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The Changing Role of the French Court as Seen in Medieval *Millefleurs* Tapestry

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Amongst the chaos of war, plague, and death of the Middle Ages in France, there remained a seemingly untouched class of people: the nobility. These courtesans, although living in the lap of luxury, were not exempt from the anxieties of the time. The Hundred Years' War left France in a constant state of unrest between the 1300s and 1400s, causing the elite to fall in and out of favor continuously. The price of luxury, it seemed, changed with each political shift. When studying the art made by and for these aristocrats, it becomes apparent that there are veiled indications of these tensions hidden throughout the iconography and subject matter of these works. Medieval tapestries from this time period are an excellent example of this, especially *millefleurs* tapestries. Although these textiles may seem to be straightforward narratives, they truly reveal the changing role of the court in the overall political landscape of the time, giving tapestry an even greater importance in the art historical conversation of this time period.

Current scholarship on *millefleurs* tapestries is sparse, but the little research that is being done seems to focus almost exclusively on gender roles and sexuality reflected in these works. For example, Laura Weigert's article entitled *Chambres D'amour: Tapestries of Love and the Texturing of Space*, which will be referenced later, presents an excellent analysis of a *millefleurs* tapestry set in light of the French court, only to conclude that the overall message is aimed at asserting the female's role in the act of desire.¹ This conclusion, in addition to being somewhat unrelated to the rest of her findings, forces a modern perspective of sexuality and gender onto a medieval society who did not have the same understanding of these issues as we do today. This is just one example used here to indicate the direction of contemporary scholarship, as well as my own goal in avoiding this pitfall. Of this issue in art historical research, Umberto Eco says,

¹ Laura Weigert, "Chambres D'amour: Tapestries of Love and the Texturing of Space," *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (January 2008): pp. 317-336, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcn030>.

“Every age has its own poetic sensibility, and it would be wrong to use the modern sensibility as a basis for passing judgement upon the Medievals.”² The following analysis, therefore, will approach the topics of tapestries and the French court through as close to a medieval lens as possible, avoiding modern concerns such as gender and sexuality.

In comparison to other cultural productions of the era, medieval tapestries have received little attention. It is necessary, therefore, to provide a brief overview of their production and popularity, as well as what is meant by *millefleurs* tapestries. Weaving was clearly not a French invention, having long since been a part of various cultures including Egyptian, Muslim, and Chinese societies. The presence of tapestry workshops in France have occasionally been considered to be a result of the Crusades bringing back goods from Muslim countries; however, there is evidence of French workshops even before the Crusades. The influence more likely came from the Muslim invasion of France in 732.³ Whatever the case may be, large textiles became exceedingly popular in France, with Paris eventually becoming the center for tapestry production in the mid 1300s.⁴ Their popularity in this region can be credited to several factors, one being the climate. Large tapestries not only decorated the bare stone walls of castles, but they also provided a great degree of insulation for the otherwise cold interiors.⁵ Additionally, they provided avenues of storytelling and entertainment for large audiences through purely visual means.⁶

² Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 61.

³ Roger-Armand Weigert, *French Tapestry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 29.

⁴ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 29.

⁵ Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 20.

⁶ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 21.

The style of French tapestries experienced a significant shift around the year 1360. Prior to this date, tapestries generally were characterized by simple geometric designs, patterns, and heraldic devices.⁷ After 1360, however, workshops were producing tapestries of both religious and secular subject matter, full of flora, fauna, and multiple figural scenes.⁸ *Millefleurs* tapestries are a genre of these new textile designs. These tapestries often depicted scenes of courtly activities and romance set against a complex background of plants and animals. This change was due, in large part, to the appointment of Charles V to the French throne.⁹ Art historian, Roger-Armand Weigert, summarizes this transition expertly when he says, “A new wealth and luxury made themselves felt in most fields related to the fine arts. Such an environment could not fail to encourage the development of tapestry, which now, without losing its utilitarian function and character, began to achieve a new refinement of execution.”¹⁰ The new wealth that followed the rule of Charles V not only encouraged artistic production, but it also influenced the formation of an actual court around the monarch, a court who recognized the ability of these textiles to communicate political messages.¹¹

In order to grasp the role of the court during the production period of the tapestries in question, it is necessary to provide a brief history of France, starting with the rule of Charles V. As previously mentioned, Charles V was a successful ruler of France, mainly due to his conquests during the Hundred Years’ War. He successfully reclaimed much of the territory lost by his predecessors, earning him popularity amongst the nobility, who were quickly welcomed

⁷ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 32.

⁸ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 32.

⁹ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 33.

¹⁰ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 33.

¹¹ Weigert, *French Tapestry*, 33.

into his court.¹² Charles V was succeeded by his son Charles VI upon his death in 1380.¹³ Charles VI suffered frequent periods of insanity, allowing room for rival political factions to fight for control over France, such as the Burgundians.¹⁴ The dukes of Burgundy became so opposed to the French throne that they even began to align themselves with England during the Hundred Years' War in their ongoing attempts to outdo the French and their court.¹⁵ The Hundred Years' War ended with the expulsion of English forces from France, owed in large part to Joan of Arc and her assistance to the dauphin, Charles VII, who was crowned king in 1429.¹⁶ After his appointment to the throne, Charles VII sought reconciliation with Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, and slowly began to reclaim the land that the Burgundians had taken in northern France.¹⁷ The devastation that both the war and Charles VI's mental illness caused on the French monarchy and economy created a great burden for the rule of Charles VII. In his attempts to bolster the economy, Charles VII expanded the noble class to encompass more people, allowing for more tax exemptions with less proof of nobility.¹⁸ Although this may seem counterintuitive, this change in the tax laws granted Charles VII approval from the nobility at court and thus greater success in other areas. The creation of *millefleurs* tapestries within the time spanning the infighting with the Dukes of Burgundy and into the beginning of the 16th century assists in revealing the concerns of the court over their changing status within society.

¹² Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 180.

¹³ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 180.

¹⁴ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 242.

¹⁵ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 242.

¹⁶ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 245.

¹⁷ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 245.

¹⁸ John Bell Henneman, "Nobility, Privilege and Fiscal Politics in Late Medieval France," *French Historical Studies* 13, no. 1 (1983): p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/286591>, 9.

In 1384 Louis de Mâle, count of Flanders, died and his son-in-law Philip the Bold, son of King John II of France, inherited the counties of Flanders.¹⁹ This small acquisition of French soil set off a rivalry that would last for almost a century. Ever conscious of their inferior titles and rank, the dukes of Burgundy constantly sought any opportunity to gain more land, increase their wealth, and distinguish their court from that of Paris.²⁰ Philip the Good, the third duke of Burgundy, was even more power hungry than his predecessors. He even went so far as to create a chivalric brotherhood called the Order of the Golden Fleece, which encouraged further dedication to the Burgundian dukes and their political agendas.²¹ This brotherhood relied heavily on elaborate ceremonies and pageantry, in which a specific set of grandiose tapestries would have been paraded: the *History of Gideon* tapestries.²² These tapestries, although now lost, indicate the political agenda of the dukes of Burgundy, as well as their view of, and relationship to, the French court.

The *History of Gideon* tapestries were commissioned specifically by the duke of Burgundy as an essential component of court ceremonies in 1449.²³ The tapestries were woven with the finest silks, as well as gold and silver threads, making them an extremely costly creation.²⁴ Additionally, Philip the Good purchased the original cartoons so as to ensure that they remained an entirely unique set, unable to be reproduced.²⁵ The tapestries told the biblical story of Gideon within eight individual panels. The story, found in Judges six through eight, begins with Gideon

¹⁹ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 242.

²⁰ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 242.

²¹ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "Portable Propaganda—Tapestries as Princely Metaphors at the Courts of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold," *Art Journal* 48, no. 2 (1989): pp. 123-129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1989.10792599>, 123.

²² Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 123.

²³ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 124.

²⁴ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 124.

²⁵ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 124.

seeking God's support to fight the Midianites who were oppressing the Israelites. He tests God by placing a fleece outside overnight, concluding that, in the morning, if the fleece is dry but the ground around it is wet then God will support him in his efforts. God does indeed perform this miracle, and Gideon immediately selects 300 Israelites to join his army, who successfully overthrow the Midianites. After their victory, the Israelites choose Gideon as their ruler.²⁶

Philip the Good, like many other rulers, utilized images of great leaders to reinforce a positive public image; however, Gideon was a unique choice. The correlations between the imagery of this tapestry set and the goals of Philip the Good's reign are easy to recognize once analyzed. First, Gideon's faith and his favor with God would have communicated that the Burgundian duke's own power was also a gift from God, unquestionable and righteous. The fact that one whole panel of the tapestries was dedicated to Gideon's subsequent defeat of the Midianites also justified Philip's conquest of land as a God ordained duty. Additionally, the fact that Gideon was chosen by his own people to rule and create a noble dynasty is significant to Philip's own aspirations for his rule. Philip the Good surrounded himself with a court that admired him and supported his authority with the hope that, like Gideon, the approval of these nobles would increase the legitimacy of his power and thus earn him the title of king.²⁷

The purpose and audience of these tapestries is also essential in understanding their relationship to the rule of Philip the Good and his relationship to the French court. Although these tapestries were essential to the ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Fleece, they were also meant to be seen by foreign dignitaries. There are several historical accounts of visiting dignitaries' awe and admiration of the stunning tapestry series seen at the court of Philip the

²⁶ Judges 6-8 ESV.

²⁷ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 125.

Good.²⁸ Also, these tapestries were brought with Philip on his trip to Paris for the crowning of Charles VII's successor, Louis XI.²⁹ Charles VII had been a long-time enemy of Philip the Good. The king's reclamation of land, as well as his expansion of the noble class emboldened the animosity between the two leaders; therefore, upon his return to Paris, Philip the Good felt it necessary to present an extravagant image, one to rival even that of the king.³⁰ Philip the Good ordered that the façade of the Hôtel d'Artois be covered in his *History of Gideon* tapestries during his stay in Paris, demonstrating to the French court that he was just as powerful as any French ruler.³¹ As art historian Jeffrey Smith says, "the adroit use of tapestries here contributed to the public's general admiration of Philip the Good, his magnificence, and, through historical allusions, the accomplishments of his long reign."³² The *History of Gideon* tapestry set, therefore, not only encouraged the support of the Burgundian court, but it also encouraged admiration amongst the French court as well.

As the 16th century approached, France changed rapidly. Louis XI succeeded Charles VII in 1461, reducing the influence of the court even further.³³ The new king caused fear and distrust amongst the French nobles, especially considering that he was known to be a self-sufficient monarch, refusing to surround himself with a court of nobles.³⁴ The position of the French elite in the political affairs of France, therefore, quickly became tenuous. The unifying of France after the Hundred Years' War, as well as the increased power of the State, subjected nobles to live

²⁸ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 125.

²⁹ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 125.

³⁰ Georges Duby, *Art and Society in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 23.

³¹ Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 126.

³² Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 126.

³³ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 245.

³⁴ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 245.

under the authority of the king in a way that they had never experienced before. Anne J. Duggan says that “some historians even speak of a ‘domestication’ of the nobility” during this time.³⁵ This shift can be felt in a *millefleurs* tapestry set produced during this time that seemingly portrays the leisure activities of the aristocracy.

The tapestry set in question is a six-paneled series, now in the Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny in Paris. There is little surviving documentation as to the owners or the precise production date, but stylistic clues indicate that it was created in the first decade of the 1500s for a noble family.³⁶ All six panels show lords and ladies participating in various activities. In one panel, we see a dog sitting on the lap of a woman who is spinning wool, while a lord reads to her (figure 1). A second panel shows a lord holding a falcon on his arm accompanied by a page (figure 2), and another depicts a lady embroidering with another woman next to her holding a mirror (figure 3). One of the larger panels presents a group of nobles standing against a floral background, while one of the ladies picks a flower and another brings a plate of fruit (figure 4). Arguably the most complex panel depicts a large gathering of noble couples engaging with each other, one couple sharing a box of candies and another couple embracing (figure 5). The final panel focuses on a lady in her bath surrounded by attendants, a very rare subject for this medium (figure 6).

Although it would be easier to simply view these tapestries as depictions of leisure and nothing more, a deeper investigation reveals that they meant much more than just this. Possibly, these tapestries follow the tradition of the courtly romance from this time period.³⁷ This was a

³⁵ Anne J. Duggan, *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 270.

³⁶ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 320.

³⁷ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 321.

popular genre of literature, often detailing the amorous pursuit of a maiden by a nobleman. The garden was the most common setting for these stories, thus it is not unlikely that these *millefleurs* tapestries were romantic in subject and nature.³⁸ The story, however, follows no linear narrative and doesn't even seem to have a main character. In this case, instead of following a single story, the tapestries reference individual moments from the lexicon of medieval romance tales, leaving the overall meaning ambiguous in nature.³⁹

Examining the way in which these tapestries would have been originally viewed may help in understanding their true intention. All six panels would have been hung in one room of an aristocratic home, a home most likely intended for relaxation and vacation.⁴⁰ The main panel that all others were oriented around was possibly the woman in her bath.⁴¹ The fact that these tapestries do not have any sort of border or framing devices indicates that they would have been butted up to each other, creating an overwhelming and immersive experience. Also, six panels clearly do not fit exactly onto four walls, further indicating that they would have covered every spare inch of the room they inhabited. This layout would have fully encompassed the viewer, transporting them into the garden itself. The figures, however, pose a problem as they do not conform to a single narrative no matter how they are arranged.⁴² The characters do not even interact with each other save for those in figure 5, but even then, the couples act apart from the rest of the figures. This fact, combined with the overwhelming arrangement of the panels, shows that the viewer was provided a chance to “play a greater role in the creative process.”⁴³ The

³⁸ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 323.

³⁹ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 324.

⁴⁰ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 328.

⁴¹ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 328.

⁴² Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 330.

⁴³ Weigert, “Chambres D'amour,” 332.

viewer could arrange and rearrange the figures in whichever way they chose, creating their own relationships between the figures.

The lack of a grand narrative and the ability of the viewer to create their own version of events parallels, according to Laura Weigert, the viewer's inability to identify with the characters in the tapestries.⁴⁴ The viewer is prohibited from actually entering into this garden, unable to relate with the figures and constantly reminded of the materiality of the object due to the overwhelming surface pattern.⁴⁵ This position of the viewer reflects the position of the nobility and the court at the time. The court's influence over politics and culture had been significantly reduced, and there were no longer extensive social connections, or even ancestral requirements, in order to be inducted into noble society.⁴⁶ Instead, people could simply purchase aristocratic titles, which shifted the economy towards urban centers and away from noble landowners.⁴⁷ Even luxury items, such as these tapestries, were becoming more available to a wider population, further reducing the amount of distinctions offered to the aristocratic class.⁴⁸ All of this tension can be felt in these *millefleurs* tapestries. The noble owner of these tapestries, upon entering into the garden room, could be surrounded by his own court, arranged in whatever way he pleased. The luxury and exaggerated status of the court can clearly be felt in these tapestries; however, the viewer would have been painfully reminded of their inability to enter into that world. The disconnect between the ideal image of the nobility and their actual social standing is clearly represented in these tapestries, especially considering their emphasis on land, paralleling the

⁴⁴ Weigert, "Chambres D'amour," 333.

⁴⁵ Weigert, "Chambres D'amour," 333.

⁴⁶ Weigert, "Chambres D'amour," 334.

⁴⁷ Weigert, "Chambres D'amour," 334.

⁴⁸ Weigert, "Chambres D'amour," 334.

nobilities own land ownership. These tapestries would have prompted in their viewer a sense of nostalgia for their irredeemable social position within the French court.

A final consideration can be made for another set of *millefleurs* tapestries, made around the same time as the Cluny series mentioned above, called the *Garden of Vanity* tapestries (figure 7). This series is one of several within the same genre, showing scenes of peasants and shepherds in their fields. This particular set tells the story of a shepherd making romantic propositions to a shepherdess, who is quick to refuse him no matter how hard he tries. Art historian Adolph Cavallo has interpreted these tapestries to represent the idea of man being slave to the passions of the flesh and woman a victim of the world's expectations.⁴⁹ What is more interesting for this discussion, however, is the popularity of the subject matter itself. To depict peasants in such an expensive medium as tapestry indicates that these characters held a significance to the nobility. In context of the social standing of the court at this time, the emphasis on the artistic representation of the peasant class sheds light on the shift of focus away from the nobility. These tapestries indicate the rising influence of lower class citizens and the decrease in the authority of the landowning elite.

The medieval production of *millefleurs* tapestries provides a unique insight into the concerns of the nobility and the court in France. Beginning with the *History of Gideon* tapestries of Philip the Good, we see the competitive nature of French courts. The Burgundian duke utilized these grandiose tapestries to present himself as a legitimate ruler, worthy of the title of king. The fact that he brought these tapestries with him to Paris to display in front of the French court shows the level of competition between these two courts, as well as the remaining influence that the court

⁴⁹ Adolph S. Cavallo, "The Garden of Vanity: a 'Millefleurs' Tapestry," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 57, no. 1 (1979): pp. 30-39, <https://doi.org/10.1086/dia41505375>, 34.

still had in French politics at this time. With the turn of the 16th century, however, the influence of the court began to wane. This transition can be felt in the Cluny tapestry series. The separation of the viewer from the nobility within the textiles reflects the viewer's own social limitations. In addition, the rising popularity of peasant scenes in *millefleurs* tapestries further emphasizes the deteriorating impact of the court in society. These findings reveal not only insights into the status of the French court at the end of the medieval era, but also the importance of the study of medieval tapestry within the overall scholarship of the Middle Ages.



Figure 1. *The Letter*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.



Figure 2. *The Hunt*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.



Figure 3. *Embroidery*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.



Figure 4. *Lovers Strolling*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.



Figure 5. *Lovers Embracing*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.



Figure 6. *Lady Bathing*, ca. 1500, wool tapestry, Musée National du Moyen Age-Thermes de Cluny, Paris.

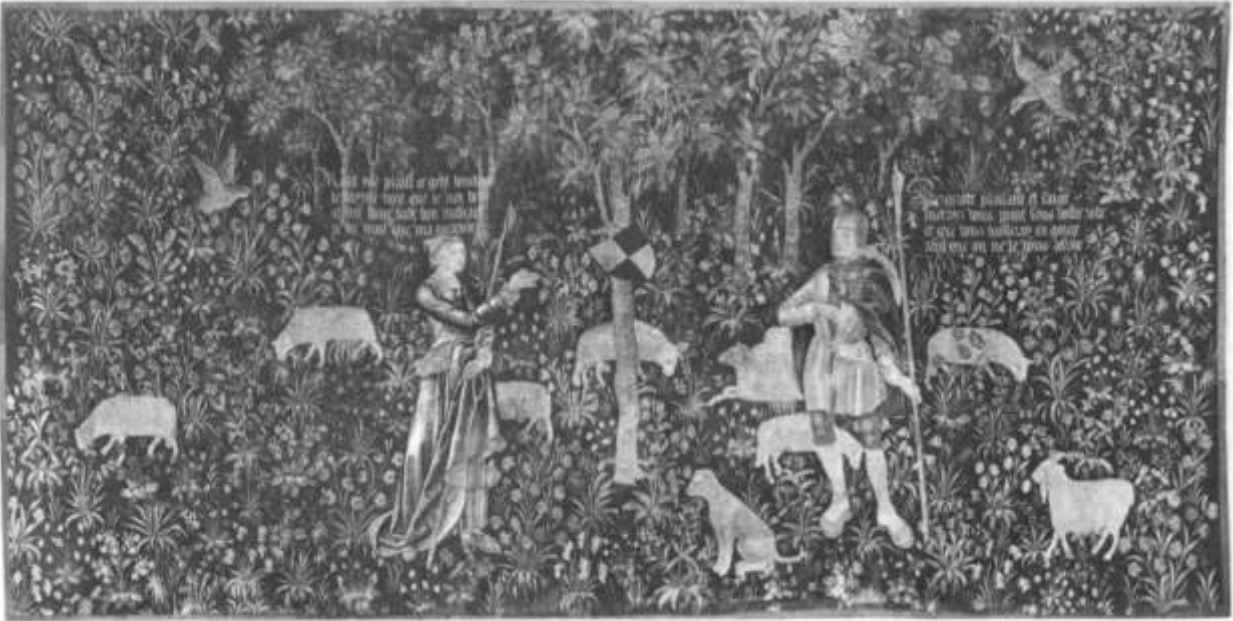


Figure 7. *The Garden of Vanity*, early 16th century; tapestry hanging, wool and silk, Bequest of Eleanor Clay Ford.

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