CHAPTER NINE

MEDIEVAL FRENCH ALEXANDER ROMANCES

Laurence Harf-Lancner*

I. Le Roman d’Alexandre and the Birth of the Romance

The dawn of the 12th century saw the development of the knightly class and, at the same time, a literature in the vernacular destined for lay people, who did not know Latin. This literature found its subject matter in the warrior and Christian legends from the beginnings of medieval society (the chansons de geste), but also in the mise en roman, that is to say the translation into French of the texts of Latin Antiquity: it is the birth of the romance genre.1 Around 1150, the author of the Roman de Thèbes recounted in octosyllabic couplets, following the Thebaid of Statius, the history of the two sons of Oedipus, a history reserved for clerics and knights, who alone were worthy of hearing it. It is one of the first French romances (romans), in the medieval sense of the term (text translated from Latin into French), but also in the modern sense, because it joins arms and love.2 Around 1160, the Roman d’Enéas translated Virgil’s Aeneid and around 1165, Benedict of Sainte-Maure based his Roman de Troie on the authority of two text-sources, the De excidio Trojae of Darius the Phrygian and the Ephemeris belli Trojanorum of Dictys.3 The French romance was born of this practice of translatio, of the adaptation of Latin texts into a Romance tongue. The 12th-century writing of the Roman d’Alexandre’s vast assemblage in verse, which has as its principal sources Julius Valerius and his Epitome, formed part of this literary movement, but at the same time distinguished itself by its profound originality.

* Translated by Martha Krieg.
The Texts of the Romance of Alexander

The first layer consists of a fragment of 105 octosyllables in monorhymed *laissez*, written in a dialect of the south of France during the first third of the 12th century by Albéric of Pisançon. Well before the *Roman de Thèbes*, medieval narrative *en roman* was attached to a different type of hero: putting aside the saint or the knight who put his prowess at the service of Christianity (as Roland did), it chose a pagan hero from the ancient world. One can get an idea of the text from the German adaptation of it done by Lamprecht around 1155 in his *Alexanderlied*. The extant fragment does not transmit more than the birth and education of Alexander. Lamprecht’s narrative stopped at the victory of Granica and the preparations of Darius for his revenge. This first version of the romance thus limited itself to the infancy of the hero. After a prologue, which placed Antiquity among the ranks of the noblest subjects and celebrated the immortal glory of the greatest of its kings (Alexander), Albéric related the first years of the hero. The principal themes of the French romance were announced beginning with this first portrayal: the astonishing superiority of Alexander in the domains of prowess and learnedness over all kings of the past and those to come, his predestination to a super-human glory, signified from his birth by supernatural signs. But there appeared also the stain that marked the medieval destiny of the Macedonian and which the writers of romances tried vainly to efface: the accusation of bastardy: “Certain makers of tales claimed that Alexander was the son of a sorcerer. They lied, the wicked calumniators.” The descent from the god Amon, on which Alexander had built his myth when he was alive, and from Nectanabus, the last of the pharaohs in the Alexandrian legend of which the *Pseudo-Callisthenes (PC)* is an echo, served only to enhance the glory of the hero in the ancient world, attaching to him that supernatural origin which characterized, in all mythologies, the birth of the hero. But in the medieval imagination, the royal figure could not be soiled by the suspicion of bastardy. Albéric only mentioned the legend in order to immediately relegate it among the lies of the *losengetours*,

---

4 The reader will find the presentation, text and translation of that fragment, with the translation of the *Alexanderlied*, in the third volume of the *Medieval French Roman d’Alexandre* (*MFRA*), A. Foulet (ed.), (Princeton, 1949), pp. 2–8 and 37–60.