EPIC OR ROMANCE: AUTHORIAL CONCEPT OF GENRE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH VISIONS OF TROY

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ABSTRACT

Middle English narratives of the Trojan war are commonly classified as romances. Their authors, however, are aware of the generic differences between romance and epic and see their works as a continuation of the epic tradition. In authorial exordia, invocations, prologues and comments, the reader finds ample proof of an epic conception of the works. The authors claim to be narrating historical facts that belong to the tradition of their own nation. They see their heroes as models and archetypes of chivalry. They believe that their role is to preserve the fame of the heroes and to promote the heroic attitude among their readers. The medieval stories of Troy are an example of Alistair Fowler's concept of mutability and changeability of genres.

As historians of literature and language, we all share a fascination with tracing the ways in which meanings of words, stories or whole cultural constructs change as they are taken over and are re-adapted by new generations of readers and writers. Most fertile grounds for satisfying this fascination are offered by the study of the various shapes assumed in history by the great stories of antiquity, which, as Frank Kermode (1975: 44) says, became classics not only because they carry "intrinsic qualities that endure, but [because they] posses also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions". It is this openness to accommodate to the requirements of romance and allegory that is believed to have allowed the classical epic to survive and thrive in the Middle Ages.

In this paper I propose to examine some aspects of the genre of the Middle English adaptations of the Trojan stories and I do this with full awareness of the difficulty that any generic discussion of medieval texts poses: the mixing of genres and kinds, the indefinite and confusing use of generic terms, the inconsistencies of tone and style, are all known facts of medieval literature. Yet I strongly

believe that the medieval authors of the Trojan narratives possessed an awareness of genre, not in the sense of a set of prescriptive features shared by a closed group of literary works, but in the meaning defined by E. Donald Hirsch, who sees genre as a function of communication. Hirsch (1967: 51) proposes that "[a] verbal meaning is always a type since otherwise it could not be sharable". To be communicable and meaningful a literary work must refer to or imply a type. Thus genre becomes endowed with a heuristic function: its implication and recognition ensures proper interpretation. The author intends his work to be read as a given type and sends some overt or covert signals to the reader to make sure that the genre recognition is correct. Diction, versification, stanzaic form, division into units, titles, names of characters, patterns of action are only a few of the devices an author can use to suggest to the reader what codes should be used to reconstruct the meaning of the work. Moreover, generic allusions, signals and implications are often communicated directly in authorial exordia, invocations or prologues. Many of the Middle English literary visions of the Trojan war open with such introductory passages. In the present paper I propose to search in them for signs of the authors' own understanding of the literary traditions they were working in. A study of these signs will help to reconstruct the authors' awareness and intention of genre.

As the medieval Troy stories are no longer among the canon works of the English Middle Ages, a brief outline of the literary scene[1] will prove useful. The medieval visions of the Trojan war depend on three major Latin texts of Roman provenance: *Epitome Iliadus Homericae* by Pindarus Thebanus, *Ephemeris Belli Trojani* by Dictys Cretensis *and De Excidio Troiae* by Dares Phrygius. The first century hexametric lines of Pindarus are an abridgement combining stories from Homer, Virgil and Ovid. The *Ephemeris Belli Trojani* professes to have been written by a participant in the siege. In the prologue we learn that it was composed in Phoenician and discovered in a tin chest in Dictys' tomb during the reign of Nero, who ordered it to be transcribed into Greek. The 4th century Latin version, as the prefatory letter claims, comes from the hand of Lucius Septimius. In most probability the original used by the Latin translator was a 2nd century Greek collection of Trojan histories, now lost.

The Trojan point of view in narrating the war was offered to the Middle Ages by a Latin abridgement of *De Excidio Troiae* by Dares Phrygius, the Trojan priest of Hephaistos mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (V, 9, 10). Unlike the Latin Dictys, most probably an impostor, this 6th century Latin work may indeed be a late version of an original Trojan history as a tradition of a "Phrygian Iliad"

[1] A detailed history of the tradition of Trojan literature in the Middle Ages can be found in the introductions to two editions of Middle English Trojan texts (Sommer (1894 [1973]); Wager (1899)).

was preserved in Greece as late as the 2nd century AD (cf. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, XI, 2, Wilson (ed.) 1997). During the Middle Ages the classical provenance of all these sources, Pindarus, Dictys and Dares, was taken for granted.

The first author to tell the story in a medieval vernacular was Benoit de Sainte Maure, who, in his French *Le Roman de Troye* of 1160 paraphrases Dares' *De Excidio* but transforms it by his own imagination. The work's romanticised and chivalric Trojan world sets the pace of most medieval treatments of the war. Benoit's special importance for English literature rests, of course, in his original story of Troilus and Briseida, which Chaucer will later use in his romance.

But Benoit's work remained obscured by its Latin translation of 1287 by Guido delle Colonne, who claimed his *Historia Destructionis Troiae* to be a direct translation from Dares. *Le Roman de Troye* was for a long time believed to be a rendering of Guido's Latin version. The Latin compendium of Trojan and mythical history was treated by the Middle Ages as the most authoritative of all the available sources.

Most of the five English medieval renderings of the Trojan history that are in existence are indebted to Guido. The earliest of them is the late 14th century *Gest Historiale of the Destruction of Troy* (Panton and Donaldson (eds.) 1869) by an anonymous northern poet. It contains 14000 alliterative lines combining Guido and Benoit. Another late 14th century work, *The Seege of Troy* (Wager (ed.) 1899) is a rhymed summary of the *Gest Historiale*. From around 1400 comes *The Laud Troy Book* (Wülfing (ed.) 1902), a lengthy paraphrase of Guido. Before 1420 John Lydgate composed his *Troy Book* (Bergen (ed.) 1906-1935) dedicated to Henry V and in 1471 Caxton translated Raoul Lefevre's *Recuyeil des Hystoires Troyennes*, a 15th century French version of Guido. The English *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (Sommer (ed.) 1894 [1973]) was one of the first English books printed by Caxton.

The Middle English narratives of Troy have been variously classified as romances, epic romances or even epics. Margaret Schlauch's *English medieval literature and its social foundations* (1956) deals with them in a chapter on romances but refrains from using any definite generic term in the discussion. Derek Pearsall proposes that *The Seege of Troy* "is certainly romance, and Lydgate's *Troy Book* just as certainly epic, and the *Laud Troy Book* is somewhere between the two" (1991: 15). This indecision is common among scholars and reflects the highly heterogeneous nature of the medieval genre. But a closer look at what the medieval authors themselves thought about their work might help against this indecision.

All the English authors of the Trojan stories know that they adopt a long-standing tradition of storytelling. In their prologues and exordia they show that they are clearly aware of the transmission task they are about to perform. The

reader is also persuaded to believe that they are aware of the change or perhaps continuity of genre that such a transmission must involve.

The *Gest Hystoriale* opens with a prologue of 98 lines. After a traditional invocation to "maistur in mageste, maker of Alle" (l.1) ensuring the success of his literary undertaking the author moves on to speak of the subject and purpose of his work. He complains that the noble deeds of our ancestors have been forgotten. The reference to the Trojans as the ancestors of the British is a well known medieval fallacy based on the ingenious etymology of Britain as coming from Felix Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas and founder of Britain. This fanciful legend, generally accepted in the Middle Ages, made Trojan history meaningful to the English author and reader in a much more significant way than any other story narrated in the romances. A certain heroic and national identification must have been the case when we hear the *Gest* author call the ancient warriors "nobill", "strongest in armes", "wisest in wers" (ll. 5, 7-8). Over a century later Lydgate explains in his Prologue to *The Troy Book* that his translation was ordered by Henry Prince of Wales, the future Henry V, "to whom schal longe by successioun For to gouerne Brutys Albioun" (ll. 103-104). Lydgate adds that the Prince "wolde that to hyghe and lowe The noble story openly wer knowe in oure tonge, about in eury age, and y-writen as wel in oure langage as in latyn and in frensche it is" (ll. 111-115). The royal choice of Trojan history for the education of his people confirms the book's significance and its national and patriotic appeal.

The opening of *The Laud Troy Book* gives a long list of heroes whose courage is praised in romances, including Gawain, Tristram, Percival, Roland, Charlemagne, Havelock and Horn, and then adds that nobody has sung yet the fame of the most worthy heroes, the ancient warriors of the Trojan war, though "there alle prowes of knyghtes be-gan" (l. 32).

> Off swyche a fyght as ther was one,
> In al this world was neuere none,
> Ne neuere schal be til domysday –
> With-oute drede, I dar wel say; –
> Ne neuere better men born ware,
> Then were than a-sembled thare;
> Neuere was, ne neuere schal be
> So many gode men at asemble –
> I dar wel say, be my ffay,–
> As were at that batayle of Troy.
>
> (*The Laud Troy Book*, ll. 35-44)

Trojan history is therefore more appropriate to be "Breuyt into bokes for boldyng of hertes" as the *Gest* author says (l. 14). To embolden the hearts of the

readers is the aim of these romances, but was it not also the purpose of the Greek and Trojan epic poets, is it not an essential aim of epic narratives in general, especially if they narrate a heroic history with which the writer and the reader are likely to identify?

Troy is clearly the emblem and epitome of honour and chivalry. But the teaching intended by the authors was not only of chivalric and patriotic nature. The didactic and allegorical turn of the medieval mind cannot have been off duty in the retelling of the Trojan history. Lydgate closes his work with an address to Prince Henry and to other readers explaining the universal meaning of the story. He shows how:

> Lordes, princes from her royalte
> Sodeinly brought in adversite
> And kynges eke plounged in pouert.
> In this boke he may ful wel beholde
> Change of Fortune, in her cours mutable.
>
> (ll. 3546-7)

> For ther is nouther prince, lord, nor kyng,
> Be exaumple of Troye, like as ye may se,
> That in this lif may have ful surete.
>
> (ll. 3576-8)

The ubiquitous medieval topos of the instability of fortune expressed in a typical "De cassibus" formula is certainly a sign of an allegorical approach to the events and a traditionally medieval treatment of history as a lesson for the present times. The epic becomes an allegory or at least a didactic example of the universal workings of fate. And this is exactly that quality of the classics of which Kermode spoke. They are open to accommodations which do not result in loss of their epic nature. Is not the appeal of an epic, like that of an allegory, meant to be universal?

At a different point of his prologue the *Gest* author makes a comparison between the stories of more modern times of which, he says, some are true and some are false (ll.13-19) and the stories of old, written by eye-witnesses of the events, that are true and show "all the crafte how the case felle" (l. 25). To add authority to the works practically all the English authors mention and praise their source, Maister Gy, or Guido, and trace his Latin version of Trojan history directly to Dictys and Dares. *The Laud Troy Book* clearly promises a detailed and a thorough treatment of the deeds of every hero, "off alle here dedis schal lakke non" (l. 96). This emphatic insistence on the assumed historicity and veracity of the narrated events is a repeated theme in the English Trojan narratives and must be viewed as a quality distinguishing them from the medieval romance

genre. No other group of romances defines their stories' historical and scholarly origin with such power. Not even the ultimately English romances of Arthur could claim so much. As early as the end of the 12th century William of Newburgh (Howlett (ed.) 1884: 12) made rather disparaging comments on the historical truth of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Britonum*. "This man is called Geoffrey, nicknamed Arturus, because he dressed up fables of Arthur, taken from primitive fictions of the Britons and added to by himself, adorned with the Latin tongue, in the honest name of history" (translated from Gradon 1971: 231).

The *Gest* author's preference of fact and truth over fables and fantasy is also seen in the way he speaks about Homer. He denounces the "fablis and falshed" brought into the story by such authors as Homer, who made "goddes [fyght] in the filde, folke as thai were" (ll. 45). This objection towards Homeric gods brings to mind W.P. Ker's discussion of the relationship between the epic mode and mythology. In his ever so valid and important *Epic and Romance* Ker writes, "Between the dramatic qualities of epic poetry and the myths and fancies of popular tradition there must inevitably be a conflict and a discrepancy. The greatest scenes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have little to do with myth" (1957: 35). Ker admits that the divine machinery of the Homeric world becomes an integral part of Homer's poetry but nonetheless claims that where the characters are most vividly realised, this machinery is superfluous. The amount, type and integration of mythical, fabulous and fantastical references are for Ker features that help to define the shifting borderline between epic and romance. The mysterious and supernatural plot elements and characters are an accepted generic mark of the medieval romance. Could then the *Gest* author's rejection of gods fighting in the field be a declaration of his belonging to a tradition different from that which amazed and horrified the reader with magic, spells, talismans, dragons and green knights?

Of course the questions asked above cannot be fully answered by reference to the prologues and exordia of the Trojan stories alone. Nevertheless, what we find in them suggests that their authors share a similar attitude to the history of Troy and to their task of retelling the events. They value and trust their sources, they believe to be narrating historical facts and profess to avoid lies and fables, they see the heroic deeds as archetypes of chivalry and as the history of their ancestors, they narrate the stories for the benefit of the readers and to preserve the fame of the heroes. By declaring their attitude to the historical material of their works the authors intervene between the work and the audience and, as Alistair Fowler (1982: 99) phrases it, establish an appropriate mood for their particular genre: in the case of the Trojan stories more the genre of epic, history or chronicle than the genre of romance, fantasy and fable. Solid roots in history, often national history, verisimilitude, a sense of the universality and the grandeur of the narrated events are all qualities of the epic mode. If we accept what Fowler calls mutability and continuity of genres (cf. Guillen 1921: 121) then the way in which the medieval narrators of Troy understand their work may suggest that the Trojan stories represent a mutation of the epic genre distinct from the genre of the romance with which they are traditionally identified. It is possible that some other, non-Trojan, medieval romances of the less fantastical and more historical type could be classed with these medieval epics. A study of other signals of generic nature found in the Trojan stories, such as style, diction, versification should be carried out to verify this suggestion but this extends the scope of the present paper.

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