

The Genre of Gautier d'Arras's *Eracle*

A Twelfth-century French 'History'
of a Byzantine Emperor

Karen Pratt,
King's College London

Gautier d'Arras's *Eracle* is a twelfth-century French narrative in octosyllabic rhyming couplets on the life of the seventh-century Byzantine Emperor Héraclius. Although its central section relating an adulterous love affair resembles courtly romance, its first part is more reminiscent of hagiography and folk-tale, while the final section has much in common with a crusading epic. Modern critics normally categorise it as a Graeco-Byzantine romance, treating it as rather anomalous when they compare its structure with the more classical biographical romances of Chrétien de Troyes, especially *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain*.¹ However, the latter works may be less representative of twelfth-century narrative aesthetics than the more baroque approach to narration we find in Gautier's first romance. Treating tangentially the issue of whether or not romance was perceived by twelfth-century French writers as a separate discrete genre with specific characteristics, this essay will focus mainly on *Eracle* as an example of medieval historiography. Through an analysis of its generic markers, historical diction, treatment of time and place and manipulation of source material, we shall consider the extent to which Gautier was writing history, and what his concept of it might have been. I hope that this is an appropriate subject for a paper in honour of Professor Peter Noble, given his interest in Byzantium and in history writing in medieval France.²

Little is known about Gautier d'Arras apart from the information contained in his two extant romances, *Eracle* and *Ille et Galeron*, the latter based on Breton material and probably an adaptation of Marie de France's *Eliduc*. In *Eracle*, Gautier names Thibaut V of Blois, Marie de Champagne, the wife of Henri le Libéral, and Baudouin V of Hainault as his patrons, and in his second work, *Ille et Galeron*, he adds to the list Beatrice of Burgundy, Empress of Rome. These patrons

locate Gautier historically as a near contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes and geographically as moving in similar circles: the extreme *termini* for the dating of Gautier's *œuvre* are 1159–84, while Henri le Libéral's court at Provins in Champagne offers a location where the poet could have made contact with all of his patrons, especially during the marriage negotiations of the late 1170s. A cleric working in court circles, Gautier seems to have been familiar with the whole range of Old French literature: the *chanson de geste*, hagiography, courtly lyric and the *romans antiques*. His knowledge of Latin and the Bible is also evident from his extant works. Despite his relative neglect by modern scholars, Gautier was quite famous in the Middle Ages, as his inclusion in a list of good *menestrels* in a thirteenth-century *Miracle de la Vierge* testifies. Here 'Gautiers d'Arras qui fist d'Eracle' appears in celebrated literary company with Guiot (de Provins?), Chrétien (de Troyes), La Chèvre and Benoît de Sainte-Maure, in other words with composers of lyric poetry, romance and history. Moreover, *Eracle*, like several of Chrétien's romances, was paid the honour of being adapted into Middle High German shortly after its composition. As we shall see, it is instructive to compare Gautier's approach to his material with that of his adapter Meister Otte, a thirteenth-century German cleric whose concern for historical accuracy led him to include some of the shadier material about Heraclius's life absent from his French source.³

Gautier's first romance *Eracle* comprises three fairly distinct parts, each of which seems to have its own dominant generic characteristic, although closer analysis shows that the poet employs other modes and registers within each section too.⁴ Its eclecticism at the level of content makes it difficult to identify a strongly unifying thread running throughout the whole work, although the biography of the Emperor Heraclius confers a certain unity on the material. In addition, the themes of faith and doubt, and appearances and reality also provide leitmotifs which help to link the apparently disparate elements. It is striking also that in all three parts there is subject-matter of Byzantine origin, not just in the later historical section, but also when Gautier is fictionalizing the early life of his Christian hero. Since no one source has been found for the French text, it seems likely that the poet from Arras was responsible for producing this multifaceted plot, a summary of which follows.

After a dedicatory prologue, centring on the secular concerns of a court poet dependent on patronage, the *enfances* of *Eracle* are

related: his miraculous conception by pious parents in Rome, his father's death and his mother's gifts to the poor, culminating in the sale of Eracle to acquire more funds for alms-giving. Biblical and hagiographical parallels are obvious, and to these are added the oriental folk-tale motif of the boy with three gifts. However, Eracle's knowledge of stones, horses and women is not magic, but God-given, and when he is put to the test by the Roman Emperor, Laïs, it is faith in God's elect that is at stake. Eracle's choice of an unremarkable stone with special powers enables him to survive trials (one might say ordeals) by water, fire and the sword; an equally unremarkable colt selected by the slave boy manages to beat three of the best horses in the empire in a relay race, although as Eracle had predicted its precocious efforts prove fatal. Eracle's third gift, his knowledge of women, enables him to reject all the candidates at a bride show and to choose a pious orphan to be Laïs's wife. However, having fallen madly in love with her, the emperor ignores Eracle's advice not to lock up his wife while he is away on campaign, and this leads to disaster. The empress Athanaïs (whose internment may reflect that of Eleanor of Aquitaine by Henry II) is released temporarily from the tower where she is being guarded to attend the annual Roman games, at which she falls in love with the athletic young Paridés. In a *fabliau*-style interlude an old woman acting as *entremetteuse* arranges for the inevitable adultery to take place. The clairvoyant Eracle soon informs the emperor of the event. At the lovers' trial, he manages to persuade Laïs that conjugal jealousy was largely responsible for the adultery, so the emperor divorces his wife and allows the lovers to marry.⁵ The courtly romance register that dominates part 2 of the work then gives way to epic discourse in section 3. Here the position of emperor of Constantinople suddenly becomes vacant and Eracle beats the one other candidate, an African, to become Phocas's successor. The *puer senex* turned knight now metamorphoses into a precursor of Charlemagne, becoming the hero of a crusading epic in the final part of the work.

This begins with an analeptic account of the Invention of the Holy Cross by St Helena and is based on the legend of Judas Cyriacus. Centuries later, Eracle sets out to win back the Cross, which has been stolen by Persians, who are now persecuting the Christians. Warned by an angel of the pagan threat, the Christian emperor defeats in single combat Chosroes, the son of the pagan king. Eracle then delivers the Holy Cross from the infidel by killing the self-styled god

Chosroes the Elder as he sits in his extravagant temple. However, the proud manner in which the emperor rides to Jerusalem with the holy relic contrasts unfavourably with Christ's humility on Palm Sunday, so God teaches him a lesson by closing the city walls before him. Despite this one lapse, Eracle ends his days a good Christian and a statue is erected in his honour in Constantinople.

In order to understand how Gautier might have viewed his work, which was based on such mixed subject-matter, it is useful to look at the terms he uses to refer to *Eracle*. In the three extant manuscripts there are two occurrences of the word 'roman', both in the prologue: 'Assés vous dirai el romans' (95) and 'Si com m'orés el romans dire' (102).⁶ Significantly, the variant readings for these lines suggest some scribal confusion over whether 'roman' is being used generically or whether Gautier is implying that his work is a vernacular translation of his main Latin source. Even if the former is the case, it is quite likely that the term 'roman' simply designates *Eracle* as a vernacular verse narrative, differentiating it from the sung genres of lyric or even the *chanson de geste*. This view is confirmed by the fact that elsewhere *Eracle* is called a *traitié* (3) (treatise), but most frequently the author calls it an *oeuvre* (86, 114, 652I, 6525), a more general term connoting craftsmanship, but also good works, thus suggesting that both Gautier d'Arras and his illustrious protagonist Eracle have dedicated their efforts to serving God. Moreover, the word *contes* (2746), at the beginning of the courtly interlude, marks new subject-matter; it is unlikely to be a synonym for romance as we know it. No generic terms are to be found in the scribal incipits and explicits either – the work is simply *about* Eracle. The manuscript context of the narrative may, however, yield a few generic clues. In manuscript A, *Eracle* is accompanied by religious and/or historical works, bestiaries and scientific treatises; in B it is copied with secular romances, *contes*, a saint's life, and some religious and historical texts; and in T, it is in the company of romances, including Chrétien's *Cligés*.⁷ The evidence for generic classification by the author, scribes, commissioners or compilers of manuscripts is therefore inconclusive, especially as some of the texts found with *Eracle* are equally difficult to categorise. However, the work does seem to have been received by some as religious history, and its Byzantine connections no doubt influenced the two manuscript compilers (A and T) who included it with Chrétien's Graeco-Byzantine *Cligés*. For our purposes it is worth pointing out also that in manuscript B, *Eracle* has been inserted into

a chronicle on the town of Tournai, although this may be because the author came from that region of France, rather than because the copyist considered *Eracle* to be a historical narrative.

In considering whether *Eracle* may have been perceived as a work of history by Gautier's contemporaries, it is important to ascertain what history writing was to a twelfth-century French audience. It seems that medieval writers relied on the distinction made by Cicero, and taken up by Isidore of Seville, whereby *fabulae* narrated events that neither happened nor could have, *historiae* related true events that actually happened and *argumenta* told of events that might have happened, but in fact they did not.⁸ History writing was further divided into the sub-genres of *historia*, *chronica* and *annales*. However, there is no real evidence for the existence of a separate genre of vernacular historiography in this period, and indeed many of the works we now classify as *chansons de geste* and romances dealt with the past.⁹ In fact, *Eracle* shows some affinity with what one might call 'romanced histories' such as the *Brut*, *Rou*, *Enéas*, *Thèbes* and *Troie*, whose style and register display a mixture of features which modern scholars associate on the one hand with courtly romance writing and on the other with medieval historiography.

The features which have been identified as characteristic of medieval historical diction are veracity claims, the invocation of written sources or eye-witness accounts to confer authority, and a high degree of geographical and chronological precision.¹⁰ These features are all present in *Eracle*, especially in the section relating Heraclius's mature exploits. For example, Gautier employs an explicit truth claim, accompanied by a source reference, to support the miracle of the closing of the walls of Jerusalem to block *Eracle*'s way. Here he calls on strong authority, both clerical and written, to defend his account, going so far as to imply that he knows even better than his sources do what Heraclius's reaction was:

Signor, ce nen est mie fable,¹¹
 Ançois est cose veritable;
 N'a home en tout le mont si baut
 Qui l'oseroit si metre en haut
 Se il de verté nel savoit,
 Et il des clers tesmoig n'avoit.

Eracles a grignor vergoigne
 Que li livres nes ne tesmoigne, (6173–80)

My lords, this is no fiction, but the truth. There is no one in the whole world so bold that he would dare to spread this story unless he knew it to be true and had it on clerical authority. Eracle was more ashamed than even the book relates...

Yet in other, more banal, contexts Gautier's assertions of veracity mean little more than the phrase 'to tell the truth'; it is in this conventional way that he vouches for the emperor's love for our hero, 'Por voir os dire et aficier' (2917); for the ideal behaviour of Athanaïs as empress, 'Ce vous voel je por voir plevir' (2932); and for the commonplace idea that only lovers can appreciate what those in love experience, 'al bien voir dit' (3827). Thus his use of truth formulae does not lead us to conclude that Gautier was intent on making his audience believe that the whole of *Eracle* was based on real events, which he could prove actually happened, in other words *historia*.

Further allusions to written sources are found mostly in Part 3 of *Eracle*, which begins with the phrase: 'Signor, nos lisons en latin' (5119) to introduce Gautier's account of the Invention of the Holy Cross, followed a few lines later by a veracity claim: 'Li ensigna, ce est la voire./Trois crois i ot, ce dist l'estoire' (*He led her to it, and that is a fact./ According to my source, there were three crosses; 5125–6*). The term *estoire* alludes to an authoritative Latin source here and similarly in Gautier's description of the golden gate: 'Et cil qui lisent les estoires/ L'ont apielee Portes Oires.' (6089–90). (*Those who read the sources have called it the Golden Gate*). Written authority is likewise mentioned for his account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: the book which he claims to have read is Matthew's Gospel 21: 9:

Et plus encor, car je le vi
 En un livre dont me souvient,
 Beneois soit icil qui vient
 El non de Diu, Nostre Signor! (6100–03)

*And that was not all, for I can remember seeing written in a book:
 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of our Lord God'.*

Reading and memory are again combined in a further written source reference, invoked to support his account of the establishment of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross:

La fu li feste adont trovee
 Qui en septembre est celebree.
 Je l'ai leü, si m'en ramembre, (6433–35)

*Thus the feast day we celebrate in September was instituted.
 I remember reading somewhere that ...*

So, in the doctrinally significant or theological parts of his narrative Gautier uses his strongest form of authority, that of written sources. Elsewhere, though, while showing some desire to establish historical authenticity, he uses weaker authorities. For example, collective memory is called upon to prove the existence of the horse fair at which Eracle demonstrates his equine knowledge:

A une liue defors Rome
 Amaintent lor cevax maint home;
 Crie e i fu illuec le foire,
 Encor l'ont maint home en memoire. (1279–82)

*Crowds of people brought their horses to a spot a league outside Rome.
 There the horse fair, which many people can still remember, was held.*

Strangely (and perhaps for metrical reasons) Gautier invokes hearsay over the naming of Eracle: 'Puis fu nonmés el baptestire/ Eracles, ensi l'oï dire.' (*Then later at his baptism he was called Eracle, or so I heard tell; 227–28*), when he could no doubt have referred in good conscience to a written source for this fact. His support for his description of the marvellous heaven with its meteorological wonders built by the pagan king is rather vague: he simply says that he finds these details:

Que par engien, si con je truis,
 Faisoit plovoir par un pertruis
 Qu'il ot fait faire el ciel dessus; (5233–35)

For, according to my sources, [literally, as I find it] he had devised a mechanism for making rain fall through an opening made at the top of the heaven.

This rather vague expression 'si con je truis' is employed again to vouch for his idealising description of the empress:

Mais de femes esce la flors,
Et se n'i ot si bone puis
Con ceste fu, si con je truis; (5082–84)

Yet she was the flower of womankind, and since then there has never been a woman as excellent as she was, as far as I can tell.

And finally he backs up his comments on slanderers with the phrase 'ce truis lisant' (*as I find in my reading; 1769*). From this scanty evidence, we can ascertain no serious attempt to convince his audience of the historical veracity of all the events narrated, with the exception of those episodes which locate Heraclius's life firmly in the context of Sacred History.

Interestingly, the many miraculous events of Eracle's youth are accompanied by rather conventional, non-committal phrases, perhaps betraying the fact that Gautier does not have an authoritative source for these. The expression 'ce m'est vis' – *it seems to me* – is scattered throughout this section: 140–01, 936, 967, 1290, 2592, 2847–8 ('ce m'est avis'), along with 'al mien cuidier' (*in my view; 1642*) used when describing the disposition of the spectators at the horse race.

While the author may not be too concerned to back up his biographical *enfances* with named authorities, he is keen to give the impression that he is in control of his narrative, deciding when to tell which parts of the story.¹² The two references to his subject-matter (*matere*) are found in this context, although interestingly in both cases the term refers more to his conception of the material, his *conjointure* as Douglas Kelly might term it,¹³ rather than to the raw subject-matter offered by his sources. Nevertheless, as the following quotation shows, his preference is for the chronological order associated with history, rather than interlacing various narrative strands, a technique which becomes more common in romance:

Ne voel pas ci entrelacier
L'ahan qu'il ot au porcacier,
Qu'ensi ne vait pas le matyre;
Ains dirai l'uevre tote entire
De nostre empereor Laïs

Et de se feme Atanaïs,
 Et de l'honor vous dirai puis
 Qu'Eracles ot, et se jou puis,
 Après dirai de cele crois... (2903–11)

I do not wish to tell the story here of his strenuous efforts to win it back, for I shall be ordering my material differently; I prefer first to relate in full the story of our emperor Laïs and his wife Athanaïs, and then I shall tell you about the honour won by Eracle, and, if I can, I shall then talk about the Cross ...

He is not concerned to tell the full story of his protagonists' lives, preferring to use only those events which fit his purpose:

Il n'afiert pas a ma matere
 Que je plus die de Laïs,
 De Pariden, d'Athanaïs;
 Iceus vos lairons ore em pais,
 Si vos dirons d'Eracle humais. (5088–92)¹⁴

It is not relevant to my subject for me to say any more about Laïs, Paridés and Athanaïs; we shall now leave them in peace and we shall tell you about Eracle from now on.

Gautier's self-presentation as an all-controlling author is accompanied by a narrator whose omniscience is reminiscent of that of the historian, who, of course, knows what has happened in the past. There are many prophetic remarks to reassure the audience that God's elect will triumph in the end, and to encourage them to share the Christian faith and hope possessed by the idealised protagonist.¹⁵ Even the outcome of the adulterous episode is predicted in advance, no doubt as further proof of Eracle's perspicacity where the behaviour of women is concerned:

Li rois ert matés par se fierge,
 Mais ce n'ert mie par l'aufin:
 Par autrë ert li jus a fin. (4388–90)

The king was going to be check-mated by his queen, but not by a move involving the bishop – another piece would finish off the game.

Another strategy Gautier shares with the historian is his emphasis on the specificity of the past, and his desire to explain to his audience historical events or ancient customs. Thus the Roman games are introduced by an *audite* formula to attract his audience's attention so that they can receive important information about a custom which no longer obtains. We note, however, his use of general knowledge as an authority rather than a written source:

Signor, oés: on vos devise
 Qu'en Rome ot jadis mainte assise
 Qui puis est tornee a noient;
 Usages cange molt sovent.
 Encor le sevent bien maint home
 C'une feste ot jadis en Rome,
 Dont li Romain grant plait tenoient; (3367–73)

Listen, my lords, we are told that in times gone by there was many a practice which has since fallen into disuse – traditions change very frequently. It is still common knowledge amongst many people that there used to be a festival held in Rome which the Romans made much of ...)

Finally, the custom of selling children is also presented as a historical phenomenon, now obsolete: 'Coustume estoit en icel tens/ Qui enfant avoit, sel vendist' (*it was the custom in those days for anyone who had a child to sell it*; 374–75).

Although medieval writers, when dealing with the past, tended to transpose it into a contemporary context, there is some attempt on Gautier's part at historical accuracy when he calls Eracle's father a senator (115), although he then anachronistically fills the emperor's court in Rome with knights, and Eracle, along with thirty men, is dubbed according to medieval practice (2891–95). This syncretism is not unusual in twelfth-century history writing, and does not in itself indicate that Gautier was composing fiction rather than history. Yet the following discussion of Gautier's treatment of time and place again reveals a combination of features associated both with fictional and with historical writing in the Middle Ages.

Indications of time in *Eracle* are both precise and vague, objective and symbolic or affective.¹⁶ The temporal frame for the whole text is the life of Heraclius; unlike the practice in chronicles there are

no references to other historical events (apart from the invention of the Holy Cross) which might contextualise the hero's biography and impose an external chronology on it.¹⁷ Some episodes, such as the arrangements for the various markets, the testing of Eracle, Athanaïs's marriage and her love affair, are presented plausibly, with the time-scale being well-defined through the inclusion of temporal markers. On the other hand, the reference to seven years during which the hero's parents pray for his conception and to the seven years during which Athanaïs behaves as an ideal empress suggests that Gautier is also employing number symbolism, seven being both a perfect number, and also one which can often designate an unspecified, but considerable length of time. References to the seasons, especially summer, in relation to the bride show (1973) and the meeting of Paridés and Athanaïs just before the feast of St John (4218) are affective, evoking the emotion of love. Moreover, although Gautier realistically tells us that the rebel city which Laïs sets out to quell takes him a month to reach (3184), he does not indicate how long it takes the emperor to return. Instead, he increases the dramatic impact of the empress's adultery by having Laïs leave for home as soon as his adviser predicts her 'folie' (4725), but making it clear through temporal markers that the emperor is just too late, returning to Rome the day after Eracle announces that the affair has been consummated (4740, 4749–50).

Geography too can be objective, contributing to the verisimilitude of Gautier's writing, but can also be subjective or affective, increasing its affinity with courtly romance. While the location of the rebel city is left rather vague, the fact that it is a long way away has an emotional impact on the emperor's decision to lock up his wife, and in this way geography is used affectively (2969–82). Gautier does, however, include some more precise geographical locations for the campaign against the pagans, referring to the Danube, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Persia, and thereby producing an *effet du réel* within his text. He also adds to his main source the detail that Eracle entered Jerusalem by the 'Portes Oires' (6090), a reference to the golden gate built by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century which was always walled up, except for twice a year on Palm Sunday and the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Earlier, the many references to the topography of Rome also include the church of St Peter's (2799), dedicated to a saint invoked at one point by the seneschal (1383), a detail which the author may have felt added local colour.

Less historically accurate, though, is the speech by Chosroes the Elder in which he encourages his son to pursue Eracle through the St Bernard Pass and into Normandy, France and Flanders: 'Pren le païs, passe Mongeu/Et Normendie et France et Flandre' (5310–11). Here Gautier seems to have forgotten that his subject is a Byzantine emperor, not the King of France, or one of the poet's noble patrons.

In a similarly cavalier attitude towards historical accuracy, Gautier reflects the political situation in the twelfth century more closely than that in the seventh by first locating Eracle in a Rome ruled by the emperor Laïs, then moving him to Constantinople, to replace Phocas. He thus gives the impression that the empire at the time of Heraclius was divided and had two emperors, one in Rome and another in Constantinople.

Thus, while Gautier deserves his reputation as a realistic writer,¹⁸ concerned with psychological verisimilitude and preferring real, historical subject-matter to the mythic material of Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances, *Eracle* is not presented consistently as history, although some historical diction is present, especially towards the end of the work. We now turn to Gautier's treatment of his sources to consider whether this aspect of his art betrays a desire for historical accuracy.

We begin with the final part of the romance as it is based on the most obviously historical material. In the Middle Ages two competing versions of the deeds of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610–641) were available to clerics in the form of 'factually accurate' chronicle accounts and more flattering liturgical or hagiographical texts. In the chronicles, Heraclius's Christian feats are eclipsed by the sins he committed in later life. In the liturgical texts, on the other hand, the emperor is presented as an exemplary Christian hero, who is quickly forgiven for his one act of hubris and whose recovery of the Holy Cross from the Persians is instrumental in promoting the True Faith in the Holy Land and beyond. As Edmond Faral has shown, Gautier's primary source for Eracle's crusading exploits was a written work from the latter tradition: a Latin liturgical text found in an eleventh-century manuscript in Rheims library.¹⁹ This *Passionarius ad usum Beatae Mariae remensis* contains readings for the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross on 4th May and includes the acts of Saint Judas Cyriacus. It also contains *lectiones* for the 14th September, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. The latter describe Chosroes's persecution of Christians in the Holy Land, his

conquest of extensive lands in the region and his self-appointment as king of kings and lord of lords. Having stolen the True Cross from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre he places it in a marvellous edifice or 'heaven' in which he is worshipped as a god. Heraclius, noted for his martial strength, eloquence, fine body and exemplary Christian faith, joins in single combat with Chosroes's son on a bridge over the Danube and defeats him, becoming leader of both armies. After converting many Persians to Christianity, Heraclius seeks out Chosroes the Elder in his 'heaven', offers him the chance to convert, then cuts off his head. Having baptised Chosroes's 10-year-old younger son, Heraclius divides up the booty between his army and a fund for the restoration of churches destroyed by the infidel. He then takes the Cross to Jerusalem, where he is greeted by crowds waving palm fronds, but is not able to enter by the gate used by Christ because the walls close before him. Bystanders marvel at this and at the sign of the cross shining in the sky. An angel of the Lord compares the emperor's proud behaviour unfavourably to Christ's on Palm Sunday, but when Heraclius shows signs of repentance and humility the walls part. A sweet divine odour fills the region as the Cross is delivered from pagan hands. The emperor, after praising the Holy Cross, returns it to its rightful place, and goes back to Constantinople where he remains faithful to the Christian religion to the very end.

Having chosen the version of Heraclius's life more appropriate to his literary aims, Gautier adapted the liturgical source quite faithfully, preserving most of the historical facts it contained, and retaining the chronology and references to place names. He did, however, use his rhetorical skills to amplify the battle scenes with motifs taken from epic poetry, examples being a war council (5440-5518) and the arming of the hero (5599-5608). He also extended or added passages of direct speech, such as an angelic warning of the pagan threat, and attempts during the single combat to convert the enemy, thus enhancing the dramatic impact of the liturgical source. In addition, he transposed some material, not thereby altering the *histoire* or chronology of real events, but rearranging the *récit*, or order in which he had chosen to relate them. In this manner a prayer to the Holy Cross is moved to an earlier point in the narrative, while information about the fate of Chosroes's younger son is postponed to a little later. Yet the justification for these changes is not to be found in a desire to be more historically accurate, but rather in an attempt to

make his material more immediate and memorable for his listening court audience.

One detail he has added to the *Passionarius* account is particularly instructive, for we are told that for the decisive single combat on the bridge Eracle bore Constantine's sword (5608). This probably indicates Gautier's primary aim: to locate his biography of the Emperor Heraclius firmly in Salvation History, and to produce for his audience and noble patrons an uplifting moral exemplum.²⁰ As we have seen from his sporadic use of historical diction, Gautier's main concern in *Eracle* was not with historical veracity, but with Christian truth. In fact, Gautier's text, set mainly in Rome and drawing on at least one Latin source, seems to exemplify Jean Bodel's second type or genre in his famous taxonomy based on the *matières* or content of medieval literature:

Li conte de Bretagne sont si vain et plaisant,
Cil de Rome sont sage et de sens apendant.
Cil de France sont voir chacun jour aparant.

The tales of Britain are so frivolous and amusing; those of Rome are wise and teach us good sense; those of France are shown to be true every day.

According to Bodel, whereas the stories of France (and one assumes he means here the *chansons de geste*) dealt with Charlemagne and other real historical figures, the *romans antiques* and other classical romances were meant to teach wisdom. Viewed in this light, *Eracle* would be a didactic, exemplary work, whose moral teaching was more important than its historical accuracy.²¹ This approach to the past explains the differences between Gautier's treatment of his source material, and that of Meister Otte, who drew in some cases on the chronicle accounts of Heraclius's biography and had to adapt his main source, the French romance, accordingly.²²

Meister Otte preferred the historical versions of Heraclius's later life provided by the seventh-century Byzantine writer George of Pisidia, by the anonymous *Chronicon paschale* (also seventh century), Otto von Freising's *Chronicon* (c. 1150), the *Kaiserchronik* (c. 1150), and the *Chronicon Reicherspergense* (late twelfth century). Consequently he mentions Heraclius's dropsy, the charges against him of heresy, and his erroneous interpretation of astrological signs, leading to

defeat by Moslems when the emperor was expecting a threat from a circumcised race to be Jewish. These are all presented in the German adaptation as divine punishments for Eraclius's sins (5339–83). Thus Otte sacrifices the religious credentials and exemplarity of his hero to his own self presentation as an educated writer, concerned to be historically accurate: 'ein gelêrter man hiez Otte, / der dise rede tihte (Otte, who composed this narrative, was an educated man; (136–7). And it seems that he was taken seriously as a historian, for in two out of the three extant manuscripts, Otte's *Eraclius* has survived as an interpolation in a longer chronicle: in one case the *Kaiserchronik*, in the other Heinrich von München's *Weltchronik*. Although Otte claims that God forgave Heraclius before his death and that he was buried in Constantinople, he suppresses Gautier's description (6485–6506) of the impressive equestrian statue which was thought by many travellers in Gautier's day and by writers such as Robert de Clari, to depict Heraclius, defender of Christendom, whose right hand was outstretched in a gesture threatening any challenge from the pagan East.²³ Since the statue was actually of the emperor Justinian, it may have been Otte's desire for factual accuracy which led him to omit this information. However, he may also have had political reasons for toning down those elements in the narrative which enhance Heraclius's role as Holy Roman Emperor, another example being the detail that Heraclius wielded Constantine's sword for his combat against Chosroes. Similarly, Meister Otte's decision to rename Gautier's Roman emperor, calling him Fôcas rather than Laïs, may result from a wish to re-establish the correct historical chronology by allowing Heraclius to succeed Phocas directly. However, Otte may also be adopting the politics of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in refusing to accept that the Greek rulers of the Eastern empire were real emperors. According to Otte, therefore, Heraclius became Roman emperor on Fôcas's death, and moved to Constantinople simply because that is where the Roman emperors spent most of their time in those days. Thus, ironically, contemporary politics rather than historical accuracy could have led Otte to adhere more closely to seventh-century reality than Gautier, whose portrayal of two emperors was anachronistic, reflecting twelfth-century conditions. Whatever their reasons for manipulating their historical material in the way they did, it is Gautier's hero who emerges as the more effective role-model for militant Christianity.

One detail that neither includes is the fact that Heraclius killed Phocas in a horrible manner before acceding to the throne of Constantinople. The historical facts are as follows: Heraclius and his cousin Niketas were both from North Africa, Heraclius's father by the same name being the exarch in Carthage and his uncle Gregory, the Patriarch. It was these brothers who came to an agreement to get rid of the emperor Phocas, by sending their sons to usurp his throne. Niketas undertook a military campaign by land and Heraclius by sea. The latter arrived in Constantinople first, but was not challenged by his cousin. Heraclius then mutilated Phocas's body before killing him.²⁴ The absence of this gruesome fact, and of the disreputable events of Heraclius's later life from the Latin *Passionarius*, may explain why Gautier does not include such negative material in his own work. However, although he attributes the murder of Phocas to the pagan Chosroes, he does mention that Eracle had a rival who was from Africa (5270). This historical detail, which is not in the *Passionarius*, may provide evidence that Gautier was familiar with the chronicle version of Heraclius's life known to his fellow European Meister Otte, but chose to ignore or suppress any unpalatable information in it to avoid undermining the exemplary nature of his chosen hero.

Since his main, historical source related only the mature exploits of Heraclius, Gautier had to look elsewhere for material for the *enfances* section of his work. Here the emphasis is on the exceptional nature of a young man who is destined to carry out a divine mission on earth: to defeat the pagan enemy, to recover the Holy Cross and to encourage the propagation of Christianity throughout the earth. As God's elect, it is vital that Eracle be shown to have extraordinary powers from an early age, especially those powers of discernment which will be vital in a ruler. In order to convey this didactic message Gautier has combined disparate material from Byzantine literature, history and custom into a moral exemplum: namely, the oriental folk-tale of the three gifts, which has survived in the Byzantine *Ptocholeon*, the Byzantine practice of bride shows for the selection of empresses, and the story of the alleged adultery of the fifth-century empress Athenaïs, the wife of Theodosius II.

The *Ptocholeon* tells of an old man impoverished by Arab attacks, who urges his sons to sell him into slavery. On account of his three gifts he is purchased by the king's treasurer. In order to test him, the king asks the old man what he thinks of a precious stone he has

bought for a huge sum of money; the latter pronounces it worthless and is proved correct when it is sawn in half to reveal a worm inside. Later the king's prospective bride is pronounced worthless as she is the daughter of a Moslem and, under threats from the king, Ptocholeon claims that his ruler is a baker's son, a situation which the king's mother reluctantly confirms. The old man is consequently promoted to be the king's wise counsellor. Although the second test concerning horses is absent from the extant manuscript, there is internal evidence that it was originally present.

The closest analogue to Gautier's *Eracle*, however, is found in the eighteenth-century Tunis manuscript of the *1001 Nights*, but it seems to be based also on a Byzantine source.²⁵ Here, as in *Eracle*, the old man's son offers to be sold as a slave. Yet his father refuses the offer and, once purchased, distinguishes for his owner a valuable pearl from a worthless one, selects the better of two horses and reveals the prince's true origins. His claim that he has read this information in the stars may have encouraged Gautier to incorporate this material into his biography of Heraclius if he knew about his hero's interest in astrology from chronicle accounts of his life. Whatever the reasons for choosing this source material, in Gautier's work it becomes thoroughly Christianised. *Eracle*, called *Diudonné* (225) at birth since his parents had prayed for seven years before he was conceived, is further marked out as the elect of God when he receives a letter sent from heaven. Sold into slavery like a lamb taken to market (429, here there are explicit parallels with Christ as the *agnus dei*), he is bought by Laïs's seneschal, who is ridiculed by the emperor and the whole imperial court for his gullibility. Thus the seneschal symbolises the Good Christian, whose faith is steadfast, whereas Laïs represents the doubting Thomas, who requires proof of divine power.²⁶ The three ordeals *Eracle* undergoes like many a Christian martyr also test his own faith. His promotion to the position of the emperor's wise adviser is presented in the context of his increasing qualification to become Byzantine Emperor. Having passed several *épreuves qualifiantes*, *Eracle* faces a final, most important test: the selection of a wife for the emperor. To this end, a bride show is arranged. Although this method of choosing a bride may have reminded a medieval audience of the romance motif of the oriental ruler's harem from which he chooses his favourite mistress to be queen,²⁷ it reflects more closely the practice in eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium, whereby the empress was chosen from girls brought to Constantinople by their

parents. They were assembled in the palace and the young prince, usually supervised by his mother, would select his bride. Until this custom died out in the tenth century, several Byzantine emperors acquired a wife in this way. Gautier uses this material to produce a negative exemplum, for during the bride show Eracle rejects various noble women who represent the seven female vices of avarice, lechery, inconstancy, loquacity, arrogance, nastiness, and the encouragement of flatterers (2163–2572). Moreover, Eracle proves once again that he can see beneath the surface of things, preferring a poorly dressed, but pious young woman, to these beautiful, splendidly attired courtly damsels. Unfortunately, Laïs's loss of faith in his counsellor results in Athanaïs's transformation from perfect empress to adulterous wife. This section of the narrative, which also serves as a moral exemplum on the dangers of ignoring good advice, is based on an anecdote about a fifth-century empress of Byzantium called Athenais. The seventh-century *Chronicon paschale* tells the story as follows:

Athenais, daughter of the philosopher Heraclitus, came to Constantinople with one of her aunts and was noticed by Theodosius's sister Pulcheria, who arranged for them to marry, once the girl had been baptised Eudokia. However, when the emperor gave a magnificent Phrygian apple to his wife, she unfortunately passed it on to a young courtier called Paulinus, who in turn offered it to the emperor. When questioned, the empress claimed that she had eaten the apple, so the emperor, suspecting infidelity, put Paulinus to death and divorced Athenais.

Again, perhaps the similarity between the name of the girl's father and Gautier's hero gave the poet from Arras the idea of using this source material in a new context. Or perhaps he was motivated by the identical Christian names of Athenais (once baptised) and Heraclius's first wife Eudokia. Whatever prompted him, Gautier has reworked this jumble of anecdotal and fictional Byzantine material into a cohesive *enfances* for Eracle, which establish him as God's chosen representative on earth and as someone worthy of his *épreuve principale*, the recovery of the Holy Cross, the divine mission which awaits him in adulthood. Although the adulterous episode, presented (in over 2,500 lines) as a psychologically convincing courtly romance, seems to somewhat destabilise the structure of the overall work, it does fit well into Gautier's moral conception, warning the audience against a lack of faith and the refusal to heed good advice.

Whilst the historical validity of the Byzantine material used here might be questionable, what is important, as we have seen, is not history, but the moral lessons one can draw from it. So, for a writer like Gautier, it was perfectly valid to fictionalise historical biography in order to convey serious Christian truths.

The influence of Byzantine history, literature, culture and customs is omnipresent in *Eracle* and in the absence of a single composite source for this romance, it is likely that Gautier himself combined these disparate Greek elements into a cohesive narrative. He may have undertaken this task of compilation because of his own interest in Byzantine material, perhaps following a journey to the East or conversations with travellers. Yet it was more likely to have been in response to the interests of his patrons at the courts of Blois, Troyes and Provins that he composed a work on the emperor whose greatest feat was to win back the Holy Cross from the Persians. In his day there were strong links between the Holy Land and Champagne, where the first Grand Master of the Temple, Hugues des Payens was born, and where Templar houses had been established in Provins and Troyes.²⁸ Henri le Libéral, the brother of Gautier's patron Thibaut V of Blois, had himself been sent to Constantinople to be dubbed a knight by the Emperor Manuel I Comnenus in 1147 and was planning to take up the Cross around the time *Eracle* was composed. Indeed, he brought a relic of the True Cross back with him from the Holy Land in 1181. So Gautier's patrons' special interest in the True Cross, in St Judas Cyriacus, to whom the main church in Provins was dedicated, and in Byzantium probably explains why the cleric they protected produced the Graeco-Byzantine romance or rather the pseudo-historical *exemplum* of *Eracle*.

As we have seen, Gautier's *Eracle* is an ideal text with which to test our generic categories for medieval compositions. From our modern perspective, this work seems to be generically hybrid – a mixture of folk-tale, hagiography, courtly romance and crusading epic – combined together into a historical biography. However, it is likely that for Gautier and his contemporaries *Eracle* was an exemplary narration of past events, whose historical veracity was less important than the Christian truths and teaching it conveyed. The fact that its author was happy to call such a narrative a 'roman', amongst other things, should warn us against too narrow a definition of the genre we call romance.

Notes

- 1 See Norris J. Lacy, 'The Form of Gautier's *Eracle*', *Modern Philology* 83 (1986): 227–32 (227 and 232) for the modern scholarly reception of Gautier's aesthetics.
- 2 I should like to acknowledge here my gratitude for all the support and wise advice I have received from Peter since my days as a graduate student in Reading and throughout my academic career.
- 3 See Karen Pratt, *Meister Otte's Eracilius as an Adaptation of Eracle by Gautier d'Arras*, Göppingen, Kümmerle Verlag, 1987, chapter XIV.
- 4 For further information, see Gautier d'Arras, *Eracle*, edited and translated by Karen Pratt, London, King's College London Centre for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, 2007 (King's College London Medieval Studies XXII), xxiv–xxv and on genre theory as applied to medieval texts, see Kathryn Gravdal, 'Poem Unlimited: Medieval Genre Theory and the Fabliau', *L'Esprit créateur* 23 (1993): 10–17.
- 5 This divorce is rather a rare event in medieval literature; see Corinne Pierreville, *Gautier d'Arras, l'autre Chrétien*, Paris, Champion, 2001, pp. 238–40.
- 6 Line references and English translations are taken from my recent edition, see note 4 above.
- 7 See my edition, pp. xlvi–lii.
- 8 See Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age*, Leiden, Brill, 1994, pp. 59–60.
- 9 Although generic distinctions were fairly imprecise, the presence of labels such as *fabliau*, *dit*, *estoire* and *lai* in medieval manuscripts, 'even when inconsequently used, nevertheless betray the existence of a medieval genre-consciousness of some kind' according to Bert Roest, 'Medieval Historiography: about Generic Constraints and Scholarly Constructions', in *Aspects of Genre and Type in Pre-modern Literary Cultures*, ed. Bert Roest and Herman Vanstiphout, Groningen, Styx Publications, 1999, pp. 47–62 (51).
- 10 See Jeanette Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages*, Geneva, Droz, 1981, and Peter Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority*, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 1999.
- 11 The use of the term *fable* clearly evokes Cicero's fictional genre *fabula* and connotes lying in twelfth-century French.
- 12 See Lorenza Arzenton Valeri, 'Au nom de l'auteur: essai d'intervention auctoriale dans *Eracle*', *Bien dire et bien apprendre* 8 (1990):

- 5–17 and Paul Zumthor, 'L'Écriture et la voix: Le Roman d'*Eracle*', in *The Craft of Fiction: Essays in Medieval Poetics*, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon, Rochester, MI, Solaris Press, 1984, pp. 161–209. The latter considers that Gautier derives more authority from the voice of his narrator, who speaks directly to the audience using the first and second persons, than he does by evoking written sources, except when narrating the reconquest of the Holy Cross (5119–6435). The words 'je vos di' thus acquire the force of a veracity claim (174–7).
- 13 Douglas Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, pp. 15–31.
- 14 Another example of authorial control is to be found in lines 2926–8: Chevaliers est teus de se main / Con vous orrés, mais aparmain / Vous dirai de l'emperéis (*His feats of arms you will hear about later, but for the moment I shall tell you about the empress.*).
- 15 See Zumthor, p. 198, for examples.
- 16 See Pierreville, chapter II and appendix I for markers of chronology in *Eracle* and Penny Eley, 'How Long is the Trojan War? Aspects of Time in the *Roman de Troie* and its Sources', in *Shifts and Transpositions in Medieval Narrative: a Festschrift for Dr Elspeth Kennedy*, ed. Karen Pratt, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1994, pp. 139–50, for a discussion of affective, subjective and objective time.
- 17 The only exception to this rule is the possible allusion in lines 6508–10 to the seizing of the Holy Cross by the Arab Emir O'mar in 644; see Anthime Fourrier, *Le Courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen-Âge*, Paris, Nizet, 1960, vol. I, p. 210.
- 18 See Fourrier, I, chapter 3.
- 19 Edmond Faral, 'D'un "passionnaire" latin à un roman français: quelques sources immédiates du roman d'*Eracle*', *Romania* 46 (1920): 512–36.
- 20 Interestingly though he has suppressed some of the more amazing Christian miracles of his source: the sign of the cross and the divine odour.
- 21 See Friedrich Wolfzettel, 'La Recherche de l'universel. Pour une nouvelle lecture des romans de Gautier d'Arras', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 33 (1990): 113–31. Nevertheless, as the use of historical diction demonstrates, Gautier treated the episodes of the invention and recovery of the Cross as historical fact, in the same way that New Testament events were viewed as historically/literally true by medieval theologians.
- 22 For the text, see *Eraclius, deutsches Gedicht des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Harald Graef, Strassburg, K. J. Trübner, 1883.

- 23 See Robert de Clari, *La Conquête de Constantinople*, paragraph 86.
- 24 For a historical account of Heraclius's life, see Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, Cambridge, CUP, 2003, and *The Reign of Heraclius (610–41), Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. G. Reinink and B. Stolte, Leuven, Peeters, 2002.
- 25 See Fourrier, I, p. 217.
- 26 See Penny Eley, 'Patterns of Faith and Doubt: Gautier's *Eracle* and *Ille et Galeron*', *French Studies* 43 (1989): 257–70.
- 27 See, for example, the romance *Floire et Blancheflor*.
- 28 See Fourrier, I, p. 254.