Dissertation #14

Title: **Über die Einleitungen im altfranzösischen Kunstepos** (On the Introductions in Old French Epic Poetry)

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Executive Summary: This work belongs to the discipline of Romance philology. Its author - a graduate of the Orthodox Berlin Rabbinical Seminary - deals with the introductions to French 11-14th century chivalric romances, attempting to reconstruct their creators' worldview manifesting itself in these works. This is based on a close reading of the primary sources in question (which are extensively summarized and/or quoted in the text of the dissertation). In addition the author makes use of then-contemporary scholarship, especially in the digressive remarks in the endnotes to the PhD thesis. In their epic romances - so the author's main thesis - high medieval courtly writers exhibit an intermediate poetic individualism and sense of authorship, halfway between the collectivism of the Early Middle Ages and the "subjectivism of the Modern Era."

Preface (p. i)

In the preface, the author sets out his aim of providing evidence for how the individual personality of the poet broke through and came to the fore in the introductions to works of Old French artistic (i.e. refined) epic poetry, referring to what is today usually called the chivalric romance, a genre which followed the earlier

Introduction (pp. 1 - 5)

This introduction serves to lay out the author's main thesis that the introductions to French medieval epic poems already evince their authors' poetic individuality and sense of authorship which is, however, also still limited by a more collectivist outlook, putting them halfway between the "objectivism of the Early Middle Ages and the subjectivism of the Modern Era."

Driving upon both French and German Romance philology scholarship and backing up his claims with references to primary sources in the somewhat digressive endnotes, the author contrasts the "artistic epic" with earlier heroic epic poetry of the Early Middle that either did not have any introductory part, but started *in medias res* without any hints as to the work's author or to its subject matter, or that, later on, did contain an introduction in which the subsequent story was usually presented as the fruit of a faithful retelling of matter from earlier manuscripts (often said to have been found in the St. Denis abbey). Only rarely were their writers' names even mentioned in these works.

Later medieval courtly romances, however, provide a different picture: here, in the introductions, their creators present themselves and, often, give biographical details, discuss the work and even, sometimes, include reflections on the nature and task of poetry. On the other hand, this is very often accompanied by portraying the poem as being based upon an earlier source, occasionally the authors even depict themselves as mere translators of works composed in other languages.

Part A: The Poet's Attitude to the Public (pp. 5 - 16)

Section 1 (pp. 5 - 7): Chivalric romances often started with an introductory sentence, asking the reader for attention, sometimes also promising some kind of benefit to the audience. The author illustrates this by quoting extensively from those epic poems. For example *Floire et Blancheflor* starts with "*Se me conte votes entendre / Moult i porres d'amors aprendre" (*If it pleases you to listen to my tale / you will learn a lot about love…", translation mine).

Section 2 (pp. 7 - 9): While the first introductory sentence had still equivalents in the earlier heroic epic poetry of itinerant musicians, so the author, courtly romances distinguished themselves from their predecessors by frequently exhibiting a more elitist attitude in subsequent passages that explicitly proclaimed that not everyone but only those with a refined taste were worthy of the poem, or in which they attacked parts of the audience or their less competent fellow writers. Again, many examples from primary sources are quoted in the original Old French.

Section 3 (pp. 9 - 16): Highly characteristic of courtly epic poems is a more extensive form of criticism voiced in their introductions, directed against society as a whole. This, according to the author, testified to their creators' self-image as "teachers and educators of humanity". Often, the past is glorified and the sins of the present world like greed, falsehood or envy and their deleterious effects on poetry or on real romantic love are decried. In addition, some writers of medieval romances combined those laments with exhortations to a virtuous life, to respect for justice and knowledge rather than for material goods. This is exemplified by many quotations and a plethora of detailed content summaries of the introductions to various medieval romances. For instance, the author mentions Chretien de Troyes's *Yvain* thus:

> *"The master of the courtly romance bitterly bemoans the decline of [King Arthur's] chivalric order [dedicated to the worship] of Amor [i.e. love]. With much chagrin, he turns away from the present in order to choose a subject matter from the past, because he, the courtly poet thinks:*
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> *…encor vaut miauz, ce m'est avis / uns courtois mors qu'uns vilains vis (v. 24 - 32) (For, I take it, a courteous man, though dead, is worth more than a living knave, translation by William Kibler.)"*

Part B: The Poet's Attitude Towards his Craft (pp. 16 - 42)

Section 4 (pp. 16 - 20): Introductions to medieval romances very often contain statements by their creators as to their motivation to write those epic poems. Those motives were quite different, as the author notes (quoting examples for each instance): the wish to ameliorate a broken society, the desire to give delight to their audience, opposition to idleness, the hope to acquire immortality through their works, interest in the subject matter of the poem, or in some cases, simply the need to carry out a patron's commission.

Section 5 (pp. 20 - 28): It is also common for romance epics to divulge details about their writers' biography. While some works include only information on the name of their maker, others also mention their geographical origin, the social class or estate which they belong to, their educational background, earlier literary works or touch upon the relationship with their patron.

This section which also serves as an overview of all the artistic romances the author made use of as primary sources in this dissertation. It is subdivided in two parts: in its first part (pp. 20 - 25), the author simply lists all examined poems categorizing them by whether their creator's name is mentioned at the beginning of the work (27 works, subsection I), at the end of it (11 works, subsection II), or not mentioned at all (34 works, subsection III). This is accompanied by footnotes in which additional information on those poets, often conjectures from secondary literature, is included. Then, in this section's second part, a selection of quotes from and references to those poems is given testifying to the various categories of biographical information on their writers revealed in medieval romances. With regard to the social background, for example, the *Roman de Fergus* whose creator self-identified as a cleric in his own poem is brought up here by the author.

Section 6 (pp. 28 - 33): In this section, the author lays out, backed up by quotations, how the introductions to courtly romances at times contain remarks on poetry's tasks, often combined with invectives against other poets which are accused of not being equal to those tasks. As to the writers' assessment of their own skills, this is sometimes characterized by modesty (occasionally, accompanied

by excuses for writing a debut work), sometimes by pride which could express itself even in the hope to reach immortality through their own romances.

Section 7 (pp. 33 - 40): A characteristic feature of chivalric epics, taken over from the earlier *chansons de geste*, is the claim that the story of the work in question was taken from an older template. According to the author, those claims are only very rarely to be trusted. Similarly, the poets' assertions that it was their patrons who drew attention to the subject matter in question, must be seen as flattery. As to the concrete source for their romances, so the author, their writers mentioned either older oral folktales, books, an oral or written report. Sometimes there was a vague reference to a "story" or a manuscript. At times, the language of the alleged original source is evoked. Only rarely is a detailed account of the alleged source text and its fate given by the writers of chivalric romances given. As usual, this overview is followed by a set of quotations or summaries, in this case this part is a particularly lengthy one, supplying many examples of what was said in the introductions to courtly romances about where their own subject matter was allegedly taken from.

Section 8 (pp. 40 - 42): Now and then - so the author claims providing again several examples - the old age or the truthfulness of the source and of the translator / poet was also stressed in those introductions.

Part C: The Romance Poets' Attitude to Their Fellow Poets (pp. 42 - 44)

Section 9 (pp. 42 - 44): Even though romance, so the author, poets at times heaped praise upon some of their confreres (and then only upon already deceased ones), much more frequently did they disparage their fellow poets, criticizing their untruthfulness or ineptitude or simply attacking them without stating a reason. One of the examples produced by the author to shed light unto the phenomenon are the broadsides of Chretien de Troyes in his *Erec et Enide* issued against his contemporary rhymesters using to "mutilate and to corrupt it in front of kings and counts."

Part D: The Poet's Attitude to G'd (pp. 44 - 49)

Section 10 (pp. 44 - 49): G'd is oftentimes mentioned, too, in the introductions to medieval courtly epics. Partly in order to thank for the blessings conferred upon them, partly in order to ask for favors for the benefit of oneself, of other contemporaries or of those already dead. The author does not just provide, as usual, examples for those invocations, but gives also an - explicitly incomprehensive - overview of Biblical passages quoted or referenced in the French romances, both from the Old and the New Testament (terms used by the author). However, in discussing the reference to the parable of the Mote and the Beam in *Matthew* 7, 3 -5 in the rather less-known late 13th century epic poem *Beaudous* by Robert de Blois, the author also points out - citing Leopold Zunz's treatment of the matter - that this saying had its origin in a dictum by Rabbi Tarfon reported in the Talmud.

Part E: Courtly Romances without Introduction (pp. 49 - 50)

Section 11 (pp. 49 - 50): In this last section, the author touches upon those chivalric epics that have either only a very negligible introduction consisting of a couple of words or no introduction at all. Often this was not the intention of those works' original creators who also wrote prologues, but the consequence of a subsequent loss of parts of the manuscript (the author, i.a., provides the example of Thomas of Britain's *Tristan* of which only fragments have survived).