

# *Introduction*

Article

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# Introduction

Professor Peter Noble has been instrumental in encouraging the study of early vernacular chronicle, in particular the earliest prose chronicles in French. Not only has he published extensively on Villehardouin, Clari, and Henri de Valenciennes, and given papers on these and other, similar subjects at high-profile conferences, but he has also taught Villehardouin's account of the conquest of Constantinople to successive cohorts of undergraduates. It is fitting, given his excellence in teaching and concern for the quality of undergraduate provision, that his most recent major publication, an edition and translation of Clari's *Conquête de Constantinople*, should make this text more accessible and available for teaching. With this major interest in mind, the subject for this volume of *Reading Medieval Studies* and for last year's Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies summer symposium, held in Peter's honour, easily presented itself. The topic of 'medieval historical discourses' has allowed for the inclusion of studies representative of Peter's wider academic interests, in Occitan literature and the *chanson de geste*, and has also opened up a significant, and we are sure, ongoing, discussion on the link between discourse and genre and indeed on the nature of medieval genres themselves.

Some of the articles in this volume were given as papers at the GCMS summer symposium of 2007. Peter Ainsworth is a scholar whose name has become synonymous with late medieval French chronicle. Severe floods unfortunately prevented him from attending on that occasion. Nonetheless the very technology whose use for the development and increased accessibility of our subject is presented in his paper made it possible for some of the material to be presented on-line at the symposium. Ainsworth begins with a review of the modern reception of Froissart. The presentation here of Froissart on-line combines the modern technology with the scholarly philology we associate with our honorand.

Shortly before the composition of the prose chronicles of the Fourth Crusade the cleric Ambroise wrote his verse chronicle, the *Estoire de la guerre sainte*, an eye-witness account of the Third Crusade. Marianne Ailes' examination of Ambroise's discourse in

this volume considers how Ambroise used the models available to vernacular chroniclers at the end of the twelfth century. The major feature of Ambroise's writing is his use of rhetorical devices and structure. Those *chanson de geste* elements which are borrowed were thoroughly adapted to a form of discourse that is dominantly that of the schools.

The question of genre definition and discourse is also examined by Philip Bennett in his analysis of Machaut's *Prise d'Alixandre* and the anonymous *Geste des ducs de Bourgogne*. While Ambroise was writing at the apogee of the verse chronicle, these less well-known texts were written in verse at a time when prose was the norm for historical writing. Bennett's investigation of the way rhetoric shapes intergeneric relationships complements Ailes' analysis of the rhetorical shaping of Ambroise's text. The exploitation of intertextual, and indeed intergeneric, allusion in the *Geste* shows how sophisticated medieval historiography could be, even in a text that appears much less sophisticated and complex than that of Machaut whose role as author-narrator is also highlighted.

Like the anonymous author of the *Geste des ducs de Bourgogne*, Wace knew how to manipulate generic conventions and reader expectations to enhance the perception of his protagonists. Wace's verse chronicle the *Roman de Rou* is the subject of Françoise Le Saux's contribution. Here again the interplay between different genres is at issue, this time the chronicle and the *chanson de geste*, the two major historical, or ostensibly historical, genres of the Middle Ages. Le Saux demonstrates how Wace shaped his basic (predetermined in that it is factual) narrative, and how he used rhetoric in the telling of the tale to give an epic flavour to his text. What he produces is perhaps more of a hybrid than Ambroise's text, though it is the latter which has been described as part *chanson de geste* and part chronicle.

The debate over the nature of medieval genres continues in Karen Pratt's study of Gautier d'Arras's *Eracle*. Pratt analyses the mixed nature of the narrative, so again we are dealing with a text often described as 'hybrid'. She then goes on to look at the words used to designate the text within the text itself before examining the manuscript context for clues about its reception and a more detailed consideration of the perception of *Eracle* as a work of history. Gautier is concerned with different kinds of truth: what we would call factual truth and more metaphysical, Christian truth. Again this recalls the way Ambroise uses rhetorical and *chanson de geste*

techniques to distinguish aspects of his text which serve as *exempla* from the eyewitness authoritative 'factual' account. For Gautier the moral lesson is more important than historical fact, as is clear from the way he selects and treats his source material.

Peter Noble is a long-standing member of the Société Rencesvals and one-time member of the British Branch Committee. No tribute to him would be complete without some discussion of the *chanson de geste*. Phillipa Hardman has turned to the Middle English version of the best known *chanson de geste*, *La Chanson de Roland* for her contribution. The change of generic conventions implicit, and perhaps necessary, in translation from one language to another and from one literary culture to another, is the focus of Hardman's study. This fragmentary Middle English text has been neglected and often derided for failing to accurately render the Old French text, or for its apparent failure to understand the Old French text. Through a close comparison of the Middle English text with all the extant Old French verse texts, Hardman shows how the translator has manipulated his source material and re-arranged the narrative. Not only is the narrative adapted for a different age, it is adapted for a different genre, to fit different expectations.

The focus of the study by Peter Noble's new colleague and replacement at Reading, Catherine Léglu, is another *chanson de geste* often treated as marginal, this time in the so-called 'Franco-provençal' dialect. The multilingualism of the heroine in *Girart de Roussillon* is discussed within the context of medieval attitudes to language, particularly the different roles given to the sacred languages of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and to the vernaculars. Léglu links the linguistic theme with the linguistic survival of the text in its three different avatars, the Franco-provençal text and two translations, one into French and one into Occitan. Discourse or language, in the text, is both a source of confusion and a source of revelation. The production of discourse in *Girart* is complemented, and sometimes replaced, by physical action which speaks more clearly than verbal discourse.

Historical writing is perhaps the most inter-disciplinary of all aspects of medieval literature. Two eminent historians, both former GCMS colleagues of Peter, have contributed studies which bring a different perspective to historical writing and which demonstrate the fact that the study of rhetoric and what could be termed contrived forms of discourse is of wide import. Anne Curry

examines the different chronicle accounts of Henry V's battle speeches, immortalised in Shakespeare's rhetoric, but recorded in different ways in near-contemporary and later chronicles. Curry's analysis begins with the presupposition that such direct discourse is not to be read as the literal word-for-word account of a speech, but must rather be read within the rhetorical conventions of the time and in the context of the writing of any particular account. Curry demonstrates how popular memory, literary conventions and rhetoric and propaganda purposes together shape the historical record.

It is with a piece of direct discourse that Malcolm Barber begins his examination of the role of the Templars in the Fall of Acre in 1291, namely the speech of William of Plaisians to Philip the Fair in 1308. The speech itself constitutes an example of historical discourse, though for William, 1291 was very recent history with contemporary resonances. Barber's examination of the writings that grew out of the events of 1291 is wide-ranging; he includes material from the contemporary to the nineteenth-century fictional discourse of Walter Scott. Like Ainsworth, Barber concerns himself with the modern interpretation of these writings. An analysis of the events leading up to the Fall of Acre leads to the clear conclusion that the contemporary accounts provide no evidence that the Templars betrayed the Holy Land, though many later works were generated by this assumption. Neil Thomas' paper also looks at (relatively) modern reception of medieval text. Thomas explores Wagner's transformation of his source material, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, itself a translation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*. Again we are dealing with transformation from one genre to another as well as the adaptation of medieval writings for a later audience.

No volume dedicated to Peter Noble would be complete without an Occitan text. It is fitting too that it should contain two short editions. Linda Paterson's study, abbreviated edition and translation of a politically engaged text moves us on to writing the present rather than the past. Like Machaut's text, this dialogue poem does not give its message in a straightforward manner, but through allegory. A reading of the text is proposed through the careful contextualising within the events of the reign of Frederick II Hohenstaufen. Tony Hunt's contribution is another edition, this time of an almost unknown late thirteenth-century work entitled *Via in terram sanctam*. Hunt labels it as a 'treatise' but prefaces the edition by a

short discussion of its genre, thus making a further contribution to the discussion of one of the themes running through these essays, namely the nature of medieval genres.

The subject matter we have chosen, historical discourse of the Middle Ages, is inherently interdisciplinary; this is appropriate for *Reading Medieval Studies*, for the GCMS and for Professor Noble. Two major threads run through the contributions. The first, as already noted is with the nature of medieval genres. It is clear in all the studies that the flexibility of generic definition is a feature of the texts discussed. It is also evident that a number of the authors exploited this flexibility in a way that suggests, nonetheless, an awareness of what in modern critical discourse we would call 'generic conventions'. The second thread that recurs in these papers is that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception of medieval writing. It would not be possible to cover all of Peter Noble's academic interests in one volume; nor would it be appropriate to include, for example, French Canadian literature in a volume of *Reading Medieval Studies*. To include modern reception of medieval texts is at least an acknowledgement of the breadth of Peter's interests and publications.

Some of the contributors to this volume have had the great privilege of being taught by Peter. His continued interest in our careers and ongoing encouragement have been a source of inspiration. All the contributors are colleagues, having worked alongside Peter at the University of Reading, or in academic societies, or shared a conference platform with him. It is an honour to pay homage to him in this volume.

Marianne Ailes