The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria

Adams, Tracy

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Adams, Tracy.
The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/477
Confraternities commonly attempted to control the actions of their members, at least with respect to matters covered by their corporate statutes, by holding an examination of conduct during their annual meeting and imposing various penalties, usually in the nature of fines or penances, for infraction of the rules. For particularly grave faults the usual penalty was exclusion from the society. They also frequently attempted to adjudicate disputes and (when possible) to effect reconciliations between members who had quarreled.

**Philibert-Bernard Moreau de Mautour**, who in 1727 unearthed the founding charter of the institution known today as the Cour amoureuse, assumed Isabeau to have been instrumental in the institution’s founding. The queen is not mentioned in the charter. Why then did the erudite antiquarian, member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, and author of numerous scholarly *mémoires* on a wide variety of subjects, associate her with the institution? His argument, laid out in an article of 1733, was that surely this queen who had introduced luxury and magnificence to the court of Charles VI “avoit aussi contribué à y introduire la galanterie” (had also contributed to the introduction of gallantry there).¹ His reasoning, in fact, is perfectly circular: Isabeau must have been associated with the Cour amoureuse because she was frivolous; the Cour amoureuse was frivolous because Isabeau was involved in it.² But interesting for this study of the life and afterlife of the queen, Moreau de Mautour’s assertion suggests that Isabeau had began to be floated as a prototype of royal profligacy during the first third of the eighteenth century.

Still, in the early decades of the eighteenth century the queen had not yet been fully vilified, despite the rumor of her promiscuity begun by the English and certain references to her as divisive by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century legal historians. Thus Moreau de Mautour’s depiction of Isabeau as a frivolous fashion setter and instigator of gallantry is condescending but not vi-
cious. However, the tone used to describe the queen became more vicious throughout the eighteenth century. By 1763, Claude Villaret, author of the first French anti-Pamela novel, could fulminate against the Cour amoureuse, that “assemblage monstrueux,” and the woman who had founded it in his *Histoire de France*: “On s’occupoit à la cour que d’amusements frivoles; et le soin d’imaginer de nouveaux plaisirs étoit devenu la plus sérieuse occupation. Le goût de la reine pour le luxe, la magnificence et la galanterie avoit encore renchéri sur celui des courtisans.” (At court, the only interest was frivolous amusement; and seeking novel pleasure became the most serious of occupations. The queen’s taste for luxury, magnificence, and gallantry surpassed even that of courtesans.)³ In a similar vein, Pierre Jean Baptiste Le Grand d’Aussy, editor of a collection of Old French fabliaux, asserted in the introduction to his edition of 1779: “La Cour amoureuse fut un des fruits qu’enfanta l’esprit de frivolité répandu par la scandaleuse reine Isabeau. Heureuse au moins la France, si elle n’avoit que ce reproche à lui faire!” (The Cour amoureuse was one of the fruits born of the spirit of frivolity instigated by the scandalous queen Isabeau. France would be lucky if this were all there were of which to reproach her!)⁴ As we have seen, the black legend of Isabeau reached its fullest expression in Louise de Keralio’s *Les Crimes des reines de France depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu’à Marie-Antoinette* of 1791, where Isabeau became a harbinger of that unfortunate queen.⁵ Madame de Keralio’s image of Isabeau as prototype of Marie-Antoinette stuck, with the result that the queen has continued to be vilified into the twenty-first century.

Isabeau’s possible association with the Cour amoureuse merits revisiting, as I suggest in this chapter. As a space of gallant amusement, the Cour amoureuse has been thoroughly revised. Many scholars, following Theodor Straub’s article of 1961, believe the institution as it is described in its charter to have been a fiction, in other words, never to have convened, never to have existed except in the imagination of the author of the charter.⁶ For those who assume it to have existed in some form, the institution is now believed to have served as a forum for amassing social capital and for the promotion of a new social stratum, “des hommes de chancellerie” (men of the chancellery), which was represented there in good numbers, although the nobility held the most prestigious offices.⁷ Carla Bozzolo and Hélène Loyau, the foremost historians of the Cour amoureuse, describe it as an “épiphénomène reflétant une réalité socio-historique” (an epiphenomenon reflecting a socio-historical reality).⁸ Missing from recent discussion, however, is whether Is-
I will not be concerned with whether the institution actually assembled for poetic competition—its purpose as stated in its charter. Some evidence suggests that such competitions may have occurred, but Isabeau’s participation cannot be documented. Rather, I discuss Isabeau’s collaboration in the composition of the institution’s charter, proposing that this in itself is worthy of interest. Her purpose in creating the charter, I argue, was to enhance her prestige as mediator, a purpose perhaps partly playful but nonetheless serious to the extent that her political clout depended upon her image as a successful peacemaker.

To make this case, I address two principal points. First, although the charter proclaims itself to have been founded by Philip of Burgundy, along with his brother-in-law, Louis of Bourbon, it was composed in the midst of Isabeau’s personal household. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that she was involved. Second, her role as political mediator, the various elements of which I have been developing throughout this study, is mirrored in the charter. Although the charter restricts the poetic competitions organized by the Cour amoureuse to men, the arbitrators of the competition were to be women. Isabeau’s role, thus, would have been to judge the poetry produced by the participants. Brokering peace and adjudicating poetry, ritualistic performances demanding a high degree of moral authority, share a hermeneutic: like the negotiations for peace between the dukes over which she presided officially, the poetic competitions of the Cour amoureuse would have placed her at the center, where her success depended on her ability to convince the observing public as well as the competitors of the wisdom and justice of her decisions. Moreover, the charter, which was similar in form to a royal ordinance, allowed Isabeau to construct and control the Cour amoureuse in a way she could not construct and control the royal court.

Over the past two decades, a wealth of scholarship has demonstrated the means by which queens of the early modern periods attempted through public display to calm warring nobles. The displays of power enacted by Isabeau do not compare in scale with the elaborate entries and performances
for which the later Valois were renowned. However, the creation of a literary puy dedicated to the honor of women presided over by women must be regarded as a significant statement. For Isabeau, the Cour amoureuse, founded just as she was beginning her career in mediation, would have represented a forum where she could reinforce her authority as arbiter of peace under what she already would have understood to be very difficult circumstances. Isabeau’s mediating activity, I suggest, is the context within which to consider the charter of the Cour amoureuse. In the following section, I discuss the logistics of the charter’s composition: who was present when it was created and what this might mean.

The Foundation of the Cour amoureuse

The Cour amoureuse is known to historians primarily through its charter (or, more accurately, through a copy of its charter) existing in a single manuscript with an accompanying list of the members’ arms; and through five further manuscripts containing partial lists of the members’ arms. In their indispensable two-volume study of the institution, Carla Bozzolo and Hélène Loyau collate information from the six manuscripts to offer a complete list of the participants along with their identifications—approximately 950 in total from 1400 to 1440.10 As Bozzolo and Loyau explain, members are added to the lists throughout the years but are never crossed out when they die. Also, the members are preponderantly partisans of the Dukes of Burgundy, with a large influx of new members entering the ranks when Philip the Good succeeded his father, Jean sans Peur, after the latter was assassinated by followers of the dauphin Charles, eventually Charles VII.11 If the Cour amoureuse was a fiction, it was one carefully maintained by the Burgundians over a long period of time. In a sense, then, whether or not poetic competitions took place is irrelevant. The Burgundians must have felt keeping up the Cour amoureuse to have been of symbolic importance. The details of the institution in its later permutations, however, are not central to this study of Isabeau’s possible involvement, although they might fruitfully form the basis of further research. For the present study, the crucial document is the charter, which I propose to have been composed under the supervision of the queen. Because Isabeau’s collaboration is essential to my argument, I will begin by making the case for it.

Supposedly narrated by Pierre de Hauteville, le Prince de la baillie d’amours (Prince of the Land of Love), poet from Hainaut, échançon, or
cupbearer of Charles VI and écuier of Philip of Burgundy and later Jean of Burgundy, the charter records two dates. One appears in the first lines of the document and refers to its publication in Paris at the Hôtel d’Artois, one of Philip of Burgundy’s city residences (of which only the Tour Jean sans Peur on the Rue Etienne Marcel remains today), on Saint Valentine’s Day, 1400. The second date is found in the final lines of the document, just before the signatures, where the institution is proclaimed to have been “octroyé humblement en salle royalle, a Mante” (granted humbly in the royal hall at Mantes), on January 6, 1400. This date is furthermore referred to within the body of the charter, which notes that the excellent and powerful princes, Philip and Louis of Bourbon, requested on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, that Charles VI create the Cour amoureuse. The charter, thus, appears to have been composed at the royal residence at Mantes on the Feast of the Epiphany and later published, or announced, in Paris.

The date given in the charter, of January 6, 1400, is crucial in determining who was at Mantes when the document was composed. As Straub points out, it is not clear whether the date refers to what we would today call 1400 (that is, the new style of dating) or 1401 (that is, the Easter style). He admits that normally in early fifteenth-century Ile-de-France one would expect the Easter style to be the practice. However, he adds that humanists were especially attached to the old Roman system of dating the year from January 1, and that as far as the public was concerned, January 1 was New Year’s Day. The holiday was celebrated with gifts and festivities on that day everywhere, including the Parisian court. To Straub, it is conceivable that in this case the New Year was dated from January and that the newly begun year was called “mil quatre cens.” Because plausible arguments for the usage of either dating style exist, Straub next goes on to investigate who was at Mantes in January 1400 and 1401. He discovers that the most important members of the Cour amoureuse all prove to have been elsewhere in both 1400 and 1401. This is not necessarily significant: charters were often initially written up in the absence of the major actors and signed by them at a later date.

However, Isabeau was at Mantes on one of the possible dates of the charter’s composition, January 6, 1400. Although the absence of people would not necessarily indicate their lack of involvement, the presence of the queen at that moment is a coincidence worth exploring. I would add that the queen’s itinerary as worked out by Yann Grandeau demonstrates that her presence at Mantes was extremely rare. She resided there at only one other time, in late February and early March 1389. During her second residence,
she arrived on December 18, 1399, and remained until January 19, 1400. Isabeau had been absent from Paris since the summer of 1399, when she fled with the children to escape the plague. She halted in Mantes on her way back to Paris, having received news that the epidemic had still not run its course. This is significant. The charter notes in its first lines that one of the reasons for the founding of the Cour amoureuse was “en ceste desplaisant et contraire pestilence de epidimie presentement courant en ce tres crestien royaume, que pour passer partie du tempz plus gracieusement et affin de trouver esveil de nouvelle joye” (during this unhappy and contrary plague at present running its course to spend some time pleasantly and to arouse new joy).19 The queen, then, was in residence at Mantes on the date on which the charter claims to have been composed for the purpose to which the charter attributes its existence.

It seems reasonable to conclude, as does Straub, that Isabeau must have been involved in the foundation of the Cour amoureuse in 1400. But I would like to add another point in support of Straub’s assessment. On January 11, 1401, the eight-year-old dauphin Charles (the second of three to bear that name) died, victim of a wasting illness that had dragged on for several months. It is highly unlikely that any of the royal family, whether the queen or any of the princes of the blood, would have chosen such a week to create a Cour amoureuse. This eliminates 1401 as the year of the institution’s founding. We are now back to 1400, when Isabeau was residing at Mantes at the correct time.

I am also suggesting that Isabeau and Philip of Burgundy were collaborators on the charter. Therefore, I would like to revisit another of Straub’s conclusions about the presence or absence of the major members of the institution at Mantes in January of 1400 or 1401. As Straub correctly points out, Philip of Burgundy was at Neauphle from December 14 until January 7, 1400.20 Ernest Petit’s itinerary of the duke’s movements based upon his accounts shows that on Monday and Tuesday, January 5 and 6, Philip was to be found at that location (sejour à Neaufle). What Straub does not mention, however, is that Neauphle is separated from Mantes by a mere eighteen miles. The duke routinely made journeys of much greater distances in one day. He easily could have travelled to Mantes on January 5 or 6.21 For example, Petit Barre, rider for the Duke of Berry, was paid for carrying letters from the king in Paris to Mantes, “a la royne de France, a monseigneur de Bourgogne et a monseigneur d’Orliens,” on December 14, 1399.22 On that very day, Philip’s itinerary has him supping and sleeping at Neauphle but dining at Dangu,
nearly forty-two miles away. The road from Dangu to Neauphle passes directly through Mantes, where he may have stopped. The journey from Neauphle to Mantes, then, is one that Philip could make during the course of a single day.

The important point is, first, that Philip and Isabeau were by no means separated by a great distance on January 6, and, second, that contact through horsemen bearing letters was easy; therefore they very well may have been in touch regarding the Cour amoureuse around or on that date. Thus it appears reasonable to imagine that Isabeau and Philip worked together on founding the Cour amoureuse. In the following section, I consider the vision of the Cour amoureuse offered by its charter to prepare my discussion of the queen’s possible interest in such an institution.

The Structure of the Cour amoureuse

As I have noted, the research of Bozzolo and Loyau on the manuscripts indicates that the institution began as predominantly Burgundian and only became more so over the years. Furthermore, Philip’s role makes itself felt in even a cursory examination of its structure as described in the charter. The charter, as we have seen, opens by announcing the date of its publication in one of Philip’s Parisian residences. Its form is that of a royal ordinance, beginning with a salutation by the Prince de la baillie d’amours, followed by a description of the situation that led to the charter’s composition. The details of the Cour d’amour are enumerated, beginning with *Premierement*, with the following points preceded by *item*.

After its salutation, the charter extols the virtues of humility and loyalty that motivated the founding of the Cour. These virtues are also those on which the organization will be based. The Prince stresses their importance, announcing that

Par humble entencion et tres debonnaire amour, la glorieuse vertu d’u-
milité et la constante vertu de leauté reluisent clerement par toutes terres
esquelles foy crestienne regente et domine, sy tres doucement que la di-
vine providence repaist en maintes agreeables mennieres tous ceulz et
elles qui de ces deux tres eureuses vertus embellissent et aournent l’en-
tendement de leurs cuerz. Et comme ce soit d’elles souverain parement
aux mieux condicionnéz et que tous nos ancisseurs, nobles et gracieux,
desquelz loenge durable est esparse parmy le monde en divers lieux, s’en
soient, leurz jourz durans, plus voulentiers paréz que de vestemens battus a or et chargiéz de pierres precieuses . . . nous . . . avons incessamment désiré la douceur de leur amisté.

[With humble intention and excellent love, the glorious virtue of humility and the constant virtue of loyalty shine clearly in all lands in which Christian faith rules and dominates, and thus divine providence nourishes in many pleasant ways all who embellish and adorn the understanding of their hearts with these two happy virtues. And because these constitute sovereign adornment for the best suited, and because all of our noble and gracious ancestors, for whom enduring praise is spread throughout the world in diverse places, were for all of their days more willingly dressed in them than in clothes of gold decorated with precious gems . . . we . . . have always desired the sweetness of the friendship of these virtues.]

The charter then notes that Philip of Burgundy and Louis of Bourbon, maternal uncle of Charles VI, asked the king to found the institution to offer some comfort to the court during a time of plagues—a borrowing from the Decameron, but also a reference to a genuine epidemic, as we saw above. The members of the Cour amoureuse are then exhorted to defend the honor of women, and they are warned that those who fail will be expelled.

The rest of the charter details how the Cour amoureuse will be administered. The names, numbers, and job descriptions of the various officers are enumerated, along with directions for keeping records. The order in which these figures and their coats of arms will be recorded is carefully outlined. The grands conservateurs of the court will be Charles VI, Philip of Burgundy, and Louis of Bourbon. A list of eleven conservateurs follows, headed by Isabeau’s brother, Louis, Duke of Bavaria, and including Philip’s son, Jean, as well as the king’s brother Louis, Duke of Orleans. Following these will be twenty-four ministers; they will be followed by officers of differing stations. Instructions as to how and when the group will meet and how it will conduct its poetic competitions are also included. After an initial meeting on the first Sunday of February, the competitions will take place monthly with each of the twenty-four ministers taking a turn at hosting the festival.

The institution as described in the charter resembles a chivalric order, organizations intended to unite their members around a common cause—like Louis of Bourbon’s Ordre de l’Escu d’Or, for example, founded in 1368. Such organizations abounded during the medieval period. As we noted, someone associated with the Cour amoureuse produced an ongoing list of the names...
of its members accompanied by illustrations of their arms. This emphasis on arms and the charter’s purpose of “l’honneur, loenge, recommandacion et service de toutes dames et damoiselles” (honor, praise recommendation and service toward all women and young ladies) indicate the institution’s similarity to chivalric orders.28

However, the Cour amoureuse was modeled in part on a particular type of urban confraternity, a literary puys, as well. Like the puys of Valenciennes, Amiens, Arras, Caen, Dieppe, Rouen, and Beauvais, the Cour amoureuse was meant to sponsor poetic competitions. And, like puys, it gathered together different levels of society under its auspices. It reveals a range of social rank among its more than 950 members from the king himself to Jacquemart, “petit bourgeois de Tournai.” As Bozzolo and Monique Ornato have observed, the twenty-four ministres, listed just after the eleven noble conservateurs, represent a recognizable social stratum: “des secrétaires, des gens du Parlement et des magistrats des ‘bonnes villes’ du Nord.” The Cour amoureuse thus promotes this group while reaffirming the primacy of the nobility.29

Although the competitions were limited to men, the Cour amoureuse would use the women of the court as judges. The finished products would be turned over to unspecified ladies, “pour les jugier a leur noble avis et bonne discrecion; lesquelles dames, de leur grace et hautesse, donront deux vergettes d’or, pour couronne et chapel, aux mieux faisans de ce jour” (to judge them according to their noble opinion and good discretion; these ladies, by their grace and honor, will award two golden branches, for crown and chapel, to those doing the best this day).30

With its mix of chivalric and literary references, the Cour amoureuse encodes a multiplicity of possible relationships theoretically susceptible of being activated. Still, Philip of Burgundy’s intent to structure the social relationships of the institution according to his own vision dominates the charter. Although humility and loyalty to a central authority are the qualities that the charter extols—indeed, the qualities the Cour amoureuse was founded to promote—Philip, a tremendously powerful prince, lacked these; he, like Louis of Orleans, was dedicated to expanding his own influence. As we have seen, Philip was lord over territories vast enough to rival those of the King of France, and he put the interests of Burgundy ahead of those of the king, to whom he theoretically owed his primary loyalty. Philip writes his relationship to the king, as he understood it, into the charter, naming himself one of the three grands conserveurs, along with Charles VI and Louis of
Bourbon, placing himself on nearly equal footing with the king. The charter’s narrator Prince, Hauteville, specifies that on the chimney in his chamber the Duke of Burgundy’s arms will hang next to those of the king’s, with the Duke of Bourbon’s to the left. Although as king Charles VI occupied the highest position of the Cour amoureuse, Philip asserts his position right beside him.

In terms of the importance of his own role, then, Philip massively overshadows the Duke of Orleans. Louis, as we have seen, appears among a list of eleven conservateurs, following the three grands conservateurs, but even here, he does not head the pack. He is preceded by Isabeau’s brother, Louis of Bavaria. Philip’s son, Jean sans Peur, also precedes Louis. The Duke of Orleans, son of one king and brother of another, in fact outranked both Louis of Bavaria and Jean by a great margin. Moreover, as brother of the king and his favorite advisor, he was entitled to be ranked ahead of Philip. In a land where disputes over rank might degenerate into violence, placing the Duke of Orleans far behind Philip and his Burgundian allies and family is significant. The preponderance of the Burgundian vision of the Cour amoureuse is further revealed by certain omissions. Orleanist grand maître d’hôtel du roi, Jean de Montaigu, who was executed by Jean sans Peur of Burgundy in 1409, is notably absent. In later years there is no trace of the renowned poet and son of Louis of Orleans, Charles of Orleans—for obvious reasons. Still, the members of the circle of Louis of Orleans were not entirely absent. Orleanists Bureau de Danmartin, patron of Laurent de Premierfait, figures among the members. Humanists Gontier and Pierre Col are included, along with Jean de Montreuil. Charles d’Albret, Guillaume Cousinot, and Guillaume de Tignonville were also there. But the size of the Orleanist circle, relative to the Burgundian circle, only demonstrates all the more effectively who Philip believed to be in charge.

Philip’s control of the Cour amoureuse is additionally manifest in the large number of members hailing from Tournai, a Flemish bonne ville traditionally loyal to the Duke of Burgundy, surpassing in number the contingent from any other town of the kingdom. The wide swath of society from the royal to the relatively humble represented in the Cour amoureuse proclaims the Duke of Burgundy’s extensive power.

The charter, then, describes a Burgundian institution. But why would Philip have helped to create such an institution? There is no reason to discount the charter’s claim that it was drawn up to offer a pleasant pastime during a dark period of plague. Isabeau and Philip, working together, created a document that marginalized Louis of Orleans, for the amusement of those present. In fact, the Cour amoureuse may have elicited a response from the 158 Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria
Duke of Orleans in the form of a poem of 1401 composed by Christine de Pizan. In “Le Dit de la rose,” the god of love sends his messenger, the goddess Loyalty, to speak at a Valentine’s Day gathering, where she invites the Duke of Orleans and his dinner guests to form a new order, the Order of the Rose. This order will be dedicated to honoring women and containing gossip. Everyone present accepts the invitation, and, pleased, Loyalty flies back to Love to tell him the good news. The sleeping narrator of the poem is awakened later in the night, after she has already witnessed the appearance of Loyalty, by a glowing light and a voice that reminds her that physical strength is merely vulgar if not accompanied by inner goodness, “bontez qui viennent de l’ame” (110, line 359). The voice explains that Love is greatly saddened by the rampant slander perpetrated against both women and men. Slander, médire, is a terrible force, a double-edged sword, one that kills both the slanderer and the slandered (112, lines 418–20). To halt the acid-dripping tongues, Love has sent Loyalty to create a new order.

The Cour amoureuse, then, may have been a poetic fiction. And yet, some evidence suggests that it met, as well, or, at least, that it may have been intended to produce poetic competition from time to time when the charter was created. A few scattered pieces of evidence suggest occasional assemblies. Arthur Piaget published in 1902 an item from the accounts of the Hôtel de Ville of Amiens, noting that a certain herald called Jacquemart David had been paid for delivering an announcement from the Prince d’amour that a feast and meeting of the Cour amoureuse was to take place in Paris on April 15, 1410. Another sign can be found in the description of the city of Paris, supposedly written in 1407, where Guillebert de Metz recounts the wonders of the city, among them artists like the diamond carver, Herman, the goldsmith, Willelm, the brass worker, Andry, illuminators, and scribes, like Flamel. He goes on to mention women in trade: female salt-sellers, butchers, carpenters, and other ladies. He then remarks upon Christine de Pizan. Finally, he acknowledges the Prince d’amour, “qui tenoit avec lui musiciens et galans qui toutes manières de chançons, balades, rondeux, virelais et autres dictiés amoureux savoient faire et chanter” (surrounded by musicians and gallants, who knew how to sing all manner of songs, ballads, rounds, virelais, and other love ditties). Finally, a poem composed between 1408 and 1413 by Amé Malingre, member of the Cour amoureuse, describes a scenario wherein the narrator comes across a lady lamenting her vilification. She asks him to see that the complaint she has turned into a poem be presented before Pierre de Hauteville and the other members of the Cour.
amoureuse. Although the itinerary of the Duke of Burgundy never mentions explicitly a meeting of the institution, Philip offered frequent dinners in Paris that may have provided occasions for such gatherings. And as we have seen, the arms of members continued to be added to lists until about 1440, which suggests that even if poetic competitions were not the institution’s main activity, the Burgundians considered it useful enough to bother to support for at least forty years.

Emma Cayley has analyzed poetic debate in late medieval France, a type of competition that “fed on earlier intellectual, legal, and literary structures, and in which an economy of exchange was nourished between debating poets.” Jane Taylor has teased out some of the social significance of medieval poetic competition, an activity that she describes as a means of winning “symbolic capital” for its talented participants. The stake here, as in “any particular field is ‘power,’” she writes, because “a field is an espace de jeu or champ du pouvoir in which players manoeuvre, more or less expertly, to acquire a reward, a symbolic capital, which may be to do with rank, or pecuniary advantage, or merely self-esteem and prestige.” We might posit, then, that in a general sense the charter transcodes the strife between the dukes into a setting of poetic competition. If the Cour amoureuse met from time to time it would have allowed Isabeau and the Burgundians to amass the “symbolic capital” to which Taylor refers. Much activity at the court was already devoted precisely to enhancing prestige: the elaborate étrennes exchanged on New Year’s, the processions and feasts at which rank was strictly followed, the handing out of liversies. Moreover, the relegation of Louis of Orleans to position inferior to that of his cousin, Jean sans Peur, suggests the sort of creative imagining of social structure such spectacles offered. Louis’s inclusion at a relatively low rank would have been more satisfying to Philip and Isabeau than his exclusion, a means of symbolically containing him.

Isabeau and the Cour amoureuse

In this section I consider connections between the roles of political mediator and that of poetic adjudicator within a puy. As I demonstrated in chapter three, Isabeau is frequently portrayed mediating in the chronicles. In addition to chronicles and the royal ordinances that assign her the job of mediating, Isabeau’s reputation for conciliation is noted by Christine de Pizan. In 1401, Christine sought to involve the queen in the debate over the Roman de la Rose by dedicating the collected documents of the exchange to her, praising
the virtue, which “est trouvée en vostre noble entendement” (is found in your noble intelligence). Four years later, when the armies of the Dukes of Orleans and Burgundy faced each other, poised for conflict, Christine wrote an open letter to the queen, “An Epistle to the Queen of France,” detailing Isabeau’s aptness for mediating between the parties and depicting the French supplicating her to come to their aid. “Haulte Dame,” writes the poet,

ne vous soit grief oïr les ramentevances en piteux regrais des adouléz supplians Françoys, a present reampliz d’affliccion et tretresse, qui a humble a plaine de plours crient a vous, leur souveraine et redoubtee Dame, priant, pour Dieu mercy, que humble pitié vueille montrer a vostre beginn cuer leur desolacion et misere, pay cy que prouchine paix entre ces .II. haulz princes germains de sanc et naturelment amis, mais a present par estrange Fortune meuz a aucune contencion, ensemble veuillez procurer et empeter.

[High Lady, do willingly hear the complaint and pitiful regrets of the suffering and suppliant French people now full of affliction and sadness, and who cry with tearful voices to you, their supreme and revered Lady, praying, by the mercy of God, that a humble pity may show to your tender heart their desolation and misery, so that you can proceed and obtain peace soon between these two princes of the same blood and who are loved ones by nature, but who are at present brought to a quarrel by strange Fortune.]42

In the Livre de la cité des dames, also of 1405, Christine emphasizes the queen’s special aptitude for effecting reconciliation, praising the woman “en laquelle n’a riam de cruauté, extorcion ne quelconques mal vice, mais tout bonne amour et benignité vers ses subgés” (in whom is nothing of cruelty, extortion, or any evil vice, but only good love and beneficence towards her subjects).43

However, the allegorical pastoral known as the Pastoralet (ca. 1422), which recounts the Armagnac-Burgundian conflict, is perhaps the most evocative of the representations of Isabeau as mediator for the purposes of this chapter, because it conflates political mediation and poetic adjudication in the character Belligère, a shepherdess, who is meant to represent Isabeau, as the text’s own notes explain. Jane Taylor remarks on the importance of the Pastoralet as evidence about poetic competition but does not expand on what it indicates about Isabeau. I would like to develop here what the allegory suggests about the queen’s possible association with the Cour amoureuse.

The Cour amoureuse 161
Although we cannot use the work to argue that Isabeau literally presided over the Cour amoureuse, the work does strongly support what I have been arguing in this chapter, first, that the idea that Isabeau, mediator between the dukes, would participate in a love court was plausible to her contemporaries, and, second, that adjudicating poetry could be seen as a metaphor for political mediation. The scene thus demonstrates very clearly that literary activity was recognized as a way of dramatizing and symbolically mastering political strife.

The Pastoralet recounts the story of the feud between the Orleanists and the Burgundians, beginning shortly after the death of Philip of Burgundy; the action thus unrolls six or seven years after the founding of the Cour amoureuse. The principal Burgundian in the story is Jean sans Peur. As we have seen, after the death of his father, Philip, Isabeau allied herself with the Duke of Orleans. At Jean’s command Louis of Orleans was assassinated in 1407, and Jean himself was assassinated in 1419. The goal of the Pastoralet is to justify Jean’s assassination of Louis. In the story, thus, Isabeau and Louis are represented in collusion, their political alliance allegorized as a love affair. Catching wind of the affair between his wife and his brother, the shepherd representing King Charles VI asks his cousin, the figure for Jean sans Peur, to murder his treacherous sibling.

But most relevant to this examination of the Cour amoureuse, within the allegory, the shepherds take part in a literary puys, reciting their own compositions before a female judge, Belligère, “qui fu sage / De rime” (who was good with rhyme; 51, lines 496–97). Perhaps Isabeau’s role as judge of the Cour amoureuse was common knowledge. In any case, the story describes the poetic offerings of Florentin (Charles VI), Leönet (Jean sans Peur), Pompeal (Clignet de Bréban), Lupal (Bernard of Armagnac), and, finally, Tristifer (Louis of Orleans). Belligère decides the contest in favor of Tristifer. This choice provokes the narrator to an outcry: the shepherdess, having been swayed by the fact that Tristifer’s poem praises her, is unjust to award him the prize.

In its allegorization of the Orleanist-Burgundian rivalry as, in part, a competition for poetic prestige under the direction of a woman, the Pastoralet argues that Louis of Orleans possessed his power by virtue of his close ties to the king. The king is represented by the queen, who is desirable because she mediates the relationship between the king and his barons, as Christiane Marcello-Nizia has made clear. The allegory is thus an attack on the king, who has wrongly diminished the power of his greatest lord in favor of his
brother. The allegory’s depiction of political strife in terms of poetic competition thus correlates with the activity of the Cour amoureuse, at least as that institution’s charter describes it, and sheds light on its status as a forum for displaying power.

The queen, then, was portrayed by her contemporaries both as a political mediator and a poetic adjudicator. To conclude this section, I would like to consider in more detail the nature of the connection Isabeau and her contemporaries may have imagined between these roles. Both required the skillful performance of arbitration. As we have seen, influential women often took part in mediation, sometimes negotiating, sometimes serving more ritualistic functions in keeping with the inherently peaceful nature attributed them by tradition. Documents recording the peace accords brokered by Isabeau demonstrate an attention to the types of ritualistic elements of reestablishing concord that would have been foregrounded in the literary forum of the Cour amoureuse, as well. Describing the accord of January 1402, a document, written in the voice of the queen, enumerates the actions that restored peace. First the queen called the Dukes of Burgundy and Orleans close to her (Nous Royne, appellasmes prez de nous). Then in the presence of the other princes of the blood, she asked them to state whether they agreed to the terms. Before everyone, they “respondirent l’un après l’autre, qu’ilz les avoient agréables, et promistrent par la foy de leurs corps pour ce baillée ès mains de nous Royné, et aussi l’un à l’autre par leurs mains dextres, les avoir et tenir fermes et estables chacun de sa partie, sans jamès aller ne faire aucunement encontre” (responded one after the other that they agreed to the terms and promised by the faith of their bodies before us, the Queen, and each other, by their right hands, to firmly uphold the terms, each of them, and never break them). In this way, peace was reestablished.

The relationships articulated through its poetic competitions would have transcoded those constantly being reformulated in the turmoil between the Orleanists and the Burgundians. Competitors would have performed the role of lovers through their poems, but a whole infrastructure of other actors would have been involved in a process that eventually produced a temporary winner. In the process, meaning would have been constructed and revised through shifting interrelationships between the different elements of the competition, elements reflecting a whole series of different oppositions: between the prince and the servant, the powerful and the helpless, the loyal and the disloyal, the glorious and the humble, male and female, the central and the marginal. Although the stated purpose of the Cour amoureuse was
to honor women, competition among such a diverse membership for poetic prestige would have allowed a number of potentially conflicting elements to find expression and resolution, including conflicts among individual members of the nobility. Thus the institution would have been a means of staging political division and performatively creating harmony among the divisive factions and translating political conflict to a level where it could be symbolically enacted and authority imposed.

Conclusion

The year of the institution’s founding, 1400, represented a crucial point in the timeframe of what was to become the Orleanist-Burgundian feud. In the years just before the date of the court’s establishment, the danger of armed conflict between the Dukes of Orleans and Burgundy escalated. In this context, the Cour amoureuse appears to be an assertion of their priority issued by Philip and Isabeau. It is interesting to note, however, that Philip raised the stakes on January 1, 1403, when he gathered sixty men together to create the Ordre de l’Arbre d’Or (Order of the Golden Tree), presenting them with clasps, *fermaux*, adorned with a golden tree standing between a white enamel eagle and lion. The words “en loyauté” were spelled out in red enamel across the bottom of each *fermail*. The trait, proclaimed essential for members of the Cour amoureuse, takes on a militaristic tone in this new context. We seem to be witness to a heightened flexing of muscle from Philip, a shift from a symbolic appropriation of power to a menace of genuine military force.

Carol Chattaway argues that the Order of the Golden Tree represented an armed cohort upon which Philip could call when necessary: his “gift of the Order of the Golden Tree on January 1, 1403, should be seen as a clever, appropriate, practical, potentially powerful and timely tactic, innovatively developed in particular circumstances, to harness unusual and unchallengeable military support, dedicated to him, against any move by Orleans seriously to undermine good order in France, as presented by Burgundian control of the French Crown, and particularly to avert or confront any attempt by Orleans to take over the Crown and subvert the legitimate succession, even if Philip had to resort to civil war or to his family, through his planned marriages, taking over the Crown itself to achieve it.” Chattaway’s research reveals that of the sixty members of the Order of the Golden Tree, only thirty-one belonged also to the Cour amoureuse. This suggests, writes Chattaway, that
Philip was seeking a “special network of men he wanted to parade with him, as a show of military strength.”  

The Cour amoureuse, emerging in the beginning years of what was shaping up to be a catastrophic feud, sought to offer a means of articulating and ordering the passions that eventually led to violence. Despite our lack of concrete detail about the institution, the symbolic economy that we glimpse in the charter reveals much about the ways in which violence was imagined and managed in the late Middle Ages, and, because of Isabeau of Bavaria’s role, of how women’s roles in peacekeeping were envisioned. It is well known that Isabeau’s attempts to impose harmony finally came to nought. As it recently has been remarked about the peacemaking strategies of Catherine de Médicis, the *mise en scène* could not ultimately “override reality;” sometimes armed force triumphs, “however symbolically charged the visual and verbal texts, however perfect their performance.” In the end, “reality demonstrated the utmost in brutality and personal ambition.” The contrast between the Cour amoureuse, with its emphasis on creating stability through poetic competition, and the Order of the Golden Tree, with its militaristic purpose, poignantly illustrates the limitations of Isabeau’s attempts at peacekeeping in a world in which armed intervention was the final arbitrator. But the queen’s failure to end the Orleanist-Burgundian feud, a task that no one was able to accomplish until the conflict finally ran its course and came to an end with the Treaty of Arras in 1435, does not diminish the seriousness of her continuous engagement with the problem.