

French Poetry

French poetry is a category of French literature. It may include Francophone poetry composed outside France and poetry written in other languages of France.

Lyric poetry to the 13th century

The 12th century saw the revolution in sexual attitudes that has come to be known as amour courtois, or courtly love (the original term in Occitan is fin'amor). Its first exponents were the Occitan troubadours, poet-musicians of the 12th and 13th centuries, writing in medieval Occitan, of whom some 460 are known by name.¹

Lyric poetry in the 14th century

Allegory and similar conceits abound in much late medieval poetry, as with Guillaume de Machaut, the outstanding musician of his day, who composed for noble patronage a number of narrative *dits amoureux* (short pieces on the subject of love) and a quantity of lyric verse. A talented technician, Machaut did much to popularize and develop the relatively new fixed forms: ballade, rondeau, and *virelai* (a short poem with a refrain).²

Major authors and influences

The art of Clément Marot, at least at the beginning of his career, took its inspiration and the forms to express it from the Grands Rhétoriqueurs, as in the allegorical poem "*Le Temple de Cupidon*" ("*The Temple of Cupid*"). But aspects of humanism in his culture, life at court (a protégé of Marguerite de Navarre throughout his life, he succeeded his father as *valet de chambre* to Francis I in 1527), and, above all, the events of his day gave his works a new dimension. Practitioner of a wide range of forms – including the medieval fixed forms of the ballade and the rondeau, chansons, *blasons* (poems employing descriptive details to praise or to satirize), and elegies – Marot preferred the epistle for its freedom of style and the epigram for its vivacity. With the epistle he reached the summit of the highly subtle art by which he defined himself, a poet of the court and also a Protestant, aspiring to a pure and simple happiness of true religious faith. He wrote his allegorical satire on justice, *L'Enfer* ("Hell"), in 1526 after his brief imprisonment on charges of violating Lenten regulations, and he fled into exile in 1534 to avoid persecution after the Affaire des Placards (in which placards attacking the Mass appeared in several cities and on the king's bedchamber door). His return to Paris in 1537 made him no more prudent; he continued his translations of the Psalms, a brilliant literary achievement, publishing the first collection in 1539. Marot's translation, continued by the Calvinist theologian Theodore Beza, became the Huguenot psalter.³

¹ "Lyric Poetry to the 13th Century", *Encyclopædia Britannica*,
www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Lyric-poetry-to-the-13th-century

² "Lyric Poetry to the 14th Century", *Encyclopædia Britannica*,
www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Lyric-poetry-in-the-14th-century

³ "Major Authors and Influences", *Encyclopædia Britannica*,
www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Major-authors-and-influences#ref22505

Poetry, 18th Century

The emphasis upon reason, science, and philosophy may explain the absence of great poetry in the 18th century. The best verse is that of Voltaire, whose chief claim to renown during most of his lifetime was as a poet. In epic, mock-epic, philosophical poems, or witty society pieces he was preeminent, but to the modern critic the linguistic intensity that might indicate genius is missing.⁴

Romanticism

In general, full-blown Romanticism in France developed later than in Germany or Britain, with a particular flavour that comes from the impact on French writers' sensibilities of revolutionary turmoil and the Napoleonic odyssey. Acutely conscious of being products of a very particular time and place, French writers wrote into their work their obsession with the burden of history and their subjection to time and change. The terms *mal du siècle* and *enfant du siècle* (literally "child of the century") capture their distress. Alfred de Musset took the latter phrase for his autobiography, *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (1836; *The Confession of a Child of the Century*). Most French Romantics, whether they adopted a liberal or conservative attitude or whether they tried to ignore the weight of history and politics, asserted that their century was sick. Romantics often retained the encyclopaedic ambitions of their predecessors, but faith in any simple notion of progress was shaken. Some distinction can be made between the generation of 1820, whose members wrote, often from an aristocratic viewpoint, about exhaustion, emptiness, loss, and ennui, and the generation of 1830, whose members spoke of dynamism – though often in the form of frustrated dynamism.⁵

New directions in poetry

The greatest changes occurred in poetry; the second half of the 19th century is often treated as a period of reaction against Romanticism. The important exception to this rule is Victor Hugo, nearly all of whose major poetry was published after 1850. The three collections *Les Châtiments* (1853; "Chastisements"), *Les Contemplations* (1856; "Contemplations"), and *La Légende des siècles* (1859, 1877, 1883; "The Legend of the Centuries") are linked by their epic quality. Different as they are in content, intention, and tone, each is loosely structured to create an overall unity. *Les Châtiments*, written from exile in the Channel Islands and published clandestinely, is a hymn of hate against the mediocrity, callousness, and greed of Louis-Napoléon (Napoleon III) and the society of the Second Empire, a deluge of brilliantly comic and cutting satire, caricature, and irony, interspersed with outbursts of compassion for the poor and oppressed. The poems are arranged so as to emphasize the darkness of the present and the light of the future, as Hugo proclaims his optimistic belief in the eventual triumph of peace, liberty, and social justice. In contrast to this political saga, *Les Contemplations* embodies Hugo's philosophical attitudes. It presents the poet as prophet and representative of humanity, penetrating the mysteries of creation and recounting the metaphysical truths perceived. *La Légende des siècles* reveals the same urge to prophesy. The poems are a series of historical and mythological narratives, borrowing some of the scientific spirit that informed Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle's work but with none of the same attention to preliminary scholarly research. Together they form not only an intensely personal

⁴ "Drama", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Drama#ref22524

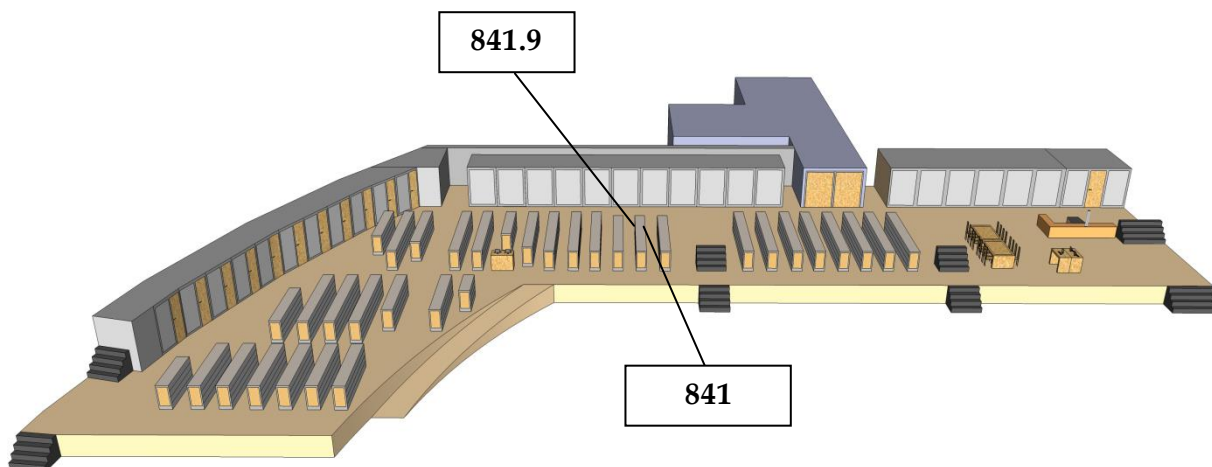
⁵ "Romanticism", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Romanticism#ref22536

and imaginative account of the origins and development of French culture and society but a key text for students of the representation of the European cultural tradition. After the three epic cycles, Hugo returned to writing short lyrics on personal themes, although he never abandoned his role as didactic poet, as the collections he churned out in the 1880s testify.⁶

The Impact of World War I

Valéry, Claudel, and Fargue continued writing poetry throughout this period, as did Breton, Aragon, and Éluard, the latter two both closely connected with the Communist Party. In such books as *Capitale de la douleur* (1926; *Capital of Pain*), Éluard's free verse plays innovatively with traditional ideas of order, focusing at least as much on the rhythms of syntax as on images. The poet's own distinctive blend of poetics and politics is based on the theme of love: a twin allegiance to the beloved woman and the ideals of the larger interrelationships of humanity. Saint-John Perse produced what he himself described as a modern epic of interior journey: *Anabase* (1924; *Anabasis*). Henri Michaux's prose poems in *La Nuit remue* (1934; *The Night Moves*) are a striking example of that difficult genre. René Char's work exalts the mystical forces that reside in the countryside of southern France, with its bare hills and its twisted vegetation. Jules Supervielle's poetry of the 1920s and '30s conjures up the mysterious spirit animating animals, plants, and objects.⁷

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina provides books on this subject to its visitors, inside the main library of the BA, at the ground level (E). You can find them by searching for the Call Numbers on the shelves from: 841 to 841.9



⁶ "From 1850 to 1900", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/From-1850-to-1900#ref22558

⁷ "Poetry", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/art/French-literature/Poetry

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