INTRODUCTION

When the early-fifteenth-century Augustinian Friar, John Capgrave, wrote that the corpse of Henry I (who had died in 1135) stank horribly, he expected his readers to understand a moral criticism. Because it had long been an agreed proof of sanctity that the deceased holy person's body resisted decomposition so far as to smell sweet rather than to putrefy, a corpse that stank might be taken as evidence of the opposite kind of life. Not John Capgrave, but Nature herself, revealed the dead king's character. Capgrave was not in a position to know for certain what a particular twelfth-century corpse smelled like; dependent upon what he himself had read, he embellished his sources according to his knowledge (from oral and written sources as well as from his own and common experience) and the picture he wanted to draw. A question such as, 'But did Henry's corpse *really* smell?', might have seemed to him to miss the point of his description. One or more authorities said so. It might have done. He writes with a presumption of truth, for no one would deliberately write what he knew to be false. Or at least, true according to his lights and not false except under certain special circumstances. His Lives of Illustrious Henries were examples of the large genre, *encomium*, patterned on earlier accounts which his learned medieval readers, familiar with the literary traditions of praise and blame, could recognize. Finding out whether or not something had happened was a difficult business, and the sources and authorities upon which he depended varied in quality and reliability. He deferred to the authority of his twelfth-century predecessor, Henry of Huntingdon (whom he quoted and acknowledged). Other twelfth-century historians, among them Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury, make no mention of any offensive putrefaction (though Orderic tells a similar story about the corpse of William the Conqueror). Capgrave could defer to, choose among, question, or reinterpret earlier authorities. His attitudes to those authorities further complicates his intention – one among many competing ambitions – to transmit his interpretation of earlier interpretations of the past. As soon as he began to

1

turn his perception of King Henry I into words, and into a shaped narrative
for Latinate readers, readers who enjoyed their prose interspersed with
elegant hexameters, other dynamics came into play. By similar kinds of
conventional allusion, a depiction of a murdered monarch (the Anglo–Saxon
Edward, say, or the French Henry IV) in the guise of a martyred saint might
suggest an interpretation of the monarch which claimed sanctity for him, or
a satirical portrait which rejected the implied claim, or a range of possibilities
in between.

For medieval writers of long narratives, for medieval historians above all,
the 'embellishments' of words bore a complex relationship to the 'truths'
they depicted. This book explores some aspects of the complicated
relationship between the claim to be telling the truth about the past, about
historical actors and events, and the conventional representations in which
such truths were expressed. It considers what appear to be claims to accurate
representation, both of word and of deed. But to ask how medieval writers
represented the deeds which had taken place in the past is not to ask simply
how they shaped their narratives, it is to ask how they re-shaped them. An
inevitable intertextuality pervades the study of the range of texts which
described themselves as historical. Medieval writers did not suddenly create
their historical methods out of nothing; they inherited a large and ever-
growing body of 'historical' narratives whose conventional patterns and
styles suggested a range of meanings. The omission of part of a narrative
which ought to have been included, the turning of historical events to
recognizable narrative patterns, the insistence that agents did or said things
which accorded with ideas about their status, or reign, or character – all these
possibilities could be manipulated in order to convey complex impressions
of the past and its relevance to the present. The rise of empiricism in the
seventeenth century, that great watershed in western culture, has erected
barriers between us and the Middle Ages, here as in so many other ways. To
ask why medieval writers claimed that what appears to us obviously
'invented' material was 'true' is another reminder of the incommensurability
of our cultures – however much ours owes to, and descends from, theirs.
Among the questions uniting the disparate texts which will come under
scrutiny in the following chapters are: What is it they mean when they
appear not to mean what they say? Can we tell when that is? If
representations are not literally true, how are they true?

Perhaps, in the late twentieth century, our own self-consciously so-
phisticated post–empiricism puts us at an advantage over some of our

scholarly predecessors because we expect to recognize a diversity of non-literal meanings. If medieval interpretations proceeded by recognition of context, of suitability of linguistic register and stylistic decorum, of the detailed description which exploited, adapted, and modified a complex textual inheritance, then we must recapture context, especially the texts which formed that context. The descriptions both of the decomposing corpse and the martyred king depend upon audience ability to evaluate a particular instance against habitual readings of similar ones, but neither description is automatic or necessitated by any *zeitgeist*; rather, each is learned and manipulated by authors within cultures. Both examples assume multiple reference: to the events that the text represented and to the text as a kind of expression which imitated other texts representing prior events. Not true/false only, but 'authorized', 'exemplary', and, inevitably, 'persuasive', and these in relation to other beliefs and practices of their writing culture. To put it another way, historical events could be written about in poems which themselves belonged to a tradition of historical poetry, often – and perhaps misleadingly – categorized as 'epic'. Such poems could be read by potential authors who expected to be able to extract their 'historical' matter for new compositions. In turn, depending upon a subsequent author's will and skill, representations of past events which also referred to past texts would emerge, sometimes claiming a direct relationship with the past which in some unexplained way jumped the intervening textual tradition. Were there not large scope for manipulation there could be no irony, no parody, no development – only imitation and pastiche, or the repetitive reproduction of earlier authorities. And understanding these manipulations implies an audience with different expectations about how texts represent and refer from those which many modern readers would bring to their reading.

The basic argument of this book thus stems from an observation already familiar to many modern scholars of different disciplines: medieval (and many renaissance) readers and writers seem to have thought they could read through or across conventional styles, narrative types, and languages to a kind of prelinguistic core of truth that lay underneath. Rhetoric is thus a prolegomenon to what follows because it grounds the habits and assumptions which pervaded medieval writing in an even older intellectual milieu. In the analyses which follow, I hope that by juxtaposing texts of different kinds, it will become possible to find underlying patterns where before there were separate insights. If something might be said to have united the many different kinds of writing in which medieval authors engaged, that

something might be derived from a version of the assumptions and practices of classical rhetoric. What words and pictures represented, what kinds of things or ideas they referred to, depended not only upon experience, but also upon some familiarity with a complex system of signs (or conventions) whose content and methods were acquired initially as part of a process of learning to read. Medieval writers were themselves often troubled by the contradictions between the principles enshrined in their prefaces and included as a matter of course in their texts and their habitual practice (especially, it must be said, other writers' habitual practice). Within a few sentences of a claim – or what appears to be a claim – to follow the strictest criteria of accurate representation or transmission they launch themselves (or catch others launched upon) an expansion, an elaboration, an insertion which confounds their previous self-description.

Allegorical imagery is an extreme case of habits which permeated medieval representations of many kinds. Aesopic Fable, which depicts lambs as talking beasts, is similar, since the lambs have to be recognized as sharing human as well as animal traits; but the limits of interpretation are drawn differently, controlled by assumptions that grow from the reading of fables, which seldom ask readers to think of their lambs as God. At least in non-verisimilar fictions, where readers can be certain that the things depicted could not have happened, there is a predisposition to look for other meanings. The punning representation of 'a' lamb as 'the' Lamb of God, Christ as the sacrifice, is a central occurrence of a common habit. It depends not on knowledge of sheep, but on familiarity with a textual tradition in which they play an important part, and such interpretation assumes an acceptance that what is represented also refers to a reality beyond what is depicted. It also encompasses verbal style, so that an author's use of shepherds (the low style of life and art) signifies something about God's willingness to humble himself. The words which embody the symbol are chosen in order to convey values. The tale is told for a purpose other than conveying information. This is straightforward enough; more difficult to recognize is the use of this transforming kind of representation when the narrative is or claims to be a verisimilar account of the past. Readers coming to medieval historians for the first time may be perplexed to find patent fictions presented as part of a true account; readers of medieval fictions may wonder why invented stories are offered as 'true'. Historians appear at least inconsistent; writers of romances hypocritical. Beginning from the observation made above about reading 'through' narratives, I shall try to elucidate some of the

complicated implicit patterns behind otherwise inexplicable inventions and inconsistencies. Medieval authors depended upon shared habits of reading in order to convey their views and beliefs to their audiences. The implications of that initial observation are complex, and lead outward in many different directions. To castigate translators for failing to achieve a particular kind of close verbal correspondence, to demand a clear, dependable dividing line between 'history' and 'fiction' is to begin with modern categories; useful as they are, they need to be related to other ideas about composition in a different culture.

How to interpret, and then how to express, core meanings, in order to move and persuade an audience, were the central concerns of rhetorical education in antiquity. Medieval readers and writers did not have to inherit the actual education in rhetorical declamation which had been the achievement of antiquity in order to inherit some of the categories of thought and of composition which underlay, for example, the depiction or dramatization of direct speech which appeared in histories and poems. They inherited the literature which was written in those categories, and which came accompanied by commentaries which emphasized the achievement of great writers in such identifiable terms as metaphoric language, dramatic and persuasive speeches, and moving descriptions of many kinds. Christianizing imitations of the categories preserved them, however much they succeeded in substituting newer, and morally more acceptable, texts for the dangerous literature of pagan antiquity. As long as classical compositions survived, ambitious writers would return to them for models of inspiration; classical literature remained a challenge, problematic but undeniably *there*, suggesting – but not compelling – varieties of creation and interpretation.

Both the examples with which I began, the reprobate king and the saintly one, presume knowledgeable audiences, since they depend upon a relation to something assumed but not stated within the particular work. And the relation of a particular work to its genre, to the kinds of books which it resembles (from which assumptions about how to read it may primarily be drawn) must be expanded to include at least potential comparison to quite different works. Saintly kings or kingly saints are not the only innovating mixtures that medieval writers created. Kings might become lions (or lions kings). The kinds of adventure that are usually found in the narratives classed as 'romances' or even the low-life anecdotes found in 'fabliaux' could be – and were – adapted for the apparently higher genres of history and the saint's life. The interpenetration of genres in the Middle Ages assumed that readers

were familiar with different styles of expression, and that they would recognize them for what they are. Yet 'genre' can itself raise as many problems as it solves, because the definitions which the Middle Ages inherited from antiquity scarcely fitted the kinds of text which were common.

'History' was the central secular category of long verisimilar narrative. Though it appeared to be obvious what 'history' meant, the breadth and variety of narratives, in verse and in prose, that described themselves (or were described by readers) as histories suggests that complex processes were at work and that playing within the definitions of history occupied many writers. Calling a text 'historical' might have a legitimating function. It might defend the embroidering of a narrative based on another narrative (which had been extracted from a text defined as 'historical'), like so many of the expansions created in the course of the twelfth century and after to tell the stories of Thebes or Troy, King Arthur or Charlemagne, or to celebrate a saint, a relic, a religious house. 'Historical', though, might be thought of as an exemplary narrative based upon events which had occurred at some point in the past, told in order to move and persuade its audience to imitate the good and eschew the evil, a 'true tale about the past' which included a vast range of what modern readers would regard as invented material and inappropriate, if implicit, moralizing. What was the place of anecdotal material in history or biography? How did the need for certain kinds of illustration or expansion inspire – and control – the use of invented, or dubious, or even true, material? What is the relation of the historical narrator to his subject, and to the traditions of historical narrators?

In the different conceptual space of the Middle Ages, 'true' might mean 'in the main' or 'for the most part' true, or even, 'it could have happened like this'. The problems of factuality were not resolved by medieval writers, even late-medieval legal writers, and the constant elaboration towards fiction created tensions between some recognizable, even extractable, central claims and narrative methods of conveying the author's sense of how the past was to be interpreted. In this sense history was a broad church, teaching by precept and example.

The corpus of classical historical texts, preserved and imitated, could be read at first hand, or through imitations and adaptations of many kinds. 'History' was an umbrella term for many different kinds of narrative, united by their being, or posing as, verisimilar reports of events which had happened in the

past. Different writers, creating different kinds of works for different kinds of
audiences in a climate ostensibly hostile to ambition, literary or otherwise,
were constrained by explicit commitments to the truth, whole and
unadulterated, which coexisted with implicit expectations about how to
elaborate and embroider in order to write elegantly and move and persuade.
Medieval historians seldom explained that a section of their work was
entirely their own invention, yet they seemed to approach other writers'
works knowing that such distinctions could be made, and assuming that they
could distinguish truth from embellishment when choosing what to
preserve and how to convey it. Internal consistency and verisimilitude
appeared to count among the highest criteria for subsequent readers and
writers, who only rarely had external validation to turn to. This in turn
meant that attitudes to the authors' authority were crucial, in medieval
societies in which 'authority' itself posed another unresolvable problem.

The classical Latin expositions of the idea of 'history', the corpus of
Ciceronian and pseudo-Ciceronian texts, the description of an Orator's
training by Quintilian, and the late-Latin commentators and expositors of
their teaching, were not always available to medieval readers and writers,
nor always fully understood when they were available, nor even completely
approved by those who owned them, read them, analysed them, and made
use of them (for their own purposes). Like so much of the inheritance from
classical antiquity, rhetoric was a two-edged sword, less an education in
oratory than an incitement to the study of potentially disturbing poets such
as Virgil and Ovid and Statius, and a stimulus to emulate their secular tales of
politics, war, family, reputation, human friendships and illicit love.
However much medieval readers thought they were studying classical texts
in order to learn the techniques of writing well (in order to apply those
techniques to holier purposes), they were still exposing themselves to the
extraordinary persuasive powers of great poetry, which convinces – against
the odds – that *this* might have happened, in this way; that, had we been
there, we too would have acted as these characters acted. The historian
Macaulay's envy of the novelist Scott's ability to convey an immediate
impression of the past is well worth carrying in mind. As long as Latin texts
survived, however sanitized by accompanying moral commentary, rhetori-
cally sophisticated works remained to tempt as well as to teach medieval
readers. The glosses, commentaries, and dialogues which explicated these
texts explicated them in terms of the rhetorical skills, from the verbal
ornaments of the 'tropes' and 'schemes' to the invention of speeches and the

creation of plots and characters. These in turn pointed back to a system of education whose basic assumptions about style and the ways styles could be varied without affecting the assumed core meaning survived with the classical texts which embodied them.

The model texts taught that writing should be metaphoric and figurative, full of the decorative additions which characterized Latin poetry and prose; that it should embody the set pieces of the model authors, and increase their number and scope where possible. The creations of recognizably intertextual *topoi*, the set pieces of medieval composition, which called attention to their place in a long tradition of creative imitation and cross-reference, were part of writerly ambition whatever the type of text being produced – where the writers were educated enough to know what and how to imitate. To be able to recognize an epic simile or a high style description; to expatiate upon a description of a city, storm at sea, praise of a man's ancestors; to appreciate a good death, or two friends vying to outdo each other in bravery; to dramatize the arguments in defence of a course taken or for and against love; all these are part of a literary inheritance that is also the way that medieval writers expressed their understanding of events and agents. It means that different sections of the same text may employ apparently inconsistent standards of veracity, and that quite different adaptations and translations could claim to represent the same original text. This book attempts to restore some large-scale (as well as small-scale) patterns which can be thought of as deriving from rhetorical attitudes to writing.

Rhetoric was itself a vexed category; at different times it was – in so far as it was one thing – the subject of debate about its content (even whether or not it had one), its legitimacy, its status, its place in the educational syllabus. In the late Middle Ages its relation to grammar and logic was often a problem, and it probably only reassumed its classical pre-eminence with the Renaissance. Rhetoric could be rejected (sometimes ostentatiously) by those who fled to the cloister, or modifed for the use of Christians, and hagiography is one route of that modification. The Psalter could replace Virgil in the classroom. But one of the things it replaced Virgil for was the teaching of just those rhetorical skills of which Virgil had been the great master. Changing the model did not change all the questions. The need to move and persuade remained, even if biblical texts were supposed to supersede pagan ones. But Virgil did not disappear, and the desire to study the works that had meant so much to Church Fathers such as Augustine and Jerome, themselves rhetoricians of great skill, led generation after generation

back to the classics. Rhetoric could be a scheme of study, or it could be, more pervasively but perhaps more intangibly, a habit of mind, a set of assumptions about how words represent the world – or other words.

In antiquity, the process of education which familiarized generations of students with these habits of interpretation was organized as an education in oratory. In the schools of antiquity, boys who could already read and who had already begun to study (and to learn by heart) their cultures' great texts, trained themselves to apply the lessons of those texts to their own compositions, especially to speeches of persuasion, of defence of a course of action, of praise and blame. It is common to call this a 'literary' education, and that is correct. Indeed, I have already invoked 'literary' ambitions as if they were commonplace among medieval writers. But 'literary' may now imply ideas of creative writing, of free-standing independent fictions. It is clear that in the Middle Ages the delineation of such a category raised many problems. 'Poetry' was the word often used to identify texts which contained large proportions of 'invented' material. Medieval resistance to the free-standing fiction was frequently expressed, although its continued existence is perpetual testimony to the human impulse to tell stories, to write and sing about feelings not altogether consistent with the pursuit of salvation. 'Literature' was everywhere and nowhere, because learning to write, whatever the style or content, was based on the acquisition of certain well-defined basic rhetorical skills. Ambitious historical writing was rhetorically sophisticated; so was poetry. Historical poetry was possible, and so was poetical history. In this sense 'rhetoric' might have meant the concatenation of skills which contributed to the analysis of texts: of what they meant and how they moved their readers. Verisimilar literary creations were problematic, and the longer and more ambitious they were the more pressing became the question of their legitimacy. What proportion of a text could be added by the poet, and how did that change the status of his new text? If he claimed higher truths for his additions what kind of hierarchy was he invoking? How were subsequent readers to know that his additions were his? What is the relation between a re-telling, or adaptation, or translation, and an original text or texts? What controlled these additions or embellishments or decorations? Reconstructing rhetorical habits of mind can go some way to providing answers to these questions.

The desire among medieval authors for rhetorical training might appear to be a dangerous impulse, at best a distraction from, and at worst a betrayal of, any commitment to preserving the truth of true tales about the past. Yet

scholars of the calibre of Bede, whose pedagogic reforms meant so much to monastic educators and ~~writers~~ of all kinds, absorbed both precept and example from rhetorical texts, and supplied new writing which had digested the lessons of rhetoric for Christian historians, exegetes, and poets. It is one of the striking testimonies to the hold of classical antiquity on the changing circumstances of the Middle Ages, that the more talented, the more ambitious, the more skilful the medieval writer, the more likely he was to know something about rhetorical methods of interpretation and expression. Whether this knowledge came from textbooks or from model authors may not make, in the last analysis, much difference. 'Rhetoric' might be a curriculum of study, the name of the discipline which enabled students to move and persuade, or the manipulations of style they acquired from handbooks, glossed or commented texts, and ambitious imitations of great classical works (which illustrated those manipulations at their best).

In dealing with what was similar, with what made variety of expression possible, it is difficult to avoid generalizations which may seem to suggest a 'Middle Ages' in which no changes occurred for a thousand years. One generalization of which I am – sometimes painfully – aware, is that although I discuss individual writers who were women, by and large the educated, Latinate class who form the focus of this book were men. When I write 'he', I usually mean 'he'; but the 'he' I describe is only a tiny subsection of medieval manhood, the curious group whose lives revolved around writing. That changes occurred, and that they were spurred by, among other things, the dramatized depictions of character and motive created by great writers, is a *leitmotif* of this book. Literature is profoundly a form of knowledge. But in the mental space of the Middle Ages that was an argument medieval interpreters could scarcely confront head on, because it glorified fiction. Medieval resistance to fiction may have been well founded, and it may be art, rather than science, which was the greatest threat to religion, because it is multivalent and multivocal, because it celebrates (even while, even by, ostensibly condemning) experiences and behaviour anathema to religious dicta, and perhaps because, by its very existence, it creates a higher escapism bound to distract even the most reverent from contemplation of the ineffable to the particularities of the great human desires: love, revenge, ambition.

The history of the study of rhetoric in the Middle Ages is still at an early stage. Historians and literary critics who are unlocking the traditions of commentary and debate have found a rich ambivalence to classical learning; my debt to their work is great, and is, I hope, amply acknowledged in the