

Abstract

The Construction of Historical Reality in Jean Froissart's Chronicles

Jean Froissart, one of the most famous chroniclers of the Middle Ages, is generally recognized for the literary qualities of his work, less so for the credibility of his account. In my research I have endeavoured to follow those scholars whose aim has been to rehabilitate the author by studying him not on the basis of principles which govern our contemporary understanding of history as an academic discipline, but rather on the basis of conceptual movements which conditioned historical writing in the 14th century, taking into account the traditions upon which medieval conception of history was built. Put differently, this work seeks to examine closely the "historical forge" of Jean Froissart.

Clearly, Froissart's historical project falls within a specific discourse on historical genres, on relationships between form and truth which an account of deeds is expected to convey, on the manner in which the authority of a story being told is constructed. It is on the very intersection of this context, on the one hand, and the individuality of the author, on the other, that I based my search for the chronicler's perspectives on the writing of history. Froissart was from the outset concerned with the issues of impartiality and credibility of his account and created a system of references, which grew more and more complex, designed to authenticate his version of important events which had been shaking the West for almost a century. In the early stages of his work, still owing much to his predecessor Jean le Bel, he but rarely introduced himself into the text as an eyewitness while the sources to which he referred typically remained anonymous. Froissart nevertheless evolved his historiographical method, gradually and significantly, throughout the decades of his writing and, having become a mature historian, began to place himself at the heart of his investigation in order to uncover in front of his readers the ways in which he gathered information, presenting himself personally as a guarantee of veracity in his own right. Intimately personal passages are let into the account only inasmuch as they can contribute to the authority of the text.

The historical reality which Jean Froissart recreates in his *Chronicles* is, obviously, dependent on personal factors which determined his understanding of the world as well as his self-identification within the society of his time. It is undeniably recreated with great storytelling talent, but also – and this has often been overlooked – with growing desire to discover and expose the relations of causes which were at work in the course of the events. Nonetheless, Froissart's literary means, which are often associated with his artistry as a storyteller, do contribute, for their part, to the textual re-composition of the historical reality. The necessarily mimetic nature of every account is particularly elaborated : Froissart's sense of dramatic detail, his effort to reconstruct the circumstances have no other objective than to create the "effet du réel" and thus to support the authenticity of the story. For if the chronicler presents himself as the one who eternalizes deeds worthy of remembrance, he refuses at the same time to write any other history than the true and truthful one. This primary concern of his should not be obscured by the fact that his approach and methods do not correspond to our contemporary criteria of historical writing.