

French National Identity through Medieval Chronicles

- Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography -

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Introduction

(1) Thirteenth Century France

The thirteenth century was a watershed era in the history of France. Capetian kings gained and consolidated more political and territorial power than had been in the hands of any single family since the era of Charlemagne. Paris became a bustling city, with the royal court as its cultural heart and the university as its intellectual center. This period also saw an unprecedented demand for illuminated manuscripts throughout the realm. Professional scribes and artists were called upon to create large numbers of secular books, including romances and histories, for the instruction and entertainment of the royal family, the nobility, and a growing bourgeoisie. One of the innovative aspects of these texts was that they were written in or translated into French. For the first time, secular works in the vernacular took their place alongside religious manuscripts in Latin as important commissions and a mainstay of the emerging book trade.

(2) Shift of Society and Historical Writing

History is useful in complex and changing societies, for the present can be explained by comparison with the past. The past supplies the standard against which the present can be evaluated. History determines the extent of social continuity and, implicitly, social discontinuity or change. It offers to a society an important dimension of knowledge to a stable, that is written, form, a society is able to view itself objectively, to project an image in light of which it can assess other kinds of knowledge about its basic character and models of operation gathered from other sources. As an activity, the writing of history, or historiography, represents an important aspect of society's search for itself. It follows, then, that major shifts in the historical writings of a society can provide us with points of access to its underlying image of itself and to those parts of its experience which it perceives as problematic.

Such a profound shift occurred in thirteenth-century France, which witnessed the beginning of historical writing in Old French prose, with the creation of texts that were among the earliest secular works in prose in any genre. The rise of vernacular prose historiography was the product of a complex combination of forces, ones that included social and political change, an enormous expansion in the scope and practice of literacy

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among the French aristocracy, and an evolving sense of the importance of language and its nature as the bearer of important “truths” about the past and present. These early histories in prose defined themselves against literary fictions such as epic and romance, hitherto the sole genres to be written in Old French, by arguing that the “truth” of history could not be allowed to languish in the domain of fiction. This was an ideologically motivated argument on the part of authors and patrons of prose historiography. That offers an account of the myriad forms of historical writing in both verse and prose in the many regions, and most especially in the realm, that make up what we term “medieval Francophonia.”

1. Medieval Francophonia

(1) Origin

It is important when considering the Middle Ages to lay aside the map of Modern Europe and the national boundaries within it. Indeed, much medieval historical writing is concerned precisely with the drawing and redrawing of borders on regional, national, and imperial levels, and it is this fluidity that leads to the creation and development of what we call “medieval Francophonia.” The wide catchment area of French from the late eleventh through the fourteenth century encompasses at once more and less than modern France, extending from certain areas of Ireland in the west to parts of Italy in the southeast and beyond to the Crusader kingdoms.¹ It bears many resemblances to modern Francophonia, which, like its medieval model, is a result of military and cultural colonization over the course of decades and centuries.

In the whole of medieval Francophonia, Old French (which flourished roughly from the mid-twelfth through the mid-thirteenth century) and Middle French (mid-thirteenth through the fifteenth) coexisted with, and sometimes competed against, Latin and the other vernaculars: English, Irish, Welsh, Dutch, German, Occitan, Catalan, Italian, and Arabic, among others. The development of medieval Francophonia was not chronologically and geographically unbroken and consistent, for its gradual evolution in the British Isles from the Norman Conquest of 1066 onward differs from the crusaders’ introduction of French in the Holy Land, especially Acre, or the rise of the languages as a literary medium in the northern Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In England, and parts of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, French was the native idiom of the conquerors, used on a daily basis for both practical and cultural purposes. The generally successful attempts by the Normans to integrate into their own culture

¹ Keith Busby, and Christopher Kleinhenz (eds.), *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and Its Neighbors*, Turnhout, 2010.

the literature and history of the peoples they had conquered necessitated a practical multilingualism for many individuals and created the conditions for the rise of a class of interpreters and translators. The taste and fashion for French in Italy were consolidated by marriage with the French aristocracy and by the importance of the Savoy domains straddling the Alps, and French was used farther south in Angevin Naples.

(2) “Old Frenches”

French, of course, is a Romance language, derives from the Latin of the Roman conquerors of Gaul. The features that distinguish it from other Romance vernaculars (Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Occitan/Provençal, Portuguese, Romanian) are largely attributable to the Celtic substrate of Gaulish and to Germanic influences, first by virtue of geographical contiguity to the East and then thanks to the Viking invasions and settlements in what became the duchy of Normandy.² The emergence of the vernacular did not replace or suppress textual production or the copying of manuscripts in Latin. Nor could it have been a decrease in Latin literacy among the laity that helped generate the rise of literature in Old French, for such literacy was never very widespread. And since clerical education continued to be primarily in Latin for most of the Middle Ages, we must look elsewhere for the causes of the explosion of literature in the vernacular. This is a highly complex issue, but it is essentially linked to the rise of the court and courtly society from the twelfth century onward, first in the south of France and later in the north and over the Channel in Norman and Plantagenet England.³ Courts, royal and aristocratic, large and small, central and provincial, espoused literature, music, and other arts forms with unbridled enthusiasm.

It was this courtly society, initially at least, that provided the audience for historical and other writing in the vernacular, an audience that later expanded to include the bourgeoisie and the urban patriciate. To speak of a permanent clash between a courtly vernacular culture and a Latin clerical one is oversteering the case, if only because the producers of courtly culture nearly all came from a clerical background. In light of the dominance of Latin as the language of medieval culture before the middle of the twelfth century in France and in medieval Francophonia, it is not surprising to find that the surviving texts of early Old French are largely hagiographical, didactic, and epic. Speaking of early Old French literature in these

² Gaston Zink, *L'ancien français*, Paris, 1987.

³ The standard work is still Reto R. Bezzora, *L'origine et la formation de la littérature courtoise en Occident (500-1200)*, 3 vols., Paris, 1944-63.

generic terms, while a legitimate procedure, does require us to be cautious about imposing on medieval literary texts the modern desire to define, categorize, and pigeonhole. Our modern classification of subject matter (often used as a basis for defining genres) into fictional, historical, biblical, and so on does not correspond to medieval perception and practice (which is not to say that authors and their audiences made no distinctions). Medieval works can combine the discussions of ancient history with that of mythology, biblical material, medieval history, edifying tales, the Arthurian legend, and more besides. One of the most striking features of this corpus of early text is that none of them were either composed or have survived in central French dialects (which consequently have left no written literary witnesses). Linguistic analysis points to the origin of these texts in Picardy-Wallonia, the south of France, and especially England, i.e., the periphery of medieval Francophonia.⁴

When we move into the second half of the twelfth century, it is clear that the cradle of Old French language and literature in general is the territory formed by Anjou, Touraine, Normandy, and England, other regions (the northeast, Burgundy-Lorraine, Paris and the central part of the country, etc.) achieving prominence only from the thirteenth century. Manuscript production corresponds in general with regions of composition, particularly in the early period.⁵

In the absence of formal grammar, morphology, and orthography, Old French is characterized by regional and dialectal variation and could more properly be called 'Old Frenches.' Philologists also refer to Old French as the *langue d'oïl* and the meridional vernacular as the *langue d'oc*, the language formerly called Provençal, which lends its name to a whole region of southern France today. In the Middle Ages, much as today, the use of Occitan lent a sense of identity to its speakers. If today Occitan culture is a minority one, in the early Middle Ages, it was the preeminent, precocious, and prestigious language of lyric poetry, whose exponents (the *trobadors*, or *troubadours*) were renowned- and traveled- outside of the Midi, from England to Italy.

Another important point to be made is that Old French, or the *langue d'oïl*, is not a standardized language in the sense that modern French is. Within the confines of medieval Francophonia, numerous distinct dialects (and border dialects) existed: for example, Picard, Walloon, Lotharingian, Burgundian, Champenois (from Champagne), Francien (from the central Île-de-France region), Norman, and Anglo-Norman. If Occitania has to be cut from the map of medieval Francophonia strictly defined, much

⁴ Basic information can be found in *Dictionnaire des Lettres Françaises: Le Moyen Âge (Rev.ed.)*, Paris, 1992.

⁵ Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript*, 2 vols., Amsterdam, 2002, pp. 485-635.

of the British Isles after 1066 has to be added; this includes most of England, parts of Scotland and Wales, and parts of Ireland following the arrival of the Normans there in 1169.

The great French “national epic,” *La chanson de Roland*, preserved in the Anglo-Norman manuscript in Oxford (Bodleian Library, Ms. Digby 23), is the most disconcerting insofar as its insular transmission (i.e., in a manuscript copied in England) put into question the whole concept of nationhood and national pride, both medieval and modern. This apparent paradox is all perfectly susceptible of plausible explanation, but the notion of what has been called “English literature in French” has been hard for some scholars to accept. The study of early Old French (in the broadest sense) has been bedeviled by national and regional prejudices from the first decades of the nineteenth century onward. Although the historical facts of the Norman invasion were never disputed, early Romance philologists (mainly French and German) regarded the insular variant of the *langue d’oïl* as a degenerate version of a pure continental, central French *koiné* (standard dialect).

The truth of the matter is that there is no such thing as standard Old French before the fourteenth century, and the notion of a *koiné* with regional aberrations has to be replaced by the demonstrable fact a text to have been composed or preserved in the insular dialect now known as Anglo-Norman for it to have enjoyed an audience in England. We should not forget that up until the very early thirteenth century there was a unified kingdom on both sides of the Channel and long after that texts and manuscripts can be shown to have circulated on the Continent and in the islands. The loss of Normandy in 1204 and the consolidation of the French king Philip Augustus’s authority over Normandy and Brittany after the Battle of Bouvines ten years later had only limited linguistic consequences in the British Isles.

(3) Verse or Prose

It is important to underline that early historical writing in insular Old French is in verse, not prose. There are later prose versions of the *Brut* in both insular and continental dialects, but Gaimar, Wace, and Benoît all wrote in verse, and Wace’s verse text continued to be copied throughout the thirteenth century. The octosyllabic rhyming couplet is the form of narrative fiction in Old French, but it first occurs in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Saint Bredan* and shortly thereafter in Gaimar. If its earliest manifestations are not romances, it soon becomes indissociable from that genre, and the shared form enables the later integration of, say, Chrétien’s works into the body of Wace’s *Brut* in Paris, BnF, Ms.fr.1450. It might seem prudent to conclude that if the

transmission of history in octosyllabic couplets lends history an air of fiction, the writing of early romance in the same form lends such tales an air of pseudo historical respectability.

This standard view is subject to caution and has been contested recently by Peter Damian-Grint; it is also discussed with particular reference to the *Pseudo-Turpin* in Gabrielle Spiegel's already classical study *Romancing the Past*, from 1993.⁶ The octosyllabic couplet, it should be noted, is also the primary form of other genres in Old French, such as the saint's life and the moral tale (as found in such collections as Gautier de Coinci's *Miracles de Notre Dame*). It is more likely that the verse form is a consequence of the oral performance of vernacular literature at this period and that the transition to prose corresponds to increasing lay literacy in the first decades of the thirteenth century.⁷ Whatever view one takes regarding the verse/prose issue, the variety forms of some later-twelfth-century works confirms the position of vernacular chronicle writing at the very center of literary activity.

2. The Translation of *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*

(1) Shift in Language Use

In the main, scholars concerned with the emergence of Old French prose historiography have tended to view it as a late, and not altogether welcome, addition to a centuries-old and already sophisticated tradition of Latin historical writing, in relation to which vernacular history, at least in its initial phases, receives rather low marks. This view of vernacular historiography seemed to be justified by the fact that the earliest texts consisted of translations of Latin works and thus, in the nature of things, invited comparison with their Latin sources. But while it is true that early vernacular chronicles translated Latin texts, they did so in a way that clearly demonstrates their ties to an already existing vernacular literary culture, distinct in its origins and modes of operation from Latin literature. Moreover, as they developed, the manuscripts of these works were ornately illustrated, and thus came to possess a strong visual component that commented on and augmented the meaning of the written text.

Until the beginning of the thirteenth century, lay taste for history had been satisfied by rhymed chronicles or epic "chanson de geste", chanted history with a large component of legend and fiction. But an expanding body of literate laymen, prepared to

⁶ Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Imposing Vernacular Authority*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1999, pp.172-207; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France*, Berkeley, 1993.

⁷ Evelyn Berge Vitz, *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance*, Cambridge, 1999; Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France*, Cambridge, 1996.

engage in what Malcolm Parkers has called the “literacy of recreation,” nurtures an apparent suspicion of poetized history.⁸ Finding the poet’s search for rhyme and measure incompatible with the historian’s pursuit of truth, laymen increasingly sought to satisfy their curiosity about the past in new ways. Around 1200, a new, popular demand for historical works accessible to those untutored in Latin progressively made itself felt. Little by little, vernacular prose, until then confined to translations of legal, biblical, or homeletic texts became the preferred form of vernacular history. For the distinguishing feature of the early vernacular chronicle lies in its militant insistence on prose as the necessary language of history and its critique of the mendacious tendencies of verse historiography.

(2)The Translation of *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*

To understand why such a shift in language use should have taken place in thirteenth-century France, it is helpful to see it against the background of those who promoted its development through their patronage of Old French writers and their texts. The rise of vernacular historiography in thirteenth-century France was largely the work of aristocratic patrons who were, at the time, experiencing significant reversals in their political fortunes due to the revival of a moneyed economy and the growth of royal centralization, both of which collaborated to undermine the sources of the nobility’s strength and to delimit spheres of aristocratic activity. The turn to the past on the part of these patrons indicated, it can be argued, a desire to revive the moral and political conditions of an earlier age of aristocratic glory as a form of ethical reassurance to an intended audience of aristocratic auditors and readers that they continued to occupy a vital place in the social order.

The implicit assumption of the power of history to provide a ethical stimulus is seen, for example, in the prologue to the translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* patronized by Renaud de Boulogne, one of the earliest works of Old French historical writing in prose. The *Pseudo-Turpin* was originally an ecclesiastical rewriting in Latin of the vernacular epic *Song of Roland*, the largely legendary account of Charlemagne’s expedition to Spain, now recast once again into Old French. The anonymous author of this text asserts that Renaud commissioned the work because “the good virtues have in this century lost their strength, and the courage of the great lords become enfeebled, for no one any longer willingly listens, as they used to, to the deeds of *preudomes* (valiant men) and ancient histories, in which can be found how one should comport oneself

⁸ Malcolm B. Parkers, “The Literacy of the Laity.” In David Daiches and Anthony Thorby(eds.), *The Medieval World*, London, 1973, pp.555-577.

honorably with respect to God and the world.” For, the prologue concludes, “to live without honor is death and decline.”⁹

The new prominence of vernacular prose signals the rise of written histories in place of oral literature as a privileged instrument of aristocratic culture. Since the earliest works of vernacular historiography, although employing prose, remained nonetheless within the domain of the performed text, it seems difficult to ascribe this change in aristocratic language use merely to the growth of literacy and a widening process of textualization, presumably occurring everywhere in medieval society in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Rather, the substitution of prose for verse, of the written for the performed text, would seem to be the product of an ideological initiative on the part of the French aristocracy, whose social dominance in French society was being contested by the rise of monarchical authority during precisely the period that witnessed the birth of vernacular prose history. No longer the expression of a shared, collective image of the community’s social past, vernacular prose history becomes instead a partisan record intended to serve the interests of a particular social group and inscribes, in the very nature of its linguistic code, an ideologically motivated assertion of the aristocracy’s place and prestige in medieval society. The collapse of a unified, public community receptive to the oral recitation of performed texts, and the rise of written, ideologically oriented historical narratives might, therefore, be seen as registering, within the domain of literature itself, the revised conditions of aristocratic life in the early thirteenth century. And it is here, at the intersection of literary practice and social life, that the study of vernacular historiography finds its most compelling vantage point for understanding the role of the past in medieval France.

The earliest products of the movement toward vernacular historiography were the translations of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, including that done for Renaud de Boulogne cited above. Strikingly, nearly all were commissioned by patrons whose lands lay in Flanders, at the time part of the French king’s realm. Around the year 1202, Nicolas of Senlis translated the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* for Countess Yolande of Saint-Pol. At the same time a certain “Master Johannes” made a separate translation, appear in a version written in Francien, the language of the Île-de-France, in one from the area around Hainaut, Flanders, and Artois, in Anglo-Norman, and in the dialect of

⁹ <Car les bones vertuz sont au siècle auques defaillies et les corages des seignorages affebloie, por ce que on ne voit mais si volentiers comme on souloit les fait des preudomes et les anciennes histories es queles on treuve comment on se doit avoir envers dieu et contenir au siècle honnorablement. Car vivre sans honneur est mort et decroissement.> : Paris, Bnf, Ms. fr. 5713, fol. 4.

Burgundy.¹⁰ These *Pseudo-Turpin* translations constitute the first stage in the adoption of prose for historical writing.

3. Diffusion of Vernacular Histories

(1) Overt Contest over the Past

By the end of the reign of Philippe Augustus (1223), vernacular prose history was adopted to contemporary chronicles as well. Beginning with the *Chronique des rois de France*, which survives in two rather different versions, one at the Vatican (Reg.lat.624), and a more complete recension found at Chantilly (Musée Condé), the focus of vernacular historiography shifts to royal history.¹¹ Contemporary with the Chantilly *Chronique* were the writing of the author known to scholars as the *Anonymous of Béthune*, who wrote both a *Chronique des rois de France*, its early history of France based largely on the *Historia Regum Francorum usque ad annum 1214*, and a *Histoire*

¹⁰ The Francien version was incorporated into some manuscripts of the *Chroniques des rois de France* by the Anonymous of Béthune and is also found in a Francien text dating from 1210-30, similarly called *Chroniques des rois de France*, which survives in two manuscripts, *Vatican, Reg. lat. 624* and the newly discovered *Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 869*. In this text, as in the *Chronique* by the Anonymous of Béthune, the *Turpin* figures as part of royal history and is inserted into the section of Charlemagne. The Francien version has been given the name of *Turpin I* by Ronald Walpole, who published a new critical edition (Ronald N. Walpole, *Le Turpin français dit le "Turpin I"*, Toronto, Buffalo, and London, 1985). The Artois-Hainaut- Flanders affiliated version is found in Ronald N. Walpole (ed.), *An Anonymous Old French Translation of the "Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle"*, Cambridge, MA, 1970. Ian Short has edited the Anglo-Norman version (Ian Short, *The Anglo-Norman Pseudo-Turpin of William of Briane*, Anglo-Norman Text Society 25, Oxford, 1973).

¹¹ The first mention of the Chantilly manuscript appeared in a review article by Ronald N. Walpole, "La traduction du Pseudo-Turpin du manuscrit Vatican Regina 624: À propos d'un livre recent." *Romania*, 99, 1978, pp. 484-514. For a full description of both manuscripts, see Ronald N. Walpole, "Prolégomènes à une édition du Turpin français dit le Turpin I." *Revue d'Histoire des Textes*, 10, 1980, pp.199-230; and 11, 1981, pp.325-370. For a detailed analysis of the sources utilized in the first 165 folios of the Chantilly manuscript, see Gillette Labory, "Essai d'une histoire nationale au XIIIe siècle : la chronique de l'Anonyme de Chantilly-Vatican." *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*, 148, 1990, pp.301-354; Gillette Labory, "Les début de la chronique en français (XIIe et XIIIe siècles)." In Eric Kooper (ed.), *The Medieval Chronicle III. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on the Medieval Chronicle. Doorn/Utrecht 12-17 July 2002*, Amsterdam/New York, 2004, pp.1-26.

des ducs de Normandie et des rois d'Angleterre.¹² These paired texts, one in the name of the king of France, the other in that of the dukes of Normandy and kings of England, rewrote exactly the same segment of contemporary history, presenting it alternatively from the points of views of the two main forces vying for political influence over contemporary Franco-Flemish society. In this, these texts embody the new conditions under which competition for loyalty, authority, and political power had radically changed the social and political rules of the game.

The emergence of contemporary history in Old French signals the beginning of an overt contest over the past that would scarcely have been conceivable in an earlier period, when history represented the trace of God's operation in human affairs. In this process, the thirteenth-century contemporary chronicle becomes a site for the negotiation of competing interests, opening up the historical text as a locus for contestation over the past. Precisely because it treated the events and dilemmas of the present, the contemporary chronicle created a textual space for the presentation of a variety of voices on the past. In moving from the distanced, absolute past of the Carolingian epic and classical antiquity, contemporary thirteenth-century history changed not only the temporal model of the world but the moral significance of history itself. History no longer presented an icon of an idealized and stable world but rather an image of an inconclusive present, whose full meaning could not be revealed by a mere account of events in their unfolding, since those events were incomplete and harbored as yet unknown consequences. The shift in temporal perspective, in this sense, produced a radical relativizing of all historical knowledge, both in terms of the perspectives brought to bear upon it and in terms of the impossibility of interpretive closure on events that continued on beyond the temporal scope of the historical work itself. In the works of Anonymous of Béthune, for example, the rivalry between the Capetian and Plantagenet monarchies for the loyalties of northern French lords discloses a society riven by internal schisms and contested allegiances.

These early-thirteenth-century translations and chronicles formed a critical stage in the development of vernacular historiography and served as important intermediaries between the Latin historiography of the twelfth century and the full-scale vernacular historiography of France, signaled by the appearance of the multivolume *Grandes chroniques de France*, the first installment of which was completed by Primat around 1274. By meeting the demand for a vernacular prose history that was both truthful and based on authoritative Latin sources these early

¹² The only complete manuscript of the Anonymous of Béthune's *Chronique des rois de France* is Paris, *BnF, Ms. n. a. fr. 6295*. On the Anonymous, see Spiegel, 1978, pp.72-88.

vernacular chronicles helped to win respectability for French historiography. One can confidently say that by the last third of the thirteenth century historiography in Old French was successfully established in the France of the Capetian dynasty.

(2) Vernacular Chronicle and National Identity

Equally as significant as the generic evolution of historical writing in Old French prose in the thirteenth century was the internal transformation in literary language and narrative style that this body of historical literature underwent. Although, initially, the vernacular chronicle may have functioned as a complementary historical genre, ultimately it competed with and came to displace epic and romance as the bearer of lay society's historical traditions. And it is striking that the success of vernacular history was accompanied by transformations in the character of its narrativity, transformations that served to remove it from the realm of performance and place it closer to the pole of textuality.

While it is not possible to demonstrate here the full range of changes that the Old French chronicle underwent in the course of its development, a few points can be briefly noted. To begin with, there occurs a gradual withdrawal of the author's voice, a diminution in the frequency of those narrative interjections by which the chronicler established his presence in the text and impresses his personality on it through apostrophes to the reader, the enunciation of proverbial wisdom, the framing of moral judgments on the events recounted, or the simple admission of incapacity for the task at hand, due to lack of literacy skill or ignorance. Instead, the vernacular chronicler retreats behind an increasingly reflective discourse, in the dual sense that he assumes his narrative will transparently mirror an objective "reality" and that he strives to produce a more systematic, concrete treatment of his subject matter, as distinct from the evocative, emotive treatment characteristic of earlier Old French literature. To be sure, individual points of view and ideological biases remain, but they are integrated into the narration of fact, behind which the historian holds secret his moral personality.

Completing this transformation from live performance into objectified text was the vernacular historian's abandonment of an epic style of narrative composed of juxtaposed scenes in favor of a causally linked construction of events, in which individual scenes (the old building blocks of epic narration) were gradually subordinated to an overall theme that is narratively developed. In lieu of its once frankly acknowledged desire to divert, the Old French chronicle increasingly claims to function as a conveyor of information, to be a written monument to the actions, beliefs, and ideals of the past, which, in theory, it transparently reflects. The so-called realism of vernacular

historiography is nothing more than the visible symptom of this ideological turn.

Thus, if we ask ourselves why the monks of Saint-Denis, after compiling an extensive series of Latin chronicles, should have undertaken to translate that corpus into the vernacular, that decision must now, I believe, be seen in relation to the prior development of vernacular historiography and the contest over the past for which it served as a vehicle. In recounting the history of the kings of France in Old French prose, the *Grandes chroniques* and its literary heirs adopted a language and literary form first devised for the elaboration of a historiography of resistance to royal authority. Historical writing in Old French prose had begun as the historiography of a lost cause, offering a threatened elite a vehicle through which it sought to recover a sense of its social worth and political legitimacy. The French aristocracy's romancing of the past, in that sense, had entailed both the *mise en roman* – the recasting of historical writing into Old French – and the quest for a lost world of chivalric power, ethical value, and aristocratic autonomy, all of which had been severely undermined by the growth of royal government in the thirteenth century. For patrons and readers alike, the consumption of vernacular history represented a search for ethical and ideological legitimacy that was displaced to the realm of culture, taking the form of a re-created past that could correct the deficiencies of the present. This re-created past asserted the perduring validity of the aristocracy's once-potent political presence, potentially recoverable precisely because it was historically "true."

Conclusion

With the emergence of the contemporary chronicle, vernacular historiography consolidated its generic identity, while at the same time bringing the contested nature of past and present to the fore as the focus of historical narration. Royal historians answered this contested past by creating the *Grandes chroniques de France*, a historiographical corpus that both responded to the rise of aristocratic vernacular historiography, and the challenges implicit in it, and at the same time provided the basis for a reconciliation of the now-defeated aristocracy with an increasingly powerful monarchy. In integrating aristocratic history into the framework of royal history in the *Grandes chroniques*, French kings and their propagandists, victors in the contest for power and authority that had set aristocracy and monarchy against one another for nearly a century, adopted the language and literary forms of the defeated nobility as the means both to conciliate the losers and to proclaim their own, newly won, hegemony over the French realm.

With the creation of Old French royal historiography, the winners in this struggle

for political authority absorb and revalorize the terms and language of the losers for their own purposes, creating a vast corpus of historical writing to establish the legitimacy of their rule over their former antagonists. The French aristocracy, no longer able to impose its needs and concerns in the governance of the realm, contributed to the dominant ideology its own defeated discourse, achieving on a literary level the success that eluded it on the political. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that Primat accorded such a large place in his historical text to the nobility, for the first and most crucial audience for his *Roman des roys* (as the *Grandes chroniques* was originally called) was the French aristocracy. It is, perhaps, one of the finer ironies in the history of medieval historiography that the original quest involved in the French aristocracy's romancing of the past should issue, ultimately, not in an idyll of a lost age but in a new vision of the French nation.

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