


Le Roman de Fauvel

Program Notes

 *Le Roman de Fauvel* is a world of wonders. Upon entering this world, we become part of the medieval mind-set. That mind-set, in turn, helps us to take a fresh look at the world in which we presently live. The creators of *Fauvel* took aim at the vulnerabilities of royal governance and skewered their victims as tellingly as the writers of a Saturday Night Live skit. You will be familiar with their concerns, as they appear in the recent film *The Favourite*, or the TV series *Game of Thrones*, or the headlines of today's newspapers.

The targets of their indignation were the disagreeable Capetian King Philip IV (1268-1314) and his upstart advisors. Philip “The Fair,” aka “The Iron King,” aka “The Blind Lion” was a disastrous ruler; a political opponent called him “neither man nor beast...a statue,” and Dante described him, with some accuracy, as “the plague of France.” Philip was ambitious, unscrupulous, and obdurate. He waged seemingly endless wars with Aragon, England, and Flanders, while entangled in bitter conflicts with the Church. He managed to bankrupt the royal coffers in order to finance his schemes, and then attempted to undo his creditors: Philip expelled the Jews, seized church lands, and destroyed the Knights Templar.

These disgraceful policies were universally unpopular, provoking uprisings in Paris and intrigues amongst the nobility. The counts, dukes, and barons in the French court didn't quite dare to attack their king directly, so instead they channeled their jealous rage into the misdeeds of his “evil” advisors. One of these was Enguerrand de Marigny (1260-1315), who became the model for *Fauvel*. Marigny seems to have been an adept social climber. He did have a drop of petty nobility in his blood, and succeeded in clawing his way from the downstairs to the upstairs, first by running the commissary for Queen Anne of Navarre, then becoming her confidante, by which means he managed to gain the trust of the King. At the height of his career, he was Philip's Grand Chamberlain and chief minister, and thus the second most powerful individual in France. Marigny was an avaricious master of intrigue, a ginger-haired nepotist. To the despair of the Peers of the Realm and their functionaries, he seemed to be invincible—that is, until Philip was fortuitously killed in a hunting accident in 1314. When Marigny and a few others of his ilk were suddenly without protection, the game was over. An aristocratic cabal led by Philip's brother, Charles of Valois, accused Marigny of fraud, heresy, and sorcery. (Sorcery was a political weapon back then, very much like red-baiting in the Twentieth Century.) It was said that Marigny, aided by his wife and a sorceress, enchanted Philip through “image-magic,” a medieval version of voodoo. The fallen Grand Chamberlain was tried before a kangaroo court, found guilty of everything, and given a public hanging in April of 1315.

Sexual scandals and mischance also bedeviled Philip's sons, their wives and children. Philip V succeeded his father, being the third of the late King's descendants to inherit the throne between 1314 and 1316. For the lurid details, Wikipedia articles will fill you in nicely, as will their entry on *Fauvel* itself.

Le Roman de Fauvel was compiled by a group of intellectual whistle-blowers between 1310 and 1317, with the encouragement of Charles Valois. Remember that the *Divine Comedy* was composed at just this time, and shared with *Fauvel* a deep sense of outrage at the ways of the world. The first books were written by the notary Gervais du Bus, who was a chaplain to Marigny, and thus on intimate terms with his subject while Marigny was still very much alive. Some time after 1316, *Fauvel* was taken up again, this time by a person known as Chaillou de Pesstain. During the time of its revision Philip IV died, Marigny was hanged, and young Philip V took control of the throne. Pesstain transformed the work by adding several thousand more lines of poetry, wonderful illuminations, and 168 pieces of music. The pictures and the music are what gave *Fauvel* its measure of immortality. In our world of wonders, you may google "Gallica bn.fr.146" and page through a splendid facsimile of the manuscript.

The idea of a romance with visual and lyric interpolations was relatively new, but not unique to *Fauvel*. At least six works of this type survive from the 13th century. One, the *Renart le Nouvel*, composed by Jacquemart Gielée around 1288, provided a template for *Fauvel*. Its subject was Renart the Fox, a con-artist par excellence, who repeatedly duped a lion king. Given the date, this black satire could have been aimed at Marigny and Philip IV. Several lines of *Fauvel* make reference to sly foxes, as do two *Fauvel* motets.

Fauvel himself is a wonderful creation. He seems to have crawled out of the menagerie of hybrid beasties that inhabited the margins of 13th Century manuscripts, to take a place in the center of the *Roman*. His name is an acronym for his failings. Of these, two are difficult to define: *variété* means inconstancy; *lascheté* is cowardice. His color, *fauve*, connoted vanity. And "Fauvel" is also a play on *faux vel*, a veiled lie. In addition to being a rogue and a villain, Fauvel played at the role of courtly lover. His endless, whining *lais* poked fun at the tired old clichés of the troubadour repertoire.

The object of his desire was none other than Dame Fortune herself. She was first his patroness, then his nemesis. She has a fascinating history: Fortuna was a late Roman semi-deity who survived and even flourished in the early Christian Era. She acquired her wheel and its helpless riders some time in the Twelfth Century. Eventually, this wheel became a clockwork, which she turned with a crank. This image conjures up associations with Fortune's role in the inexorable passage of time, and the inevitable rendezvous of humanity with its destiny. She was the dedicatee of the early Twelfth Century *Carmina Burana*, and played a central role in many of the French verse romances written over the course of the next 200 years. By about 1300, she was often painted quite fancifully; sometimes blindfolded, sometimes with a face divided between black rage and benign good humor, sometimes brandishing cudgels and crowns. Her palace was precariously balanced on a rock, surrounded by raging waters.

Pesstain and his collaborators took pains to embed in the text of *Fauvel* every genre of music known to the French, from ancient chant and Notre-Dame *conductus* of the previous century to avant-garde motets written or adapted for *Fauvel*; from long-winded *lais* to the newly fashionable refrain-songs—*ballades*, *rondeaux*, and *virelais*. Nine Latin *conducti* by Philip the Chancellor (1160-1236) are among the oldest pieces of music in the *Fauvel* repertoire. Philip mastered the art of expressing his deep disgust at political and clerical corruption to powerful Latin verse. The melodies may have been supplied by musical clerks at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, where Philip was Chancellor. We do not know who contributed the *lais* and shorter lyric forms to *Fauvel*, but at least three of the 37 motets in *Fauvel* were the work of Philippe de Vitry (1291-1361). The motets are the most innovative, elegant, and recondite music in the *Roman*. Vitry was an ordained priest who, to judge by his erudition, must have had a university education. As a young scholar, he appears to have been part of the Valois circle that put together the *Fauvel* satire. Philippe was a remarkable character. He was a groundbreaking composer and music theorist whose treatise *Ars Nova Notandi* (1322) defined Fourteenth Century music. He also had an impressive military career, and ended his days as Bishop of Meaux.

While the monophonic music in *Fauvel* is very easy to understand and enjoy, the motets were not intended for the uninitiated. Medieval motets were constructed on “tenors,” tone rows taken from bits of chant or popular song. These melodic patterns could be repeated any number of times, in a technique now known as *isorhythm*. Above the tenor were fashioned one to three melodic lines, each with its own text, or even its own language. You might think of the genre as being meant for the expression of serious religious thought, but late medieval motets could concern themselves with any topic, from the political to the obscene. The dramatic possibilities were endless.

here’s just a fragment of what you need to know to understand them: In *Qui Secuntur/Detractor* *est*, the fox is Marigny; *Quare fremuerunt* paraphrases Psalm 2 Verse 12. *In nova fert* quotes the opening phrase of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The piece is unique in the medieval motet repertoire because it is in a mixed duple and triple meter, as kind of metamorphosis in itself—see if you can hear it. In the same motet, the blind lion is Philip IV; the dragon and fox are again Marigny; and Bell, according to the Vulgate, was a lawless or worthless man. *O Philipe* is addressed to the young king Philip V. His great-grandfather was St. Louis IX, the fanatical Crusader. *Heu, Fortuna subdula/Aman novi* contains the most specific reference to Marigny; in the Book of Esther, Haman refused to bend the knee to Mordecai, for which he was hanged. *Quoniam secta latronum/Tribum, qui non abhorruit* contains a reference to Gallus Nasonis, known to us as Ovid. The last three lines of text paraphrase a letter written by Ovid to a treacherous former ally.

These remarkably complex little pieces were relished by a growing number of enthusiasts over the course of the Fourteenth Century. Who was this audience? Perhaps those who appreciated them the most were the performers themselves, followed by educated music-lovers who perhaps listened to the music many times, catching more meaning on each repeated hearing.

During the first decades of the early music revival, *Fauvel* has been staged and recorded a number of times. These stagings have ranged from fully costumed theatrical presentations to intimate concert performances. Because there is no direct evidence that *Fauvel* was ever put on in its own time, we have to take a look at circumstantial evidence to get a sense of what might have been possible. Minstrels and courtly amateurs engaged in mummings—masked entertainments which involved song and dance. The *charivari* in *Fauvel* is a bit of mummerly; one could select an episode from the piece and recreate it in this way. Remember that *Fauvel* is enormously long. It would take many hours to perform it in its entirety, doubtless over the course of several evenings. So, no modern ensemble has attempted to produce the whole work. Medieval composers of other “mixed media” entertainments suggested that these might be read quietly, declaimed aloud, sung, or all of the above. Chances are that *Fauvel*’s intended audience was, at first, the inner circle of courtiers and intelligensia who wrote it; after the deaths of Philip IV and Marigny, the audience could have been broadened to include the young King Philip V and his noble gentlemen and ladies. Instrumental minstrelsy would have been part of the fun. We hope that our use of images and music will give you a taste of what *Fauvel* was, is, and doubtless will be.

- Mary Springfels



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