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EXPERIMENTS IN FICTION: FRAMING AND REFRAMING ROMANCE AT THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES, AND BEYOND

Introduction

The *préfaciers* of fifteenth-century fictions and histories are comfortably self-congratulatory: the readers they have in mind, and whose tastes, they say with happy confidence, they are satisfying, are newly sophisticated, newly demanding, "plus agut[s] et soubtille[s]", says Philippe de Vigneulles, than readers used to be, and thus appreciative of new and different modes and styles. These new readers prefer, says Philippe in the preface to his *mise en prose* of the *Geste des Lorrains*, "chose abregee et plaisante"[1]; they are impatient, says Jean Bagnyon transposing *Fierabras*, of confusion or disarray[2]; they require, says Jean Molinet rewriting the *Roman de la Rose*, a French now no longer *corrompu* but "fort agensy, fort mignon et renouvelé"[3]. The *romanciers*, the translators, the *prosateurs*, of the later Middle Ages naturally play to this urbane and lettered clientele, a clientele prepared to appreciate and pay not only for subtleties of language, but also, and lavishly, for appropriately sumptuous manuscripts to add to their magnificent libraries: the ducal library of Burgundy above all, of course, but also, all over France and the Low Countries, libraries belonging for instance to a Charles d'Orléans or a Jean de Wavrin, a Margaret of Austria or a Charles d'Angoulême. The

1 See C. M. Jones, "'Modernizing' the Epic: Philippe de Vigneulles", *Echoes of the Epic: Studies in Honor of Gerard J. Brault*, ed. D. P. Schenck and M. J. Schenk, Birmingham AL, Summa, 1998, p. 115-132, at p. 117.

2 Jean Bagnyon, composing a *mise en prose* of *Fierabras*, finds his source text "sans grande ordonnance"; his prose version, he says, is neatly arranged in "chapitres ordonnez". See G. Doutrepont, *Les mises en prose des épopées et des romans chevaleresques du XIV^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle*, Brussels, Palais des Académies, 1939; repr. Geneva, Slatkine, 1969, p. 559.

3 Quoted from the entry for Molinet's *Rose* in the invaluable new *Catalogue raisonné* of *mises en prose*, *La vie en proses: "rescrivere in prosa nella Francia dei secoli XIV-XVI"*, http://users2.unimi.it/lavieenproses.

present collection of essays celebrates the efforts of the fiction-writers of the fifteenth century: their experiments in fiction which have often been, until recently, depreciated and undervalued[1]: the efforts of those who translated and transposed the *romans* and *chansons de geste* which, they say, they have found languishing illegibly in faded and mildewed manuscripts; the efforts of those who essayed new approaches to what they saw as out-dated fictions; the efforts of those who re-imagined modes of story; the efforts, more distantly, of those who preserved and popularised – or attempted to popularise – the last gasps of an older fictional world, those who made it their aim to bring that world into the cultured courts of the fifteenth century and even, surprisingly, into the Renaissance and into a rationalising eighteenth century. The core of the volume – the essays by Brown-Grant, Chase, Dixon, Grimbert, Krueger, and Taylor – consists of revised versions of papers given at the International Congress of the Courtly Literature Society in Lisbon in 2013; the essays by Colombo Timelli, Ferlampin-Acher and Lacy are invited contributions designed to broaden a field of enquiry which, in recent years, has moved from backwater to cutting edge.

All this, of course, runs very much counter to what is still accepted stereotype. Too many critics, and certainly too many literary manuals, still talk of late-medieval fictions as merely mediocre: repetitive, derivative, at best dutiful. As Michel Zink put it, sadly but rightly, as recently as 1988:

> Personne ne lit plus les romans du XIV^e^ et XV^e^ siècles. […] On soupçonne en eux une forme qui a perdu son sens et qui se répète en remaniements et en compilations interminables et dépourvus d'invention[2].

Still less, of course, do they celebrate the assiduities of the *prosateurs*, and even less again the appeal of such oddities as the Middle English *Chinon*,

1 Witness, for instance, G. Doutrepont's distaste for the rewritings on which he spent half a lifetime, obvious in his *Mises en prose*, and also his *La littérature à la cour des ducs de Bourgogne Philippe le Hardi, Jean sans Peur, Philippe le Bon, Charles le Téméraire*, Paris, Champion, 1909; repr. Geneva, Slatkine, 1970.

2 I quote from his essay "Le roman", in *Grundriss der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, vol. 8/1, *La littérature française aux XIV^e^ et XV^e^ siècles*, ed. D. Poirion, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1988, p. 197–218, at p. 216. For a counter, see R. Brown-Grant, *French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality, and Desire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, "Introduction".

or the determinedly modernising *Bibliothèque universelle des romans*. We, on the other hand, aim here to add to the growing chorus of voices that is now permitting the re-evaluation of late-medieval French fictions, by covering a range of texts of different sorts, and drawing on a range of different analytical disciplines. Fifteenth-century France was, of course, a period of intense and competing literary and codicological activity: the period which saw an extraordinary final flowering of romance and epic; which saw the production of many of the most magnificent of vernacular manuscripts – but which also saw the first steps towards print, and towards what is now the novel. The papers offered here are, at the textual level, steps towards our understanding of the repertory of literary devices and prototypical editorial moves that shape the new experiments in fiction; at the socio-cultural level, on the other hand, they aim to improve our grasp of the role played by these particular artefacts in the social, ideological and literary systems.

The first of these papers, that of Christine Ferlampin-Acher on *Artus de Bretagne*, is a textbook demonstration precisely of the value of exploring such devices in neglected fictions. *Artus de Bretagne* is, admittedly, a fourteenth – rather than a fifteenth-century artefact, but it enjoyed a quite remarkable popularity at the end of the Middle Ages, with twelve manuscripts and no fewer than fourteen editions before the end of the sixteenth century. There is still no full-scale critical edition and only a handful of studies[1]. In a move characteristic of many of the papers in this volume, Ferlampin-Acher focuses on something easily overlooked, gesture: the gestures of affection in particular which seem, for the anonymous author, to embody paradigms of cultural difference and to betray presuppositions about social attitudes and social participation. An ingenious *prosateur*, here, has integrated a particular motif into a new receiving culture, and operated, it seems, a cultural filter that accommodates an older romance for that target culture's different presuppositions about social *mores*, attitudes and relationships.

As, of course, does Antoine de La Sale with his *Jehan de Saintré* – which, by contrast, has always attracted considerable scholarly attention,

1 A facsimile of the 1584 edition was published by N. Cazauran and C. Ferlampin-Acher, Paris, Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1996; Ferlampin-Acher's edition of the text is eagerly awaited. ARLIMA shows a string of articles, published as from 1995, by Ferlampin-Acher, which add to a small tally dating from the 1970s by Sarah Spilsbury.

in part as being perhaps the first modern novel[1]. Jane Taylor's reading of *Saintré* is, in a sense, political: she argues that, in part, La Sale is creating meaning quite specific to one particular collective reading consciousness, that of a Burgundian court dismayed by, and preoccupied with, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the ferment of diplomatic and military activity which planned, though ultimately did not execute, crusading responses. Saintré's resounding, if unlikely, victory of Christians over *Sarrazins* can, she suggests, be explained in terms which later centuries were to understand as "counter-factual": that is, it recasts the outcomes of authentic history in ways that recreate a historical past to intrigue, or in this case to flatter, the readers of the late fifteenth century. In this connection, it is interesting to look at the recasting of fiction in ways which show traces of press and market and readers, as Roberta Krueger demonstrates via the Comte de Tressan's rewriting of *Saintré* for the tastes evinced by the *Bibliothèque universelle des romans*. Tressan prunes La Sale's romance of much of its chivalric content: gone also, above all, are the didactic passages which served perhaps, for La Sale, as justifications for fiction[2]. Tressan's focus is, almost exclusively, the love-affair between Saintré and Madame des Belles Cousines, and the tone he uses is faintly but unmistakably salacious. He has, as it were, and as Krueger shows, colonised his source-text, in ways that tell us more, in the end, about the receptor culture's preoccupations than about the fifteenth-century romance itself.

Translation and *ré-écriture* have, of course, always been about the power relation between source culture and target culture: the adaptor or translator has always as his first preoccupation to appropriate and thus refract – sometimes to rewrite – a source text in order to ensure that it can remain alive and functioning in a new cultural context[3].

1 As suggested, unexpectedly, by J. Kristeva in her first book, *Le texte du roman*, The Hague, Mouton, 1970; Ferlampin-Acher's paper suggests comparisons on this ground between *Saintré* and *Artus*.

2 Writers and adaptors of the fifteenth century insist on the "improving" value of romance: see N. Cazauran, "Les romans de chevalerie en France: entre exemple et récréation", *Le roman de chevalerie au temps de la Renaissance. Actes du 12e Colloque de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Société internationale de recherches interdisciplinaires sur la Renaissance, 1986-1987*, ed. M.-T. Jones-Davies, Paris, J. Touzot, 1987, p. 29-48.

3 For cogent discussions of this point, see, among many others, A. Lefevere, "Translation: its Genealogy in the West", *Translation, History and Culture*, ed. S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere, London and New York, Pinter, 1990, p. 14-28, and Yong Zhong, "Death of the Translator

And one of the great benefits of exploring a major experiment in fiction, the proliferating *mises en prose* of the fifteenth century, is that it provides an embodiment of the experience of reading, a record of one era's encounter with another[1]. Three papers, here, bring out what we earlier called the prototypical editorial moves of the *prosateurs* of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Joan Tasker Grimbert and Carol Chase[2] address two unusually celebrated cases of *mise en prose*: respectively, the so-called Burgundian *Erec* and *Cligés*: celebrated because available to scholars from as early as the last years of the nineteenth century, and therefore much more widely analysed than is the case with other *mises en prose*[3]. Both scholars see the translations as particularly clear testimony to the complex, dialectical relationship between the *prosateur(s)*, the source text(s), and the reading public. As is usual with *mises en prose* but perhaps here with particular acuity, the *prosateur*'s textual management, his intrusions and deletions, suggest significant ideological preferences designed, no doubt, for its intended Burgundian court audience[4]: a marked enthusiasm for the tournament which seemingly outweighs his interest in the love intrigues of the principal characters. Interestingly, however, his preference is for the tournament *à l'ancienne* – the dramatic *mêlée* rather than the single combat – but shorn, carefully, of less courtly features such as the taking of prisoners, the demanding of ransoms or the appropriation of horses and armour. His tournaments, as Grimbert and Chase argue,

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and Birth of the Interpreter", *Babel*, 44, 1998, p. 336-347, both arguing that (re)interpretation is inseparable from the process of translation. For the role of the Burgundian *scripteur/éditeur*, see P. Cockshaw, "À propos des 'éditeurs' à la cour de Bourgogne", *Le statut du scripteur au Moyen Âge: Actes du XII^e colloque scientifique du Comité international de paléographie latine […]*, ed. M.-C. Hubert, E. Poulle and M. H. Smith, Paris, École des Chartes, 2000, p. 283-289.

1 As witness, for instance, the papers in *Mettre en prose aux XIV^e–XVI^e siècles*, ed. M. Colombo Timelli, B. Ferrari and A. Schoysman, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010.

2 Who are, of course, responsible for the translation of the prose *Erec* and *Cligés* into English: see their *Chrétien de Troyes in Prose. The Burgundian Erec et Cligés*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2011.

3 As supplements to Christian von Troyes, *Sämtliche erhaltene Werke*, ed. W. Foerster, 4 vols, Halle: Niemeyer: vol. 1, *Cligés*, 1884; vol. 3, *Erec et Enide*, 1890.

4 This begs, of course, the question of authorship: one *prosateur* or two? Critics have tended, perhaps simply for reasons of convenience, to assume one; Colombo Timelli, however, in her editions of the *mises en prose*, is rightly more hesitant (see the introductions to her *Histoire d'Erec en prose*, Geneva, Droz, 2000, and *Le livre de Alixandre, empereur de Constentinoble et de Cligés son filz*, Geneva, Droz, 2004).

are certainly nostalgic recreations of a chivalric and heroic past – but they also underline a continuity with that past by figuring as pageants calqued on the highly political tourneys designed by Philip the Good of Burgundy, for instance, as parades of power or tools of persuasion. The *prosateurs*, it seems, are concerned to extend the expressive relevance of their source texts – and although the scanty manuscript witness to the two *mises en prose* would suggest that this experiment in the fashioning of literary taste was unsuccessful[1], the two romances show that their author was conscious of the Burgundian chivalric revival, and eager to exploit it by rebalancing his sources[2]. How far was this a conscious manœuvre? The *prosateur* of *Cligés* intervenes in his translation in terms which suggest that, in his case at least, this was a considered, thoughtful process – and interestingly, Pierre Durand, the *prosateur* of *Guillaume de Palerne* (c. 1527), who might seem rather more conservative in his manipulation of the source, is, as Maria Colombo Timelli shows, consciously interventionist, although in his case on moral grounds: is Durand perhaps intrigued by an ethics that, to his Renaissance eye, will seem dismayingly crude and unsophisticated? Whatever the case, all three of these *mises en prose* re-emphasise how imperative it is to take account of the particularities of each as a translating, and reformulating, project: the new interest in *mises en prose*, the new editions, the new tools at the disposal of critics, allow us, as in this volume, to see how the belief systems and values of the writer, and especially those he perceives to be the preference of his audience, inflect and affect translation and modernisation strategies[3].

Finding favour with the dukes of Burgundy and the courts of their circle must, however, have meant taking account of a richly various range of practices of production – including, of course, illustration, itself

1 The prose *Erec* survives in one complete and two fragmentary mss, the prose *Cligés* in just one. Here again, however, in her editions of *Histoire d'Erec* and *Le livre de Alixandre… et de Cligès*, Colombo Timelli cautions against reading too much into the scarcity of manuscript witness.

2 This close attention to Burgundian ambitions is not unusual in the writers and *prosateurs* of the ducal court: see for instance, Aimé Petit, "L'activité littéraire au temps des ducs de Bourgogne: les mises en prose sous le mécénat de Philippe le Bon", *Synergies*, 2, 2007, p. 59-65.

3 In ways which a modern translational consciousness might find disturbing, as for instance B. Folkart, *Le conflit des énonciations: traduction et discours rapporté*, Candiac (Québec), Les Éditions Balzac, 1991.

an aspect of "translation", but also of "reading", the topic of Rosalind Brown-Grant's and Rebecca Dixon's papers[1]. Both scholars address one of the more appealing artists working in Burgundian circles: the so-called Wavrin Master, known for his rapid, expressive, cartoon-like sketches done in pen and watercolour, and which provide dense illustrative programmes for a string of manuscripts. To say "cartoon-like" has, in the past, suggested an artist parodying the absurdities of plot in the fictions he illustrates – but here, Brown-Grant shows that the artist operates a far more responsible, explicative, complex reading. The Wavrin Master, she argues, is as experimental, as innovative, as are the romances he illustrates: *Olivier de Castille*, *Florimont*, the *Comte d'Artois*, the *Histoire des Seigneurs de Gavre*. He mediates between text and reader and acts as conscientious explicator, adapts his miniatures to the precise delineaments of the narrative, comic certainly, but also, when required, serious, and when required playing a serious role in the explication and articulation of the romances. Dixon, on the other hand, addresses a romance – also Burgundian – so neglected as to be virtually unknown: the *Roman de Buscalus*, a pseudo-historical account of the history of Tournai[2]. Dixon shows that *Buscalus* is perhaps, of all the romances dealt with in this volume, the most startlingly experimental – "a new genre [...] the exoticized foundation myth". But this romance too, incidentally, in its only near-complete manuscript, was illustrated by the Wavrin Master – and Dixon argues that just as this artist, with a string of other romances, was receptive to tone and narrative function, so here, with *Buscalus*, he is insistently documentary, thus responding, creatively, to the pseudo-historical, but also insistently inventive and ludic, and reacting, just as creatively, to the ferment of exotic adventures that characterise this interesting curiosity of a late-medieval romance. Brown-Grant and Dixon, in other words, demonstrate that in Burgundian circles, constructing meaning and assigning value are

1 Recent conspectuses on this topic are T. Kren and S. McKendrick, *Illuminating the Renaissance: the Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, and H. Wijsman, *Illustrated Manuscript Production and Noble and Princely Book Ownership in the Burgundian Netherlands (1400-1550)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010. On the ways in which illustration may be seen as evidence of reading, see A.-C. Le Ribeux-Koenig, "Écriture et lecture du Romanesque à la fin du Moyen Âge: *Le Petit Artus de Bretagne*, *Meliador*, *Ysaïe le Triste*", PhD dissertation, Paris IV, 2005.

2 Dixon is currently preparing an edition.

participatory activities, in which manuscripts are a hybrid amalgam of text and imagery, with decorative programmes that actualise the imaginative, affective and emotional potential of the new romances[1] – *mises en prose*, pseudo-histories – with which the writers are experimenting.

And so to an oddity, our coda: Christopher Middleton's anonymous, and much unread, *Chinon of England*. Norris Lacy is politely deprecatory – although in terms which will surely make readers distinctly curious to read more … *Chinon*, a product of Tudor England (1597), is a farrago of riotous adventure, replete with all the commonplaces of romance; it is also, distantly, an Arthurian romance, distantly because it pays no more than lip-service to its predecessors, with little more than a few familiar names. But does not *Chinon* too emerge from an era of English narrative experiment, the era of the tangentially Arthurian *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), the era of Anthony Munday's translations of the even more remotely Arthurian, even more teeming *Amadis* (of which the first book was published in 1596)? Romance, in England as in France, was by this time pervasive and persistent, inventively produced, widely distributed, responsive to the desires of readers: even if *Chinon* is a cultural leftover, even if its pullulating adventures defy all coherence, it surely remains evidence of an effort to meet and satisfy those readers' cultural tastes.

Critics in France and England have long discussed the continuity between romance and novel: in older histories, however, romance is often dismissed as marginal, "fiction" and "literature" and "the novel" having been invented, curiously, only in the sixteenth century. Those older literary histories, at least in France, skip the fictions of the fifteenth century, with the grudging exception of *Jehan de Saintré* and perhaps the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*. This present collection of essays addresses precisely the romances they skip, which were often popular in manuscript and which dominate the first century or so of fiction in print. As the *romanciers*, the *prosateurs*, the illustrators of the fifteenth century and later negotiate the cultural differences embodied by language, as they integrate the alterities of the source texts into their receiving culture,

1 For earlier suggestions on these lines, see J. J. G. Alexander, "Art History, Literary History, and the Study of Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts", *Studies in Iconography*, 18, 1997, p. 51–66, and more recently E. Morrison and A. D. Hedeman, *Imagining the Past in France: History in Manuscript Painting, 1250-1500*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010.

as they break down the barriers of textuality and contextuality, they create, to borrow an expression from Samuel Daniel welcoming Florio's translation of Montaigne's essays, an "intertraffic of the mind"[1]: a series of experiments in fiction, sometimes successful, sometimes abortive, but which bear witness to a rich encounter with the other which transcends time, and geography.

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1 I borrow the phrase from Daniel's *Letter to John Florio*, which appears as a prefatory poem to Montaigne, *The Essayes […] done into English by John Florio*, London, V. Sims, 1603.