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2 Vernacular chronicles and narrative sources of history in medieval England

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The main objectives of this essay are twofold. First, I wish to consider briefly the term 'historical texts' from a primarily medieval point of view; second, I wish to offer a broad classification and survey of such texts within the cultural context of medieval England in relation to texts that are nowadays more commonly regarded as 'literary'. Similar studies could, of course, be made for every European country with a tradition of historical writing, but the present study concentrates on England writings in English for reasons of space and because of the richness of the relevant materials.

The language background

Writers of all sorts and of whatever period are influenced by linguistic and socio-linguistic constraints in their choice of language in which to write, subject matter, literary form, and the appropriateness of literary form to subject matter. Historical writers are no exception, and the development of historical writings in medieval England parallels the fortunes of the English language and its social context. The linguistic period known as Middle English traditionally spans the years 1100 to 1500.¹ Historically, it is approximately bounded at its beginning by the Norman Conquest and the introduction of the feudal system and at its end by the advent of the English Renaissance and the rise of a mercantile economy, presaged by William Caxton's introduction around 1476 into England of that great instrument of cultural change, the printing press. Linguistically, the period sees a post-Conquest restriction in the use of written English in most areas in favour of Anglo-Norman and Latin, a restriction that prevailed for 250 years until, from around 1350 onwards, the English language began to reassert itself as the primary language for all kinds of writings.² Over this period of four centuries, English developed from an insular Germanic tongue into a cosmopolitan pot-pourri of native English, Scandinavian, Latin, French and Low German, with a dash of Cornish, Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, and even more exotic elements.³

The problem with genres

The student of history might define 'historical texts' as 'those texts that are of value to the modern historian in establishing accurate historical facts'. But this is a modern, utilitarian viewpoint that disregards many of the texts – or even parts of texts – that medieval English men and women would have considered historical.

Part of the problem is the result of literary conditioning. Genre divisions dating back to the Renaissance formed the basis for a traditional hierarchy of fixed poetic 'kinds' until the end of the eighteenth century, from epic and tragedy at the top to short lyric, epigram and the like at the bottom. The development of new literary forms in the Romantic period drastically altered the conception and ranking of genres, and since then they have been thought of as convenient but rather arbitrary ways of classifying works of literature.⁴ Criteria for the critical analysis and evaluation of literature have metamorphosed from rigid generic rules through 'sincerity, intensity, organic unity, etc.' to, from New Criticism on, the (supposed) non-evaluation on aesthetic grounds of texts of whatever type. Genre study may have become fluid or even been dismissed as irrelevant, but Middle English anthologies and literary histories have generally lagged behind the times in terms of what passes for cutting-edge literary criticism and theory. Editors often use genre as a convenient and pragmatic way of presenting their materials, but their terminology just as often betrays uneasiness with such divisions.⁵

The validity of applying Early Modern and later classifications to pre-Renaissance writings is doubtful. Renaissance literary criticism was based on the humanist rediscovery of the classics, including Greek theory. However, Aristotle's *Poetics* was not well known in the Middle Ages, and medieval literary theory, such as there is, was based on watered-down, sometimes misrepresented, classical theory. The primary concern was rhetoric, as exemplified by the *Speculum Doctrinale* of Vincent of Beauvais (1190–1264) and works by Radulfus de Longo Campo, Nicholas Trivet, John of Garland, and, put into practice, Geoffrey Chaucer.⁶

It is worth noting that the English word 'fiction' is first recorded as a descriptive division of literature only in 1599. In Middle English, the word meant 'artefact, something made or invented; lie, untruth'.⁷ There was no single blanket term for 'literary fiction' in Middle English.

Medieval genre theory is vague and non-specific about individual works. However, in a series of important articles, Paul Strohm has shown, by close reference to what the writers themselves called their works, that medieval conceptions of different literary genres did not correspond to our modern terminology based on Renaissance critical theory.⁸

An alternative textual classification

The following survey of 'historical texts' attempts to accommodate both the medieval Englishman's and the modern historian's interpretations of the historicity of texts, which frequently, though not always, reflect different perspectives on the meaning of history and different perceptions of historical truth.

Thus many narrative texts are included that are not traditionally regarded as primarily historical texts, and I have included poems with a historical or political content. Saints' lives and legends and biblical narratives have been included as texts which were historical from the medieval point of view. A major genre that is re-evaluated is the romance, which continues to be notoriously difficult to define; definitions have become increasingly wide and vague in order to accommodate the disparate nature of the works involved.⁹ The main criteria for classification are

subject matter and an estimate of authorial intent, the intended audience and the historical credence given to the works by their authors or readers.

Accordingly, texts that do not record historical narrative but which represent reactions to history or current events, such as a number of political poems, satires and elegies, have been excluded. In the widest interpretation, all Middle English texts can be considered as informational documents in one way or another. Thus Chaucer and William Langland are valuable witnesses in social history and are, indeed, first-rate social historians in their own right. Mystical, devotional and Wycliffite writings are important documents in ecclesiastical and spiritual history. Medical and scientific works are the factual evidence for the history of science. All are witnesses in intellectual history or the history of ideas; all texts, no matter what their subject matter or literary quality, and all texts, no matter how removed from the authorial original, are valuable for the history of the English language. However, many 'aesthetic' writers were also active historians by the standards of the time. Thus Chaucer is a historical writer from the medieval perspective in the *Second Nun's Tale* of St Cecilia, the *miracle of the Prioress's Tale*, and the moral stories of the *Monk's Tale*. John Gower and John Lydgate often narrate historical events, while Thomas Hoccleve is a frequent reporter of saints' lives.

Texts that are overtly and self-consciously fictional, such as Chaucer's tale of Sir Thopas, do not appear below, though their precise definition can be difficult.

Also excluded are official and public record texts and documents, such as wills, deeds, charters, indentures and account rolls; and official records, such as the Rolls of Parliament, the proceedings of the Privy Council, and Chancery and Exchequer records. Private and official letters also belong to this category. Such documents were not intended primarily as systematic records of history; they are, in general, non-narrative records of facts and transactions which by their nature have become primary historical sources of paramount importance to the modern historian.

Medieval historical texts

In the present analysis, historical texts are defined as those texts whose primary authorial intent, as perceived by a medieval reader (or hearer), was to record the events of past or recent history. The subject matter is the political history of nations or of significant periods, the narration of important individual events in national or local history, ecclesiastical history, and the lives of historical or possibly historical persons. Taken together, these texts represent the sum of reliable history available to the medieval person in the vernacular, and thus help define the possible limits of his or her knowledge of history and the parameters of historical consciousness.

Chronicles and historical narratives are discussed first, followed by 'biographical' narratives, that is, texts focused on all or part of the life of an individual. Under 'Chronicles and historical narratives' I include verse and prose chronicles, various propagandist texts, and short historical poems and ballads. Under 'Biographical narratives' I include both religious texts (primarily saints' lives) and secular narratives of individuals, some of whom are now considered non-historical.

*Chronicles and historical narratives*¹⁰

The most readily recognizable historical texts are the various secular chronicles of England. The audience for such works was originally upper-class or monastic, but widened in the fifteenth century to include members of the increasingly wealthy merchant class.

Verse chronicles

The late eleventh- and twelfth-century prose continuations to the Peterborough copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* represent the conclusion of the vigorous Old English tradition of chronicle-writing. A new tradition – in verse, however – of English chronicling arose in the thirteenth century, originally modelled on French verse chronicles such as those of Geffrei Gaimar and Wace, utilizing and expanding on the comprehensive history of Britain and England presented in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The result was, in approximate chronological order of composition, the comprehensive treatments of English history found in *Lazamon's Brut* (early thirteenth century), the A and B versions of Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*, the *Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Chronicle* (all written during the early fourteenth century), Thomas Castelford's *Chronicle* (mid-fourteenth century), and the A and B versions of John Hardyng's *Chronicle* (mid-fifteenth century).¹¹

Most verse chronicles of England begin with the founding of Britain by Brutus, either the son or the grandson of the Trojan hero Aeneas. This ultimate base for English history is paralleled in narratives of the Trojan War that are now often classified as 'romances' (see further below), such as the *Seege of Troye* (early fourteenth century), the *Gest Historiale of the Destruction of Troy* (late fourteenth century), the *Laud Troy Book* (c. 1400), and Lydgate's *Troy Book* (commissioned as a historical work by the Prince of Wales, later King Henry V, and completed in 1420). All are based on what were for the medieval English reputable historical sources – Dares Phrygius's *De Excidio Trojae Historia*, Benoit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, and Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* – and all are presented as serious historical narratives.

Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, which is found in association with the *Troy Book* in three manuscripts, was written as a supplement to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The historical account is overlaid with a good deal of topical political moralizing on war and peace.

The war waged by Titus and Vespasian against Jerusalem is recounted in two verse works. The alliterative *Siege of Jerusalem* interweaves Latin chronicles and legends, including among its sources Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* and the *Legenda Aurea*, while the couplet *Titus and Vespasian* utilizes the Gospels, the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and the *History of Josephus*.

The *Sege of Melayne* lays claim to historical accuracy in several references to its source as 'the Cronekill,' and is partly intended as a glorification of the warlike Bishop Turpin, Roland's associate in the Charlemagne cycle.

Prose chronicles

The popularity of verse chronicles was small compared to that enjoyed by prose chronicles after their reintroduction in the late fourteenth century. As in the case of the verse chronicles, the earliest prose chronicles were originally translations, but as linguistic confidence and nationalist pride increased, they developed into independent English productions early in the fifteenth century.

The major published prose chronicles are John Trevisa's translation of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon* (and subsequent translations thereof), the various versions of the *Chronicles of London*, John Capgrave's *Abbreuiacion of Cronicles*, and the *Prose Brut*, the most popular and successful of all Middle English secular works. Major unpublished chronicles include translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (a single manuscript) and Nicholas Trevet's *Cronicles* (a single manuscript), and prose paraphrases of Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle* (two related manuscripts) and of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Chronicle*, Part 2 (a single manuscript).

William Caxton's *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* (published 1473/74) is a prose counterpart to the verse narratives of Troy described above. Caxton's comments on his work make it clear that he regarded it as historical (with a topical moral), though he was aware of the variations to be found in different authors' accounts.

The *Prose Brut* became the first printed history of England when Caxton published it in 1480 (2nd ed. 1482) under the title *Chronicles of England*. The printer was probably the author of the final section in his edition, and he re-used this material in compiling a *Liber ultimus* for his edition (1482) of Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon*. Caxton makes a significant comment in the colophon to his continuation, that 'where as ther is fawte, J beseche them that shal rede it to correcte it. For yf J coude haue founden moo storyes, J wold haue sette in hit moo.'¹²

Shorter prose chronicles

Shorter prose chronicles focusing on specific events or periods include the *English Conquest of Ireland* (probably translated from a Latin chronicle ultimately based on the *Expugnatio Hibernica* of Giraldus Cambrensis), John Shirley's *Dethe of the Kyng of Scotis* (said to be translated from Latin), and the chronicle formerly attributed to John Warkworth, which is appended to two manuscripts of the *Prose Brut*.

Several shorter prose works cover the same subjects as the longer narratives described above. Two short narratives, occurring in the same manuscript and each abbreviated from the corresponding long poem by Lydgate, are the *Prose Siege of Troy* (with added details from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*) and the *Prose Siege of Thebes*. Three prose works deal with the siege of Jerusalem: the *Sege of Jerusaleme* in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Porkington 10, abbreviated from the couplet *Titus and Vespasian*; a translation of Roger d'Argenteuil's *Bible en Francois* in Cleveland, Public Library, MS W q901.92-C468 (which also contains a *Prose Brut* text); and *The Dystruccyon of Iherusalem* by Vaspazyan and Tytus, printed by Wynkyn de Worde (1510?; 2nd ed. 1528) and by Richard Pynson (1513?).

Ecclesiastical history is represented by three dissimilar works. The *Book of the Foundation of St. Bartholomew's Church in London* piously relates the history of the church, with associated miracles. The *Chronicle of Popes and Emperors* (that is, of Rome) is a translation and abbreviation of Martinus Polonus's thirteenth-century *Chronicon Pontificum et Imperatorum*. A Lollard chronicle of the papacy presents a vitriolic account of the 'rablement of the popes' drawn from Higden's *Polychronicon*, supplemented by Martinus Polonus's chronicle. Clearly, the perceived historicity of the latter work would depend greatly on one's theological point of view.

Political and propagandist newsletters and pamphlets

Unlike the ideal (at least) of modern historical writings, none of the above works is written from a totally detached viewpoint; the medieval chronicler does not hesitate to use history to state or draw his moral judgements or to show his political predilections. Even more consciously designed to influence are those short relations of recent or current events circulated as open newsletters or as propagandist pamphlets, particularly during the politically turbulent late fifteenth century. Official or semi-official accounts such as the *Chronicle of the Rebellion in Lincolnshire* (1470) and the short and long versions of the *Historie of the Arrivall of King Edward IV* (c.1471) use privileged inside information and official documents. The *Deposition of Richard II*, *Coumpleyntes ayens the Dewke of Suffolk*, and the *Claim of the Duke of York* (1460) are extracts or adaptations from the official records in the Rolls of Parliament that were circulated generally for partisan purposes, thus allowing their inclusion here as historical-informational rather than record texts (see below).

Genealogical chronicles of Edward IV, beginning with Adam, justified the legitimacy of the Yorkist claim to the throne. These are often quite elaborate, illustrated productions in roll format and may well have served as public manifestations of the political allegiance of the rich and powerful. Descriptive 'occasional' pieces are more neutral in motive, such as accounts of the death and funeral of Henry V or of the coronation of Elizabeth Woodville. Relatively few examples survive of this latter type of texts, which were nevertheless a major source of current information for the general populace; by nature ephemeral, no doubt many copies were passed from hand to hand and read to death.¹³

Short poems and ballads

A number of relatively short poems qualify as historical-informational texts, paralleling in subject matter and intended audience the shorter prose texts described above. Although they are usually anthologized together under the rubrics 'historical' or 'political' poems, a distinction should be made between those poems that contain to some extent records of historical events – that is, true historical texts – and those that represent political or social interpretations or moral reactions triggered by historical events (see further above). Such historical poems are common from the beginning of the fourteenth century,¹⁴ which was the heyday of the verse

chronicle, until the end of the fifteenth century and beyond, and all are marked by some form of nationalist pride or partisanship.

Most similar in general outline to the prose chronicles, and quite possibly derived from a *Brut* chronicle, are Lydgate's highly popular verses on the *Kings of England*.¹⁵ The *Battle of Halidon Hill* and John Page's eyewitness *Siege of Rouen* are verse narratives that are close in style to the prose chronicles in which they are frequently incorporated.¹⁶ A poem in three parts describes the French campaign of Henry V, including the battle of Agincourt, and probably drew upon earlier ballads; in one manuscript (London, British Library, MS Harley 565) of the three surviving texts it is incorporated into a London chronicle. The war poems of Laurence Minot, written over a period of twenty years (c. 1333–52), have been linked together in the surviving manuscript by short prose rubrics in the manner of the chapter-headings of a prose chronicle such as the *Brut*. The *Recovery of the Throne by Edward IV*, called 'the balet off the kyng' in the explicit, covers much the same ground as the short Yorkist prose *Historie of the Arrivall*.

Of varied historical value, both now and when originally written, and containing an uneven amount of historical detail, are short poems and ballads on the execution of Sir Simon Fraser, the siege of Calais, and the battles of Agincourt, Whitby, Northampton (cast in allegorical mould), Towton and Otterburn.¹⁷ Although not all are contemporary with the events they describe, they were intended for popular consumption and their role probably approximated to that of the prose newsletters.

Biographical narratives and related texts

Biography is a flexible medium for the conveyance of historical information, for it can be written at various levels to appeal to a variety of audiences.¹⁸ In common with most other Middle English works, biographical narratives are a mixture of 'sentence and solas'. Many were intended for public reading aloud, and this fact, together with the literary forms employed, suggests that different categories of such works would reach a wide range of social classes, whose members – generally and individually – possessed differing degrees of sophistication in their perception of historicity. As a result, it is difficult, and in some cases impossible, to gauge precisely – or even guess – how much historical truth would or could have been accorded to certain works. I have, therefore, been tolerant in including such doubtful works in the following sections, on the principle that there are many people who will believe almost anything, especially if it is written down and bases its claims to truth on ancient authority.

Almost all the narrative works classed here as biographical narratives are saints' lives (or 'legends' as many were called) or romances and, as Strohm has demonstrated, such works were considered historically true in the Middle Ages.¹⁹

Religious texts: saints' lives

The lives of saints and of Christ and the Virgin, accounts of miracles, narrative works based on biblical or apocryphal sources, and even the Bible itself can be considered as historical texts, although, as in other medieval historical works,

there are other motives and purposes involved as well.²⁰ Their claim to historicity was inherent and self-evident, and the overwhelming majority of readers or hearers of such works would have accepted their historical truth without question. Saints' lives constitute the vast majority of such texts, and it is on them that I concentrate here.

In the preface to his *Lives of Saints*, the Anglo-Saxon abbot and scholar Aelfric asserts the historicity of his hagiographical narratives (quoted here in modern translation):

We say nothing new in this book, because it has stood written down long since in Latin books, though lay-men knew it not. Neither will we feign such things by means of falsehoods, because devout fathers and holy doctors wrote it in the Latin tongue, for a lasting memorial, and to confirm the faith of future generations. ... We shall describe many wonders in this book, because God is wonderful in His Saints, as we said before, and the miracles of His Saints glorify Him, because He wrought hem by their means.²¹

There is no reason to doubt that Aelfric's convictions were shared without question by the great majority of English men and women throughout the medieval period.²² For many persons, both lay and religious, hagiographical narratives were one of their two main sources of historical information (the other being the popular romances).

Saints' lives in verse

Beyond a few early works in prose, legacies from the Anglo-Saxon period, the majority of saints' lives were written in verse until the fifteenth century. Several large collections and many individual lives have survived, testifying to their saturating influence on medieval intellectual life.

The various versions of the massive *South English Legendary*, whose over fifty extant manuscripts span the late thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, were intended for the oral instruction of an unsophisticated, largely illiterate audience.

The sources of the material in the versions of the *Legendary* are diverse, and the progressive accretion of *sanctorale* and *temporale*²³ narratives in some texts suggests the same principle is at work as in Caxton's chronicle continuation to the *Polychronicon* – if more stories can be found, then they should be included. In addition to the recognized, though fluid, types of saints' lives such as *vita*, *vita et passio*, and *passio*, there are exotic romance-like narratives such as those of St Thomas of India, St Katherine of Alexandria, or the tales of St Thomas Becket's parents. There are stories common to the *Legendary* and to the full-scale chronicles; thus the story of St Brandan is paralleled in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*, while the story of the martyred St Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins and miracles associated with Thomas Becket and Duke Thomas of Lancaster are factually recorded in the later chronicles such as the *Brut*.

The intention of popular oral instruction is continued in the fourteenth century in another large compilation of *sanctorale* and *temporale* material, combined with

verse sermons and moral tales, in the different versions of the *Northern Homily Cycle*. One of the manuscripts containing this work is the Vernon Manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a.1), which also contains a verse translation of selected items from the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine. Direct address in the Vernon *Golden Legend* shows that it was intended originally for oral presentation to a mixed lay audience, though the manuscript in which the text is preserved was probably intended for private reading.

At the same time, there survive many verse lives (for example, those of Sts Katherine, Gregory, Alexis and Mary Magdalene) designed primarily for entertainment – and presumably for pecuniary profit – written in the minstrel tradition. The life of St Marina in London, BL, MS Harley 2253 has a typical beginning:

Herk[n]eþ hideward & beoþ stille,
y preie ou, 3ef hit be or wille,
& 33e shule here of one virgine.

One of the minstrel copies of *St. Gregory* concludes with a true professional's claim:

Alle þat herden þis storie rede
Wiþ herte and deuocioun ...
Be pope haþ graunted hem to mede
And hundred dawes to pardoun.

In saints' lives composed in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by experienced authors such as Chaucer, Lydgate, Osborn Bokenham and Capgrave, a shift to a more educated audience of a higher class can be observed, although texts of the *South English Legendary* continued to be copied and were thus still available for public instruction. Popular verse lives designed for public performance also continued to be written or reworked (for example, lives of Sts Margaret, Katherine, Erasmus and Alexis, who remained a perennial favourite) in the fifteenth century. Again, several were clearly for minstrel recitation, and use direct exhortations similar to those found in fourteenth-century lives and in minstrel romances to attract and keep a restless, peripatetic crowd.

The diversity of audience is illustrated by three lives of St Anne designed for public reading aloud. The stanzaic version in Minneapolis-St Paul, University of Minnesota, MS Z.822.N.81 is an addition to a *Northern Homily Cycle* collection, designed to be read in church, and begins: 'Herkens now to me. / A lytill tretice 3e sall her.' The version in rhyme royal in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 601 is a paraphrase of *lectiones* for St Anne's day in the Sarum Breviary and is addressed to an audience of male religious, the author's 'most dere brethern'. A third version in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 407 (based on the *Legenda Aurea*) is written in quatrains for a guild celebration, possibly for the St Anne's Guild in the parish of St Peter at the Skinmarket in Lincoln.

Fifteenth-century lives of English saints with local connections were written primarily for special-interest audiences. The lives of St Etheldreda and St Editha

were written by a resident of Wilton Abbey and are remarkable for their consciousness of historical context and attention to the claims of historicity. Thus the life of St Etheldreda begins with a long introduction setting the story in the historical context of the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and gives marginal references to Bede as an authority. A similar introduction and references are also found in the life of St Editha, which also appends a list of historical reference works, or *auctoritates*, including 'Legenda s[an]c[t]e Edithe virginis' among chronicle sources.²⁴

The *Legend of St. Wolfade and Ruffyn*, written at the monastery of Stone in Staffordshire, recounts the lives of Wulfhad and his brother Ruffin and the foundation of the monastery; as sources are cited 'the cronakle' and a tablet that hangs in the church.

The *Life of St. Cuthbert* was intended for a gentle audience, and the author carefully identifies his sources, including Bede's *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* and *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which he combines to form 'a collection of previously existing lives, thrown into English verse'.²⁵ The writer describes his method of compilation and acceptance of hearsay evidence thus:

... diuers othir cronykill
Of cuthbert and his, tell I will,
Þe whilk writen I haue sene,
And herde tell of whare I haue bene.

The *Metrical Life of St. Robert of Knaresborough* was probably written by a brother of the Trinitarian Order at its house at Walknoll, Newcastle, and the authenticity of the source – 'a boke / That was sentt me by a frere / Fray ['from'] Sayntt Robertys to me her' – is referred to throughout the work. The poem associates itself with the minstrel romances 'Of Arthure, Ector, and Achilles' by attacking their seriousness, not their historicity, relative to the present subject matter.

Saints' lives in prose

Saints' lives in English prose do not begin to be written until the early fifteenth century. They fall into two groups according to whether they are connected with the *Legenda Aurea* or whether they are independent of that immensely popular collection.

More than 700 pan-European manuscripts survive of Jacobus de Voragine's Latin *Legenda Aurea*, which was probably completed by 1267. Its huge influence in England extended from the late thirteenth century to the Reformation.²⁶

Prose lives of two individual saints are based, directly or indirectly, on the Latin *Legenda Aurea*: St Dorothea (in possibly three separate versions) and the first chapter of a life of St Jerome in a work commissioned by Margaret, Duchess of Clarence.²⁷

In 1438, the *Legende Doree* of Jehan de Vignay, a close translation into French of the *Legenda Aurea*, was translated into English as the *Gilte Legende*, possibly by a monk of St Albans. The full *Gilte Legende* consists of 178 items (in 179 chapters, since Cecilia is duplicated). Three of the eleven surviving manuscripts

contain a set of additional lives, mostly of English saints, that are with one exception prose redactions from the *South English Legendary*. The constant interweaving of religious and secular history is illustrated in the chapter heading that begins 'the life of S. Pelagien, with Geestis of Lumbardie'.

Caxton published his version of these works in 1483 (2nd ed. 1487) under the title the *Golden Legend*. He combined a Latin *Legenda Aurea*, a French *Legende Doree*, and an expanded English *Gilte Legende* and added a set of lives of Old Testament figures, possibly taken from an unidentified English *Temporale*, and, when that text ended, he translated items from the Vulgate Bible.²⁸ The underlying principle is again, as in his *Polychronicon* continuation, one of all-inclusiveness. The implicit historicity of the narratives and lives is reinforced by Caxton's frequent omission of sceptical comments found in Jacobus de Voragine and generally retained by Jean de Vignay.²⁹

Saints' lives independent of the *Legenda Aurea* are few. A life of St Anthony in London, BL, MS Royal 17.C.xvii was intended for oral presentation either to the congregation of a church dedicated to the saint or a monastic community. The lives of Sts Elizabeth of Spalbeck, Christina Mirabilis of St Trudons, Mary of Oignies and Katherine of Siena were translated from Latin by a monk, possibly at the Carthusian monastery of Beauvall in Nottinghamshire, who stresses the authenticity of his sources.³⁰

Capgrave's *St. Augustine* was written for an unnamed gentlewoman, presumably for private reading; his *St. Gilbert* was made at the indirect request of Abbot Nicholas Reysby of Sempringham for the use of his nuns, 'wher vnneth can vnderstande Latyn, þat þei may at vacaunt tymes red in þis book þe grete vertues of her maystyr.'

A prose life of the popular saint and king, Edward the Confessor, fills all fifty-two leaves of Oxford, Trinity College, MS 11. That the work constitutes a complete manuscript by itself suggests that its interest was less religious than purely biographical; the miracles associated with Edward are simply accepted as facts in his life.

Two translations by Caxton belong here.³¹ His account of 'the decollacion, the lyf after, and the translacion of Saynte Wenefrede' was translated c.1485, probably from a Latin life of St Winifred by Prior Robert of Shrewsbury (c.1140), to which an account of the saint's translation was added.³²

According to Wynkyn de Worde, who printed the work in 1495, Caxton finished his translation of the *Vitas Patrum* on his death-day in 1491. It is a sprawling, ill-organized work, as is its French source, *La Vie des Pères*, published in 1486/7, whose purpose was the spiritual amendment of its readers.³³ The lives of a number of desert Fathers are supplemented by the lives of other early saints and of the twelfth-century French Saint Christian of Maine, together with much anecdotal and admonitory material.

Secular texts

Romances were extremely popular with all levels of society in medieval England and were written in various styles to cater for different audiences and modes of delivery (oral or read).

✦ The close relationship between chronicle and romance can be observed best in the interweaving and borrowing of material and the association of texts in manuscripts.³⁴ Thus some romances, such as *Havelok*, were incorporated wholesale into chronicles and the English verse romance *Arthur* is interpolated in a Latin chronicle on the kings of England in a Longleat House manuscript. Even the romance hero Sir Bevis of Hampton turns up as the name of an Arthurian knight in Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle*.

✦ The association of texts in manuscripts is often telling. The verse romance *The Siege of Troy* immediately precedes the unedited translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* in London, College of Arms, MS Arundel 22, and presumably serves as a kind of amplified introduction to the latter work. London, Lambeth Palace, MS 491 contains a Prose *Brut* text, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, the prose *Three Kings of Cologne*, and the *Awntyrs of Arthur*, while Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 185 has another copy of the *Brut*, together with the prose romance *Ponthus* and Hoccleve's stories of the emperor Gerelaus and of Jonathas.

✦ The reverse case is where a romance is set within its own framework of history, as in the introductory synopsis of the Trojan ancestry of Britain and the concluding references to Troy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem 'zooms in' to focus sharply on a specific story (and it is interesting to note that the year taken by Gawain's adventure corresponds to the primary unit of historical time for medieval man) before 'zooming out' again at the end, thus situating the narrative in a larger world/British/Arthurian historical context. Taking these points with the setting of the story in a real and concretely described locale, I would suggest that a veneer of possible historicity is being established.

Verse secular lives

We may consider here the great majority of Middle English romances, which were written solely in verse until the fifteenth century, when their counterparts in English prose first began to be produced (see below).³⁵

✦ Many of these biographical romances are set in Arthurian times and should be read in the context of the chronicle accounts of King Arthur, especially of the twelve-year period of peace in England that the chronicles skip over.³⁶ Several are closely associated with chronicles, such as the short *Arthur* interpolated in a Latin prose chronicle in a Longleat manuscript and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which was partly based on chronicle sources. Others, such as *Arthur and Merlin* and Henry Lovelich's *Merlin*, cover segments of their protagonists' careers, while yet others feature exploits of individual knights such as Gawain, Ywain, Lancelot, Perceval and Tristram.

✦ Minor groups of romances that act as historical biographies include those associated with characters like Firumbras, Roland and Otuel from the Charlemagne cycle, usually derived from French *chansons de geste*, and Alexander the Great. A few romances feature English heroes such as Horn, Havelok (also found in chronicles), Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick (in several versions), and Richard Coeur de Lyon (in several related versions, some of which emphasize the supernatural

and one of which is embedded in a prose chronicle). The Robin Hood narratives are similarly associated with historical figures and events.

We might also consider here works like Chaucer's *Legends of Good Women* and the series of short 'biographies' that constitute the Monk's Tale, as well as Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. In Scotland, John Barbour's *Bruce* and 'Blind' Harry's *Wallace* function as panegyric historical narratives.

Prose secular lives

The first examples of prose lives of secular historical figures written in Middle English appear in the early fifteenth century with works such as John Rous's Warwick Roll and the *Pageant of the Birth, Life, and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, K.G., 1389–1439*.³⁷ Only tantalizing traces remain of English lives of Henry V and Edward IV. Lydgate's *Serpent of Division*, composed in 1422, is essentially a biographical narrative (entitled in the colophon of one text 'the cronycule of Julius Caesar') but, like other historical texts, it also presents a strong political moral.

Prose romances began to appear around the middle of the fifteenth century but remained few in number before 1500. The major works of this sort are *King Ponthus*, a version of the Horn tale; the *Prose Merlin*; and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (finished before 1470). This last work was printed by Caxton in 1485 and it is significant that the printer rewrote Malory's account of Arthur's war against the Romans to accord with that found in his editions of the *Chronicles of England* (1480; 1482).

A case in point: texts printed by William Caxton

Examples of most of the types of texts already mentioned were published in the late fifteenth century by William Caxton, and Caxton's comments in his prologues can be taken as representative of what a fairly well-educated Englishman considered to be the range of acceptable historical texts.³⁸ Less educated people – the majority of the population – had, presumably, commensurately wider limits of belief. Caxton's view on the usefulness of history, given in the prologue to the *Polychronicon* (1482), is that history acts as a moral spur and an admonition to men of all ages and stations by presenting the lives and actions of individuals. The *Golden Legend* and the *Polychronicon* are equally described as 'historye', containing within them 'many noble historyes' and 'many wonderful historyees' respectively. The history of Jerusalem and the life of Godefroy de Bologne in *The Siege of Jerusalem* (1481), the life of Charlemagne in *Charles the Grete* (1485), and 'the cronycle & hystory' of *The Four Sonnes of Aymon* (1489?) are presented as authentic historical works. Even the romance of *Blanchardyn and Eglantine* (1489?) is represented as true (and morally proper); its emphasis on the steadfastness of love relative to deeds of derring-do is due to the youth of its projected gentle readership. Scepticism concerning the authenticity of King Arthur is discussed and rejected in the printer's prologue to his edition of Malory, though the reader is allowed to form his own opinion, however

misguided, of the veracity of the book – ‘for to gyue fayth and beleue that al is trewe that is conteyned herin, ye be at your liberte.’ Caxton’s comments here on the number of vernacular and foreign accounts of Arthur and his knights and in the prologue to *The Siege of Jerusalem* – ‘O blessyd Lord, whan I remembre the grete and many volumes of Seynt Graal, Ghalehot, and Launcelotte de Lake, Gawayn, Perceval, Lyonel, and Tristram, and many other of whom were overlonge to reherce and also to me unknowen’ – suggest a predisposition to consider as true almost anything found in written form. When two sources disagree in *The Historie of Jason* (1476/77) as to a proper name, Caxton simply records the fact of the disagreement. Hearsay evidence makes Caxton question in *The Mirrour of the World* (1481) the visions supposed to be experienced at St Patrick’s Purgatory, but he tempers this scepticism by the observation that ‘hit may wel be that of auntyent tyme it hath ben thus as a fore is wreton, as the storye of Tundale & other witnesse.’

Conclusion

The foregoing survey attempts to define the historical consciousness of medieval England and suggests that a large segment of medieval writings functioned as vehicles for the transmission of historical information, overlaid with the proper moral interpretation. Even those romances whose possible historicity might have seemed incredible to medieval audiences were usually cast in a historical mould. In the same way that a romance could set itself in a framework of history, so a saint’s life could be established within a larger historical context. It is easy to understand why medieval audiences might lack a touchstone for critical historical judgement. They might hear the true life of a saint, replete with miracles, read out and expounded in church on a feast day, then hear the life of the same saint, with essentially similar details, recited two days later in popular tail-rhyme form at the fair, immediately followed by a romance of a chivalric hero in the same tail-rhyme form and with similar claims to authenticity. As for marvels, in a circumscribed local world who knows what wonders might have occurred far away or long ago? *Mandeville’s Travels* and the encyclopedia of Bartholomaeus Anglicus are full of them.

The sixteenth century was a watershed: the Reformation put paid to saints’ lives (and altered irrevocably the sense of ‘legend’), changing literary tastes doomed the romance, and more ‘sophisticated’ approaches to historiography condemned the earlier sections of many chronicles as fanciful legends. Until then, however, chronicles established the framework of history. Historical narratives, romances, saints’ lives, and other works formed an interlocking nexus of texts that fleshed out the details of history. History was very much a succession of individual lives. Even the chronicles of England are a series of royal lives, where the major formal unit is an individual reign. The well-being of the nation depended upon the character of the ruler; wider trends and abstract forces in the movement of history were simply not recognized. History was personal, filled with good stories and moral exempla; it was not restricted to what a seventeenth-century playwright dismissively termed the ‘leaves of a worrne eaten Chronicle.’³⁹

Further reading

General

The Medieval Chronicle Society website, <http://medievalchronicle.org/>

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Notes

- 1 See Kemp Malone, 'When did Middle English begin?', *Curme Volume of Linguistic Studies*, James T. Hatfield *et al.* (ed.), Language Monographs 7 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1930), pp. 110–17; Richard Jordan, *Handbook of Middle English Grammar: Phonology* Eugene J. Crook (transl. and rev.), (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 1–2; for the fifteenth century, see J. H. Fisher, 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century,' *Speculum* 52 (1977), 870–99; M. L. Samuels, 'Spelling and Dialect in the Late and Post-Middle English Periods,' in *So Meny People Longages and Tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh*, Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (eds), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 1981), pp. 43–54 (repr. in *The English of Chaucer and His Contemporaries: Essays by M. L. Samuels and J. J. Smith*, J. J. Smith (ed.), (Aberdeen: Aberdeen U.P., 1988), pp. 86–95); E. J. Dobson, 'Early Modern Standard English,' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 67 (1966), 122–32.
- 2 See Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), pp. 108–57; Basil Cottle, *The Triumph of English 1350–1400* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969).
- 3 See Mary S. Serjeantson, *A History of Foreign Words in English* (London: Kegan Paul, 1935); Erik Björkman, *Scandinavian Loan-Words in Middle English* (Halle a. S.: Niemeyer, 1900, 1902).
- 4 See Brian Joseph Duffy, *The English Language and English Literary Genres in Transition, 1475–1600* (New York: Garland, 1987). A traditional but still useful survey of genres appears in Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1961), pp. 66–90; see also René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), chapters 5 and 17. Northrop Frye proposed a new mode of generic theory, in which four major genres – comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire – reflected the archetypal myths correlated with the four seasons (*The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1957, pp. 158–239).
- 5 Compare Polonius's trenchant survey of the theatre: 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited' (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 398–401). For the problems of anthologists, see Thomas J. Garbáty's divisions and his introductory remarks in *Medieval English Literature* (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Co., 1984), pp. 6, 8, 12, 14, 27–28, 29, 30 note, and the combinations of terms on pp. 53, 92, etc.

- 6 See A.J. Minnis, A. Brian Scott, and David Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c.1100–c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); Alex Preminger, O.B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane, *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1974); Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson, *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1973); and, *in toto* and on the specified pages for the individual rhetoricians mentioned here, James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 179; Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400) Interpreted from Representative Works* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 175–76; Clifford Leech, *Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 2, 4.
- 7 See OED, s.v. fiction, where the earliest quotation is 1599 Richard Linche, *The fountain of ancient fiction*, trans. 1780 [1781 in Bib.] James Harris, *Philological inquiries* (publ. in Works [1841]): 'Dramatic fiction copies real life.' For the medieval senses, see MED, s.v. ficcioun.
- 8 See Paul Strohm, 'Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives,' *Speculum* 46 (1971), 348–59; 'Some Generic Distinctions in the Canterbury Tales,' *Modern Philology* 68 (1971), 321–28; 'Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative,' *Chaucer Review* 10 (1977), 62–75, 154–71; 'The Origin and Meaning of Middle English Romaunce,' *Genre* 10 (1977), 1–28; 'Middle English Narrative Genres,' *Genre* 13 (1980), 379–88.
- 9 For example, 'a story of adventure – fictitious and frequently marvelous or supernatural – in verse or prose' (A. C. Baugh); 'a narrative about knightly prowess and adventure, in verse or in prose, intended primarily for the entertainment of a listening audience' (Elaine Newstead); 'secular narratives, with a hero, designed for entertainment' (Derek Pearsall). Formal classifications are attempted in Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968 [i.e., 1969]) and Derek Pearsall, 'The Development of Middle English Romance,' *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 91–116. Pearsall splits off 'historical epics' from 'romances'.
- 10 The spelling of titles of medieval works in the rest of this essay follows that of their standard modern editions, as listed in the bibliographical reference works in the Further reading section.
- 11 Many of these works survive in manuscripts of later date than the presumed composition date, thus showing their continuing popularity.
- 12 Quoted from Lister M. Matheson, 'Printer and Scribe: Caxton, the *Polychronicon*, and the *Brut*,' *Speculum* 60 (1985), p. 614.
- 13 Official proclamations and public declarations would also have played a similar role when facts or situations were described.
- 14 See Rossell Hope Robbins (ed.), *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1959), p. vii.
- 15 Lydgate makes frequent appeals to historical authority, such as 'thus saith the Cronicle' and the like. In some copies made after Lydgate's death in 1449 the material is extended up to the present king; sometimes the poem is incorporated into a chronicle or is found in the same manuscript as a chronicle.
- 16 Halidon Hill is only found in the second translation of the Prose *Brut*. Most Siege of Rouen texts form part of a continuation to the first translation of the *Brut*, in which tradition the poem was subsequently paraphrased in prose. Indeed, the scribe of London, BL, MS Harley 753 copied out the poem as prose. There are occasional traces of ballad originals underlying sections of the *Brut*, such as the description of the battle of Agincourt; this is an interesting example of attitudes to such texts as valid historical sources.
- 17 A second poem on the siege of Calais occurs in a version of the *Brut*.

- 18 The English word 'biography' is a modern invention, first recorded in 1683 in Dryden, but narratives of the lives of eminent persons have an ancient pedigree. For England, see Donald A. Stauffer, *English Biography before 1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1930).
- 19 See the articles cited in note 8 above.
- 20 We could also consider a number of other works in verse and/or prose, such as lives of biblical persons other than saints and the Holy Family; histories of sacred objects, places, etc.; miracles and visions; moral tales, collections thereof, and religious works using these; and even the Corpus Christi cycle plays, which can be seen as dramatized histories of God's plan for mankind. For reasons of space these are not considered here; their general development, however, parallels that of the saints' lives.
- 21 *Aelfric's Lives of Saints, Being a Set of Sermons on Saints' Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, Walter W. Skeat (ed.), Part 1, EETS o.s. 76, with facing-page translation by Misses Gunning and Wilkinson (London, 1881), pp. 5, 7.
- 22 See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: OUP, 1988) and Charles W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1947). Sceptical comments occasionally appear, as, for example, in the *South English Legendary* and the *Legenda Aurea* about the devil swallowing St Margaret (noted in D'Evelyn and Foster [see Further reading], p. 418).
- 23 *sanctorale*: 'That part of the breviary and missal which contains the offices proper for saints' days' (OED); *temporale*: 'That part of the breviary and missal which contains the daily offices in the order of the ecclesiastical year, as distinct from those proper for Saints' days' (OED).
- 24 There is also a series of learned notes in Latin on the history of Wilton Abbey.
- 25 J.T. Fowler (ed.), *The Life of St. Cuthbert in English Verse, C. AD1450*, Surtees Society, vol. 87 (Durham, 1891), p. vi.
- 26 Among the verse texts, the *Legenda Aurea* was used as a source in the early development of the South English Legendary and by Bokenham. Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale of St Cecilia is also based in large part on 'Frater Jacobus Januensis in Legenda'.
- 27 Wife of Thomas of Lancaster (1388?–1421), the second son of Henry IV by Mary de Bohun, created Duke of Clarence in 1412.
- 28 See N.F. Blake, 'The Biblical Additions in Caxton's Golden Legend,' *Traditio* 25 (1969), 231–47 (repr. in N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), pp. 213–29).
- 29 See N.F. Blake, *Caxton and His World* (Elmsford: London House and Maxwell, 1969), pp. 119–20. Caxton's generic terms for the varied types of narrative in the *Legenda Aurea* is 'hystories,' though he also speaks in the prologue of 'eche hystorye, lyf, and passyon' and characterizes the book in the epilogue as containing 'alle the hygh ... hystories and actes'.
- 30 Her life was also printed from a mid-fifteenth-century translation by Wynkyn de Worde.
- 31 The lives of St Katherine and St Elizabeth, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1493, may have been Caxton's translations.
- 32 Include this work as a saint's life rather than a miracle narrative since the 'virgyn and martir' survives for fifteen years as a nun after St Beunow has restored her to life after her beheading, which begins the narrative.
- 33 The French text is a translation of the *Vitas Patrum*, printed in 1478 at Nuremberg, which is in turn a combination of the *Vitas Patrum* attributed to St Jerome and the *Historia Monachorum* of Rufinus of Aquileia. The three texts, Latin, French and English, represent up-to-the-minute European hagiography of the late fifteenth century.
- 34 For further discussion, see Lister M. Matheson, 'King Arthur and the Medieval English Chronicles,' in *King Arthur Through the Ages*, Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day (eds), 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1990), 1, pp. 259–63.

- 35 Works that deal generally with the sieges of Troy, Thebes, Jerusalem and Milan are noted above in relation to verse and prose chronicles; none of these narrates the deeds of one central character throughout.
- 36 See Richard J. Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) for a full discussion of the complex relationships between chronicles and romances.
- 37 Some earlier Latin lives survive, such as Eadmer's twelfth-century life of Anselm (more hagiography than secular biography, however); Robert of Avesbury's mid-fourteenth-century *Chronicle*, entitled *De gestis mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Tertii*; the *Historia vitæ et regni Ricardi II. Angliæ regis*; and several Latin lives of Henry V.
- 38 We can also compare the work of the compiler of the greatly amplified *Brut* text in London, Lambeth Palace, MS 84 and his work in his two other known manuscripts.
- 39 *Everie Woman in her Humor* (1609), in *A Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. Arthur H. Bullen, IV (1885), C 4 b.