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## "THIS VAGUE RELATION:" HISTORICAL FICTION AND HISTORICAL VERACITY IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

By RUTH MORSE

The relation between history and fiction is of paramount interest for students of the novel, but has been neglected by medievalists. Historians of the Middle Ages have in recent years devoted considerable attention to the question, What is truth in medieval historical writing? Beginning from the point of view of the reader of medieval romance, especially "historical" romance, I approach a related question from a different angle: What things authorized and controlled invention in medieval "historical" writing? I put "historical" in quotation marks because the specific body of texts with which I am concerned here lies somewhere between our ideas of history and fiction. The methodological implications of my argument are applicable to a larger range of works, some of which I have dealt with at greater length elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> but I wish to make it clear that in this article I write as a student of the late medieval historical romance and not as a bona fide historiographer. Beginning with the familiar problem of romances which claim to be histories, in Part I I return to antiquity in search of reasons. In Part II I briefly show what we gain by a recreation of the context of historical writing, and I end with some general reflections on the importance of certain kinds of background study for the understanding of medieval generic categories.

### I

There is a certain puzzle for readers of romances which claim to be true, or, at least, historical. Their claim tends to come in two forms. One is the appeal to a particular authority or book, as for example, when Geoffrey of Monmouth claims that his history is authorized by a book in the ancient British tongue lent to him by his friend Walter; when Boccaccio quotes Theodontius in the *Genealogia*; when Chaucer relies upon Lollius. Since this kind of claim can be checked, we suspend our suspicions of forgery, ill-will, or, more sympathetically, *jeu d'esprit*, until we have exhausted the potential sources and, sometimes, our patience. The second claim is to a general knowledge of events, when a reference sends us to other sources to see how accurately the past is being reported, by Benoît, or by one of the authors of the romances of Troy, or by Froissart. Although authors may be cited by name, in this sort of historical romance the author relies upon an assumption of common knowledge. With this kind of romance we tend to check the narrative against other reports, to search for historical parallels

(as for *Horn* or *Havelok*) or references to actual campaign routes which heroes follow (as for some of the Arthurian romances). There is an empirically based tendency to conclude that in the more sophisticated romances a reference to historical authority is a sure sign that what we are reading is a fiction. Indeed, we have two ways of dealing with such appeals: either they are as conventional to romance as the May opening is to a dream vision, or they are instances of the naiveté of an unhistorical imagination. In neither case do we ask what medieval authors mean by their claim.

That there is a confusion in our minds can be shown if we look briefly at a familiar distinction as it was drawn by a well known scholar, W.P. Ker. Ker, and many others, liked to divide medieval narrative into Epic and Romance. "Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy."<sup>2</sup> This sounds rather dated now, but we have only to think of John Finlayson's introduction to the alliterative *Morte Arthure* to realise how current this kind of division is, though we might now find scholars less keen to emphasize the "mystery and fantasy".<sup>3</sup> Ker saw Epic as an exercise of the dramatic imagination upon history and stressed the interplay of heroic characters over "the historic importance or the historic results of the events with which" poets dealt (p.20). This line of argument led Ker to a logical difficulty about the relation of Epic to historical veracity. "The strange thing is that this vague relation should be so necessary to heroic poetry . . . . Heroic poetry is not, as a rule, greatly indebted to historical fact for its material. The epic poet does not keep record of the great victories or the great disasters. He cannot, however, live without the ideas and sentiments of heroism that spring up naturally in periods like those of the Teutonic migrations" (pp.25-6). Now Ker's sense that it is the interplay of characters which makes good epic poetry depends on the idea that the characters are the invention of the poet. For Ker, the significance of the events depends on the poet's and his audience's belief that they are historical. Then, however, he leaves the problem of what the "vague relation" between characters and events might be to posit a literary category which he calls Epic. Authors are praised or blamed according to the closeness of their achievement to the kind of poem best represented by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, and others. At one extreme the genre can be defined by actual formal rules abstracted from classical Epic, so that the 1584 Scots *Judith* is an epic because it is in verse, opens with an invocation, and begins *in medias res*. At the other extreme, Saints' Lives or Romances define Epic by exclusion. This exclusion reinforced the separation of what seemed to be quite obviously different kinds of writing. Poems are epics for Ker, Finlayson, and others, when their characters (usually men) espouse heroic values, and when their plots stand in a "vague relation" to history. The problems of this approach are obvious. The argument is circular: a narrative is categorized as epic when it corresponds to an idea of Epic built on a number of works which may or may not describe *themselves* as epics. The kinds of adjectives with which such compositions are praised, words like "virile", "vigorous", etc., reveal certain underlying

prejudices about the superiority of Epic. This kind of classically-based literary category-distinction will not do. Poems like the *Siege of Jerusalem* or the *Destruction of Troy* at one boundary, *Guy of Warwick* at another, break the bounds of Ker's categories; and the prose histories, or historical romances, cannot be accommodated at all. Medieval historical writing cannot be made to fit ideal literary types. Moreover, literary categories do not deal with the problem of what medieval men meant when they said that they were writing true tales about the past.

Because medieval historians had no sense of their writing as purely independent literary creation, it is not surprising that the application of purely literary generic categories obscures rather than illuminates medieval attitudes toward "true tales about the past". The relevant context for medieval historical writing is to be found in antiquity, though modified to some extent by Christian revelation. The idea of history, rather than Romance or Epic, provides the appropriate intellectual context for an analysis of historical writing. In antiquity the theory and practice of history, as the theory of fiction, were tied together by rhetorical considerations about narratives generally.

For those of us who are not classical scholars, Herodotus and Thucydides are likely to loom as the models upon which ancient history was based. This was not, however, the view of writers who succeeded them. The kinds of ethnographic and other research which Herodotus attempted seemed to later historians methodologically impracticable. In this they were right. In an age without documents, reliance on traditions of hearsay seemed to be the only memory of the past. When documents did begin to appear, they brought with them intractable problems of forgery. Methods such as numismatic, archaeological, or even stylistic analysis upon which our historians depend did not yet exist. Given this reliance upon hearsay (which would not do for legal evidence, after all) it is no wonder that Herodotus founded no school. Nor was Thucydides much more successful in providing a standard model. His attempt to solve Herodotus's problem of evidence had been to write about his own times, about events which he had witnessed himself, or events about which other living witnesses could be consulted. But if *The Peloponnesian Wars* established the model of how a historical subject should be chosen, it did not establish an accepted standard of how historians should proceed. Thucydides' idea of "scientific" history did not take, though he made war (political history) the paramount subject and the reportorial the paramount style. It is for style that Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* X) recommends both Herodotus and Thucydides, whom he matches with Livy and Sallust respectively in a certain indication that his eye is not on veracity of content.

The explanation for the failure of historians after Herodotus and Thucydides to follow their standards is given by historiographers in terms of the rise of rhetoric as the controlling discipline in classical education:

Serious study of psychology and morality passed to the philosophers; history became either pedestrian fact-finding or a vehicle for political propaganda and

emotional appeal; a writer's success was measured by his rhetoric and pathos, his entertainment value, rather than by truth and understanding . . . . In a formal sense, history had quickly fallen victim to the great curse of post-fifth-century Greek culture-rhetoric. The emergence of oratory as an art-form in itself was but one example of a pervasive evil. Another was manifest in education; Isocrates triumphed over Plato and rhetoric was elevated above philosophy in the curriculum of the higher schools which became a feature of Hellenistic and Roman Greece. The servant had become master: the manner in which an idea was expressed became more important than the idea itself.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Nancy Streuver writes:

In the Hellenistic period the rhetorical historians forego their historical purpose (of confronting their reconstructed reality and extracting meaning from it alone) to create a tragic or pathetic scene which would move their readers to pity or terror.<sup>5</sup>

But before turning to rhetoric, one must attempt to identify the distinguishing features of late classical history, since the works of men like Lucan, Sallust, and Suetonius were to become the agreed models for medieval writers.

The forms, conventions and style by which we recognize that a long narrative is meant as "history" are readily identifiable. The author announces his subject, which is, following Thucydides' restriction of subject and time, almost always taken from the recent past, and, ideally, events which the author experienced. It begins at the beginning, recounts the political and military deeds of those men (occasionally, though exceptionally, women) who influenced the course of events which were of importance to the city or state, describes anecdotal material which illuminates the effects of those men and events upon the city or state, draws from this narration lessons of individual and corporate behaviour, and ends. We might want to distinguish "biography" as a recognizable subset. The historian's style is recognizable by its verisimilitude and seriousness. Verisimilitude is not the same as true reporting, and no one would ever assume that the historian presented the actual words of the speakers whose famous orations he reported. As early as Herodotus, and with especial brilliance in Thucydides, the writing of speeches was a highly esteemed part of the historian's art. Part of his skill was his invention of words appropriate to the argument which had been propounded. No one disputed the historian's right to attribute his own words to a historical speaker. Erasmus still took this for granted when he advised potential writers on "copiousness".<sup>6</sup>

The right of invention is an important point, though one which may seem obvious. The principle which justifies it is that it is the recreation of the argument rather than the orator's personal

style which counts. Of equal importance, the convention of unspecified invention was not limited to words. The situation in which they were spoken, with all its circumstantial detail, was equally open to literary modification according to the skill of the writer. Indeed, his skill was measured according to his manipulation. To put it sympathetically, historians were praised for their ability to reduce the flux of the past to an ordered, patterned account. In this, the classical historian was close to the poet, a conjunction which was not unnoted at the time.<sup>7</sup> To Cicero, Herodotus was both the father of history and the father of lies, and no one seems to have found this strange until Petrarch.<sup>8</sup> "History" meant, and still means, a subject; it implied a style, as Dionysius of Halicarnassus pointed out in his *Letter to Pompey*.<sup>9</sup> For Dionysius, however, this distinction was only a convenience for literary discussion, and was not developed either by him or by later theorists. History was supposed to record what had happened in a manner which was verisimilar, but a good deal more modification was permitted, even expected, than might be predicted from the writers' pronouncements. The truth was embroidered with a certain amount of plausible invention even when the author did not mean to slant or distort the past. Indeed, his invention might be the best way he could find to make his conception of the past convincing. In the hands of a man who was trying to justify the present, this could, and did, result in something which has for us the most unpleasant connotations: forgery and propaganda are but two of the names by which we designate partisan accounts of the past. But before our empirical and positivist age, the case for the historian was different. It was almost impossible for untrue history to be falsified where there was no exterior criterion of verifiability beyond the memory and judgement of the reader. The plausibility or inconsistency of single, or contradictory accounts provided no obvious means of proof. The reader was in the position of having to make judgements about the truth or falsehood of a historical account on literary grounds.

Given that the "facts" of any history might be assailed, its value as moral and political example provided its defence.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes tacitly, but often explicitly, historians claimed that it was right to remember the deeds done in the past and the fates of groups of men in order to learn to guide our own conduct and to give us a sense of the fortunes of the world. It is to be found over and over in ancient, and, as we shall see, in medieval histories. It occurs in Polybius, the lone follower of Thucydides' "scientific" method:

But all historians . . . have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History, and that the surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune, is to recall the calamities of others.<sup>11</sup>

That this attitude continued for over 1,000 years is one of the themes of Professor Hexter's essay on the education of the aristocracy in the Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> It is the attitude attacked by

Macchiavelli, who suggests that there are more useful lessons to be learned.

The moral claim of history was twofold. Since examples gain force because they are true, history may be said to be superior to poetry. Since true examples are more forceful than precepts alone, history may be said to be superior to moral philosophy. While neither of these claims was to go unchallenged, the poets and philosophers having rather a lot to say for themselves, they remained commonplace arguments.<sup>13</sup> This covering law that truth is morally superior to fiction, and, concomitantly, the fear that fiction might be by its very nature corrupting, was to appear and reappear in classical thought. Plato discusses the problem in the *Republic* (II, 378), where we come across the kind of argument which was to be important throughout the Middle Ages, and one which was echoed in the eighteenth century by Dr Johnson in *Rambler* no. 4. This argument stressed the moral force of a fictional example which is believed to be true, though it is a refinement which contradicts the basic premise. Plato wanted certain versions of the past (e.g. that no citizen ever quarreled with another citizen) to be presented to his citizens as a true report in order to influence their behaviour. Johnson repeatedly stressed the importance of poetic justice. The implication of this kind of use of the "past" is that the report may be manipulated on moral grounds, a sort of morally inspired forgery. This rewriting or invention of stories which were to be presented as historical was to be particularly important in Christian Europe in the writing of saints' lives and the material now known as the Apocryphal Gospels. Though we usually call these tales "pious frauds", they belong to recognizable historical categories.

The right of invention was important not only to historians, but to poets, whose source material was traditionally historical. Since their use of plausible invention was so much more obvious than the use made by historians, and since it is literary theory which survives, we have considerable comment on the problem as it applied to writers of Epic and Tragedy. Poets had not only to choose among a variety of versions of what had happened in the past, but they had also to fill in the details about which report was silent. Different dramatists gave Iphigenia different fates, or disagreed over the circumstances of Orestes' revenge. Examples of poets who contradicted all the traditional accounts also exist, as in the *Medea* of Euripides: that Medea should murder her own children in order to ruin Jason was Euripides' invention.<sup>14</sup> Virgil certainly invented Aeneas's adventure with Dido; Macrobius's *Saturnalia* preserves for us some of the adverse comment which this manipulation of history aroused. There seem to be two criteria to apply to the works of the poets. First, the more remote the period, the more permissible (and of course the more necessary) plausible invention became. Secondly, the manipulation of the past was necessary to the poet because it was the way in which he brought out the moral truths which were his real concern. To later readers, however, the inventions of Euripides and Virgil looked as authentic, or even more so, than many other accounts.

Here again we are tending by implication to a position where invention is justified by the ends of the work, and morally inspired fiction becomes acceptable. In a culture where the "true" facts are known, the inspired fiction can be seen for what it is. When the surrounding cultural facts have been lost, the fiction may take the place of the truth. The interpretation of Dares and Dictys throughout the Middle Ages as the eye-witness accounts they pretend to be is an example of a problem which classical thinkers had anticipated.<sup>15</sup>

Worries about fictions which look like history are found not only in formal discussions but in asides in the writing of philosophers and theorists. Julian the Apostate wrote:

It would be fitting for us to make acquaintance with those histories which are written about deeds actually done in the past; but we must deprecate those fictions put forth by previous writers in the form of history, that is, love stories, and, in a word, all such stuff.<sup>16</sup>

We may wish that Julian had given us more than "all such stuff" to refer to the fictions he deprecated, but it is clear that he was aware of the distinction between history as substance (deeds actually done in the past) and a style of writing which is historical (in the form of history). This distinction seems to have escaped the writers of Rhetoric books: history as substance and history as style appeared as one word, without clarification, in the manuals which the Middle Ages inherited from antiquity. We are left with the assumption that writers who have something important to say (i.e. some moral end) will use the past properly. The rest is a waste of time. The difficulty of distinguishing the convincing from the true is acknowledged but unresolved.<sup>17</sup>

Any consideration of the Arts of Poetry (or Rhetoric) among medievalists is likely to bring with it a certain confusion, since we tend to identify the term with those texts edited by Edmond Faral.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, textbooks from Cicero onwards which deserve this appellation. It is only in the last few years that the assumptions underlying these texts, and, in fact, the texts themselves, have been made available to readers who are put off by the long columns in Migne.<sup>19</sup> This recent work, which supersedes that of such pioneers as Baldwin and Atkins,<sup>20</sup> helps to reorient our view of what medieval writers believed about the theory of narrative by showing not only that they had such theories, but by showing how differently their theories were organized. This is not literary criticism, but education and the organization of knowledge: literature (as we think of it) is not cut off from other forms of writing and speaking. Epic shades into Romance or biography, or the three into Lives of Saints, without any rigorous exclusive claims.

Roman rhetoric is homogeneous enough that we can generalize about its precepts and be certain that we can find examples of a common tradition in the pages of Cicero, Quintilian, or the Auctor ad Herennium. This same tradition was preserved throughout the Middle Ages whenever scholars wrote about Rhetoric; and since Grammar, Rhetoric, and Dialectic form the Trivium, the axioms of



the Ciceronian tradition were widespread indeed. We are interested in what the rhetoricians had to say about narration. Cicero, in the *De Inventione*, defined narration as "an exposition of events that have occurred or are supposed to have occurred" (*Narratio est rerum gestarum aut ut gestarum expositio* [I, xix]). The Latin indicates a technical term which is hidden in translation: *res gesta* and its derivatives in the European vernaculars had a particularity of meaning which we tend to neglect, whether it be history or law.<sup>21</sup> In the *Ad Herennium* (I, viii) representation is subdivided three ways. The first two are strictly congruent with political and forensic oratory and need not concern us. They include the discussion for the reason of the case at issue and digression for the purpose of comparison, *ad hominem* attack, or amplification. The third division deals with narration for its own sake. This canonic analysis is to be found with slight modifications in rhetorical works from Priscian to John of Garland, and remains recognizable in the last two chapters of Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*.<sup>22</sup> There is some critical disagreement over what Cicero meant when he said that his three parts included both events and persons. He described three kinds of representation of events. *Fabula* is a narration which is neither true nor verisimilar, that is, you could not mistake it for something which had happened. Often, *fabulae* contain morals, as in the fables of Aesop. Secondly, *argumentum* is a fictitious narrative which is verisimilar. It is associated with the style of representation used by comedy, and with hypothetical cases in actual law suits. Thirdly, *historia* is a verisimilar account of actual events. About the persons represented Cicero says very little beyond telling us that they show their mental attitudes through their conversation and their acts; the subject had been covered in some detail by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*. Ker's idea that Epic gives us human beings owes more to the ethos created by Bradley than to the kind of creation which Cicero probably meant.

What is important is that the rhetoric manuals thus reinforced, in what must be to modern eyes rather an unexpected corner, the idea of *historia* as a category both of style and substance which we have already discovered in the practice of the historians themselves. The assumption basic to the culture is that the governing category is "writing" itself, rather than the distinct categories we make of "history" and "literature". In antiquity, history might be well or badly written in verse or prose, but its style was to be evaluated on the same kinds of grounds which applied to Epic or Tragedy. This is why we find Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland listing history as a kind of narrative used by Tragedy, Comedy, and the Church.<sup>23</sup> The amalgamation of these three is more natural than it would be starting from the point of view of modern literary criticism, since the description of writing begins from the point of view which uses Rhetoric to organize formal public speaking. That history was seen as one of the kinds of persuasive writing meant that whoever did it, it was susceptible to the rules which the rhetoricians applied to all kinds of composition. The kinds of exercise which the Rhetoricians set in their schools were employed as a matter of course by classical writers. The description of a character, the throes of a difficult decision, the defence of a course taken - these set scenes appeared and reappeared, creating

practical precedents for the Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, this freedom to manipulate speeches is one which historians discussed as a theoretical issue while continuing to do as they had always done. "Justin" explains one of his own embellishments of his model as follows:

His [Mithradates'] speech, on this occasion, I have thought of such importance that I insert a copy of it in this brief work. Trogius Pompeius has given it in the oblique form, as he finds fault with Livy and Sallust for having exceeded the proper limits of history, by inserting direct speeches in their works only to display their own eloquence.<sup>25</sup>

While "Justin's" disagreement with Trogius Pompeius raises numerous questions about his attitudes to authority and evidence, it certainly points towards "normal" expectations.

This view of invention should help to explain why speeches in literature were for so long naturally, that is, habitually, written as rehearsals of arguments or statements of position rather than as expressions of the character's inner psychological state. This is not for a moment to suggest that literary characterization as we understand it did not exist in antiquity or in the Middle Ages; it is to attempt to identify the norms. And the norm of characterization, as those who teach other medieval literature than such exceptional authors as Chaucer know, continued to be defined from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to Erasmus's *De Copia* by age and status and not by any of those gratuitous idiosyncrasies which make us think that the description is of that particular person and of him only. This is also particularly frustrating for readers of medieval biographies, who long to hear something particular, anything individual about the protagonists, whose deeds of war or sanctity have inspired an author to preserve their memory.

The normal expectations which the Middle Ages inherited from Antiquity derived from classical texts of several kinds. In addition to such models of history writing as Lucan, Sallust, and Suetonius, medieval writers referred to the "historians" Virgil, Statius, or Dares and Dictys. They were not unable to distinguish history from "poetry" but believed the historical parts of Epics to be extractable by the acute reader. Important Roman histories were amalgamated and translated at an early date as *Li Fet des Romains*.<sup>26</sup> In these models medieval writers found the conventions of subject, style, and set scenes which belonged to the writing of history. For theory and prescription, the rhetoric manuals provided approval of the use of a serious plain style for historical narratives, and made it the normal prose style. Because the *artes* were not analytical, underlying questions about the manipulation of historical facts, the difficulties of research, even the difference between history and not-history, could all be ignored.

From the distrust of Antiquity for mere fiction, that is, stories or anecdotes told without any kind of exemplary purpose, the Middle Ages inherited a serious prejudice against the writing of any long

narrative which was fictive unless it was clearly not verismilar. This view pervades medieval thought from the report that Apollonius of Tyana disallowed fictions that were not obviously *fabulae* to the preoccupations of Boccaccio. In part theorists were afraid of not being able to tell, and of the discrediting effect of suspicion.<sup>27</sup> This contempt for fiction was a given of Western culture well into the period when we would think that novel writing was respectable: novels are full of examples of heroines who rail against the reading of novels. The idea that literature which indulges the fancy is corrupting died hard. To put it simply, imagine a medieval author beginning his story by saying that it was neither true nor authorized: it's an absurdity. The slow development of a self-consciously independent historical mode has been charted by Roberto Weiss,<sup>28</sup> and its application to literary studies is made in *The Better Part of Valor* by Robert Adams.<sup>29</sup> Both these scholars have concentrated on the Humanists. We shall now turn to the late Middle Ages and have a look at the type of book which delighted Ariosto and Dr Johnson, however much it enraged Humanist and neo-Classical theorists.

## II

By applying these insights into the rhetorical organization of history established in antiquity, hitherto puzzling attitudes on the part of self-styled "historians" become understandable. Our loss of generic context has encouraged the reading of historical fictions as "inferior romances". The result of the identification of medieval conventions and intentions will be that we cease to criticize these works for being on the one hand unpoetic, flat, and essentially boring, and on the other hand, fantasies which wreak havoc with the facts of the historical past.

I should perhaps stress that I omit annalists and chroniclers from consideration here. Nor will I discuss the problems of chronology for historians whose inherited documents were mainly pagan and had to be accommodated to a historiography which was emphatically Christian, or the extreme importance of consideration of levels or kinds of truth to resolve the conflicting books of the Scriptures which vexed medieval exegetes.<sup>30</sup> There is one important related argument, however, which must be indicated, though it will involve a brief digression.

In the context of Saints' Lives, Martyrologies, and Apocryphal Gospels, something of a double standard of truth was tolerated, and a certain amount of invention was accepted in the creation of exemplary stories in order to encourage the faithful. The writers did their best to avoid terms like "forgery" or "deception" while they "filled in" accounts that were missing. Here we should refer back to the Platonic approval of fictions presented as history where it is a question of inculcating correct moral doctrines among the populace. That writers were in large measure aware of what was being done can be seen in prefaces which indicate a certain self-consciousness. To take three examples: first, there is the preface to one of the Apocryphal Gospels which says, "The truth of this

statement I leave to the author . . . and the faith of the writer; for myself, while pronouncing it doubtful, I do not affirm that it is clearly false."<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the author of an extravagant *Life of St. Gregory* concludes a list of increasingly more implausible miracles by saying that even if these events did not happen, they are true anyway.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, Petrarch, in the letter to Boccaccio in which he indicates what he has done with the Tale of Griselda, makes a joke about the truth depending on the author, who is, of course, Boccaccio himself.<sup>33</sup> The effects of this widespread manipulation of homiletic and religious material were to provide examples of the rewriting of the sacred past which were obviously important to historians of the profane past.<sup>34</sup> The existence of these accounts must have reinforced the rhetorical and manipulative methods of medieval historians of all kinds.

If no formal medieval discussion of the elements of history exists, the conventions are obvious enough when once one begins to compare historical poems to each other and to prose histories and "biographies". Just as autobiographies have traditionally begun with the subject's antecedents, working up to "I was born", so there are certain set pieces for the writer of history. History begins at the first chronological moment appropriate to what will be narrated; neither with the Creation (as in Universal History or Chronicle) nor *in medias res* (as in Epic). The preface, the analysis of character, speeches, battles, heroic actions, and moments of difficult decision, provide the historian with formal places where he might show his skills. Several of these "set pieces" are considered by Peter Burke in his succinct little book, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*.<sup>35</sup>

Historical prefaces provide a crucial example, as it is from what the writer says in his preface that we ought to be able to recognize his intention. Prefaces recall how right it is to remember the deeds of men of the past ("Hystoria est res gesta ab etatis nostre memoria remota", as John of Garland put it). While some prefaces simply state this as a given, others remind us that the reasons for remembrance are to preserve the knowledge of whence we came, and to teach us how to govern our conduct. Laȝamon decided, "þat he wolde of Engle þa aeðelaen tellen / wat heo ihoten weoren & wonene heo comen / þa Englene londe aereſt ahten."<sup>36</sup> Blind Hary laments that we do not remember often enough: "Our antecessowris that we suld of reide / And hald in mynde thar nobille worthi deid / We lat ourslide throw werray sleuthfulness, / And castis ws euir till vthir besynes."<sup>37</sup> Raoul Lefèvre stresses a commitment to restore his hero's reputation.<sup>38</sup> When authors move from the purposes of history to the citation of sources it is because they are historians with scruples, even though their scruples are different from ours.

To take only one other historical set piece, consider the speech-before-the-battle, when the king (or war leader) addresses his troops. Such speeches really were made, but in medieval historical literature they are the product of the historical imagination. Just as Thucydides gave Pericles the words of the Funeral Oration, so medieval writers delighted in invented oratory, from Einhard's Charlemagne to Thomas More's Richard III. Thomas Wright printed an extract from an early chronicle of London in which we

can discern the alliterative lines in which the poet who was the chronicler's source wrote Henry V's speech before Agincourt.<sup>39</sup> The chronicler gave up turning the poem into prose, so some of the poem survives. If we compare Henry's speech to the ones Froissart or Shakespeare gave him, they are, of course, different. All three are written in more or less the same level, or style of language: the historical. Otherwise they could not have been so easily adapted. Style is a key to meaning.

The question arises: how are we to understand "a verisimilar narration of events which actually happened" if it is clear that certain topoi determine what is worth writing about? And, further, what happens when the demand that certain things are to be written about cannot be satisfied by the memory or the record (such as it is) of what actually happened? As in antiquity, medieval historical writers accepted a certain amount of decoration, of plausible invention. The audience for which a particular historical work was intended may have determined how much a history writer manipulated his material. William of Newburgh's anger with Geoffrey of Monmouth was not that he had "embroidered" or "filled in" the British past, but that he had done it to such an extreme degree - and in Latin. Works explicitly intended for a non-scholarly audience seem to have had more latitude than those meant for scholars. This hypothesis is supported by the various translations (or adaptations) made of Benoît's Troy history. In its original verse form it is "popular history" at its best. Then Guido made something more scholarly of it; his Latin prose pruned Benoît's more obvious extravagances (though not all, since Guido had no external criterion of verification and had to rely largely on common sense and literary judgment), added classical references of his own to indicate his learning, and supplied us with moral reflections upon what was to be learned from the past. Of course modern literary critics found Guido less poetic, less delightful than Benoît.

When the English poets returned Guido's history to the vernacular, they took many of his scholarly reflections out again.<sup>40</sup> But I am convinced that they thought they were preserving the essence of his true account of the past. The substance was reliable even if the accidents were disputable. The line between history and story, so obvious and so important in our modern minds, is so difficult to find in the Middle Ages that one may sometimes despair of finding it at all. Perhaps the search for "a line" is itself mistaken. A brief analogy from our modern experience of reading historical fiction may be illuminating. When we read good novels about historical personages or events (Renault on Alexander, Vidal on Julian, or Yourcenar on Hadrian), our suspension of disbelief is mixed with curiosity mounting to irritation when from time to time during the narrative we begin to wonder if what we are reading is true or not, and are forced to rely only on our own literary judgment. We are at the great advantage (though the novelists may not think so) of being able to compare a given interpretation with historical sources. Sometimes a list of the ones the novelist has used is provided. Modern writers are thus bound by stricter, more learned audiences than were their medieval predecessors, who would certainly have resisted the identification. Yet it may be possible

to isolate more technical terms in medieval "historical fiction" than the three which I have already indicated in discussing the rhetoric of antiquity. Words like *geste* provided certain kinds of "cues" to guide a medieval reader's interpretation of the truth status of what he was reading. But the spectrum of historical writing is very wide, and includes a long period. Two kinds of tangible benefits accrue from an interpretation of medieval historical writing as proceeding from the rhetorical organization of history.

In late medieval France there was a long-lived, and highly influential vogue for histories of the sort which I have been depicting, when many early *chansons de geste* were modernized and turned into prose accounts, and a large number of new histories were written. If we take the latter first, Froissart provides us with a famous example. The *Chronicles* have been called nostalgic and romantic because of their focus on *gestes*, which, far from being a condemnation, is exactly what one would expect of a man who took seriously the two-fold historical task of preserving the deeds of great men and providing an example for the future. Froissart modelled his account according to those set pieces which were standard in his genre: characters of great men, difficult decisions, actions, and especially heroism in battle. Some of his scenes are so beautifully written, so very convincing, that we may not realize how much they conform to literary expectations: indeed, Froissart's own perceptions were no doubt determined by such expectations. The description of the battle of Crécy is a fine example of this. There is little of modern warfare here; his main concern is the behaviour of the great men who were there. Comparison of the successive versions of Froissart's work shows that his changes consistently tended to make his history conform to ideas of what History should be, both in style and content. His latest editor remarks, "Le souci littéraire tend vers un réalisme autre que celui de l'exactitude historique . . ." <sup>41</sup> In the former category, the *mises en prose*, those books which we call the historical romances, there is a similar moulding of actual recorded events to individual exploits, and from deeds themselves to style and values of behaviour. <sup>42</sup> Their lack of aesthetic appeal has led to neglect by modern literary critics, and their utter unreliability as documents has earned them the scorn of modern historians, but they have a great deal to reveal.

That many of these fifteenth-century writers saw themselves as historians is evident from their prefaces, the form and matter of their books. The large libraries of men like Louis de Bruges, Jean de Wavrin (himself among the most interesting of the writers), Philippe and Charles of Burgundy, were used as we would use research libraries today. From their books authors (some of whom were actually their employees, as it were) modernized and rewrote the old accounts. Jean Wauquelin, Raoul Lefèvre, and David Aubert were three translator/authors of great popularity and influence. The fifties and sixties were a peak time of composition. The method was to follow a major historical outline, rationalize conflicting sources according to ideas of probability and verisimilitude, and glorify the houses of the rich and powerful. In France these

historical romances were turned into prose. In England verse was still being used, although by the late fifteenth century prose was coming into its own at last. The justifying principle was the exemplary value of the past. Caxton was typical when, in his preface to his translation of *The Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prynce Charles the Grete* he wrote, ". . . the thynges passed dyuersley reduced to remembrance engendre in vs correction of vnlaful lyf. For the werkes of the auncient and olde peple ben for to gyue to vs ensauple to lyue in good & vertuuous operacions digne & worthy of helth, in folowyng the good and eschewyng the euyl."<sup>43</sup>

It is surely one of the ironies of literary history that the masterpiece of these Burgundian French histories should have been composed in English. The History of Arthur was written at the end of the period in which historical romances belonged to high culture. A generation later the campaign of the Humanists might well have prevented it from ever being written. Indeed, had Caxton not been interested in Burgundian-style narratives, Malory's book might have fallen into the oblivion which was the fate of most of its contemporaries.

Caxton thought of Malory's work as historical, in the sense of "historical" which I have been developing, and he classified the *Morte Darthur* with his two recent histories of Godfrey of Boulogne and of Charlemagne. Malory enabled him to complete a trilogy of books about the Christian worthies, as indeed he points out. With a degree of scepticism, along with a publisher's readiness to encourage his readers to think whatever would redound to the credit of the book, Caxton indicates some of the problems which surrounded the historical existence of Arthur. He leaves the reader to discriminate the good from the evil: this is the exemplar theory, and is a very different thing from making a category distinction about the true and the false. A comparison of Caxton's book and other histories of the period shows immediately that he meant it to be, like them, narrative history. The kinds of editorial work which he did increase this impression, as Professor N.F. Blake has shown.<sup>44</sup> This background of historical writing applies also to the didactic burlesque of *Petit Jehan de Saintr *, which assumes a coherent shape once its relations are recognized.

The gains from a reconsideration of generic boundaries in medieval historical writing are considerable. An increased sense of the complexity and latitude of medieval ways of patterning the past should enable scholars better to weigh the balance between adherence to source and the individual imagination. It should stop us from criticizing long patches of historical poems because they are boringly copied out of books, lack the exciting imagery we expect of "poetry", and seem in many ways tedious and repetitive. Conversely, our awareness of the rights of historians to plausible invention, and our awareness that there were different standards of acceptability for different audiences should stop us from criticizing passages of obvious invention, and should make us wary of dismissing something as "obvious" invention before we have made some rather careful distinctions about invention and tone. It should show us that there might be reasons for the authors of historical poems to use a steady line which does not call attention

to itself. The aa/ax line of the alliterative histories may be the equivalent of Barbour's or Andrew of Wintoun's octosyllabic couplets. There is just no point in blaming a writer for failing to do what he never intended to do. A consideration of the "vague relation" helps us to recover some basic assumptions underlying medieval writers' intentions, which must always be to the good when we are looking at a culture so far removed from us in so many ways. It should send us outward to the vocabulary used for the law, as in Pecok, or for religious persuasion. Finally, as ever, an awareness of what the important questions were for the Middle Ages helps us to see to what subsequent generations reacted, to recognize continuities which extend into the seventeenth century and beyond.



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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Historical Fiction in Fifteenth Century Burgundy", *MLR* 75 (1980) pp.48-64. An analysis of a single historical romance will appear in *MLR* 78 (1983).
- <sup>2</sup> *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, 1908) p.4.
- <sup>3</sup> *Morte Arthure* (London, 1967) esp. pp.3-11, where Professor Finlayson replaces Epic with *Chanson de geste*, one of the three "classes" of Ker's Epic. See Ker, *Epic and Romance*, p.6.
- <sup>4</sup> Moses Finley, *The Ancient Greeks* (Harmondsworth, 1966) p.114.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1970) p.24. Historians were not always inhibited by their education: fear also played a part. Sidonius Apollinaris declined to write history because "to tell lies is disgraceful; to tell the truth dangerous". (*Poems and Letters*, ed. and trans. W.B. Anderson (Cambridge, Mass., 1965) p.148.)
- <sup>6</sup> *De Duplici Copia verborum ac rerum* (3rd ed. [with Erasmus's final revisions] Basel, 1540) pp.323-4: "Ad hanc formam praecipue pertinet schema Διαλογισμός, id est, sermocinatio, quoties uniuersum sermonem accommodamus, aetati, generi, patriae, uitae [,] instituto, animo, moribusque congruentem. Nam huiusmodi sermones in historia licet affingere. Vnde tot Thucydidis, Salustii, Liuii, orationes effinguntur & epistolae & apophthegmata. Demum & cogitationes, ueluti hominis secum loquentis, quanquam hoc poetis familiaris". See also Janet A. Fairweather, "Fiction in the Biographies of Ancient Writers", *Ancient Society* 5 (1974) pp.231-75.
- <sup>7</sup> The problem is frequently referred to, e.g. Aristotle, *Poetics* 9.1451b, esp. on Epic 23.1459b; Cicero, *De Legibus* 1.1.4 and *Ad Familiares* 5.12.3; Horace, *Ars Poetria*, e.g. 119ff; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10. See also Pierre Grimal, "Le poète et l'histoire", *Entretiens Hardt* 15 (1968) pp.51-106 and discussion pp.108-17; F.W. Walbank, "Speeches in Greek Historians", The Third J.L. Myres Memorial Lecture (Oxford, n.d.).
- <sup>8</sup> See Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography", reprinted in his *Studies in Historiography* (New York, 1966) pp.127-42. The passage from Cicero is from *De Legibus* 1.1.5.
- <sup>9</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Three Literary Letters*, ed. and trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge, 1901) pp.88-127.
- <sup>10</sup> On the exemplar theory from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries see George A. Nadel, "Philosophy of History before Historicism", *History and Theory* 4 (1964) pp.291-315.

- 11 *The Histories*, ed. and trans. W.R. Paton (Cambridge, Mass., 1922) I.1.
- 12 J.H. Hexter, "The Education of the Aristocracy in the Renaissance", in his *Reappraisals in History* (London, 1961) pp.45-70.
- 13 See, for a convenient survey, the notes to Geoffrey Shepherd's edition of Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (London, 1965), e.g. notes to p.96, pp.145-6.
- 14 Euripides, *Medea*, ed. Sir Denys Page (Oxford, 1938) pp.xxi-xxx.
- 15 While I do not think that I would want to stress the moral content of either work, such a case has been made by Robert M. Lumiansky, "Dares' *Historia* and Dictys' *Ephemeris*: a critical comment", in *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, ed. E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald A. Hill (Austin, 1969) pp.200-9. The kind of "moral purpose" which Professor Lumiansky sees in Dictys' distribution of praise and blame (p.205) is intrinsic to a historical narrative and not a sign of literary quality.
- 16 Quoted by Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (Berkeley, 1967) p.78; from L'Empereur Julien, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. J. Bidez (Paris, 1924) Epist. 89.301b, where Julian seems to want to protect philosophers from the emotions which such works arouse.
- 17 This becomes a key problem for Humanist theorists like Scaliger and Sidney.
- 18 *Les Arts poétiques du XII<sup>e</sup> et du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1924). The collections printed by Carolus Halm, *Rhetores Latini Minores* (Leipzig, 1863) provide a wide range of rhetorical handbooks.
- 19 The best recent guide is James J. Murphy, *Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography* (Toronto, 1970).
- 20 Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400)* (N.Y., 1928; repr. Gloucester, Mass., 1959) and J.W.H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase* (Cambridge, 1943). Again, part of the problem with these early critics is that they approached medieval literature in terms of modern category distinctions like "epic" and "romance".
- 21 This issue is raised by Luis Castro in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Idea of the Fact in English Law* (Cambridge, 1976). See *Novum Glossarium Mediae Latinitatis* (Munksgaard, 1959-) s.v. "narratio".
- 22 Texts in Halm, *Rhetores*. For Boccaccio see *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols. (Bari, 1951). C.G. Osgood's translation of the theoretical books, *Boccaccio on Poetry* (New York, 1930) is marred by his use of modern literary terms, so that distinctions in the original are obscured.
- 23 John of Garland, *Poetria Parisiana*, ed. T. Lawler (New Haven, 1974); Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, ed. Faral, *Arts Poétiques*; also Vincent of Beauvais, quoted by C.S. Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric*, pp.174-6.
- 24 For these historical topoi see Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969). *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (ed. Alistair Campbell

- (London, 1949) I.4) contains an extended *descriptio* of a navy which owes much to classical precedent.
- 25 Quoted from *Justin, Cornelius Nepos, and Eutropius*, trans. J.S. Watson (London, 1897) pp.255-6 (Book 37.3). Justin's *Epitome* was among the books important enough to be translated by Arthur Goldyng (1564), and was frequently recommended as educative reading by medieval and renaissance writers, including Antoine de la Sale.
- 26 *Li Fet des Romains: compilé ensemble de Saluste et de Suetoine et de Lucan*, ed. L.-F. Flutre and K. Sneyders de Vogel, 2 vols. (Paris, 1937-8); printed by A. Vêrard as *Lucan, Suetoine, et Saluste en françois* (Paris, 1490, 1500). See Paul Meyer, "Les Premières compilations françaises d'histoire ancienne", *Romania* 14 (1885) pp.1-81. I do not wish to argue that all medieval historians deliberately modelled their writing on particular classical texts, but that the surviving Roman histories were important as a group. Einhard's *Vita Caroli* followed Suetonius and Sidonius, and the anonymous author of the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* consulted such models of historical writing as Virgil, Lucan, and especially Sallust. I am at present writing a book-length study of the problems raised here.
- 27 Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. and trans. F.C. Conybeare, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1912) V.14. See also *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, p.5: "For when in writing the deeds of any one man one inserts a fictitious element, either in error, or, as is often the case, for the sake of ornament, the hearer assuredly regards facts as fictions, when he has ascertained the introduction of so much as one lie!"
- 28 *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 1969).
- 29 *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, and Vives on Humanism, War, and Peace, 1496-1535* (Seattle, 1962).
- 30 On these problems see Roger Ray, "Bede, the Exegete, as Historian", in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Honor of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976); Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments* (Chicago, 1977); Paule Démats, *Fabula* (Geneva, 1973).
- 31 *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. M.R. James (Oxford, 1953) p.72. This is quoted by William Nelson in *Fact or Fiction: the Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973) p.21. See also Roger Ray, "Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*", *Speculum* 55 (1980) pp.1-21.
- 32 *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great: by an Anonymous Monk of Whitby*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Lawrence, Kansas, 1968) pp.128-35. I owe this reference to Dr Peter Godman.
- 33 J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale* (New Haven, 1942) pp.291-2. "Quisquis ex me queret an hec vera sint, hoc est an historiam scripserim an fabulam, respondebo illud Crispi: 'Fides penes auctorem (meum scilicet Johannem) sit'"; from *Letteres Seniles* 17.3.
- 34 See H. Delehaye, *Les Légendes hagiographiques*, 3rd ed. (Brussels, 1927); S.C. Aston, "The Saint in Medieval Literature", *MLR* 65 (1970) pp.xxv-xlii.
- 35 How long-lived the conventions of the historical preface were may be seen by sampling the collections edited by Bernard Weinberg, *Critical Prefaces of the French Renaissance* (Evanston, 1950); and Ioan Williams, *Novel and Romance 1700-1800: A Documentary Record* (London, 1970).

- <sup>36</sup> La3amon, *Brut*, ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, EETS OS 250 (London, 1963), Caligula MS, ll.6-8.
- <sup>37</sup> *Hary's Wallace*, ed. M.P. McDiarmid, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1968-9) ll.1-6.
- <sup>38</sup> *L'Histoire de Jason*, ed. G. Pinkernell (Frankfurt, 1971).
- <sup>39</sup> *Political Poems and Songs*, Rolls Series, 2 vols. (London, 1859-61) II, pp.123-7.
- <sup>40</sup> C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature: Guido delle Colonne's 'Historia Destructionis Troiae' in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1980).
- <sup>41</sup> Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. George T. Diller, Textes Littéraires Français 194 (Geneva, 1972) pp.23-4. So also R.W. Southern: "The presentation of great and noble events in language appropriate to the subject-matter, and the moulding of this subject-matter into artistically contrived patterns, which emphasized grandeur and relegated pettiness to oblivion, became a major preoccupation of a long line of historians". ("Some Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20 (1970) p.180.)
- <sup>42</sup> They are conveniently listed in Brian Woledge's *Bibliographie des romans et nouvelles en prose française antérieurs a 1500* (Geneva, 1954) and *Supplément 1954-1973* (Geneva, 1975).
- <sup>43</sup> Ed. S.J.H. Herbage, EETS ES 37 (London, 1881) p.1. See also, Robert Guette, "Chanson de geste, chronique, et mise en prose" in his *Forme et Senefiance: études médiévales* (Geneva, 1978) pp.135-62.
- <sup>44</sup> *Caxton and his World* (London, 1969) pp.108-13. See also Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).