

Notes Toward a More Comprehensive Approach to Medieval Literary Cycles

Unfortunately, though often for reasons of practicality, the study of medieval literary cycles has frequently been carried out sporadically, in relative isolation, with little first-hand interdisciplinary discussion. One recent exception to this rule was the colloquium held in Amsterdam that led to publication of the present volume. While the organizers' own work on the Dutch *Lancelot Cycle* exemplifies the considerable potential for cooperative and productive study of a medieval literary cycle, their initiative in organizing this colloquium is a major contribution to the objective of placing the study of cycles within a collective, interdisciplinary context. In such an environment, we become aware that a medieval literary cycle is an extremely complex phenomenon, one that requires flexible methodological procedures capable of approaching it from many different perspectives. Though they are by no means exhaustive in either scope or detail, the following remarks address some of the major areas and types of inquiry that might be involved in a more comprehensive collective approach to the study of medieval literary cycles.

I. Production

Study of cyclic production, attentive to the cycle as perceived in the *diachronic* dimension of its growth over time, may involve a narrow or a broad focus. The former weighs the evidence of authorial design, as for example when a text within a cycle constructs an authorial persona, thus providing potential documentation of the cycle's etiology.¹ Both in their magnitude and in their adherence to an anterior tradition, however, medieval literary cycles often exceed the dimensions of authorial design at a specific moment and thus compel a broader focus, as we move from a given stage of the cycle's development to an "archeological" mapping of its successive antecedent sedimentations. Manuscripts, as repositories of both scriptorial *and* pictorial information, may

¹ See, for example, the "signature" of Jendeus de Brie in the *Bataille Loquifer*, B. N. fr. 1448, fol. 290 b and c.; or those of Perrot de Nesle and Jehan Madot in B. N. fr. 375. On the latter, see Lori Walters, 'Le rôle du scribe dans l'organisation des manuscrits des romans de Chrétien de Troyes', in *Romania* 106 (1985), pp. 317-21. For views on literary production offered by writers in their own narratives, see Douglas Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

reveal deliberate schemes of compilation or assembly,² disclose the cycle's temporal displacements, and help to identify the larger spheres of genre and textuality that intersect with the cycle at specific junctures.³

II. Synchronic analysis

Determination of the modes of cyclic production — the phases and procedures of a given “mise en cycle” — is not in itself sufficient to provide an account of the cycle's coherence. Synchronic analysis is vital to perception of the hierarchies of its organization, either at its maturity or in some earlier phase, and thus also accessory to study of its development over time. Rather than giving account of the cycle as a static entity, however, it is preferable to examine the dynamic mechanisms of cyclic properties, in a word, their “cyclicality”.⁴ These features require two complementary types of analysis:

1. Microanalysis is attentive to discursive details within and among texts in the cycle. There is always the risk that such analyses may bog down in sterile taxonomies of constituent properties or else remain too narrowly focussed on one level of coherence. To counter these tendencies, it is useful to adapt the criteria and methodologies available in the area of “discourse analysis”. In his ‘Discours du récit’, for example, Gérard Genette provides a remarkably broad and diverse framework for such a multi-faceted inquiry, one that identifies a wide variety of criteria for study of the temporal, aspectual, and enunciative features of narrative.⁵ In similar fashion, we need to develop more systemati-

² See, *infra*, Lori Walters' discussion of compilation and Chantilly ms. 472.

³ For example, see Cedric E. Pickford, *L'évolution du roman arthurien en prose vers la fin du Moyen Age d'après le manuscrit 112 du fonds français de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris: Nizet, 1959); Madeleine Tyssens, *La geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange dans les manuscrits cycliques* (Paris: Champion, 1967). A suggestive array of possibilities is found in Jean Frappier, *Les chansons de geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange* (Paris: SEDES, 1955; 1967); Robert F. Cook and Larry S. Crist, *Le deuxième cycle de la croisade, deux études sur son développement: Les textes en vers; Saladin* (Genève: Droz, 1972). See also, *infra*, the contributions of R. F. Cook and Geert H.M. Claassens on the Crusade Cycle; of Elspeth Kennedy and Carol Dover on stages in cyclification of the prose *Lancelot*.

⁴ See Richard A. Dwyer, ‘Approaching Cyclicity’, a paper presented at the Sewanee Medieval Colloquium, April, 1982; Jane H.M. Taylor, ‘The Fourteenth Century’, in N. Lacy et al., eds., *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), i, p. 210; *idem.*, ‘Arthurian Cyclicity: The Construction of History in the Late French Prose Romances’, in *The Arthurian Yearbook II* (New York & London: Garland, 1992), pp. 209-23. See also the nine essays from a colloquium on medieval literary cycles held at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1991, in S. Sturm-Maddox and D. Maddox, eds., *Transtextualities: Of Cycles and Cyclicity in Medieval French Literature* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, forthcoming), including an essay on the history of the concept and the term “cycle” by David Staines, and essays by Michel-André Bossy, Kimberlee Ann Campbell, Carol Dover, Alan Knight, Paul Rockwell, Mary Speer, Jane H.M. Taylor and D. Maddox that variously address the question of cyclicity in a variety of genres and discursive types.

⁵ Gérard Genette, ‘Discours du récit’, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 65-267, and *Nouveau Discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983). For application of certain of these criteria, see Taylor, ‘The Fourteenth Century’. For another useful, well-researched, comprehensive view of discourse analysis, see Cesare Segre, *Avviamento all'analisi del testo letterario* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985).

cally a range of techniques for analysis of the “discours du récit cyclique” according to the manifold hierarchies of its signifying architecture. This would entail detailed consideration, within the cyclic context, of recurrent constructs, such as characters, events, motifs, episodes and episodic organization, idiomatic usages (formulas, figures, tropes, etc.), and the voices and points of view combined within the mechanisms of enunciation.⁶ Here it is a question of disclosing on the one hand how *intratextual* features within a given poem relate it to the cyclic corpus as a whole, on the other how individual works within a given cyclic ensemble maintain *intertextual* relations among themselves at various levels of coherence.⁷ These complementary inquiries may then provide the basis for a convergent reading of the cycle’s networks of transtextual meanings and significance.

2. Macroanalysis: Throughout the Middle Ages one finds examples of textualization based on a global format, such as the ages of man, the four seasons, the human life cycle, universal history, and so on.⁸ Whether by unconscious patterning or as part of a conscious design, some medieval literary cycles also adhere to a comprehensive organizing principle, one that becomes apparent only as the cycle is perceived as a whole, thus involving the problematic of macronarratives and macrotextuality.⁹ Although this issue is sometimes neglected - many global characterizations of cycles are attuned less to the form than to the substance of their content¹⁰ — numerous comprehensive cyclic formats are quite evident and are frequently cited: epic cycles that progressively construct, often in retrograde fashion, the phases of an heroic biography or lineage; romance cycles that depict the successive reigns of a line of monarchs or phases of a dynasty, or that reconcile disparate “matières” and cultural traditions on the model of the “translatio imperii”; dramatic cycles whose individual plays together evoke the full sweep of Judaeo-Christian universal history; and so on.¹¹

Relations between a cycle and its macrocontext(s) are characteristically of two types: the cycle may either tend toward replication of the macrocontext or else transgress the latter in ways that reveal intentional modification of received models and traditions. While replicative cyclification is more typical of didactic cycles, late medieval dramatic cycles being a prime example, transgressive

⁶ D. Maddox and S. Sturm-Maddox, ‘Intertextual Discourse in the William Cycle’, in *Olifant* 7 (1979), pp. 131-48; Ital. trans. in *L’epica*, ed. A. Limentani and A. Infurna (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), pp. 305-21.

⁷ The notion of “signaux cycliques” is highly pertinent to this type of investigation. See Povel Skårup, *supra*.

⁸ D. Maddox, ‘The Semiosis of Assimilatio in Medieval Models of Time’, in *Style* 20 (1986), pp. 252-71.

⁹ See Teun A. Van Dijk, *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Discourse, Interaction, and Cognition* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980); Segre, *Avviamento*, pp. 98-100.

¹⁰ This was in fact true from the outset: in an oft-cited passage in *Girard de Vienne*, Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube — one of the earliest medieval contributors to the question of cycles — distinguishes — among three types of epic cycle on the basis of content. On the distinction between the form and the substance of content, see Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage* (Paris: Minuit, 1973), pp. 65-79.

¹¹ Some of these formats were discussed in the Amsterdam Colloquium session on ‘Genetic Aspects of Cyclification’.

cyclification often betrays an ideological bias, a case in point being the French Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian romances which takes significant liberties with more orthodox views of salvation history.

Although a global form is determined by the textual ensemble which makes up a cycle, it can be conceptualized independently as an analytical model for the study of comprehensive cyclicality on a comparative basis. Consider the form known as the “eschatological text”.¹² Invested with the content of salvation history, the eschatological text serves as both subject and theme in the vast dramatic cycles of the later Middle Ages.¹³ In other types of medieval textuality, however, it occurs as a form which is virtually devoid of any content having to do with universal history and is instead invested with many other types of content, or “matières”. Thus it serves, for example, as the morphological vehicle of exemplary biography or as the matrix of the life-cycle of a collective polity. Jane Taylor has recently drawn attention to this form’s importance as an architectonic principle of late French prose cycles in which its relation to the content of “historia” remains in evidence.¹⁴ Elsewhere, I have shown how various medieval usages of this content-form retain essentially the same configurative features, including notably that of a highly prominent, centralized crisis depicting an axiological conversion.¹⁵ While in single-text usage this pattern subtends a characteristic bipartite pattern widespread in vernacular works, in numerous epic and romance cycles — the Narbonnais Cycle of chansons de geste, the compilation of Chantilly ms. 472, the cyclic prose *Lancelot*, and so forth — it tends to recur at regular intervals in isomorphic strata, as the biographical, heroic crisis is superimposed onto genealogical or social crises, the resolution of the subjective *and* the collective crises often being mutually contingent.

This kind of stratification of global form is typical of one salient characteristic of medieval macrotextual cyclicality in general: as a given body of epic or romance material is reworked in successive stages of cyclification, we are likely to find not just one but *two or more comprehensive formats* layered, superimposed, or otherwise combined into an analyzable syntax of maximal forms. For example, while twelfth-century verse romance and many of the early chansons de geste are normally elaborated within a limited segment of the biographical cycle, in later prose cyclifications this context is variously assimilated to a genealogical or an historical format.¹⁶ Sometimes macrotextual configurations are evoked in restricted enclaves. To take but one example: while, as has often been noted, the epic cycle of Garin de Monglane constructs by inverse chronology a cyclic macrocontext based on an illustrious line of heroes, the frequent use of the “prière du plus grand péril” at crucial junctures provides a means of inscribing the functions of the various heroes into the macrocontext of

¹² Jurij M. Lotman, ‘The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology’, in *Poetics Today* 1 (1979), pp. 161-84.

¹³ V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966); Knight, ‘Cyclicality in Medieval French Drama’, in *Transtextualities: Of Cycles and Cyclicality*.

¹⁴ ‘Arthurian Cyclicality’, esp. pp. 210-19, and her contribution here.

¹⁵ D. Maddox, *Voix et textualités du schéma eschatologique* (Limoges: PULIM, 1994).

¹⁶ These matters were addressed in the session on ‘Biographical Aspects of Cyclification’.

“historia”.¹⁷ In effect, such prayers intermittently introduce into the cycle a figural “mise en abyme” of universal history and thus implicitly locate the biographical and lineal macrocontexts of the epic cycle within the maximal durativity of a Judaeo-Christian conceptualization of historical time.

The cyclification of French Arthurian romance provides several instances of one prominent scheme of macrotextual concatenation involving cyclic amplification predicated on antecedent “matière”. According to this format, a cycle progressively constructs continuity between an extensive diegetic dimension in the process of unfolding as the primary story, and a much larger proto-diegetic universe, a universe which, though temporally anterior to the events depicted in the main story, provides the latter with the value systems and the norms that regulate its elaboration. Beginning in the early thirteenth century, we find variants of this model at work in the elaboration of Arthurian cycles: the diegetic dimension of Arthurian heroism is amplified, often as interlaced stories adapted in some cases from earlier discrete biographical strata, notably those of late twelfth-century verse romance. Concurrently, the collective life-cycle of Arthurian society is progressively inscribed into the comprehensive proto-diegetic framework of salvation history, but exclusively through the mediatory macro-narrative of the Grail’s passage through time, starting with Joseph of Arimathea at the very center of the Judaeo-Christian eschatological text and progressing thence to Galahad, whose foretold achievement of the Grail quest ushers in the crepuscular phase of Arthurian society. In sum, like many other examples one could cite, this one would seem to suggest that in our attempts to determine the nature of macrotextual cyclicality, we may well discover that its comprehensive armature is comprised of not one, but a plurality of macronarrative strands.

III. Reception

No matter how ambitious or diversified in terms of coverage, analysis of production and intrinsic properties will most likely fall short of achieving a satisfactory apprehension of the cycle as a cultural entity. Questions of reception are clearly involved here. A cycle can provide a remarkably rich and diverse record of the reception of antecedent traditions that inform it, yet it also inscribes the virtualities of its own reception.¹⁸ In locating these, intrinsic analysis might again come into play. For example, episodic organization may provide clues as to the material conditions of a temporally-fragmented performance or public reading; or again, thematic emphases — for example, on the relationship between monarchy and vassalage in the William Cycle; on vendetta and genealogy in the *Lorrains* cycle;¹⁹ or on the hero’s initiation or education

¹⁷ See D. Maddox and S. Sturm-Maddox, ‘Le chevalier à l’oraison: Guillaume dans le *Couronnement de Louis*’, in M. Tyssens and C. Thiry, eds., *Charlemagne et l’épopée romane* (Paris: Société d’Édition ‘Les Belles Lettres’, 1978), II, pp. 609-15.

¹⁸ An issue addressed in the session on ‘Codicological Aspects of Cyclification’.

¹⁹ See François Suard’s contribution, *infra*.

in the Arthurian prose romances - may suggest the kinds of cultural messages invested in a cycle as well as the kind of public which provided a climate of receptivity for cyclic development or for the recyclification of earlier traditions. In this volume, Carol Chase discusses thirteenth-century narrative cycles in terms of the "mental structures" they reflect. Indeed, when we measure the extent to which medieval narrative cycles embody biographical, topographical, genealogical, historical, eschatological and other types of culture texts, we realize that they may serve as both the archives and the imaginary expressions of the mentalities of medieval culture.²⁰

This orientation leads us well beyond issues which are primarily philological and literary to questions of a more interdisciplinary hue. It is not a question, however, of a purely taxonomic cataloguing of the cycle's historical sources and of the popular and learned traditions it reflects. It is more important to determine how their appropriation within a cyclic frame modified them and adapted them to new usages. Thus, along with the need to familiarize ourselves with the methodologies of the historian and apply them to the study of cycles goes the desirability of examining more closely the affective, political, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of reception. Moreover, the question of the cycle's social functions, of how its usages unite its makers and users in coherent ways, brings us to the notion of "textual communities".²¹ Perhaps it becomes a matter here of identifying what Gabrielle Spiegel has called the "social logic of the [cycle]", which would locate it "within a broader network of social and intertextual relations" and thus alert "us to its own social character and function, its own combination of material and discursive realities that endow it with its own sense of historical purposiveness."²²

A more comprehensive study of medieval cyclicality would thus entail, in addition to numerous philological and literary inquiries, a plurality of approaches emanating from the sphere of the social sciences, as well as a rare spirit of interdisciplinary consultation and cooperation among textual philologists, art historians, discourse analysts, literary theoreticians, and historians and theoreticians of culture. Medieval cycles compel such a collective approach in order to strengthen our inquiries and to prevent them from being unduly reductive. One hopes that many more occasions for interdisciplinary discussion of these and related matters may ensue.

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²⁰ See Jacques Le Goff, 'Les mentalités, une histoire ambiguë', in J. Le Goff and P. Nora, eds., *Faire de l'histoire. III. Nouveaux objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 106-29, with a bibliography of works on medieval aspects of the question; Philippe Ariès, 'L'histoire des mentalités', in J. Le Goff, ed., *La nouvelle histoire* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1988), pp. 167-90; Alex Mucchielli, *Les mentalités* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

²¹ See Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 'Textual Communities', pp. 88-240.

²² Gabrielle Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', in *Speculum* 65 (1990), p. 85. I have substituted "cycle" for "text" in recognition of the larger implications of the author's comment.