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Prise d'Alixandre and the anonymous
Geste des ducs de Bourgogne*

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Rhetoric, Poetics and History

Machaut's *Prise d'Alixandre* and the anonymous
Geste des ducs de Bourgogne

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From among the records of a century which saw all the 'grans merveilles' and the 'biau fait d'armes' which fuelled the four books of Froissart's *Chroniques*,¹ a decision to concentrate on Machaut's account of the 'side show' of Pierre de Lusignan's crusade to Egypt (1365) and on a pseudo-epic poem giving a highly biased version of the Armagnac-Burgundian conflict of c. 1398-1411, culminating in the short-lived Anglo-Burgundian victory at Saint-Cloud, requires a little explanation. The initial motivation for studying these comparatively little-known texts comes from the simple fact of their presenting history in verse at a time when historiography was increasingly dominated by the prose model established by the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, including early *mises en prose of chansons de geste*, and consecrated by a series of great writers of history from Jean le Bel to Philippe de Commines. To that extent this investigation extends one, on which I have been engaged for some time, into the way rhetoric shapes the intergeneric relationships of epic, romance and verse-chronicle in texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For reasons that will become clear a continued comparison of *La Geste des ducs de Bourgogne* with *chansons de geste* composed between ca 1150 and ca 1250 remains pertinent, although putting it back in the cultural context of the early fifteenth century will, I hope, contribute to the revision of a major myth of 'Whiggish' literary history: that prose is the natural vehicle for narrative, especially historical and pseudo-historical narrative, after 1300. While Machaut's *La Prise d'Alixandre* both benefits from and contributes to that same cultural context, its case is rather different, since it also sits in a tradition of Machaut's own writing, including *Le Remède de Fortune* and *Le Confort d'Ami*, which, as has been shown in a recent book, contributes to the

evolution of 'parahistorical' writing by Froissart and Christine de Pizan.²

To refer to *La Geste des ducs de Bourgogne* as a little-known text is itself a rhetorical strategy somewhere between euphemism and litotes. It has received one edition, by Kervyn de Lettenhove, in the 1870s, and virtually no critical attention since.³ Tarring Machaut's work with this brush may seem unreasonable, but until very recently the only available edition of what was then called *La Prise d'Alexandrie* was that by L. de Mas Latrie, published in 1877. There is now a translation into English by Janet Shirley, an edition and translation by R. Barton Palmer, and, soon to be published, a new critical edition by Angela Hurworth, a revision of her 1985 PhD thesis.⁴ Moreover, the situation with regard to critical interest in the *Prise* is rather different from that of the *Geste*, because of the historical interest Machaut's poem has always been held to offer; also, probably because of the reputation of its author, the *Prise* has excited a reasonable amount of interest among literary scholars.⁵ The aim of this paper is not to reassess either the literary or the historical value of either of the poems concerned, although incidentally the proposed consideration of the rhetorical and polemical aspects of both works may help to resituate them, not as recorders of what earlier generations regarded as 'historical facts' but as witnesses to the *mentalités* of the communities which produced and received them.⁶

Both of the works I am addressing here have been classified as either rhymed chronicles, which might have generic or sub-generic implications, or chivalric biographies, which can have only sub-generic implications; I shall briefly consider the impact of such affiliations in my conclusion. What I shall concentrate on in this paper is the exploitation of allegory, particularly in prologues to the poems, as a rhetorical device programming the reader's interpretation of the works, and the relationship of such programming to the unfolding narrative of the poems and its moral, socio-political and spiritual implications.⁷

The *Geste* begins with a rhetorical preamble giving in allegorical form a synopsis of the events narrated from 1406–1411, but bears no title or incipit.⁸ However, despite this lack of an external scribal *seuil* orienting the public in its reception of the poem, and despite its recounting an apparently arbitrary slice of two ducal reigns (the last years of Philippe le Hardi and the first seven of Jean sans Peur), the

narrative quickly establishes the universal epic theme of the struggle of Good against Evil. Jean sans Peur is presented as the virtually isolated hero faced by a coven of villains, most notable among whom are Louis and Charles, successive dukes of Orléans; Jean, duc de Berry; and Philippe de Mézières, Chancellor of Cyprus under Pierre de Lusignan and ardent propagandist for the crusade. In the *Geste* Philippe de Mézières becomes a diabolical necromancer responsible for the death of Bernabò Visconti before coming to France to teach Louis d'Orléans the spells by which he ruins the health of Charles VI. The structure so established is less that of the epics of revolt or of the feudal cycle than that of later poems from the so-called 'Cycle du Roi', as exemplified in the Paris manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland*, in which a hero struggles to save Charlemagne from the manipulations of Ganelon's kin. This reading of the poem is actually established by that internal *seuil* mentioned above: the allegorical prologue. The *Geste* opens with a typical epic appeal to the audience, 'Signeur, or entendés...' ('My Lords, do listen...') followed by an invocation of the Virgin and her Son (ll. 1-8); there follows a brief allusion to the desolation of France in 1406 (the pivotal year for a Burgundian partisan, in which Louis d'Orléans gained control of the king and Jean sans Peur was excluded from government) and the first properly epic reference:

Mais puis le tams Charle qui en tint le saizine,
Ne fu autant grevée de le gent sarazine
Qu'elle fu celle année, ne à telle ruyne; (12-14)

But since the time of Charles who had seisin of [France] she has not been so grievously harmed by Saracens as she was that year, nor so destructively.⁹

Here the equivalence Armagnacs = Saracens is established. The reference to Charle[magne] is, however, at best allusive. It is only after this that the civil war between Burgundians and Armagnacs for the control of King Charles VI is told in terms of animal allegory: a great pack of wolves attack

... le gardin plaisant où a mainte aube-espine
Et la flour de lis à coulour azurine (16-17)

... the pleasant garden in which there are many hawthorns and the azure coloured fleur-de-lis.

But God sends a lion (the Duke of Burgundy, a heraldic identification) and a swallow (*arondiel* = Earl of Arundel); actually the latter is sent by 'le lupart à la rouge poitrine' (Henry V, king of England, again a heraldic representation) with a host of other fiercely pecking birds (archers) who clear the land of wolves (Armagnac-Orléanistes). The *laisse* ends with a shift into abstract allegorical discourse, psychomachia replacing the pseudo-Aesopic or Beast Epic narration, to draw the moral of the story which will unfold:

Par leur trop convoitier eurent honte et famine,
Et puisque convoitise se met avec hayne,
Veritet et raison et de consail doctrine
S'eslonge de la place et convoitise avine,
Le fel cuer hayneux de soumettant fait myne;
Car convoitise ardant, l'acteur de (ce?) détermine,
Fait petit mout souvent et chiet vers lésine. (33-39)

By coveting they suffered shame and famine, and as soon as covetousness joins with hatred, truth and reason and wise counsel quit the place and covetousness moves in; the evil, hateful heart pretends to be submissive, for burning covetousness, so the author states categorically, rarely achieves anything and falls into sordid avarice.

The allegorical prologue thus imposes a unity on the work by predicting the destitution of the Armagnac party after the battle of Saint-Cloud, ravening wolves brought low by their inherent vices of covetousness and hatred, which drive truth, reason and wise counsel from their midst.

Yet this apparent unity is breached by the last *laisse* in the surviving manuscript, which begins with the sort of summing up of the fate of minor characters following the culminating battle of Saint-Cloud familiar from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels and then ends:

Mais pour ce tans présent finerons no cançon;
Jusques à tant que matère arons pour le cruçon.
Dieux doinst que che puist estre à le salvation

Du roi et du roiaume et du duc bourgegnon
 Et de tous cheux qui ont loial opinion!
 Amen! Que Dieus l'otroit par se rédension! (10535–40)

But for the moment we shall end our song, until such time as we have subject matter to expand it. God grant that it be to the salvation of the king, the kingdom and the Burgundian duke and of all who hold loyal views! Amen! May God grant it by His Redemption!

These lines offer only a false closure, since, again in keeping with more recent serial publications of novels or serialised radio and television dramas, they constitute a hook – the natural accompaniment to the cliff-hanger – creating suspense with their two closing prayers to lure back the reader for the next episode. If we accept that this version of the poem was indeed composed in or soon after 1411, and that the author was composing in the heat of events, the note of anxiety evident in the prayers could be explained by the escape from the battlefield of Charles d'Orléans and the other leaders of the Armagnac party: the fear expressed is that, as in previous episodes, they will return to renew the struggle. However, there may be evidence that the poem was composed much later, possibly in the early 1420s, so that the suspense like the closure was false. The audience would actually be waiting in full knowledge of the unravelling of Jean sans Peur's policies, leading to Agincourt, his murder at Montereau in 1419 and the treaty of Troyes in 1420 which effectively put control of the French crown beyond the reach of his heir, Philippe le Bon.

Evidence for such a scenario exists in the identification by Georges Doutrepoint of a second manuscript, now lost, which included these events.¹⁰ In his discussion of the lines quoted above, Doutrepoint comments only on the first two lines, suggesting that the author had temporarily run out of material and was waiting for the next instalment of some chronicle or archival source unspecified before he could continue (p. 78). However, a few pages later (pp. 81–82) Doutrepoint asserts on the strength of quotations from the second manuscript he has identified (preserved in a seventeenth-century document cited in his footnote), that the whole work must have been composed very soon after 1420. If that were the case the second part of the poem and its inevitable ending with the replacement of the Dauphin as king of France by Henry V and his heirs runs counter

to the programme established by the allegorical prologue, of which Dautrepoint takes no account. If, on the other hand, the poem was composed in two parts, and what survives in the Institut de France manuscript is the copy of a prototype lacking the continuation, we find ourselves dealing with an author who appears to have been imitating a well-established *chanson de geste* structure in which an opening, which predicts a satisfactory epic closure, is replaced in the end by an awareness of historical contingency which makes such completion impossible. To take just two examples, the opening *laisse* of the *Chanson de Roland* announces a completion which the whole of the succeeding poem calls into question, until the poem ends with Charles being called out to combat an evil the poem had previously announced to have been annihilated.¹¹ *Le Couronnement de Louis* establishes in a learned prologue that the king-emperor of France has absolute divinely ordained authority over all other lands; but even the imperial coronation in Rome, which should confirm this programme, proves to be only an episode. Louis is subsequently chased from his capital to be taken by Guillaume to relative safety in Laon, and Louis' universal dominion is reduced to the submission of fifteen counts and marriage to the sister of his faithful protector.¹² In the former case the poem itself hints in its opening *laisse* at what the real non-conclusion will be, since even before that *laisse* is over the perfection of the number seven is contradicted by the survival of Marsile in Saragossa, so that historical contingency is written into the poem as one of its dimensions. In the latter, it is the literary cycle into which the poem is inserted which stands in lieu of historical contingency and imposes an ending which will be confirmed by the contradictory figure of Louis, ultimately unable to resist Saracen invasion in his own person in the final poem of the cycle, *Le Moniage Guillaume*.¹³ The close imitation of *chansons de geste* for this chronicle, or biography if that is what it is, right down to the choice of a conscious, but not always successful, attempt to use highly archaic Old French rather than the language of his own day, suggests that such a shift from the transcendent to the contingent may indeed have been the intention of the author of the *Geste*. What is certain is that by the time the surviving manuscript was copied for Antoine de Croy in 1445, the closing prayers evoked a history of vicissitudes. These had ultimately led to the Duke of Burgundy, Philippe le Bon, effecting the release of Charles d'Orléans from his English captivity and marrying him to Philippe's own niece Marie de Clèves; an

alliance which by another twist of fate alienated Charles VII and began the long and tortuous process by which Charles' heir, Louis XI, would destroy the duchy which Philippe le Bon, his father, Jean sans Peur, and grandfather, Philippe le Hardi, had so meticulously constructed.

Unlike the *Geste*, Machaut's poem does bear an *incipit* at least in some manuscripts: manuscript A (BNF fr 1584) has the *incipit* 'ci commence le livre de la prise d'alixandre', and the *explicit* 'explicit la prise d'alixandre'¹⁴ a double marking which makes of a military adventure lasting not much more than a month *in toto* – the town was held for just a few days between 10th October and 16th October 1365 – the emblematic event of the ten year reign of Pierre Ier de Lusignan. Now, it is true that Pierre did expend much energy in the first years of his reign, when he was not trying to stabilise commercial relations between his kingdom, Genoa, Venice and various Muslim powers, on trying to organise the crusade which would lead to the expedition to Alexandria. It is equally true that the various military expeditions to Gorchigos, Alanya and Tripoli, as well as the convoluted negotiations with the Egyptians and the Turks which occupied the last five years of this crusade, can be viewed as a consequence of the Alexandrian expedition. Nevertheless the decision, which we may reasonably believe to be Machaut's, to give the poem what amounts to the title *La Prise d'Alixandre* does imply an intention to manipulate the public. The narrative is to be read against its own apparent chronicle linearity, and the hero is Pierre, despite his shortcomings as man and monarch.

As has been frequently pointed out, like the *Geste*, Machaut's *Prise* follows a distinctly declining trajectory, but one much more obviously focused on the single hero.¹⁵ This focus is very clear in the extensive prologue (ll. 1–258), the pseudo-Virgilian narrative of which presents a council of the Olympian gods in Roman form having unmistakably allegorical import. This can be seen from the central role given to Venus, whose links to Cyprus orient the reading. The game Machaut is playing of explicitly christianising the classical gods, to the extent of having Mars affirm

si deveriens tuit labourer
 au bon godefroy restorer
 et querir homme qui sceust
 maintenir sa terre et deust (63–66)

*we should all labour to replace the good Godefroy and seek a man who can and should maintain his land,*¹⁶

exploits a tradition of exegesis of classical authors which goes back to late Antiquity, and reaches a sort of climax around 1300 in the *Ovide moralisé*.¹⁷ That the interweaving of Olympian religion and Christianity is a game, can be seen very clearly from the way the new King of Jerusalem is created, with a heavy insistence on the 'conjunction' of Mars and Venus. In response to the plea from Mars to have a successor to Godefroi de Bouillon, the assembled gods beg Nature to produce the best creature she can (ll. 69–72), whereupon

lors de mars et de venus ensamble
fist conjunction ce me samble
et la creature crea (73–75).

then it seemed to me that she organised the conjunction of Mars and Venus and created the creature.

The pun on *conjunction* works to show Pierre as the natural product of cosmic order, because the assembly of the gods has been called under the auspices of the cosmos in a version of the Golden Age which itself emphasises its own playfulness:

Quant li dieu par amours amoient
et les deesses se jouoient
aus dous gieus courtois savoureux
qui sont fais pour les amoureux
li clers solaus la belle lune
et des estoilles la commune
li .xii. signe et les planettes
qui sont cler et luisans et nettes
ordonnerent un parlement
fait de commun assentement (1–10)¹⁸

When the gods loved with true love and the goddesses played at the sweet and delightful courtly games which are made for lovers, the bright sun and the beautiful moon and the commune of the stars, the twelve signs and the planets which are bright and shining and pure ordained a parlement by common consent.

This is a well-ordered polity, appropriate to producing a child of Mars and Venus, whose only known offspring in antiquity was Harmonia, who becomes an allegorical figura of Pierre. The bodily, almost carnivalesque part of the pun is presented some lines later, when Venus speedily gives birth:

mais longuement pas natarga
 que la deesse descharga
 le fais de la conjunction
 dont je vous ay fait mention
 par lordenance de nature
 qui en avoit toute la cure. (85–90)

but it did not take long for the goddess to unburden herself of the load of the previously mentioned conjunction by order of Nature whose sole responsibility it was.

Between these two mentions of a stellar and sub-lunar conjunction comes the first allusion to the Christian God,¹⁹ introduced by a very learned set of circumlocutions amounting to an allusion to Alpha and Omega, who is responsible for putting the soul into the still-to-be-born King of Cyprus (ll. 77–84). For those among his readers unable to con this as clerklly game – and there is absolutely no hint in this work as to an intended audience – Machaut offers two unmistakable indications in the role assigned to Vesta, who in this account is not a goddess but a priestess with a foot in both camps. First, she prays to all the Olympian gods and goddesses that they will give ‘bonne destinee’ to the young prince (ll. 96–100), sacrificing appropriate animals to them (ll. 101–05). The poet then puts a sting in the tale of this *concordia oppositorum*:

si recurent
 son sacrefice en si bon gre
 que li enfes en haut degre
 en fu · cest chose veritable
 ne say se le tenez a fable (105–08)

and they accepted her sacrifice so readily that the child was consequently of high estate: that’s quite true; I don’t know if you think it’s a lying fiction.

Whether we read these lines with modern punctuation or not, the enjambement of lines 106-107 imposes a pause before the assertion of truthfulness which contrasts in a way typical of Machaut with *fable*, which as a rhyme word crowns a line in which the poet affirms explicitly his ignorance of his audience's attitude, and implicitly his indifference to it.²⁰ Moreover, punctuated or not, it is impossible to tell whether what may be considered *fable* (fiction or untruth) is Pierre's high station, the willing reception of the sacrifices by the gods, the link of that event to Pierre's rank, which may also be read as success, or simply everything we have read up to this point.

This confusion is undoubtedly part of Machaut's game, because ll. 107-08, reintroducing the author-narrator's voice to make a comment which is as much doctrinal and moral as it is intellectual, appear to mark a conclusion. Such would be their role in both epic and romance. However, Machaut is barely one third of the way through his allegorical prelude, and the text is relaunched immediately with a speech from Saturn, who calls on the assembled gods to endow the child with the gifts he will need to enter the house of Honour 'par vaillance' (ll. 114-17). This is followed (ll. 137-228) by the appointment of Hebe, goddess of youth, to take care of Pierre 'jusque a lestage de congnoissance / ou plus avant se mestier yere' ('until he reached the age of reason, or longer if necessary'; ll. 150-51). This in itself is a barbed comment (though made by the gods, not by the narrator), particularly since Minerva, goddess of wisdom, is merely to serve him in an unspecified way, not to educate him (l. 154): one can see in the future King of Cyprus a figure of the boy who never grew up. Of course *jouvente* (the word used to signify Hebe's function) has positive connotations stretching back to the twelfth-century troubadours and trouvères, and indeed to *chansons de geste*, in which *jouvente* refers to the active years of a knight's career, so we should not necessarily read a satirical comment into these lines. Notably, however, in both Machaut's *Voir Dit* and in Froissart's *Joli Buisson de Jonece* the word is used in contexts in which the poets take a 'bain de jeunesse' thanks to their Lady; the former in imagination and by proxy only in the pseudo-Ovidian tale of Architelés and Orphane told him by Joneche in his dream, the latter in the (literary) reality of his relationship with Toute Belle.²¹ However, the ironic distance Machaut establishes with the notion of perpetual youth is manifest in the *Voir Dit* through his introducing the evocation of Toute Belle's effect on him by an allusion to Hebe, whose powers of rejuvenation

the gods queue up to exploit, although the goddess declines to help them

Car la deesse bien apprise
 Lor(s) respondoit par bonne guise
 Et disoit qu'elle n'avoit cure
 De tollir son droit a Nature. (5100-03)

*For the well educated goddess replied fittingly to them and said that she had no mind to strip Nature of her rights.*²²

In the light of this it is possibly not too fanciful to see in the gods' request to Hebe to keep Pierre young and to Juno to load him with riches (ll. 159-72), requests that surround and squeeze out the subordinate role given to Minerva, a predictive criticism of a man who exercised *jouvente* until his death aged 40, despite marriage and kingship. The allegorical passage proper then ends with Venus teaching him the art of love, Mars teaching him the art of war and Vulcan making him arms and armour, though at the specific request of Mars, which fails to make the future monarch a new Aeneas (ll. 181-228).

In this second part of the allegory Machaut sets up a regular dialogue between the neutral third-person narrative and a first-person voice which comments in a way which undermines its own apparent narratorial authority. The first such intervention denies knowledge on the part of the narrator as to the presence of Fortune at the assembly of the gods; this will be made clear only by the outcome of the young king's life (ll. 123-26). There follows a return to realist discourse, in which, out of a sense of duty ('or il est drois...' ²³) the narrator gives in great detail not only the year [13]29 but the day '[la] feste saint denis' (= 9th October) and even the hour 'a leure que jours est fenis' of Pierre's birth (ll. 134-36). In a note, p. 430, Palmer indicates that this means that Alexandria fell to Pierre on his birthday, which is not totally accurate according to Machaut, since the city fell to the second assault

et se vous di
 que ce fu en .i. venredi
 et fu · pour ce que je ne mente
 lan mil .ccc.v. et sexante

landemain de la saint denis
einsois que li jours fust fenis (3141-46)

and I tell you this was on a Friday, and was, so that I shouldn't lie about it, in the year 1365, the day after the Feast of St Denis before the day was done.

Unfortunately Machaut is the only source for the date of Pierre's birth,²⁴ so we cannot be sure that the biographically satisfactory cycle, which appears to demonstrate either that Fortune was not present when the gods endowed Pierre, or that she was uncharacteristically benign, and which is heavily underscored by the repetition of hyperprecise information guaranteeing its own truth and the truthfulness of the narrator, is more than a literary device enabling the reader to identify this moment as the accomplishment of Pierre's destiny.

To return to the role of Vesta, whose interventions frame the second part of the prologue and re-assert the inextricable conflation of pagan and Christian divine activity, it is she who baptises young Pierre (l. 233), in a passage in which Machaut announces in his own voice that the time has come to name his hero. However, he not only does not do that, at least not directly, wrapping the name up in a pair of pseudo-lyric lines to produce an anagram, but he is at least as concerned to stress the recording of his own name, a fact he mentions twice (ll. 234 and 236) before giving the anagram, and once more in the final lines of the prologue, which also contain another assertion that the author does not know what will be the end of his book, asking his readers' indulgence for so early an inclusion of an anagram:

si supplie tous de cuer fin
sencor met ces vers en la fin
de ce livre · que desprisier
ne men veuillent ne mains prisier
car savoir ne puis nullement
de ce livre le finement
si vueil dire eins quil soit parfaits
le signeur pour qui je le fais
et moy nommer qui nuit et jour
y vueil entendre sans sejour (249-58).

and in all honesty if I place these verses even now at the end of this book I beg all who are nobly inclined not to despise me on that account or esteem me less, because I cannot in any way know what the outcome of this book will be, so I want to tell you before it is completed the name of the lord for whom [i.e. in whose honour] I am producing it and name myself who intend to apply myself to it day and night without respite.

Palmer mistakenly translates 'encor' as if it meant 'again' ('if I repeat these verses at the end / Of the book'), which identifies the book not as the allegorical narrative we have just been reading, but the story of Pierre's life. Such an interpretation would provide a structured reading of the *Prise* directly opposed to that offered by the allegorical prologue to the *Geste*: whereas the Burgundian chronicle announces closure but produces an open ending, that of the *Prise* would announce a chronicle contingency which escapes even the author of the work only to see it replaced by a biographical closure brought about by the protagonist's murder. In fact Machaut is playing on the double concept of the book: the physical object the reader has before him, the bulk of which still lies under his right hand, and the identification of the allegory as 'book the first', acting as a premonitory *somnium*, the interpretation of which is necessarily obscure. Neither the hero's nor the author's name is clearly given, as is appropriate to the context, in this obscure part of the work. 'Book the second', the transparent biography of Pierre, which provides the necessary gloss on the allegory, is about to begin:

Or vueil commencer ma matiere
et dire toute la maniere
dou damoiseil que dieus aye
et comment il usa sa vie (259-62).

Now I want to begin my subject and explain the whole conduct of the young lord, whom God help, and how he spent his life.

Now, it is true that Machaut does repeat his anagram at the end of the whole work in a form of colophon which follows the account of Pierre's murder and burial in a carnivalesque simulacrum of royal robes; Machaut's formal *planctus* over the dead king and final prayer for his soul closing the book proper with a final 'amen' (l. 8873). This

time the poet announces very clearly the names to be found before presenting the puzzle:

Pierre roy de jherusalem
et de chypre · le nomma len
et moy guillaume de machaut (8874-76).

Pierre, king of Jerusalem and Cyprus, he was called, and I, Guillaume de Machaut.

However, this is not the first repetition of the anagram. That comes in a paragraph linking Pierre's visit to the court of the emperor, Charles IV, son of Jean de Luxembourg, the veritable apogee of his tour of Europe in search of funds for his crusade, and his journey to Venice, where the fleet is gathered to attack Alexandria. Up to this point Pierre has no name: he is the *damoiseil* until his father's death, when he becomes *le roy*, and during his time at the courts of Jean le Bon and Charles V in France and of Charles IV in Prague and Vienna he is simply 'the foreign (or strange[r]) king' (*le roy estragne*), a supposedly mysterious figure, a latter-day hero not of epic but of romance. The re-introduction of the naming anagram not only refers back explicitly to the opening of the book, now a unified entity, but debunks its own mechanism, while allowing the poet to boast tongue in cheek of his own ingenuity; it debunks the mystery and the heroism of the protagonist, despite eulogistic formulae applied to him, and repeats the author's uncertainty as to the outcome of a history both he and his audience must have known, certainly if that history is, as apparently indicated in these lines, the capture of Alexandria:

Or me couvient ce roy nommer
qui est venus doutre la mer
car raisons est que je vous nomme
le nom de si vaillant preudomme
et pour ce vous le nommeray
quassez plus aaise en rimeray
et se je lay mis autrement
et le mien au commencement
de ce livre par tel maniere
adieu ma vraie dame chiere

pour le milleur temps garde chier
 honneur a vous quaim sans trichier
 cest pour ce que chascuns na mie
 scens de trouver tel muserie
 de chipre et de jherusalem
 fu roys · pierre lappella lem
 or vous ay nomme son nom
 qui est et fu de grant renom
 et sera sil joit de semprise
 quil a a lonneur dieu emprise
 et dieux li ottroit bonnement
 quil sen traveille durement (1379–1400)

Now is the time for me to name this king who came from overseas, because it's fitting that I should name the name of so valiant and worthy a man, and I'll name him because that will make it easier to compose my poem, and if I put it differently along with mine at the beginning of this book, like this, adieu ma vraie dame chiere / pour le milleur temps garde chier / honneur a vous quaim sans trichier, it's because not everyone has the intellect to invent such a bit of nonsense; he was king of Cyprus and Jerusalem and was called Pierre; now I've named his name, who [which] is and was of great renown and will be, if he is happy in his enterprise, which he has undertaken to the honour of God and may God willingly grant that he labours hard at it.

The last half dozen lines of this paragraph are full of unsettling ambiguities: is it to Pierre as person or as name that we should attach the 'est et fu et sera' formula, previously used to introduce the Christian divinity into a conclave on Olympus? Are we right in assuming, as we seem to be meant to do, that the 'emprise' is the crusade, the outcome of which will determine Pierre's eternal (i.e. atemporal) renown, turning him (or it) into a quasi-divine *imago* of chivalric prowess? How are we to interpret the verb of l. 1400, as an indicative explaining why God should grant Pierre success, or as another optative, turning the couplet into a prayer that God grant that Pierre takes all necessary pains to achieve his 'enterprise', whatever that may be?

The solution to some of these conundrums is to be found in the closing episodes of the poem. Machaut uses *abbreviatio formulae* to

avoid narrating in full all the minor armed expeditions undertaken by Pierre towards the end of his reign:

car trop longue chose seroit
 qui toutes les y meteroit
 et anuier porroit au lire
 qui toutes les vorroit escrire (7165–68)

*because it would be exceedingly longwinded if I recorded all of them
 and if anyone wanted to write them all out reading them would be
 exhausting.*

He then equates him with Hector and Alexander and calls Pierre the Tenth Worthy (ll. 7175–82) in a passage which closes a circle with the allegorical prologue, particularly by recalling that it was Nature who formed him to be perfect (ll. 7187–90). So far so good, but in the final passage following the *planctus* for the fallen king, a new note is sounded. Whereas in the prologue Hebe, Venus, Mars, Saturn, Vulcan and even, perhaps, Minerva as well as the Christian God and His handmaid, Nature, collaborated to produce the perfect man, at the close of the poem his place among the *Preux* is owed solely to Mars who raised him to win battles against epic odds (ll. 8858–61). This re-insertion of the classical god of war into the text has two effects: first, it denies to Pierre all those ‘softer’ chivalric and courtly attributes personified particularly by the goddesses,²⁵ thereby confirming the negative impression given by the extended comparison of Pierre with Charles IV (ll. 989–1454); second, it acts as a lightning conductor, removing from the Christian God any responsibility for the increasingly bloody and vicious campaigns of Pierre’s later career, marked as they were by repeated burnings of whole towns and the wholesale slaughter of women and children. It also has a third and more important effect in its own context, inasmuch as it forces the reader to think quite carefully about the rhetorical indirect question that the poet proceeds to ask and his comment on it:

mais dune chose me merueille
 comment jhesu crist pot souffrir
 tel homme a tel mort offrir
 car onques mais certainement

de si tres bon commencement
je ne vi si piteuse fin (8864–69).

*but I am astounded that Jesus Christ could bear to offer up such a man
to such a death because at no time have I ever seen such a very good
beginning come to such a pitiful end.*

Traditional readings of these lines concentrate on the fact of Pierre's capture of Alexandria and his murder by vassals and relatives held guilty of treason. This is notably true of William Calin's reading of the *Prise*, for whom Machaut's admiration of the King of Cyprus is unbounded, the Christian God's approval of all his campaigns unquestionable and his death an indefensible regicide.²⁶ However the placing of the last two lines contrasting beginning and end may not merely repeat the reference to death of l. 8866, but inscribe a tragic trajectory (as the Middle Ages understood tragedy) for the whole life, from excellent beginning to lamentable end, implying a moral decline from elect of God who, like Samuel, receives a direct divine command to go and serve, to remorseless and irrational psychopath whose assassination Jesus himself appears to sanction.²⁷ Now, as opposed to references to God, which are often conventional and put into the mouths of characters, there are only five other references to Christ in the poem, and all in the voice of the narrator.²⁸ This one closes a passage which begins with the line 'plourez la foy jhesu crit' ('weep for the religion of Jesus Christ'; l. 8839), the last of a series of six anaphoric lines of the *planctus* for the death of Pierre, and passes through the allusion to Mars before returning to Jesus to close the circle. Taken with the following reference to beginnings and ends, this set of allusions will remind the reader of the poet's uncertainty as to the ultimate outcome of his hero's enterprise, and the uncertain role of Fortune in the endowments made to the child Pierre in the prologue. Although Fortune is referred to regularly throughout the poem,²⁹ she never has any effect on Pierre's life, God countering her action at all points. Indeed, in a significant passage just before the expedition to Alexandria, Pierre's trust in Jesus Christ is specifically evoked as an antidote to seasickness (ll. 1630–80), which emerges as a Boethian symbol for malign Fortune. Only in these last lines of the poem, therefore, does the reader become aware of the true nature of the enterprise of which the narrator claims not to know the outcome at the start of the work: it is living the life of a Christian monarch,

not merely capturing towns from the infidel. Only if God finally accepts to receive Pierre into his glory will the King of Cyprus have a 'noble et digne victoire' ('noble and worthy victory'; l. 8872).

On the basis of the opening allegory, David G. Lanoue analysed the *Prise* as Virgilian epic,³⁰ however, the only truly epic part of the poem, which incorporates a number of formulae normally associated with *chansons de geste* – notably a repeated use of the deictic formula 'qui (donc) veïst ...' ('whoever [then] could have seen ...') – is the episode dealing with the capture of Alexandria proper. The tension which this sets up between the epic manner and the romance or chronicle use of octosyllabic couplets is much less evident in the accounts of the other campaigns, even that of the defence of Gorhigos, which offers as much scope for epic development as the Alexandrian campaign. Nor can we simply label this poem chivalric biography in the mould of *La Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin* or *La Vie du Prince Noir*. Unlike these poems, the story Machaut gives us, never letting us forget his central place as author creating the text of his hero's life, seems to run on two planes simultaneously. On the literal plane we have a life which it is hard to classify as a success, whether we consider it from a military-chivalric or a monarchic-governmental point of view. On the allegorical plane, which Machaut establishes at the start of his poem and which returns at the end, we read an atemporal iconic figure, whose place as the tenth preux is also predicated on the iconic status of a highly circumscribed victory.

Compared with such complexity, the *Geste* seems at first glance a much simpler product: its opening allegory programmes a linear narrative to be read on one level. Yet we still note the tension between the fantastic diabolisation of historical characters and the incorporation into the narrative of legal and archival material, which keeps it firmly anchored in this world. On the literary plane the poem is less focused on one character than the *Prise*. We should notice, for instance, that Jean sans Peur's participation in the Nicopolis campaign, which is recorded as an *incidence* in the parallel prose chronicle, *Le Livre des trahisons de la France envers la maison de Bourgogne*, is mentioned only as part of a *laisse* introducing both him and his father, Philippe le Hardi, to illustrate the fact that in his youth, Jean was not a favourite of Fortune. This omission of a major element in Jean's life, and which earned him the epithet by which he is known to history, restricts the role of the *Geste* as chivalric biography.³¹ We must also take account of the self-conscious archaism

of the text, the almost mechanical recreation of epic form, in which almost every *laisse* begins with a variation on the formula 'Signeur, or entendés ...', and offering a reconstruction of Old French more complete and self-consistent than Villon managed, for instance, in his *Ballade en vieil langage françoys*.³² It also contains an intensity of Picardisms that relate it most closely linguistically to the First Crusade Cycle or to the Lorraine Cycle of epic poems. As a point of comparison, the *Livre des trahisons* is written in dialectally neutral, standard literary Middle French. It is impossible now to tell how the first audience would have received this intense archaism, but the disjunction between matter, virtually contemporary history, and vehicle must have been intended by the author to lift the hero out of the flow of that history and give him the iconic status of an ancestral epic hero. To that extent we can say that, despite obvious differences between them, both the *Geste* and the *Prise* use their rhetoric to serve very similar poetic ends.

Notes

- 1 Jean Froissart, *Chroniques, Livre I (première partie, 1325–1350) et Livre II, rédaction du manuscrit de New York, Pierpont Morgan Library M.804*, ed. Peter F. Ainsworth & George T. Diller, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 2001 (Livre de Poche; Lettres Gothiques, 4556); *Livre III (du Voyage en Béarn à la campagne de Gascogne) et Livre IV (années 1389–1400)*, ed. Peter Ainsworth & Alberto Várvaro, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 2004 (Livre de Poche; Lettres Gothiques, 4563). The quotations are from the first volume, p. 71.
- 2 Didier Lechat, « Dire par fiction », *métamorphoses du je chez Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart et Christine de Pizan*, Paris, Champion, 2005 (Études Christiniennes, 7).
- 3 *La Geste des ducs de Bourgogne*, in *Chroniques relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique sous la domination des ducs de Bourgogne*, ed. M. le baron Kervyn de Lettenhove, 3 vols, Brussels, Hayez, 1870–1876, vol 2 (1875), pp. 259–572; the lack of critical interest in this work is indicated by the brevity of the entry in *Grundriß der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, XI, *La Littérature historiographique des origines à 1500*, tome 2, partie documentaire, ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Dagmar Tillmann-Bartylla, Marianne Gbenoba, Gisela Seiffert-Busch, Heidelberg, Winter, 1993, p. 109 [14237]: the only references are to G. Doutrepoint, *La Littérature française à la cour de Bourgogne*, and to G. Gröber, *Grundriß der Romanischen Philologie*;

- since then the only reference to the *Geste* that I am aware of is in Philip E. Bennett, 'Épopée, Historiographie, Généalogie', in *Les Chansons de Geste, Actes du XVI^e Congrès International de la Société Rencesvals, pour l'Étude des Épopées Romanes*, ed. Carlos Alvar & Juan Paredes, Granada, Universidad de Granada, 2005, pp. 9–38 [22–25].
- 4 *La Prise d'Alexandrie ou, Chronique du roi Pierre Ier de Lusignan par Guillaume de Machaut*, ed. L. de Mas Latrie, Geneva, J.-G. Flick, 1877 (Publications de la Société de l'Orient Latin, 1); Guillaume de Machaut, *La Prise d'Alixandre (The Taking of Alexandria)*, ed. and trans. R. Barton Palmer, New York and London, Routledge, 2002; Guillaume de Machaut, *The Capture of Alexandria*, trans. Janet Shirley; introduction and notes by Peter W. Edbury, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2001; Dzelzainis (née Hurworth), Angel Doreen, 'An Edition and Study of Guillaume de Machaut's *La Prise d'Alexandre*', PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1985; Dr Hurworth's edition is due to be published by Champion in the near future; I am particularly grateful to her for allowing me to consult and use parts of her work revised from her thesis but not yet published.
 - 5 For details of scholarship pre-1995 see Lawrence Earp, *Guillaume de Machaut, a Guide to Research*, New York; London, Garland, 1995 (Garland Composer Resource Manuals, 36), pp. 233–34; more recent work is listed in the bibliography of the ed. by R. Barton Palmer (see note 3).
 - 6 The use of Machaut's *Prise* as a reliable historical source on a par with other chroniclers of the time has been a given of historical scholarship for over a century. A case in point would be Sir George Francis Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, 4 vols, Cambridge University Press, 1940–1952, II, *The Frankish Period, 1192–1432*, p. 308, where Machaut alone is used for the date of Pierre's birth; later, p. 323, note 1, the estimate by Cypriote chroniclers that the Turkish army which tried to retake Satalia from Pierre in 1363 numbered 45,000 men, and Machaut's using the same number (*Prise*, l. 4463) to describe the Grand Karaman's army which attacked Gorhigos in 1367, both receive the mild comment that they are 'probably exaggerated'. William Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain, Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut*, Lexington KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 1974, pp. 207–09, gives a long list of factual errors in the *Prise*, but comments that Machaut was doing the best with the information he had, a judgement which begs the question of the literary exploitation of his sources.
 - 7 For the importance of allegory as a rhetorical device of *inventio* see Jody Enders, 'Memory, Allegory, and the Romance of Rhetoric', in

- Rereading Allegory: Essays in Memory of Daniel Poirion*, ed. Sahar Amer and Noah D. Gunn, *Yale French Studies* 95 (1999): 49–64.
- 8 Fernand Bournon, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de l'Institut*, Paris, Champion, 1890, p. 29, gives the following entry for MS 303: 'Chronique métrique ou rimée de Martin de Cottignies, composée en 1445, sur les règnes de Charles VI et de Charles VII. XV^e s.; 174 feuillets, papier. Cachet de la Ville de Paris.' The details of author and date of composition are wrong: they refer rather to the scribe and date of copying. The absence of a reference to an *incipit* is significant, since Bournon regularly gives the *incipit*, *explicit* or other notable rubrications where such occur in other manuscripts.
- 9 All translations from the *Geste des ducs de Bourgogne* are my own.
- 10 Georges Doutrepont, *La Littérature française à la cour des ducs de Bourgogne*, Paris, Champion, 1909, (*Bibliothèque du XV^e Siècle*, 8), pp. 73, 80–81.
- 11 *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. Ian Short, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1990 (*Livre de Poche*, *Lettres Gothiques*, 4524), *laisses* 1, 262–266, 291.
- 12 *Les Rédactions en vers du 'Couronnement de Louis'*, ed. Yvan G. Lepage, Geneva, Droz, 1978 (*Textes Littéraires Français*, 261), *laisses* 1–3; Philip E. Bennett, 'Des jongleurs et des rois: réflexions sur le "prologue" du *Couronnement de Louis*', in *La 'Chanson de geste' e il ciclo di Guglielmo d'Orange: atti del convegno di Bologna 7-9 ottobre 1996*, ed. Andrea Fassò, *Medioevo Romano* 21.2–3 (1997): 296–312.
- 13 *Le Moniage Guillaume: chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. Nelly Andrieux-Reix, Paris, Champion, 2003 (*CFMA*, 145).
- 14 Palmer (ed.), *La Prise*, p. 40 (*incipit*), p. 416 (*explicit*), Palmer's edition is semi-diplomatic, resolving abbreviations and distinguishing i/j and u/v according to modern criteria, but offering neither modern punctuation nor capitalisation; the only other manuscript to offer an *incipit* is E (BNF fr 9221), 'Cy commence la Prise d'Alexandre', Earp, p. 184; manuscripts G (BNF fr 22546), B (BNF fr 1585) and the Codex Vogüé (Vg), currently on loan to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, have neither *incipit* nor *explicit*.
- 15 Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain*, p. 204; Dzelzainis, pp. 35ff, 51–52.
- 16 The translations from *La Prise d'Alixandre* used in this article are my own, and not those published in the edition by R. Barton Palmer.
- 17 For the importance of the *Ovide moralisé* in Machaut's use of allegory see Lechat, «Dire par fiction», *passim*; the long history of such allegorisations from late Antiquity to Dante and beyond is traced by Peter Dronke, *Sources of Inspiration: studies in literary transformation*,

400-1500, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1997; *idem*, *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1992.

- 18 The person who commissioned *G* clearly saw the significance of this image for interpreting the whole biography of the hero. Unlike *A* and *Vg* which place at the head of the *Prise* a miniature showing Pierre participating in the landing which led to the capture of the town, or *E*, which has as the first miniature of three in its version of the *Prise* Pierre's literal, human, birth, *G* has a two column miniature on f. 1r depicting a child-sized Pierre in full armour in the presence of a number of deities, and of one human figure in a blue robe powdered with the symbol *Y*, against a diapered background and beneath a canopy of heaven with sun, moon and stars.
- 19 This is not the first christianisation, however, since in referring to Godefroi de Bouillon, Mars calls the land he conquered 'la terre de promission' (l. 60).
- 20 This is an attitude which Machaut also displays in *La Fontaine amoureuse*: see Lechat, «Dire par fiction», pp. 170-71.
- 21 Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre du Voir Dit (Le Dit Véridique)*, ed. & trans. Paul Imbs, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet & Noël Musso, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1999 (Livre de Poche, Lettres Gothiques, 4557), ll. 5104-23; Jean Froissart, *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*, ed. Anthime Fourrier, Geneva, Droz, 1975 (Textes Littéraires Français, 222), ll. 2124-209.
- 22 My translation.
- 23 Palmer, l. 130, prints 'li est drois', but this, if not a misprint, requires correction: he translates as if the pronoun were 'il' (p. 45).
- 24 Francis, *History of Cyprus*, II, 308.
- 25 This is particularly true of Hebe, indicated as educating him in all good doctrine (ll. 287-90); additionally, at the point where Pierre first tries to slip out of Cyprus to organise a crusade, *Vg* offers an interesting variant replacing the unknown human agent who alerts the young prince's father with Vesta (l. 535), suggesting that for some readers of the *Prise* at least wisdom and warfare, even in the form of a crusade, were not in the same camp.
- 26 Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain*, Ch. 10 (pp. 203-26), passim; Palmer (ed.) p. 32.
- 27 Hill, *History of Cyprus*, II, 364 and Palmer (ed.), p. 453 both describe Pierre as insane or unbalanced at the end of his life; Dzelzainis, pp. 63-64 argues convincingly from this passage that Machaut is moving

responsibility for Pierre's fate from Fortune to his own character defects.

- 28 Lines 300 (reference to Crucifixion – Pierre's vision happened on a Friday), 1630–36 (Jesus and God associated in prayer for Pierre's safety at sea), 1671–80 (Pierre puts his trust in Jesus in face of seasickness), 5735ff (as part of treaty with Sultan Pierre will receive the relic of the post of the flagellation), 8839 (appeal for public to weep for Christian faith).
- 29 Shirley and Edbury list five references to Fortune in the Index to their translation of the poem.
- 30 Lanoue, David G., 'La Prise d'Alexandrie: Guillaume de Machaut's Epic', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 29(1985): 99–1108.
- 31 *Le Livre des trahisons de la France envers la maison de Bourgogne*, in *Chroniques relatives à l'histoire de la Belgique*, ed. cit., II, 8 (§ VII).
- 32 François Villon, *Poésies complètes*, ed. Claude Thiry, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1991 (Livre de Poche, Lettres Gothiques, 4530), ll. 385–412.