Gestures of Authorship in Medieval English Historiography: The Case of Robert Mannyng of Brunne

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The textual presence of the authorial persona in medieval historiography is circumscribed by intra- and intertextual issues of authority and power. The importance attributed to the *auctores*, on the one hand, necessitates constant negotiations of authority. This is done, among other strategies, by a strong emphasis on the physicality of the source as a book, as an object to be handled and controlled by the author. This move is further extended by the inscription into the work of the processes involved in its creation, such as the search for, evaluation of and selection from the source text, thus simultaneously establishing and undermining the source's authority. On the other hand, authors, in a sort of "mise-en-abyme," empower themselves when they write about writing (for example the exchange of letters between potentates) as a powerful and empowering element within their histories. Working with different episodes from chronicles of the *Brut* tradition, especially Robert Mannyng's chronicle, I will focus on these two divergent yet related gestures of authorship as they appear in medieval English historiography.[1]

In the afternoon of Friday, 15 May 1338, Robert Mannyng of Brunne has a problem. He is just concluding his work of English history and is rather worried about what will happen to it once it leaves his hands. Will someone else read it, aloud or in private, and in so doing appropriate the "I" in the text for himself? Will someone call it "my book" when referring to it as a source, virtually seizing the sourcebook and usurping its

author's authority – just as he has done with his own sources? Or will the book eventually even start to *speak for itself* and thus defy authorial control and authority altogether? The concluding six lines of Mannyng's work read like an anxious attempt to reassure himself and anyone else of his authorship. In just six lines, there are six instances of the first person singular "I," coupled three times with the verb "write:"

> Now most *I* nede leue here of Inglis forto *write*,
> *I* had no more matere of kynges lif in scrite;
> if *I* had haued more, blithly *I* wild haf *writen*.
> What tyme *I* left þis lore, þe day is for to witen:
> Idus þat is of Maii left *I* to *write* þis ryme,
> B letter & Friday bi ix þat ȝere ȝede prime.
>   (Mannyng, book II: ll. 8353-8358, my italics)

Mannyng here claims that he must end writing at this stage because of a lack of sources and that he would happily have written more had he had them and he places himself and his work at a very precise moment in time when he says that he stops writing on "Friday, 15 May 1338, nine hours after prime."[2] However, with the repetition of "I" and "write" he also states, and very markedly so, "I write."

It is this "writing I" as it appears in medieval historiography and its struggle for authorial control that I am concerned with in this article. When I refer to the "writing I," I mean the authorial persona as a textual construct. Roland Barthes, though explicitly referring to modern authors, proposed to call this construct "scriptor" (142); for medieval authors, Lee Patterson and Paul Zumthor have used "the author's author" (Patterson 10) and "l'homme dans le texte" (Zumthor, *Essai* 69) respectively.[3] While the "real," extratextual author is now commonly denied authority and control over his work, this "writing I," the intratextual author, definitely makes claims for authority. As an author, he does not stand alone. There are those authors before him, Latin *auctores* as well as vernacular predecessors, on whose authority he bases his own and whose authority he sometimes undermines in order to establish his; there are those authors who will come after him and who will hopefully consider his work authoritative enough to base their authority on his. Naturally, he does not want *them* to undermine *his* authority in order to establish theirs. The writing of history hence becomes a dynamic of appropriation and control: the author wants as much of the authority from

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[2] The weekday Friday, as well as the exact time 3 o'clock, are obviously chosen to match the traditional hour of Christ's death.

[3] Philip Bennett translates Zumthor's term as "author as textual persona" (Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics* 44).

his *auctores* as he can get and he wants to lose as little as possible of his own to future authors.[4] There are several strategies to achieve this aim which are employed by the vernacular historiographers I will discuss here, but which are not exclusive to them. However, as Ruth Evans has pointed out (368), the fact that historiography is one of the genres closest to the Latinate tradition does increase the authorial struggles for authority. I consequently suggest that the gestures of authorship (liberating as they are vis-à-vis the *auctoritates*) analysed here carry a different weight in historiography than they do in other genres. Robert Mannyng, as I will argue, may well be the best example thereof. Many of the authorship studies which include medieval historiography (most of them do not), such as the essays and textual commentaries in *The Idea of the Vernacular* (Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al.) have focused on the ways in which vernacular historiographers write themselves into the tradition on which they draw by appropriating the literary conventions of their *auctores*, especially in their prologues. While I have also begun this article by referring to an epilogue of a work, i.e. the other end of the frame, I propose, in what follows, to also investigate gestures of authorship which appear *within* the actual histories of England.

The first strategy I want to discuss is one employed to appropriate the authority of the *auctores* by emphasising the materiality of the source text. Whenever the source text is referred to as a "book," it becomes an object which can be handled by the author, an object which can be grabbed and held – and controlled. A first element of this strategy is the inscription into the work of history of the processes involved in its creation, such as the search for, the evaluation of and the selection from the source text. When Laȝamon in his prologue famously evokes the picture of himself lovingly turning the pages of three excellent books he chooses during his extensive travels, he does several things at once: He makes himself an authority who is able to choose three books from – presumably – many books he came across on his travels, an authority also who is able to judge that these three books are "excellent:"

> Laȝamon gon liðen wide ȝond þas leode,
> and biwon þa æðela boc þa he to bisne nom.
> He nom þa Englisca boc þa makede Seint Beda.
> Anoþer he nom on Latin þe makede Seinte Albin.
> and þe feire Austin þe fulluht broute hider in.
> Boc he nom þe þridde; leide þer amidden,
> þa makede a Frenchis clerc,
> Wace wes ihoten, þe wel couþe writen;

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[4] Kenneth Tiller claims this to be the case for Laȝamon's prologue (97-126).

and he heom ȝef þare æðelen Ælienor
þe wes Henries quene þes heȝes kinges.
Laȝamon leide þeos boc and þa leaf wende;
he heom leofliche biheold - liþe him beo Drihten!
        (Laȝamon, proem II. 14-25)

But Laȝamon at the same time also stresses these books' materiality when he describes how he puts them in front of himself and turns the pages. He is the one, at that moment, who holds the books in his hands and controls them.[5] Likewise, when Robert Mannyng refers to Dares the Phrygian as his source for the Trojan wars, he refers to his history as "the book that we now know":

Dares þe Freson of Troie first wrote
& putt it in buke þat we now wote;
he was a clerk & a gude knyght.
(. . .)
þat it were oure long to telle;
& many wald not þerin duelle
þare names alle forto here,
bot þe Latyn is fayre to lere.
        (Mannyng, book I: ll. 145-162)

Dares the Phrygian's *auctorial* authority, of course, is unquestionable: His work is old, it is in Latin and Dares is allegedly an eyewitness of the Trojan wars. This is why Mannyng refers to him as his source for the Trojan wars, despite the fact that, as has been proven (book I: ll. 320-726, notes), he actually did *not* use his work. But Mannyng, even at the moment of presenting Dares as an *auctor*, starts undermining his authority: Dares' account, he points out is "oure longe to telle," but Mannyng grants, and he does so in a rather patronising tone, that at least "the Latin is nice." When an author thus assumes a position from which he assesses (and simultaneously presents himself as *able* to assess) the quality of the other author, this author's work and his language, he imposes his authority upon that of his source. Such remarks consequently pertain to the *clinamen*, an author's "swerve away from his precursor" as defined by Harold Bloom (14).[6] However, the quote above also contains a refer-

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[5] See Tiller's intriguing reading of this passage in terms of sexual violence (105f.).

[6] "*Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper. (. . .) This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction the new poem moves."

ence to the "buke that we now wote" which suggests that there is a physical book which Mannyng at one stage holds in his hands. Hence, while the remarks just mentioned help to appropriate the *auctores'* authority, the evocation of the source as a physical object doubles the effect by visualising this appropriation.

If we read references to sourcebooks in medieval historiography closely (and take them literally), then we will find that books seem to have the unpleasant potential of *speaking for themselves* and hence eluding the author's control. There are many examples of books "saying," "telling," "narrating" something. In the chronicle which is partly attributed to Robert of Gloucester[7] for example, a book tells of Empress Maud's death: "Þe nexte ȝer þer after þe ampresse mold wende out of þis liue as þe boc aþ itold" (ll. 9732f.). Robert Mannyng presents a book which disagrees with what is apparently another source ("my boke tellis nay") to then "say" the opposite: "My boke tellis nay, Godwyn did him no dere; it sais þe Quene Egyn þe blame suld scho bere" (book II: ll. 1570f.). Much more numerous than references to "speaking books" are references to the more abstract "story" (also meaning 'history') as speaking. Chaucer, for example, makes two such references in the *Canterbury Tales* ("Man of Law's Tale" l. 969 and "Physician's Tale" l. 161). However, Robert Mannyng seems to be more inventive than others in expressing the notion of speaking texts. The combination of the terms "stori" and "speken" which Mannyng uses twice appears in only two other middle English works,[8] and the combination of "stori" and "monen" seems to be unique to Mannyng.[9] Was he, perhaps, more aware and more afraid than other authors of the possibility of the work's afterlife, independent from and uncontrollable by the author? The book as part and promoter of the self which Eric Jager so aptly describes in *The Book of the Heart* has here turned into a danger to the authorial self.[10]

On yet another level, there are authoritative sources which tend to speak in an authoritative way, commanding or forbidding the author to write something. This is the case in the following example from Mannyng's chronicle, in which the (source)book forbids the historiographer to write about the death of Robert II, duke of Normandy:

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[7] For simplicity's sake, I will, in what follows, refer to it as Robert of Gloucester's chronicle.

[8] Other kinds of texts, especially books, letters, the Bible, etc, are however often referred to in combination with the word "speken." See "speken" in the *Electronic Middle English Dictionary*. A search in the Middle English Corpus suggests that the "speaking story" only appears twice more in middle English literature.

[9] See the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse, Boolean search for stor*+mon*.

[10] See also Ernst Robert Curtius' chapter on "The Book as Symbol."

> At Coue is Roberd dede; þe maner of his endyng
> *my boke it me forbede* to telle þerof no þing.
> A hardy knyght was he, ouer all bare þe pris.
>   (Mannyng, book II: ll. 2486ff., my italics)

The authority of the book here is of course, ultimately, the authority of its author. In this example, intriguingly, the reference is not to *a* book but to *my* book. The possessive pronoun, I would like to suggest along the lines of A.C. Spearing's concept of textual subjectivity (1ff.), makes a significant difference. It produces a pose of taking possession, as if Mannyng said: "if this book tries to order me around, I'll just make it *mine.*"

When a book speaks, it is a subject, the history it narrates is its direct object and the author who is informed by the book is the book's indirect object. If the author does not want to be the book's object, he needs to invert the roles. Consequently, whenever a historiographer relates that he has searched for and found information in a book, he firstly makes the book his grammatical object but also, secondly, evokes it as a physical object, a material book which is handled and searched by him. In an example from the Northern *Cursor Mundi*, the author explains that he has found a certain episode in some book: "In sum bok find I þar a wile þat ioseph fand þat was sutile" (ll. 4749f.). This effect is even more striking when the author of the sourcebook is named, as is the case in another example from Robert Mannyng's chronicle: "In Gildas boke þus i fond þat Gurmund departed þe lond" (book I: ll. 14'151f.). The maker and original "owner" of the book, Gildas, is dispossessed and his authority is appropriated by the researcher who, at the moment of finding information in the book, is supposedly holding it in his hands.

Books are not only present on this metatextual level, but also as objects within the historical events related in the chronicles. A second strategy I want to analyse in this article is the one of writing about writing (and writers) on the story level and thereby, by a sort of "mise-en-abyme," constructing and empowering the author.[11] Against the background of the examples above, in which the historiographers present themselves as searching for and finding information in their sourcebooks, it is not surprising that, when books are mentioned on the story level, they are likewise the domain of learned specialists. *Literati*, mostly of ecclesiastical learning, are portrayed as searching for and finding es-

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[11] This is along the lines suggested by Monika Otter in her discussion of 12th century historiography. See also Gabrielle Spiegel's discussions of vernacular French historiography.

sential information in books. One example is the case of the exiled Briton king Cadwallader who needs help interpreting his vision and whose friend, the Breton king Alan, calls for "wise clerks" to search "all the books" in Mannyng's version (book I: ll. 15'851f.). Robert of Gloucester's account of this episode, in contrast, is less specific as to who does the researching in the books: "Þe king alein let þo anon in is bokes aspye" (l. 5106).

Another example is that of King Edward I's search for written proof of his right to overlordship of Scotland for which he needs the assistance of secular and ecclesiastical counsellors. In both Mannyng's longer and his source Pierre de Langtoft's shorter versions, the search for proof is not accomplished by the king himself but by the barons who act as the king's counsellors and a bishop respectively (Mannyng, book II: ll. 5997-6008; Langtoft, II: 190). Here, as in many other instances, books are presented as testifying the truth. In all cases, however, that truth is not easily accessible to everyone. Even kings, as the two examples show, need the *literati's* help to access that truth. Needless to say that historiographers in general and Robert Mannyng in particular (who associates himself with Cambridge University, Mannyng, book II: ll. 8225-8234) would have considered themselves *literati*, too.

Apart from books, there is a second type of writing present on the story level: Letters. In terms of content, letters are often conceived of as a plea for liberation or as a defence of liberty as is the case with the two examples below. In what follows, however, I want to focus on the function that is attributed to the letters in the communication between potentates. A first example is the appeal of Brutus to the Greek king Pandras to liberate his enslaved people. While most chronicles mention this appeal, only few represent it as being made in the form of a letter. Wace and Robert Mannyng are among them and they present the contents of this letter in considerable length and detail which I will not discuss here. The lines immediately preceding the direct speech of the letters however show interesting differences in the two versions. While Wace (who is Mannyng's source for this account) introduces the letter in three lines, mentioning "breif" once and neither names Brutus nor Pandras,[12] Mannyng has the following four lines:

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[12] "Puis ad sempres un breif fait faire./ Le rei de Grece salua/ E ces paroles li manda: (…)." Wace 224ff.

> Brutus did write a brefe
> vnto sire Pandras, kyng & chefe.
> Þis is þe brefe þat he sent
> þat Latyn vnderstode þus ment: (. . .)
>   (book I: ll. 937-940)

He mentions "brefe" twice, and, more importantly, names the sender, Brutus, and the receiver, Pandras, in close proximity to the word. Mannyng's version enhances the notion of letter writing as an act of liberation: Brutus as the soon-to-be liberator of an enslaved people is portrayed as having the letter written before attacking and fighting Pandras. It is certainly no coincidence that Mannyng, as a "writing I," thus commends the preeminence of the quill over the sword. But Mannyng also, in contrast to his source Wace, mentions the language of the letter, Latin, which has to be translated, by some *literatus*, on two narrative levels. Firstly, probably, to the Greek Pandras and secondly to the chronicle's audience who receives the letter's contents in English. The *literatus* to provide the translation in the latter case is clearly Mannyng himself, who thus underlines his central role as intermediary.

A second example is the exchange of letters between the Roman emperor Lucius and King Arthur. This exchange is opened by twelve messengers bringing a letter by Lucius to Arthur in which the emperor presents the main reason why the Britons should submit to him, namely the fact that the Romans held Britain in the past. At this stage, Mannyng inserts a passage in which Arthur announces that he will write a letter back to Lucius (Book 1. ll. 11'401-11'410). Neither Mannyng's source Wace nor his near-contemporary Robert of Gloucester mention this. In all three works however, a long speech by Arthur follows, in which the Briton king not only presents his arguments against the Roman emperor's claims, but also sets up his own claim to overlordship of Rome, followed by a lengthy discussion among his liegemen. Both Wace and Robert of Gloucester then have Arthur send messengers back to Rome, who inform Lucius that Arthur has no intention of submitting to him and will instead attack (Wace ll. 11'059ff., Robert of Gloucester ll. 4113ff.). Mannyng, in contrast, has Arthur inform Lucius through a letter (called "charter" here):

> Þe chartere þei schewed þer barons
> & said, "Suilk ere Arthure respons."
> Whan þe Romeyns had wele herd
> how þe messengers ansuerd,
> & þer chartre acorded wele
> vnto þer saw ilka dele,
> þat Arthure wild no seruise do,

bot haf treuage, þe letter wild so.
  (Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle*, book I: II. 11'651-11'658)

The charter is shown to the Roman barons and testifies to Arthur's reply, it hence doubles up on what the messengers say ("the charter accorded that it was indeed so"). It underlines in a very pronounced way that Arthur will not submit himself: "þe letter wild so." In correspondence with the speaking books mentioned above, this is in fact an example of a speaking letter. Throughout this exchange between Lucius and Arthur, Mannyng evokes letters as being not merely a reflection of the spoken word, which would make them secondary and inferior, but as being interchangeable and on a par with it. The written word, thus established as powerful and potentially empowering in turn is a reflection of the power the historiographer envisages he could have through his writing.

A third and last example is the scene in which Arthur receives news of Mordred's betrayal. His nephew, in the king's absence, has usurped the power and married Queen Guinevere. In many chronicles, for example in Wace, the way in which this news is brought to Arthur is not specified. Arthur just "hears" the bad news:

Arthur *oï* e de veir sot
Que Modred fei ne li portot;
Se terre tint, sa femme ot prise.
Ne li sot gré d'icel servise; (. . .)
  (Wace ll. 13'031-13'034, my italics)

Robert Mannyng, however, has the information brought to Arthur through letters:

A day as he to mete went,
out of þis lond *lettres* were sent;
right als his trompes blewe,
a messengere þat he wele knewe
þe *lettres in his hand laid*,
& tille him with mouth said
þat Modrede, his sistir sonne,
had don him grete tresonne, (. . .)
  (Mannyng, book I: ll. 13'469-13'476, my italics).

The letters play a crucial role in this passage: They come from England together with the messenger who carries them and both, the messenger and the letters, bring the bad news. The letters, through their "writtenness" testify to the truth of the messenger's elusive spoken words – oth-

erwise it would have sufficed to send just a messenger with an orally transmitted message. The letters are laid in Arthur's hand and become, again in contrast to the spoken words, a physically graspable form of the bad news.

The three examples discussed above all show the historiographical construction, especially by Robert Mannyng, of the written word's power. The written word establishes power relations between potentates, it has the power to evoke fervent speeches of one potentate in the court of the other, and it has, in letters as well as in books, the power to testify the truth. Such representations of the written word as powerful and empowering, I claim, empower also the historiographer in his function as a writer. Likewise, the strategy of emphasising the source's materiality as a book, which constructs the book's (and consequently the *auctoritates*') susceptibility to authorial control and domination, empowers the historiographer in his claim for authority. As such, they serve as gestures of authorship employed in medieval historiography, and most skilfully, as I hope I have been able to show, by Robert Mannyng of Brunne.

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