totally ignorant of the broad outlines of the medieval segment. Then too the aims of instruction in the fundamentals of Old French are modest: reading ability is virtually the only one; that is, passive recognition of words and forms. To this end certain editions of texts contribute assistance: The Bartsch-Wiese Chrestomathie, for instance, appends tables of Old French inflections, and the Jenkins edition of the Roland devotes a section of its introduction to the discussion of language.

With these facts in mind we might hazard some conclusions that will double as proposals. The study of Old French as a language in itself will serve the undergraduate only as a means to each of two ends: it will always be subordinated to the understanding and appreciation of literary works and to study of the history of the language. Thus a minimum of class time will be spent in talking about Old

French, and we will draw heavily on the students' training in acquiring a new language, on their familiarity with distinctive grammatical features and structural differences between languages, and on the existence of special helps furnished by the editors of texts and by Old French grammars (the Introduction à l'ancien français of Raynaud de Lage is particularly good for an undergraduate-level course). And inasmuch as no language is learned outside the context of examples (although it will never be a question of "learning" Old French in the way that we speak of learning Modern French or Spanish or German), we will proceed almost immediately to the literature. For the sake of language instruction and to give students an early confidence in their ability to read, it is probably better to begin with a text of at least the twelfth century. Since we cannot expect a class to analyze and discuss a work from the cultural or aesthetic point of view without first being able to read it, the business of line-by-line translation as classroom procedure, however tedious it may be, is absolutely necessary, but it can be controlled if we take the time to treat our initial texts as linguistic exercises before passing on to criticism. We subscribe to a two-month apprenticeship in Old French, during which the instructor will review the characteristics of the nominal system (including pronouns and modifiers) and the verbal system, giving particular attention to the so-called irregular verbs and to variant forms and spellings. Reference will be made to a standard Old French grammar (which students should buy) and to whatever indications are provided by any of the texts. Within this time also translating will have begun aloud in class with the text serving for illustration and clarification of the morphology and as a basis for the study of syntax. Reliance on a good glossary will be encouraged rather than memorization of vocabulary; the latter will be acquired gradually as reading progresses. It is already favored by the students' command of French (and, incidentally, of English) and will be helped along by the later excursion into historical linguistics. Note that little,



if any, time has been sacrificed from literature: by the end of the language fundamentals session something has been read and read closely. It should be possible to speed up the coverage of the reading material over the remainder of the course -- at least to match the pace that textual discussion sets. We must bear in mind, however, that language problems will not cease after an arbitrary two-month workout; they are a continuing part of the Old French course, but a level of competence sufficient to permit independent reading should be actively sought early in the year so that the instructor might feel free to move on to other matters in class. Interlacing of language fundamentals and reading, then, is not to be avoided, but regulated.

The second linguistic objective is that of teaching the history of the language, and even here the reading can be scheduled to support it. At that point in the course when selections prior to the twelfth century enter the program, conditions are appropriate for tracing the evolution of Vulgar Latin into Old French. Appropriate mainly because of the shift in historical perspective as we move back in time, a shift that brings into focus the relatively rapid change in the early language, in contrast to the stability that students will recall from their other French courses spanning the four-century "modern" period. But appropriate also because of the dialectal variants that characterize all the early pieces: now is the time to talk about the emergence of francien and to demonstrate it with the traditional tableaux of sound and system changes. Regrettably the students cannot be expected to bring much of this part to the course: we cannot even count on a one-hundred per cent preparation in Latin, so that everything, from the concept of linguistic evolution down to its facts in the case of French, will be new. There appears to be little alternative to a full-scale classroom elaboration of the material, but of necessity treating only the highlights in this introductory course. Most of the books on the history of the language are beyond the reach of students or more complete than is suitable at this stage; consequently a minimum of outside reading can be assigned. But this may well

turn out to be an asset, because the reading of the literature need not stall while linguistics holds the floor. Again a spaced presentation is in order, both literature and linguistics sharing successive class hours.

##### 5. Conclusion.

The preceding remarks resume, in the broadest of outlines, the major considerations that face the organizer of an Old French course based on a literary-linguistic orientation. They by no means exhaust all the decisions he will have to make. Outside of recommending a kind of reverse chronological order, we have, for instance, said nothing about what to read. The choice is wide, even within the limitation of available texts, and it is best left to the instructor. For the record we will repeat only what was stated above: that we favor reading shorter items (a few hundred lines or less) in the original, e.g., Lais of Marie de France, the Eulalia, Léger, Alexis; whereas longer works (the Roland, a Chrestien romance, the Rose, etc.) reduce without too much damage to excerpts in Old French with larger areas or the balance in translation. And within it all room should be made for the raw material -- the language itself. Lacking some conjunction of the two, the student will never come into direct contact with the subject but will merely skip across the surface of an immensely rich field which he should experience personally to the maximum depth that the course can carry him. Which is not very deep, after all, for although it may be ungracious to think of undergraduate Old French as an elementary course, still that is precisely what it is: elements of a language, elements of historical linguistics, elements of a literature. But until such time as each of these disciplines can be explored more fully, independently of one another, and can build upon each other (which is never likely to happen for the undergraduate), it can hardly be otherwise. The alternative -- that of restricting the content

of the course to literature alone, or to language or to civilization -- is far less desirable, because it would deprive the literature, necessarily in translation, of its form, the language of its life, and the civilization of its voice.

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