

Expansion and Remaniement in Epic Cycles: The Case of the Old French Crusade Cycle

The typical process of development for *chanson de geste* cycles is the well-known sequence of expansions from a core text or texts. The classic example is furnished by the cycle of William of Orange and the lineage of the Narbonnais, described definitively by Jean Frappier. Beginning in the twelfth century with the relatively short epics recounting the principal events of William's own career, the cycle grew over the next century or more to include lengthy poems about the hero's ancestors and descendants. There is no extensive rewriting of the old central texts until the subject is reconceived by the prose authors of the fifteenth century.

This typical expansion sequence is apparently analogous to the development of the narrative cycle known as the *Roman de Renart*, whose oldest and simplest texts are not the first ones appearing in the manuscripts (e.g. Branches II, va) and are followed by numerous continuations of somewhat different natures. It should be noted, however, that the *Renart* tradition also offers extensive texts that are not closely connected to the loose tale of the struggle between Renart and Isengrin announced in the first lines of the cycle (*Renart le nouvel*, *Renart le bestourné*, *Renart le contrefait*). The development of the *Lancelot-Graal* cycle is rather different, at least as we are able to know it: instead of retaining (let us say) the romances of Chrétien and developing prologues for them, the thirteenth-century redactors furnished new narrative matter and opted at once for prose as their vehicle.

The epic poems of the Old French Crusade Cycle present an interesting variation on these forms of cyclical development. The oldest "branches" tell the story of the capture of Antioch and of the campaign against Jerusalem. Soon writers attracted to the "matter of the Crusades" extended the story of the First Crusade outward from its nucleus in both chronological directions: backward to the ancestors of Godfrey of Bouillon (e.g. the Swan Knight) and forward to the taking of Acre and the death of Godfrey. Without rewriting or adapting the core texts, the thirteenth-century sequel authors finally furnished partially overlapping and competing versions of the chronology of the Crusades down to the time of Saladin (with omissions).

But in the fourteenth century the development of the Cycle took a new turn. The form remained the same (the formulaic epic alexandrine), but the core texts were no longer respected: instead of adding to them, the redactor or redactors

replaced them. The mid-fourteenth-century *Chevalier au Cygne et Godefroid de Bouillon* recasts and retells the entire Crusade legend, retaining some early narrative elements but with a new emphasis on emotions and with new elements from the chronicles. This massive rewriting (not a compilation exactly, although it has been called by that name) has its associated poems (*Baudouin de Sebourc*, *Bâtard de Bouillon*, probably a *Saladin*) that include crusading episodes and that carry the story onward to some degree, but these poems do not derive from the CCGB and are indeed surely older than that work in its preserved form.

This loose form of cyclical relation is not unlike that characterizing the Renart material or the *Lancelot-Graal* cycle in its relation to Chrétien particularly, but it is rather unlike the orderly exploitation of tradition usually associated with epic. It may or may not be characteristic of the fourteenth century's approach to the *chanson de geste*, then still a living and growing genre. To cite only two of the possible analogues, *Florent et Octavien* has a quasi-cyclic ending that may be thought of as a continuation, but its earlier sections seem not to have been replaced; on the other hand, the material of the Nantueil cycle receives a very different treatment in the thirteenth-century *Parise la duchesse* and in the fourteenth-century *Tristan de Nantueil*.

What motives, then, led to the rejection of an often recopied, "canonical" core, and to its rewriting after a long period of stability? One's first reaction is that it must be a matter of taste, but if so, why did the recasting of the late twelfth-century poems take place only in the mid-fourteenth century? Or, conversely, why did the continuators of the *Chanson de Jérusalem* retain that text, and even earlier ones, in the manner of the *Perceval* continuators? My own tendency is to associate the development of the Crusade cycle with trends in the Crusade ideology and in Western ideas of the Crusade and its feasibility and modes, but I am far from convinced that motivation is the only one possible.

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