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Froissart Across the Genres

Donald Maddox, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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Froissart Across the Genres

Edited by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturn-Maddox
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In Jean Froissart we encounter one of the great synthesizing minds of the fourteenth century and one of the most engaging writers of his age. To that age, he was a privileged witness: Born in Hainaut in 1337, he entered as a young man into the service of Queen Philippa of England, the wife of Edward III, and his eight-year period as *clerc de chambre* acquainted him with the English and French nobility and afforded occasions to travel widely in Scotland, France, and Italy; after Philippa's death he enjoyed the favor and protection of a series of nobles in Hainaut and elsewhere, before and after taking holy orders. His literary production covers his entire adult life, while the *Chroniques*, a vast work frequently revised, recast, and expanded, ends with the death of Richard II, four years before Froissart's own death in 1404. Chronicler, lyric poet, and narrative artist, he was renowned in his own time as a leading cultural figure, one whose influence readily transcended national boundaries; "up until quite recent times," one critic observed, he was "the best known and the most widely read French writer in England." To posterity, upon which he often mused, he left an extraordinarily rich assortment of writings. His works offer us an unusually diverse and vivid array of perspectives on this frequently turbulent, always dramatic period, which witnessed not only devastating political upheavals and the ravages of warfare and pestilence but also a vigorous renewal on several fronts in the arts and humanities.

The critical reception of Jean Froissart *écrivain*, however, has long presented something of a paradox. While he has been widely acclaimed as France's greatest chronicler, as author of "the last Arthurian romance," and as a lyric and narrative poet of considerable range, his works themselves have often been judged with severity, occasionally with condescension. A notably different orientation emerged from the Amherst Froissart