CHAPTER SIX

FROISSART: THE MANAGEMENT OF CHIVALRIC EXPECTATION

Froissart is, without doubt, the most famous of the medieval chroniclers. His enormous histories of the fourteenth century remain as one of the most important and detailed accounts of the later Middle Ages and are one of the best contemporary expositions of chivalric and courtly ideals. Given his place in history and his importance as a source of information, it would appear to be prudent to examine the works of Froissart in a critical manner to see just how useful they really are in explaining medieval attitudes towards the use of surprise and deception in warfare. The chapter will first establish Froissart’s popularity and importance as a source before moving on to looking at the ‘flavour’ of his works. Who was he writing for and what events did he regard as important to his audience? This will be answered by examining the attitudes Froissart expresses and the type of themes he chooses to focus upon. Different case studies from the various editions of Froissart’s Chronicles will then be presented to highlight the role of surprise and deception in a variety of different circumstances and contexts, from accidental encounters in ‘everyday’ war through to pitched battles. The chapter will demonstrate that Froissart does indeed provide very useful insights into many aspects of the warfare in the period. As well as encouraging brave men to perform deeds of arms, in many places Froissart also reminds them of what their duties were. However, despite his stated intention to focus upon ‘honourable enterprises’, episodes detailing the use of surprise and deception are well covered in his works. On one level it appears that the words he places in the mouth of the Duke of Lancaster at a joust reflect his own view of chivalric practice when he says ‘I consider a man wise who knows how to seize the advantage in combat’.¹ On another level, although often subtle, the context within which those advantages could legitimately be grasped are absolutely vital to understanding medieval warfare and this is also

¹ Froissart, Chroniques, Kervyn de Lettenhove (Ed.) 29 vols. (Brussels, 1867–77), XII pp. 121f. This edition contains variations found in different versions of the manuscript.
reflected in Froissart’s work. As such, although the lessons are not always obvious to us today, Froissart’s Chronicles provided and represented a framework of understanding within which medieval chivalric expectations could be effectively managed.

Who was Jean Froissart?

Froissart was born in Valenciennes, Brabant, around 1333 although the year 1337 is also suggested by a number of sources. As well as the exact dates of his birth and death being unknown we are also unaware of his family background. We do know that after receiving ecclesiastical tonsure he travelled to England in 1361 at the invitation of Queen Philippa, a fellow Hainaut. This may have been to present an account in verse of the battle of Poitiers (1356). He remained with the English court, on and off, for the next six years, joining the Black Prince in Aquitaine in the winter of 1366 during one of his own frequent excursions which also involved a trip to Scotland where he met David Bruce. Froissart was a poet in the tradition of Guillaume de Machaut, and produced a number of works in this genre including L’Horloge amoureux, which compares the heart to a clock, and Méliador, which is a chivalrous romance in the style of the Round Table cycle. His ballades and rondeaux expose some of the poet’s personal feelings while his l’Epinette Amoureuse relates the story of his own life. Although he was later to find fame as the chronicler of the first half of the Hundred Years War, it is more than possible that for much of the time that he spent in England, Froissart was in fact more interested in poetry than history. The romance Méliador alone is a vast work of over 30,000 lines and is dated to before 1373 at the latest. It would clearly have taken quite a substantial amount of time just to complete this one work. Scenes from some of Froissart’s travels around the British Isles are incorporated into the poem demonstrating that, at least at the time, Froissart was obviously

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3 Barber, Froissart and the Black Prince, pp. 25f.