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### Truth and Invention in Medieval Texts: Remarks on the Historiography and Theoretical Frameworks of Conceptions of History and Literature, and Considerations for Future Research

Verdad e invención en los textos medievales: Observaciones sobre la  
historiografía y entramados teóricos de las concepciones de la historia y la  
literatura, y consideraciones para futuras investigaciones

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**Abstract:** This article surveys previous and recent scholarship and theoretical reflections on fictionality, and on the divisions and relations between history and literature in medieval texts. Evidence and examples from scholarly literature will be taken from various geographical contexts, academic disciplines and communities. Thus, it is my intention to set out a *state of the question*, and furthermore to suggest some lines and prospects for further research in this field.

**Keywords:** history; literature; fictionality; medieval literature; historiography

**Resumen:** Este artículo hace una síntesis de las reflexiones teóricas y las investigaciones previas y recientes sobre la ficcionalidad y la división y las relaciones entre historia y literatura en textos medievales. Evidencia textual y ejemplos serán sacados de varios contextos geográficos, disciplinas y comunidades académicas. De este modo, es mi intención presentar un *estado de la cuestión*, y además sugerir unas líneas y propuestas para futuras investigaciones en este campo.

**Palabras-claves:** historia; literatura; ficcionalidad; literatura medieval; historiografía

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## 1. Introduction

“The pair historical narrative and fictional narrative, as they appear as already constituted at the level of literary genres, is clearly antinomical. [...] They are distinguished from each other by the nature of the implicit contract between the writer and the reader. Even when not clearly stated, this contract sets up different expectations on the side of the reader and different promises on that of the author. In opening a novel, the reader is prepared to enter an unreal universe concerning which the question where and when these things took place is incongruous. In return, the reader is disposed to carry out what Coleridge called a ‘willful suspension of disbelief,’ with the reservation that the story told is an interesting one. The reader willingly suspends his disbelief, his incredulity, and he accepts playing along as if-as if the things recounted did happen. In opening a history book, the reader expects, under the guidance of a mass of archives, to reenter a world of events that actually occurred. What is more, in crossing the threshold of what is written, he stays on guard, casts a critical eye, and demands if not a true discourse comparable to that of a physics text, at least a plausible one, one that is admissible, probable, and in any case honest and truthful” (Ricoeur, 2010: 261).

The above quotation describes a distinction commonly held to be true among contemporary readers. We want one thing from a scholarly book of history, another thing completely from a novel. And although a history book may have narrative qualities, that does not diminish our expectations of accuracy or plausibility –if not truth– whereas a work of fiction, even a historical novel that recounts the adventures of factual historical persons, is expected to invent, to make up and appeal foremost to our imaginations.

Did this distinction hold true for medieval readers and audiences? Did there exist such a “contract” between readers and writers in the European Middle Ages? Scholars disagree on these questions. While some would situate the (or at least *a*) birth of fiction and the appearance of just such a contract to the medieval period –the twelfth century has been proposed as the time of birth of such a conception of fiction in Europe, with the work of Chrétien de Troyes, but this has been hotly debated for twenty years–that would for some scholars signify that fictional genres had reached autonomy, others account for the inexistence of rigid boundaries between history and fiction or historical discourse and literature, downplaying the independence of fiction vis-à-vis

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other literary modes.<sup>2</sup> Lately, fictionality as a feature of literature of various types has gained academic ground.

The developments within the philosophy and theory of history during the last few decades has created a heightened consciousness of the narrativity inherent in all history writing, and the inevitably subjective selection and emplotment of historical material that every such endeavour entails. Representations of history are subjectively formed stories of the past that are made, not found, and presented to a specific audience by means of a narrative voice. For Hayden White, emplotment is a literary operation, marking all proper narratives as fictional in a sense (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 1; Fleischmann, 1983: 293; see also Ankersmit, 2001 and White, 1979). The presence of this narrator can be greater or lesser, emphasised or concealed, depending on the needs of its author. In doing the former, the historian may unveil the process in which s/he is involved, a strategy that was available even in the medieval period (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 2-3). In this, traits common to historical and fictional literature are apparent.

This article intends to survey previous and recent scholarship and theoretical musings on fictionality, and on the divisions and relations between history and literature in medieval texts. Evidence and examples from scholarly literature will be taken from various geographical contexts, academic disciplines and communities. Thus, it is my intention to set out a *state of the question*, and furthermore to suggest some lines and prospects for further research.

Previous research has mainly focused on French and German romance in the period c. 1050–1200 as the foundations of medieval fiction. Only very recently has a wider geographical scope been attempted on a larger scale, where areas considered in one way or another to belong to the periphery of Europe, have been taken into account. Such is the nature of the 2012 anthology *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction*, edited by Panagiotis Agapitos and Lars Boje Mortensen, which also attempts to broaden the focus with regard to genre. We will also be well served by remembering that medieval fiction had a predecessor in Antiquity, and that fictionality continued to develop in Latin alongside the blooming vernaculars (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 7-8). Such initiatives are valuable if the study of medieval fictionality is to continue in new directions.

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<sup>2</sup> The definitions are sometimes clouded by a varied usage, but it should be clear that both history and fiction were modes of literature in the Middle Ages, while fictionality was not limited to full-fledged fiction but appeared as an aspect also of historical literature.

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## 2. Past/Present/Future: Medieval Historical Consciousness

The general historical consciousness of the medieval period was very much focused on an eschatological future and the present was often eaten away by the weight of the past, according to Annales School historian Jacques Le Goff. The theory of the six ages of the world was widely spread, according to which the world had already passed into its last stage, that of decay and old age, and would soon be no more –and this spurred an orientation towards the past, a historical consciousness (Le Goff, 1992: 12).

The present then, for the people of the Middle Ages, would be no more and nothing less than “a moment of eternity,” (Le Goff, 1992: 13) lived outside of chronological temporality, as Stelling-Michaud has argued (1959) – an idea that meets us intensely in various works by Saint Augustine. Likewise, medieval art strove towards the expression of atemporality, the symbolic, that which is outside of time. And was not all time present? Since biblical figures were painted and seen in present attire, the sins and virtues of long gone and ancient peoples actualised, condemned or praised (most memorably by Dante in his comedy). Is this “constant anachronism” (Le Goff, 1992: 13) a diminishing of the importance of the present, as Le Goff suggested, since its significance is utterly and unavoidably bound up in the past? And yet, change occurred in this aspect of medieval mentality. Progressively, towards the end of the medieval period, the time of the chronicles and progress in dating and the measuring of time affected historical consciousness (Le Goff, 1992: 13).

According to the Le Goff, early medieval literature did not delineate past and present as distinctly as did later medieval writers, and this reflects a changing understanding of temporality and varying attitudes towards the past. Using studies by Brunot and Imbs, Le Goff shows how confusion between tenses is common in Old French texts from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, in contrast to the relative clarity and decisiveness of grammatical temporal structures in Middle French texts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, while temporal consciousness is also attributable to social class; the time of the philosophers and theologians differs from that of the knight or the peasant (Le Goff, 1992: 6). In medieval literature and historiography, this is evident in the different conceptions of history prevalent in texts written by a clerical or lay author respectively.

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With a clearer differentiation between present and past came the need to define what the present was. In some cases, the expression “modern times” (*tempora moderna*) was used to demarcate the present. According to French historian Bernard Guenée,

“In the Middle Ages, some historians define modern times as the time of memory, many of them know that a reliable memory can cover about a hundred years, and modernity, modern times, is therefore for each of them the century in which they are living, or have just lived through the last years” (Guenée, 1976/77: 35).

Thus, the modern or the present is that which the living can remember or have heard their fathers or grandfathers tell them about, and the past becomes that which survives in written statements, books, and chronicles. Therefore, the need to produce historical statements, to preserve the feudal memory and the family memory (genealogy) in written evidence is obvious.

A medieval conception of historical truth has direct bearing on the separation of history and literature (or fictional narratives from historical ones) in that these types of text are all pervaded with the sense that the “[...] ‘facts of history’ are characteristically presented as subordinate to a higher truth, which, like the *sensus moralis* of romance, must be *interpreted* by the consumer”, according to Suzanne Fleischmann (Fleischmann, 1983: 289). This is materialised in textual form, in a repetitive pattern, wherein the actions of historical figures (factual or fictive) are perceived as more or less imperfect personifications of a divine ideal, removed from time and a single historical moment or context (Fleischmann, 1983: 289-290).

Conceived differently, looking aside from the theological truths of Christian belief, the medieval experience of the past and knowledge of the past was generally embodied to a higher degree than our own. Abstract, scientifically motivated concepts of historical “truth” were not available then, and one met the past only through other people’s lived experience, through storytellers, books, and art that had a tangible form. Thereby, the distance between the representations and the represented was so small that they “shared the same body and thus often looked almost identical” (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 11-12).

The gradual rise and expansion of literacy and documentation, the keeping of records and archives, had various effects. It was certainly a benefit to medieval historians. While scholasticism marked a regression of historical

culture, the interest of the lay public in history continued, and a rise in the number of people who had the means and opportunity to enjoy and promote the writing of history surged at the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> This marked the high point of national history writing. The collective memory of the kingdoms (or its ruling classes) would be put down in chronicles, while literature perhaps is best seen as a textual form of collective imagination for these same groups.

### 3. History and Literature, Fact and Fiction: Generic and Functionalist Approaches

The problem of history and literature has been a recurrent theme in scholarship, albeit in varying degrees and conceptualised in different manners. At times it has mainly appeared to be a question of genre; generic boundaries between these two poles and the overlap of such borders have been the focus of such discussions. In that vein scholars have identified the appearance of diverse literary tropes, rhetorical devices and epic formulae in historical discourses. Likewise, characters known from epic or legendary sources, whose historicity is at best dubious, were sometimes seen as historical personae by medieval readers and writers.

Concentrating rather on the functionality of the texts (the social function) and their perception by medieval audiences (reader response or reception), the arguments turn towards other questions, more concerned with the *why* and the *how* than with the *what*. What is the intention of a historical discourse, and by what means does the annalist, chronicler or historian propose to attain their goal? Similarly, what kind of function did medieval audiences expect a literary discourse to fulfill?

Well, to be frank, the easy answer is that each type of textual or orally performed discourse intended to entertain and to teach (*delectare et prodesse*), perhaps in equal measure. A history could not be stylistically inept, in that case the moral lessons would not be pleurably learned. Correspondingly, no one would dare listen to an amusing story that did not contain an ethical gem inside, however rough the surface. This binary model could be extended to a triangle, incorporating the values of example, historical knowledge and entertainment (cf. Mortensen, 1994). Many social functions, such as

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<sup>3</sup> The late Middle Ages marked the dominance of the European vernaculars as the language of history, to the detriment of Latin, which tells us that lay circles became the main audience for these types of works.



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edification, exemplarification, commemoration, and others, appeared as features of various texts irrespective of what genre they belonged to, so that this particular question does little to resolve the efforts of modern scholars to attempt a generic division (Fleischmann, 1983: 291).

Our discussion of the role and function of history and literature cannot ignore definitions offered of these genres or phenomena, in the Middle Ages as well as in modern and contemporary scholarship. As Else Mundal recently pointed out, discussions of medieval fictionality tend to be divided between those that seek to discover something similar to our modern conception of fiction in medieval texts, and those that attempt to identify a consciousness of fictionality in the texts themselves (Mundal, 2012: 167).

Isidore of Seville's oft-cited definition of *historia* reads: "*Historia est narratio gestae, per quam ea, quae in praeterito facta sunt, dinoscuntur*" (*Etym.*, I, xli.1), in translation "History is the narration of things done, through which those things that happened in the past are sorted out" (Poppe, 2007: 20). It treats history as a narrative textual genre, concerned with true events that actually happened ("*res verae quae factae sunt*", *Etym.*, I, xliv.5), being a written record of memory. He distinguished *historia* from the genres *argumentum* and *fabula*. Isidore realised that histories were often written with didactic purposes, in order that the past may have some value in the present. (Poppe, 2007: 19-20) Many medieval texts that we may not as modern readers define as history would most likely have been defined as such by their medieval authors. Such may be the case with a large part of the medieval Irish story cycles (Poppe, 2007: 26), but also the Icelandic sagas have been seen as textualised history. In the words of Margaret Clunies Ross:

"Meulengracht Sørensen characterises the saga in terms of its transformation of past events into fictive form, but in a fashion that proclaims both the narrative's truthfulness and its traditional base. [...] The] historical past, which was recognized as lost, came to be recreated as narrative and as literature. History became literature and literature was history. [...] As] Meulengracht Sørensen has rightly asserted, medieval Icelanders recreated the past as saga literature and *that literature became history for them*" (Clunies Ross, 1998: 49-50, my emphasis).

At least in some parts of medieval Europe it seems like the distinction between *historia* and other genres also entailed critical judgment. History was didactically exemplary, and therefore good and valuable. Perhaps fiction was

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not to the same degree. There are judgments passed on medieval texts by contemporary or near-contemporary readers based on how historically accurate they were deemed to be (Poppe, 2007: 24). Some earlier commentators have argued that for a medieval reader, “a story was but a story, it mattered not whether it was legend or true history” (Meyer, 1966: 97). This is almost certainly incorrect. Even though history as story may have become more important during the later Middle Ages, plausibility as a criterion for its worth did not diminish. We shall return to this question below in another section.

The value of history (as a source of morality and wisdom) is also attested to by William of Malmesbury, who wrote in the second book of his *Gesta Regum* that

“Ethics I explored in depth revering its high status as a subject inherently accessible to the student and able to form good character; in particular I studied History, which adds flavour to moral instruction by imparting a pleasurable knowledge of past events, spurring the reader by the accumulation of examples to follow the good and shun the bad” (Rener, 2007: 32).<sup>4</sup>

Jacques Le Goff pointed out: “A history is a narrative, which can be true or false, based on ‘historical reality’ or on pure imagination; it can be a ‘historical’ narrative or a fable” (Le Goff, 1992: 102). But should we really devote our studies to finding out what is fact and what is fiction (according to modern standards) in medieval texts? If we concern ourselves instead, as does Erich Poppe for instance (2007: 18), with medieval perceptions, then the historical veracity of an apparently literary text can become a serious and interesting object of study. Meanwhile, some texts, as medieval Irish literature makes clear, defy clear-cut distinctions, and have urged scholars to come up with new terms, bridging the gap between history and literature which to medieval readers did not appear in the same way as it does to modern critics; thus, the “dramatised or fictionalised history” of Irish literature concerning characters known from genealogies, coined by James Carney (2005: 479). Perhaps the binary distinction between history on the one hand and literature or fiction on the other is quite useless to us as historians or literary critics, since it is grounded in a division between two types which may never have existed in their pure or ideal forms. At least in the Middle Ages, literature was probably never entirely fictional, or supposed to be read or interpreted as

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<sup>4</sup> See also Rener, 2007: 34.



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something other than the truth (if we understand true to mean “of this world”, things that could conceivably happen).

Dennis Green described the dichotomy between true and untrue as foreign to the judgment of medieval fictionality, since in his opinion it occupied a middle-ground between the two (Green, 2002: 16-17). Suzanne Fleischmann previously argued that the division between history and literature (or historical and fictional narratives) was recognised by medieval authors and audiences, although it was cut along different lines from our own today (Fleischmann, 1983: 300). New perspectives that analyse this complex relationship between different literary modalities rather than try to classify them are much needed.

The modern understanding of the functions and *raison d'être* of history and literature respectively, and the clear-cut boundary between them in twentieth-century writing, is what has impeded understanding of the much more complex interrelationship between history and literature (which cannot be entirely distinguished one from the other) in the medieval period. The rise of consciousness of the narrative dimensions of contemporary historiography has perhaps contributed to the furthering of our understanding of medieval literature and history writing and allows us to ask new questions of the medieval textual evidence.

What, then, is constitutive of fiction? Discussions about fictionality and the Middle Ages have raged hotly for quite some time now. In 1985, Walter Haug located a “discovery of fictionality” to the latter half of the twelfth century at the hands of Chrétien de Troyes, but his revolutionary originality in this aspect has been questioned, by D. H. Green and others, who find similar notions among the medieval German romances, in the Latin literature of the earlier Middle Ages, and even in classical Antiquity.

Since the 1980s and into the current millennium, a standard account among literary historians, who were mostly interested in finding the beginnings of the modern novel, has had the following key features:

“[...] a passing but rather dismissive reference to fiction in antiquity; an insistence on defining fiction as written, not oral, and as the product of an author in contrast to the traditional storyteller; the importance of the matters of Rome and Brittany (and the role of Geoffrey of Monmouth); and, not least, the dominating figure of Chrétien de Troyes who in the 1160s and

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1170s created a whole new literary idiom to be imitated for centuries to come” (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 13).

Then, from the 1990s and onwards, a new paradigm, more theoretical and spurred by advances in a wider field of studies (such as literacy and reception studies), has emerged among medievalists; foregrounding “fictionality”. Scholars writing in the German language, such as Walter Haug and Fritz Peter Knapp, have particularly contributed to the new advances. Though no consensus was reached, some main problems and questions were identified, such as whether fictionality (in the German romances) should be defined through extratextual or intratextual features or a combination thereof, and whether a synchronisation of the theoretical Latin terminology of literature and the vernacular poetics should be attempted. Various scholars writing in English have lately broken new ground, Monika Otter, Robert Stein, and Laura Ashe among them, but most quintessential in this field is the contribution of Dennis H. Green. (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 13-15).

A problem is, of course, a great absence of testimony as to how readers actually perceived these texts. The work of scholars rests mostly upon meta-literary remarks made by the authors, and on intra-textual narrative devices. However, writers are also readers.

But the question of when one deems fictionality to have appeared hinges, again, on the definition of this phenomenon. A recurring metaphor that seems to capture much of what fictionality means to us as readers and writers is that of the *contract* between reader and writer. Perhaps most effectively put, the reader make-believes that the story is true even though s/he knows it is not. Also, one might express this notion by saying that while being factually untrue as relating to the outside world, a phrase in a fictional narrative may be true if judged as part of the narrative, if only intra-textual references be taken into account.

Green’s working definition was purely contractual:

“Fiction is a category of literary text which, although it may 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” (Green, 2002: 4).

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The most essential aspect of this definition highlights the complicity between author and audience to engage in this game of make-believe, the willingness to “adopt a fictive stance” (Green, 2002: 13). It had the advantage of being flexible, insofar as it allowed the same text to be interpreted as history or as fiction depending on the audience. Certain narratives invented to be trusted could then be identified as “fabricated,” although they were not fictional. This can also serve to make the question of the truth or falsehood of fiction irrelevant, since fiction should not be seen as lying if complicity is at hand (Green, 2002: 12). Furthermore, it incorporated the medieval conceptual division between *fabula*, *historia* and *argumentum* (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 15).

Green offered two explanations for a burst of fiction in the second half of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth: the extra-discursive circumstances in the form of a literate, aristocratic courtly milieu, the members of which could appropriate a different set of values than the clerical authors of previous centuries had upheld; and the intra-discursive aspect of narrative gaps within historical discourses, that could be filled with fictional material, the twelve years’ peace during King Arthur’s reign deriving from the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 16).

Lest we succumb to teleology and the idea of a linear process where fiction grew from such gaps to become a full-grown and autonomous literary mode (and thus replacing history writing),<sup>5</sup> that should be studied apart, we must bear in mind the closing words of Green’s seminal book:

“[...] fiction did not simply take over from history for a time. Instead, history remained a continuous feature of literary interest through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, giving rise, as we have seen, to fiction, but not vanishing before it in the timespan during which literary fiction flourished creatively in romance form. Fictional writing in this period cannot be regarded by itself alone, since it arose from an interplay with history. It lived side by side with historical writing, defining itself not by negating it or by leaving it behind, but by differentiating itself from it.” (Green, 2002: 201)

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<sup>5</sup> Bautista, 2004: 27 argues similarly, but referring to the medieval Iberian historiographical tradition.

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Another oft-cited definition concerns the autonomous nature of fiction, and the separation of author and narrator (also defined as the narrator's distance to the narrative), the appearance of which has also been identified with the works of Chrétien. But if we move beyond the search for beginnings, this separation should be able to provide further clues as to the modalities of narrative voice in medieval texts, irrespective of genre.

There is definitely a great difference between arguing, on the one hand, that medieval audiences perceived little distinction between history and literature because the generic boundaries were blurred to a high degree, and arguing, on the other hand, that we should not focus on the distinction as scholars and critics because all medieval textual production has *historicity*.

Paul Strohm made a great case for the latter view in his 1992 book *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*. His main foundational theoretical principle is that all texts are argumentative and interpretive in nature. They are bound up in a historical context since they are written at a specific point in time, and may even be created in reaction to certain historical event. Since all texts are interpretations, Strohm maintains that a common characteristic to the texts he studies is their fictionality. Bear in mind that he emphasises that this is not to be taken as “an embarrassment to a text's ultimate historicity” (Strohm, 1992: 4). Part of Strohm's argumentation leads us to the next thematic cluster: power and social *function*.

#### 4. Products of Power: Medieval Literature and its Social Logic

All medieval literature, be it historical or literary discourse, was bound up in relations of power and domination. Writing belonged in the upper stratum of society. We cannot conceive of a historiographical project unallied with spheres or centres of power and great resource, be they clerical or lay, royal or aristocratic in nature. Likewise, medieval literature was not everyman's leisure occupation. Books were extremely expensive, the production and copying of them required great financial assets.

Paul Strohm maintains that fictions, composed within history (that is, at a certain moment in time), though they can only rarely tell us with any credibility “what actually happened,” may offer vital evidence on other matters: “on contemporary perception, ideology, belief, and –above all– on the imaginative structures within which fourteenth-century participants acted and assumed that their actions would be understood” (Strohm, 1992: 4). Strohm

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underlines that “a text can be powerful without being true” (Strohm, 1992: 5), arguing that

“One reason past generations of academics maintained distinctions between ‘the literary,’ with its reliance on invention, and ‘the historical,’ with its adherence to fact, is the reassuring implication of such clearly bounded categories that fictional elements of a text can be segregated and controlled” (Strohm, 1992: 5).

Strohm declares the inextricable and inevitable intertwinement of truth and falsehoods (or fictions) in his sources, while still asserting their representativity within their genre (Strohm, 1992: 6).

Strohm’s perspective foregrounds the “environment” of the text, dependent upon other texts (taken in its larger meaning) and actions constituting its textual and social context in a diachronic and synchronic perspective, and comprised of a field of shared knowledge that assures the author of his or her intelligibility. To be able to be understood was a necessary prerequisite for the communicative and social act that writing meant. This environment should not be understood simply as another term for “context,” since Strohm is careful in pointing out that the text is not the centre of an ordered system at any point, rather one constituent part of an array of different factors, which allows the view of texts as subject to outside exploitation and contending interests (Strohm, 1992: 6-7).

Laura Ashe has studied fiction and history in England in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and wants to contrast her source material to the continental (French and German) case, as set out by D. H. Green and Gabrielle M. Spiegel. Whether we identify the development of a separate fictional narrative genre, the romance, as the rise of fiction or the fall of history, scholars seem to agree that medieval French romance can be studied separately, as literary fiction. Ashe argues that English romances of the late eleventh century must be read alongside historical works and chronicles of the same period, since they embody both the pattern of romance and the events of history (Ashe, 2007: 24). Thus, these texts share an ethos that cannot be delimited to literature or history, as “the triumphant inscription of cultural ideology. These insular narratives exercise (to different degrees) both the freedoms of fiction and the referentiality of history” (Ashe, 2007: 26). In treating various genres jointly, Ashe, similarly to Robert Stein, gainsays the supposed autonomy of fiction. Both of them are also prime examples of the

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turn towards the social, political, and cultural functions of narrative, their reception history and constitutive features, marking them as parts of a process of identity formation or creation of selfhood (Ashe, 2007: 209). Stein closes his book with the statement: “Representational practices, too, are real actors in the social world” (Stein, 2006: 210).

Ashe, then, where Spiegel stressed the political utility of medieval historiography (1975), emphasises the cultural utility of these texts, which do not create an ideology simply for a certain class, but for a country. “In so doing, they occupy a space between literature and history which is all their own” (Ashe, 2007: 26).

## 5. Books and Their Worlds, Mirrors and Their Distorted Reflections

Whether literature reflects reality is an oft-debated question. As stated in the call for papers for the current issue of *Roda da Fortuna*, the third generation of the *Annales* School, with Jacques Le Goff as one of the leading figures, promoted the use of literary sources in historical research, with the intention of stimulating research on the history of mentalities. However, Le Goff was aware of the distortive vision of society that literature represented. But perhaps we should ask ourselves if the same description is not accurate (or even equally so) when describing medieval historical discourse, despite its apparent truth-claims.

Still today, in contemporary academic discourse, the view of medieval literature as a reflection of society is preserved –though often with the addition of its performative nature, and thus the dialectical relationship between literature and society. It is widely accepted that texts are constitutive of, if not reality *per se*, then at least conceptions, attitudes, and ideological beliefs.

Another possible perspective, aligned with that of Paul Strohm, is that texts are interpretations of reality (this foregrounds the author, and even the reader, as historical actors) rather than reflections (an impersonal term). Surely, to me it stands clear that the best way to emphasise historical agency, human intervention, as a crucial part in the creation of literature –and at the same time display the nature of texts as constructions– is to get rid of the metaphor of the reflecting mirror (distorted or not), and keep to the description of all texts as *interpretations*.



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As much as our own readings of medieval texts are coloured by our concepts, medieval history writing was bound up in a medieval world-view that it was impossible for their historians to cast off. We should see this as an asset, a feature which can continue to engender fruitful analyses. While trying to keep in mind our own role as “intruding observers” (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 12), we should not forget to consider medieval authors’ similar role in recounting their past, which not only reveals how they interpreted history but what experience of the past (also a fabricated or imagined one) their audiences would have:

“The tension between referentiality and imagination is never ultimately released or resolved in discourses about the past. Even with different truth claims, both sides of the scale still share – as they did in the Middle Ages – the same task of shaping identities: by representing a certain past or representing a certain canon of texts, a certain language and linguistic register, identity markers are being made. All narratives under discussion here are moralizing and lead the audience to a contact – through language, names of people and places – with the local past” (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 22).

## 6. Where Is Further Work Needed?

One question remains foremost in my mind, which does not seem to have been answered sufficiently by previous research: how did medieval audiences react to *fictional* features or devices within a non-fictional discourse?

Since most of the work done so far on medieval fictionality has been aimed at finding the beginnings of the novel or of modern modes of fiction, it has been teleologically oriented. Even if we cannot completely distance ourselves from modern concepts (and this is arguably undesirable, because then what purpose would our research serve?), there is a problem involved in studying medieval fictionality in order to discover the origins of a modern mode of literature. This perspective might make us unnecessarily inattentive to other related aspects of fictionality that were present in medieval texts, but that are not central to modern fiction and thus not at the forefront of our attention. Seeking the beginnings of fictionality might allow us to look at not fully realised fictional modes that preceded full-fledged fiction, but when we reach the romances of Chrétien they blind us to other, co-existing models. It is indubitably the case, that fictionality remained a part of non-fictional discourse throughout the Middle Ages. This should garner more attention in future.

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If a medieval reader took a historical narrative to be essentially true, or at least plausible and trustworthy, how was a feature that (to us at least) is blatantly legendary or fictional in nature perceived? Were manipulations of history of this sort too subtle to be noticed as deviating from the main frame of the narrative, and should they thereby be read as propaganda or intentional distortion? Or, were they rather noted and appreciated as contributions to the entertainment value of the story, and should they therefore be read as acceptable divergences ascribable to poetic license? Medieval audiences were certainly not so naïve that they could not distinguish pure invention from referential history; but what then did they make of fiction *within* history?

For example, within a historical chronicle, what did the introduction of a fictive character or personage in an important role signify to a medieval audience? For instance, the magnate Joar Blå (not known with any certainty from documentary evidence and quite possibly a legendary figure) in the Old Swedish *Erikskrönikan* (c. 1320) appears as the main instigator of the election of King Valdemar, the first of the dynasty of the Folkungs in the thirteenth century. Was this seen as a manipulative device? Was it believed to be part of the *true* historical discourse or was it an agreed-upon fictional device that was true within the discourse but not factual with reference to historical reality?<sup>6</sup> How advanced can we assume medieval audiences for literature to have been?

Some work has been done on this particular topic, notably by Monika Otter on history writing in twelfth-century England (Otter, 1996), but it remains understudied. Otter's account, though insightful and fruitful, focuses mainly on the authorial intention and does not really delve into the imagined reception of these works, except to state that the readers' sense of referentiality would have been confused by the kind of episodes she studied (treasure hunts, quests to retrieve lost objects, descents into the underworld), which are then analysed principally in terms of authorial self-reflection; they serve, according to Otter, to highlight the textuality of the historical account and to act as metaphor for the historical investigation of the past.

What remains to be done for much of medieval narrative history is to examine how readers perceived fictionality in histories. Since we lack much information about reader response, this can mostly be investigated by way of how medieval writers (and translators) remarked on previous texts upon which they were building their own argument, or which they were contending.

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<sup>6</sup> On the external referentiality of history writing in contrast to the self-referentiality and intertextuality of fiction, see Green, 2002: 142.

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Recent studies of medieval historiography have sometimes tackled the theme, though not precisely in these terms, yet they deserve to be referenced.

In the critical study of medieval Castilian historiography, it has long since been noted that the, for its time, quite scientifically motivated and undertaken history writing begun under the aegis of the cultural projects of Alfonso X the Learned (r. 1252-84) soon after his death lapsed into other forms, more influenced by fictional sources, mainly epics. The post-Alfonsine chronicles, the *crónicas generales*, drew closely on Alfonso's unfinished *Estoria de España*, but elaborated their own versions of events, using different discursive strategies.

Aengus Ward's recent study of late medieval Iberian historiography, refers to the novelisation of this genre (and here he follows up on arguments by Manuel Hijano, 2006) –previously commented upon by, notably, Diego Catalán (1969) and Leonardo Funes (2001)– in relation to the question of reception. The perspective of Catalán focused on the lessening of the scientific rigour of the historians in the post-Alfonsine period, at the dawn of the fourteenth century, when the writing of history was no longer under the patronage and control of Alfonso X, which allowed new forms of history writing to flourish, including rhetorical, novelistic, and anecdotal discourse within historiography (Catalán, 1969: 423-424).

Hijano is probably correct in assuming that this did not imply a new or much changed audience for these types of work –which continued to be the royal and high noble courts or households– but rather that the enunciative focus of the histories, their perspective or point-of-view, became more ideologically and aesthetically attuned to its audience. Instead of representing history as a moral or ethical lesson about the past that the king offered his subjects, history became the discursive setting for stories about the deeds of epic heroes, as examples of aristocratic conduct, but also as sources of pleasure for the readers (Hijano, 2006: 141). Ward emphasises this last factor, the growing interest in history as narrative or story, as a spur for novelisation (Ward, 2011: 101), which among other things affects the discursive techniques used by the chroniclers. The frequent use of direct speech in chronicle discourse, according to Ward,

“may also point to the dissolution of the genre of chronicle as it had been up to that point, for the performative aspect of direct speech may hint at the privileging of history as story and therefore entertainment over history as record” (Ward, 2011: 181-182)

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Francisco Bautista, in his work on the *Crónica carolingia* (previously *Crónica fragmentaria*), a post-Alfonsine chronicle incorporating legendary and romance material such as the story of Floire and Blanchefleur, has argued for a dual historic-literary perspective that takes into account the co-existence of history and fiction in certain texts. There were mutual benefits in the legitimation of fictional discourse through its historical context and the aesthetical heightening of the historical narrative through fictional devices. Thus, a single work might not have a unique (and intended) reception, but could be used for various purposes and have various functions (Bautista, 2004: 28-30).

Chris-Given Wilson proposed that authenticity or plausibility rather than truth should be seen as a main point of medieval audiences' appreciation of the accuracy of a work of history. Earlier, a similar idea had been expressed by Leonardo Funes:

“[H]istorical truth did not imply authenticity of events [...] the historical was connected to consensus, to the familiar, to the widely accepted tradition and to the collective conviction; all of which made the limits between history and fiction notably dynamic” (Funes, 1997: 27, my translation).

The main point is that medieval historians did not strive towards, nor need to, tell the truth in every instance. So long as the narrative was plausible, the audience would accept it. History was what was commonly held to be true (Fleischmann, 1983: 305). Suzanne Fleischmann argued for the importance of the perspective of reception in that legendary material could be incorporated into historical discourse by being “*received as history*” (Fleischmann, 1983: 303). The important aspect is here how both authors and audience perceived and used the material. In the light of these findings, Ward argues that it would be invalid “to consider the modern limits between truth and fiction as operable categories in the analysis of medieval chronicles” (Ward, 2011: 192). He continues:

“The category of novelisation would have made no sense to the chroniclers concerned. They were engaged in a process of writing history as the authentic and plausible. [...] Chronicle discourse therefore became the juxtapositioning of the commonly-known and the written (and therefore authoritative) precedent [...] That this process would lead into a conceptual division between history and fiction was neither inevitable nor, in the context of the fourteenth century, especially relevant” (Ward, 2011: 193).

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I suppose this is what this article has been striving towards, an appeal, a suggestion, or a request, to reconsider the operative categories in analysis with reference to medieval literature and history. We must abandon the mirror metaphor and its *reflections* and observe medieval texts, historiographical as well as literary in nature, as *interpretations*. These interpretive texts are then not to be divided into fact and fiction, whereby historically accurate details in literature or fictional aspects of history writing will be seen as divergent, irregular, or contradictory. Rather, we need to accept that medieval audiences had perspectives highly different to that of modern readers, and continue to explore in what ways novelistic or literary expressions within history writing enriched the narrative and affected the reception of history, and vice versa, during the Middle Ages.

In doing so, we must not forget the comparative and the trans-national perspectives. The *translatio* of medieval fictionality deserves further study, as it was often left at the margins of the national literary histories that dominated the field until quite recently (Agapitos & Mortensen, 2012: 6). If, for instance, a French chivalric romance was translated into Old Swedish by way of not only the original but also via an Old Norse *riddarasaga*,<sup>7</sup> did two different modes of fictionality meet and co-mingle? Was one of them prioritised, and if so for what reasons? Or were they essentially one and the same? Such questions will arise in a possible combination of studies of medieval fictionality with Translation studies that has also been gaining headway within medievalism of late.

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<sup>7</sup> As was most likely the case with Chretien's *Yvain: Le Chevalier au lion*, which was translated into Old Norse as *Ivens saga* and into Old Swedish as *Herr Ivan*. See Lodén 2012.

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