

PREFACE

Rhetoric is an art of conspiracy. It is an art of making a particular version of a story convincing over against different, even conflicting or contradictory versions of the same story. Conflicting versions of narratives are the basis of dispute in courts, one of the places the art of rhetoric still receives its most consistent application. Such rhetorical conspiracy animates Chrétien de Troyes's attack on the inaccurate, incomplete versions of Erec and Enide's story told by contemporary storytellers as well as his assertion at the end of *Yvain* that any change in his version of the romance will falsify it. Authors like Chrétien when retelling and rewriting received *matières*, along with those who imitated his stories, themes, motifs, and lines of verse, did so in a cultural context that favored rhetorical training. Daring to rewrite — Horace's *Ausus idem* — characterizes virtually all ancient and medieval writing that is based on scholastic paradigms and models, paradigms and models that are informed by the art of rhetoric.

Macrobius refers to the art of *conspiratio* in the Preface to his *Saturnalia*. Among the metaphors he employs to describe the composition of this work is that of a symphony of voices blending their breath in unison, underscoring in this way the *con-* (with) *spirare* (breathing) that enables (em)plotting: “tale hoc praesens opus volo: multae in illo artes, multa praecepta sint, multarum aetatum exempla, sed in unum conspirata” (*Sat* praef. 10)¹ [This is the kind of work I intend to write: it should contain many arts and many precepts as well as illustrations from many times, but all brought together into one harmonious whole.] Different voices sing the same song. Not only do different authors proffer different versions of a single story, but each individual author must negotiate among the many voices heard in order to arrive at a new version. Homer and Vergil, as Macrobius shows in Books Five and Six of the *Saturnalia*, provide examples. “Quid enim suavius,” exclaims Macrobius, “quam duos praecipuos vates audire idem loquentes?” (*Sat* 5.3.16) [what is more sweet than hearing two exceptional poets saying the same thing?] Macrobius is here attributing to “conspiracy” something of its literal signification in Latin: the unison of different voices. His sense of *conspiratio* in this passage is,

¹ Cf. Hooley 1997 p. 253.

actually, an art of allusion — that is, “how one text quotes, comments, corrects, integrates, and rereads another text.”² The Middle Ages raised the art of allusion to an art of poetry.

Now, “nothing guarantees that a medieval *ars poetica* will provide the best available guide to the processes of the fictional text.”³ At issue is interpretation — that is, can knowledge of a formal art of writing help us interpret texts that exemplify that art, appreciate their originality, and identify features of their composition that might otherwise have escaped notice or have been misunderstood? Doubts often spring from a Romantic view of the creative, imaginative, because inspired artist rather than from the view most prevalent in the Middle Ages, a view fostered by arts of poetry and prose, and relying on the medieval meaning of invention. Invention is taught by precept and treatise, at least when the young student begins to study rhetoric. But the constraints of precept, especially with the talented or gifted writer, inform habits of conception, and can turn constraint into awareness of a language’s potential for original expression. When the student of the treatise becomes the observer of actual poetic models that he or she sets out to rewrite, either by imitation or emulation, the rhetorical intent to retell the same story comes into play; the author plots another version of a given matter or theme,⁴ and, in so doing, he or she engages in the art of conspiracy rather than submitting to a burst of inspiration — that is, he or she engages in intertextual allusions that rewrite and even correct earlier voices rather than relying on inspiration whose only source is the creative imagination.⁵

My purpose here is to delineate this poetics of conspiracy and to illustrate its usefulness for interpretation of a number of specimen romances in French from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The book begins with Chrétien de Troyes’s reference in *Erec et Enide* to Macrobius, an early fifth-century author best known to medievalists for his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. The commentary has

² Wills 1996 p. 15. On the variety of such citations in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*, see Fiocchi 1981.

³ Pensom 1993 pp. 533-34. SunHee Gertz has suggested to me that *inspire* seems to have precluded *conspirare* in our conception of invention. See also Moos 1976 pp. 111-14 and Abramowska 1985 pp. 45-46.

⁴ See, for example, Fredborg 1987 pp. 87 and 89-92, and Blänsdorf 1995.

⁵ For a contemporary analysis of some of these issues, but in a framework compatible, I think, with that developed in this book, see Attridge 1999.

generally been taken to be the source of Chrétien's reference, although, as I shall argue, this is doubtful; if the later writer (in this case, Chrétien) makes only a more or less accurate paraphrase, this is antithetical to the medieval art of poetry as we know it, which does not teach how to recover or reconstruct a text, as in source scholarship. Rather, it teaches how to rewrite by drawing on an earlier work's potential for new expression. Indeed, this "immanent poetics"⁶ is what Macrobius meant by description, and it is the art of description that Chrétien de Troyes says Macrobius taught him, description being the art of rewriting. This immanent or implicit poetics lies in the arts of poetry themselves, projecting them into a larger milieu of reading, instruction, and imitation.⁷ Rewriting, therefore, is the sphere within which medieval writers in the scholastic tradition sought and achieved originality.

Thanks to Chrétien's allusions to Macrobius we can bring together the source, medieval arts of poetry, and rewriting or reconfiguring of *topoi* that both Macrobius and Chrétien suggest by description. Macrobius's surviving works illustrate the art of description that important medieval writers actually practiced; it can be found anew in their own works and used to interpret them. My book focuses on practice in the especially crucial period from about 1150 to 1225 when the Latin and French languages were producing some of their greatest and most representative works. Those works are rewrites. They rewrite by description, that is, by topical invention. In this way, they raise issues of interest to some aristocratic audiences during their own time: war and combat, consent in love and marriage, and constancy in love and marriage.

If we seek to appreciate how romancers rewrote their predecessors, we must be selective since rewriting presumes a new version of anterior material. Therefore, we must choose to examine specific romances that reveal the practice of the art and illustrate how they used it to achieve originality. Inevitably, this requires comparison based on allusions in the rewritten work to its antecedent sources and models: to be original is to be, if not unique, at least different. Such comparison allows us to recover the medieval art of writing in original compositions.

I referred to antecedent works as models. "Model" will be a key

⁶ Roberts 1985; see Chapter Three.

⁷ Gerritsen 1973 part 3 p. 11.

term in this study. It is preferable to that of “genre” since, as Thomas Haye as pointed out, medieval authors often construed rewriting in terms of models rather than of genres. A critical model for the Middle Ages was, for example, the *Aeneid*. It is in terms of models that medieval poets thought of their own rewriting, whether they relied on the same plot as the model or whether they adapted the art implicit in its composition to new matters — as we shall observe in the case of Huon de Mery, who rewrote Chrétien’s motifs and themes in a new, allegorical matter.

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D.K.

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