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0521813999 - The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150-1220

D. H. Green

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CHAPTER I

Defining twelfth-century fictionality

The aim of this chapter is to propose a working definition of fiction applicable to the romances written between about 1150 and 1220, making no claim to wider validity. Even so, some assistance will be sought from elsewhere (classical literature, modern philosophical theory) on the grounds that, although some aspects of fiction vary widely over time, others are common to different periods.

To start by taking classical antiquity into brief account is not so irrelevant as it might seem. Plato's criticism of poetry was acceptable to early Christianity at odds with pagan literature and to early medieval thought dominated by Platonism before the relatively late reception of Aristotle,¹ whose *Poetics*, although available to the Latin West only from the thirteenth century,² provided arguments more favourable to fiction than those of Plato.

Plato's criticism rests on the view that the poet is a mere imitator, dealing with appearances rather than with what is real and therefore presenting a lie instead of the truth.³ The basis of his argument is a radical distinction between poetry and philosophy, later adapted to Christian ends as one between poetry and theology.⁴ As Plato's myth of the cave makes clear, the poet resembles the prisoners who, facing backwards, see only the shadows cast by the fire, so that the product of the poet is twice removed from reality. Plato's objections to the dangers posed by poetry (or by art at large) are fundamental: it accepts appearances instead of questioning them; it apes the spiritual and thereby degrades it; it aims at plausibility, so that its 'truthfulness' is a fake.⁵

As if these misgivings were not enough, Plato also has reservations about writing and therefore about literature which has found its way into writing.⁶ For him writing is inferior to memory and the living

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exchange of dialectic discourse; it resembles poetry in providing yet another way of distancing oneself from truth and reality. Like art it can lie and amount to imitation and forgery. The importance of this criticism of writing is not merely that it reinforces the attack against poetry (in the specific form of written poetry), but that it is also relevant to fiction in particular, since the rise of fiction in classical Greece has been associated with the beginnings of literacy there.⁷ (That these two developments may be causally connected is suggested by the parallel in the Middle Ages, where the genesis of vernacular fiction in the twelfth century coincides with a new place for literacy in the literature meant for laymen.)⁸ For Plato poetry (and, more specifically, fiction) is untruth and unworthy of a philosopher.

With Aristotle the position is quite different. Fictionality is involved in his view of poetry as imitation or mimesis, so that his *Poetics* describes what can be recognised as a theory of fiction.⁹ That this amounts to a defence, as opposed to Plato's critique, is clear when Aristotle, instead of contrasting the poet with the philosopher, differentiates him from the historian. Instead of ending up as a distinction between untruth and truth this defence argues that, whereas history makes particular statements, poetry makes general ones (and is therefore more philosophical!).¹⁰ This universalising nature of poetry, telling not what has happened but what could happen, makes it of greater value than history. By claiming that this generalising function of poetry renders it more philosophical Aristotle meets Plato's critique on his own ground, but he also does this when arguing that in poetry we should even prefer plausible impossibilities to implausible possibilities.¹¹ He thereby grants a positive role to plausibility (whereas Plato saw this as a weakness, a shirking of truth) and points to a central feature of fiction: that it should not be judged by the standards of truth and untruth, like factual discourse (history or philosophy).¹² Aristotle therefore acknowledges the fictionality of poetry, whereas Plato rejects poetry because of that feature, and it is possible to read Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* as a defence against Plato's attack.¹³

Whereas Plato's thought dominated the early Middle Ages and his attack on poetry was acceptable to Christian fundamentalism, Aristotle's *Poetics* became available in the West in a thirteenth-century translation of an Arabic commentary that presented the theory of mimesis in a much

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altered form.¹⁴ Because of this these two classical authorities appear to be irrelevant to our discussion: Plato's attack provided only a criticism of fictionality, whilst Aristotle's justification was known too late (and in a bowdlerised form) to preside over the genesis of vernacular fiction in the twelfth century. One way round this difficulty is to consider classical Latin authors who shared Aristotle's view and who were themselves known in the Middle Ages, especially in the twelfth century. In a century termed an Ovidian age it is fitting that our example should come from Ovid.

In *Amores* III 12 Ovid says¹⁵ that, although he could have dealt with historical themes (Thebes, Troy, Caesar), he has instead sung only of Corinna (15–18), but that as a poet he is not to be believed as if he were a witness (19) and that no weight is to be attached to his words. That the authority which he disclaims is to be seen as historical (or biographical) reliability is suggested when the fertile licence of poets is said to be tied to no *historica fide* (historical trustworthiness, 41–2), so that the praise of the poetic figure Corinna is in fact a lie (43–4), but not in the sense of a wilful deception, for it is the credulity of his audience that prevents them from seeing, as they should, that his words are untrue.¹⁶ In these lines Ovid reminds us of both Plato and Aristotle. Like Plato (and others) he equates his poetry with lying, but he resembles Aristotle in distinguishing the fictive nature of his apparently autobiographical poetry from historical truth (*poetas* and *licentia vatum*, poetic licence, as opposed to *testes*, witnesses, and *historica fide*). By insisting that the untruth of his poetry (*falso*) should have been seen through and should not have deceived his audience Ovid is making a point central to a definition of fictionality, that it rests on a contract between author and audience in which each consciously plays his allotted role.¹⁷

This example from Ovid, even though others could be adduced,¹⁸ represents only an isolated case, too narrow a basis for showing how classical views on fictionality could have found their way into medieval theory or practice.¹⁹ Another way, not so restricted, is to consider the theory of classical rhetoric, transmitted to the Middle Ages largely through Isidore of Seville, concerning the three types of narrative, *genera narrationis*.²⁰ According to this theory one of these types, *historia*, was a true record of events that had actually taken place, but at some distance in time from present memory. By contrast, *fabula* recounted fictitious

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events that neither had taken place nor could have conceivably done so (as in Aesop's fables or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Logically situated between these two extremes was the *argumentum*, dealing with events that had not happened, but could have. The direct value of this threefold division for the development of a medieval theory of fictionality has been described as meagre,²¹ but this must be questioned in the light of Mehtonen's work on the adaptation of old (rhetorical) concepts to new poetics, above all in twelfth-century France.²² She draws on a wide variety of sources (rhetoric, grammar, poetics, including medieval commentaries on earlier sources), ranging from antiquity through to the early thirteenth century, and shows that the threefold scheme defining degrees of truthfulness was inherited from classical rhetoric, but interpreted anew under changed cultural conditions. The scheme was utilised to legitimise poetics as a new, independent discipline in the twelfth century, so that what had originally been a rhetorical scheme could now be used for poetological distinctions and even for the reading of a poetic text.²³ The originally rhetorical distinction between *historia* and *fabula* could also be applied to the production of a fictional text, as when Chrétien's intertextual reference to Wace's *Roman de Rou* in his *Yvain* is employed as a signal to his fiction.²⁴ Also of interest is the way in which Dominicus Gundissalinus, for example, correlates the three types (which he expressly associates with *poetica* as a *scientia*) with the Horatian prescription that poetry should both delight and instruct,²⁵ for we shall see that this, too, played a role in finding a place for fiction in the twelfth century.²⁶ There is therefore every justification for taking account of these three types of narrative in the definition of fictionality that must now be attempted.

Even though Haug nowhere defines what is for him a revolutionary innovation of twelfth-century literature we must venture on a working definition adequate to the scope of this book. I propose the following.

Fiction is a category of literary text which, although it may also include events that were held to have actually taken place, gives an account of events that could not conceivably have taken place and / or of events that, although possible, did not take place, and which, in doing so, invites the intended audience to be willing to make-believe what would otherwise be regarded as untrue.

A number of points in this definition require elaboration.

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In equating fiction with literature this definition is deliberately restricted to one field, a focus made necessary by the wide use of the term 'fiction' (literary, but also legal, logical and mathematical).²⁷ The definition is not intended to be applicable to fields other than literature, where fiction is also a topic of current concern. These include philosophy, where I have nonetheless borrowed ideas from Searle, Rorty, Newsom, Currie, Walton, Lamarque and Olsen, without feeling it incumbent on me to provide a formulation reconciling my literary concerns with their philosophical ones.²⁸ The same is true of art in the case of Gombrich and Walton (even though the latter seeks a definition to embrace the visual and the verbal arts).²⁹ We need not press our definition that far, nor indeed, within the field of literature, beyond the circumscribed medieval period in which vernacular fiction in written form first arose.

A second point touches upon the inclusion in this definition of events that were held to have taken place, for this appears to smuggle *historia* or truth into the field properly reserved for *fabula* and *argumentum*. Although rhetorical theory distinguishes between history and fiction, historical details may still be included in fictional works, a fact acknowledged by modern as well as by earlier theory. Currie argues that a 'work of fiction is a patchwork of truth and falsity, reliability and unreliability, fiction-making and assertion'.³⁰ Others, having Tolstoy in mind, observe the conjunction of history (Napoleon's invasion of Russia) with fiction (Napoleon's conversations, invented by Tolstoy, or the story of Pierre and Natasha).³¹ Lamarque and Olsen point out that works of fiction can also contain names of places or people from the extra-fictional world (Moscow, Napoleon again) alongside fictional ones.³² Medieval parallels, such as the contrast in Wolfram's *Parzival* between Baghdad and Anjou on the one hand and Munsalvaesche and Schastel Marveile on the other, would not be far to seek.³³ Wolfram also introduces the figure of Prester John, regarded as historically credible, towards the close of *Parzival*, whilst other romances dealing with the fall of Troy introduce what could be regarded as a historical dimension by basing themselves on the written accounts of Dares and Dictys, held to be eyewitnesses of the Trojan War and therefore more reliable as 'historians' than the poet Homer who lived much later.³⁴ This presence of the extra-fictional even within the fictional world has been further stressed with the observation that fictions can re-assemble familiar details in new combinations,

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so that, whilst the constituents may be drawn from reality, it is their occurrence in a new combination that makes up the fiction.³⁵

Earlier observers were also aware that, despite the distinctions made by theory, history could often percolate through fiction. Aristotle knew that, in addition to tragedies containing entirely fictitious names, there are others where some names are not fictitious.³⁶ Medieval critics of Homer agree with classical ones in attacking him for having mixed historical truth with impossible fictions such as the participation of the gods in human events.³⁷ Horace, on the other hand, while conceding that Homer lied, praises him for having mixed the true with the false in such a way that he remained consistent (and therefore plausible).³⁸ Macrobius' analysis of Virgil's *Aeneid* proceeds along similar lines: the Latin poet, too, added a fiction about Dido to an account of historical events involving Aeneas' departure from Troy and the founding of Rome.³⁹ This view of Virgil's work was still shared in the twelfth century. The *accessus* attributed to Anselm of Laon begins with Virgil's *intentio*: to praise Augustus, thereby suppressing much historical truth and adding certain poetic fictions.⁴⁰

This mingling of fiction with factual details may well have been confusing to some members of a court audience for a fictional romance in the twelfth century, not because they were like the proverbial backwoodsman at a theatrical performance who leapt onto the stage to save the heroine from the villain,⁴¹ but rather because they may still have been unacquainted with the new (and complex) phenomenon of literary fiction.⁴² The reaction of an audience unused to such novel demands could have been to take the whole fiction (not just the historical, factual details in it) as representing actual facts or events. They mistakenly regarded a fiction as *historia*.⁴³

To define fiction in terms of events that could not conceivably have taken place brings us, as the next step, to the rhetorical definition of *fabula*. In treating it now I abandon the sliding scale of the three types of narrative (moving progressively away from reality in the sequence *historia-argumentum-fabula*) in favour of a logical order, discussing the two extremes, *historia* and *fabula*, before the middle position, *argumentum*.

Fabula, sometimes explicitly designated 'untrue',⁴⁴ comprises events which are not simply untrue, but not even like the truth, not even

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plausible. Markers to make this clear include fictive happenings such as those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or the intervention of the gods in human affairs in Homer and Virgil. They can also consist of fictive creatures, those that fly in the face of reality (Isidore's definition of *fabula* includes the words 'contra naturam', against nature)⁴⁵ such as animals that speak. This raises the question, difficult to answer, how far these happenings and creatures were possibly believed in, how far the author could rely on their being seen through as fictitious.⁴⁶ Even if they were not seen through, this does not make of the fiction a lying deception, since by using such features the author has at least given a signal which is transparent for him and also potentially for his audience. In what follows we shall come across evidence for two possible reactions to these features: their acceptance as true, but also suspicion or scepticism. From this there follow two reactions to fictionality: an inability and an ability to recognise its presence, in other words the fact of a twofold audience.⁴⁷ In recognising this we must avoid assuming a straightforward replacement of credulity by scepticism over the course of time (Marco Polo, who had travelled to the Far East, still believed in the existence of Prester John, who also, even later, lurked behind the voyages of discovery of Henry the Navigator and Vasco da Gama).⁴⁸ Even those who did not acknowledge the presence of fictionality may not simply have failed to recognise signals to it, for they may have maintained (for example, as clerical rigorists) that the fiction stood in no relation to actual events or facts and was therefore simply untruth. Hence the equation of *fabula* and fictions based on it with lies.

As an example of *fabula* as the basis of a fiction I take the medieval Latin beast epic *Ecbasis captivi*. By its very genre, in the tradition of Aesop's fables regularly quoted as obviously fictitious, this work must be classed a fiction.⁴⁹ Quintilian says of this genre that the more simple-minded take pleasure in listening to 'quae ficta sunt' (what has been made up), while Isidore locates its fictionality in the fact that animals are presented with the gift of speech ('fictorum mutorum animalium inter se conloquio', conversation between invented dumb animals).⁵⁰ Although the *Ecbasis* belongs to a genre traditionally recognised as fictional, its novelty consists in the invention of a new narrative plot with a more ambitious structure than the beast *fabula* or *fabella* usually shows or than can be assumed for the stock of *vulgares fabellae* on which the author

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may have drawn.⁵¹ The author makes his audience aware of his work's fictional status from the beginning. He first states what his undertaking is *not*, distancing himself from what used to be the practice, namely to concern oneself with deeds that had actually been performed (*res gestae*) and written up (*notator* and *scriptus*) on the basis of what an eyewitness (*visus*) or at least credible hearsay (*auditor certus*) had reported.⁵² What the author here keeps aloof from is nothing other than *historia*, not merely because of his reference to *res gestae*, but because he sums up the traditional view of the historian. (For Isidore no one in antiquity wrote history who had not witnessed the events himself, and Konrad von Hirsau defines the *historiographus* succinctly as the 'rei visae scriptor', one who writes up what he has seen.)⁵³ Instead of history the author of the *Ecbasis* presents a 'rara fabella', strange fable (39), where the noun, a diminutive of *fabula*, denotes a fictional story and the adjective suggests that it is factually not entirely reliable.⁵⁴ This hint gives way to certainty, however, when the work is termed a lying book (40: 'mendosam cartam'), but useful ('utilia multa') because of its ethical content. If the work is described as lying this is hardly because of any rejection of its fictional nature, for otherwise it would not be recommended as useful, nor would the author conclude it by placing himself in the line of Horace's satires, giving delight together with instruction.⁵⁵ Instead, the word 'lying' was probably used because of the lack of a theoretical place and critical vocabulary for medieval fictionality,⁵⁶ so that it reflects the conventional contrast between historical truth and *fabula* or lies.

We come now to the third type of narrative, *argumentum*. Both Bernard of Utrecht and Konrad von Hirsau, by using the phrase 'dubiae rei fidem faciens' (conferring credibility on something doubtful), underline the ability of an *argumentum* to appear plausible.⁵⁷ Theoretically, *argumentum* occupies middle ground between *historia* and *fabula*: because of its fictional content it is linked to *fabula* and distinct from *historia*, but because of its plausibility it resembles *historia* and differs from *fabula*.⁵⁸ This middling position of *argumentum* made it attractive to authors of the twelfth century who sought the freedom to invent their narrative, but were constrained to present it as plausible or even (if by non-factual criteria) as truthful.

Gottfried's *Tristan* has been discussed in terms of *argumentum* or verisimilitude, in particular the episode of Tristan's combat with Morold.⁵⁹

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Chinca has shown that this was seen as a single combat both by received opinion ('al die werlde') and by the authoritative source (6870–1) which at the beginning of his work Gottfried took pains to equate with historical truth and which is here expressly termed 'diu wârheit', the truth (6881). Like the author of the *Ecchasis captivi* Gottfried then deviates from this historically true version (6875 ff.), so that his account, no longer of a *facta res* (something that happened), is a *ficta res* (something made up), but one which, in contrast to the manifest impossibilities of a beast fable, he proposes to show is *wârbaere* (6880), i.e. probable, plausible, fictionally true, by means of an imaginative interpretation of the episode. This he does by converting the combat between two men into a conflict of principle, for Morold may have the strength of four men, but Tristan is supported, on an abstract level which gains him victory over mere force, by God and the allegorical figures of justice and a willing heart (6881 ff.). By thus going against historical truth Gottfried opens up a new perspective in his fiction but, in remaining within the bounds of plausibility, he invites his audience's complicity. To the poet's ironically expressed pride in his achievement (6896: 'als übel als ich doch bilden kan', as imperfectly as I can depict it) there corresponds the need for his audience to agree to the truth of his version (6901: 'nu habet ir ez vür wâr vernomen', now you have heard it as the truth). A consensus between author and audience has been established on the basis of its plausibility.

A comparable interpretation, even if it lacks the pointer to plausibility in *wârbaere*, is possible with another episode, where Tristan is clothed in readiness for his knightly ceremony.⁶⁰ With Tristan's thirty companions Gottfried has no difficulty in presenting them, for he will simply follow the source (4557), which we know already to be 'historically true'. Tristan himself is more difficult, so much so that Gottfried fully five times casts doubt on his ability to do justice to his description.⁶¹ All this suggests that some special literary effect is aimed at, but it also insinuates a question: why does Gottfried not follow his source here, too? (Eventually he does, but only after insistently raising this disturbing question.) If the source is not (immediately) followed, this suggests a possible deviation from the historical truth incorporated in it, as later in the Morold combat. What follows at some length is confined to literature rather than history: the review of contemporary poets and a

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prayer for poetic inspiration to enable Gottfried to achieve his version. In the end, four allegorical figures prepare Tristan (4965 ff.), as they had his companions (4561 ff.). The irony of this rhetorical build-up, achieved with so much difficulty, is that Tristan resembles his companions in outward clothing, but surpasses them inwardly, invisibly (4986 ff.).

The fictionality of this episode in Gottfried depends on four features, in each of which the author is not tied to following his source and cannot therefore ultimately claim its historical truth for himself. One of the criteria for Gottfried's depiction is that it should be acceptable to his audience (4593: 'daz man ez gerne verneme', that you may gladly hear it; 4596: 'daz iu geliche und iu behage' that it may please and suit you), whilst another is that it should fit in with the overall purpose and meaning of his narrative (4594: 'und an dem maere wol gezeme', and be fitting for the story; 4597: 'und schône an disem maere stê', and contribute to the beauty of this story).⁶² Each of these points is repeated and, coming so close together, they drive out any idea that Gottfried's primary obligation is to source and attested truth, rather than to an imaginative interpretation of events that will meet with his audience's approval. This approval depends, thirdly, on his making his version plausible. When at the beginning of this episode (4558 ff.) Gottfried challenges any objector to provide a better alternative he knows that no one in his audience can outdo him in studying the historical sources he claims to have consulted in the prologue. In other words, they are being invited to accept his version as plausible, as is the case with the game played by Hartmann von Aue with his (fictive) know-all interrupter in *Erec*.⁶³ This clothing episode in *Tristan* is meant to be as *wârbaere*, as much in conformity with verisimilitude, as the Morold combat. Like this episode it rests on complicity between author and audience. On reaching the point where Tristan is clothed allegorically the poet is confident that he has his audience with him (4963: 'mac ich die volge von iu hân', if I may have your agreement), so much so that when it comes to entrusting Tristan to the allegorical figures Gottfried does this in conjunction with his audience (4976: 'so bevelhen wir in vieren / unsern friunt Tristanden', so let us entrust our friend Tristan to the four of them). In both these episodes complicity with the audience is present, a collusion which is central to fictionality and to which we now turn.