

NARRATIVE STRATEGY AS *AUCTORITAS*
IN THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY
PROSE VERSION OF THE *ROMAN DE THÈBES*

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The story of Oedipus, his sons, and the destruction of the city of Thebes offered considerable appeal to the literary public of the second half of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as evidenced by the three extant verse versions of the tale created between approximately 1155 and the end of the century¹ and the prose version of 1208-1212.² The prose *Roman de Thèbes* is particularly interesting for the modern reader because it raises questions about form, narrative technique, and the notion of *auctoritas*.

Auctoritas is not used here to refer to the narrower sense of *sententiae* excerpted from the work of an *auctor*,³ but rather the broader notion of authoritativeness. Unlike the anonymous author of the short verse *Thèbes*, the unknown prose redactor who composed this new version of the well-known tale does not call our attention to the importance of transmitting wisdom and drop the names of such illustrious *auctores* as Homer, Plato, Virgil, and Cicero.⁴ Although it can be surmised that the prose historian was familiar with Statius' *Thebaid* as well as at least one of the vernacular verse *romans* popular in the second half of the twelfth century, his version of the text does not correspond to any of these works as they are known to us today.⁵ His adaptation of the story lacks any explicit reference to a known source that would authenticate his new vernacular prose version. It is our theory that the prose writer seeks to create a text-emanent *auctoritas* by both the use of the prose form itself, and by the insertion of editorializing comments that occasionally interrupt the recounting of the events. The following pages offer an analysis of the narrative interventions and their function in creating an implicit pact between the public and the narrator; this pact replaces the missing reference to an extra-textual *auctoritas*.

Before examining the narrator's comments, a note is in order about the use and aesthetics of prose in the early thirteenth century. Prose, as the form used in the Bible and in other religious texts, carries a connotation of seriousness and veracity that verse does not. Recent scholarship suggests that the late-twelfth-early-thirteenth-century preference for prose over verse in historiographical texts was based on the notion that the prose form was a more appropriate vehicle for true histories than verse.⁶ This is largely due to the fact that verse is associated with oral culture and unwritten sources and prose with writing and an increasing reliance on documents as

sources.

It is this essential difference that has retained the interest of critics: verse is associated with orality and personal guarantorship of a text's veracity and prose with written culture and a more objective, neutral validity. If one accepts this distinction, the presenter of a verse text provides a sort of personal *auctoritas* by the mere fact of his oral performance; however, the prose text, connoting an aesthetic of impersonality and neutrality, must be able to stand independently of its performer. While prose, like verse, is usually read aloud, it nonetheless offers a new textual dynamic—it alone incarnates the text and does not require a "chanteur" to sing it or otherwise bring it to life.

The choice of prose of the author of the prose *Thèbes* can be seen in this context as an expression of his preoccupation with truthfulness and his concern that his history be accepted as valid and serious. It is noteworthy that the prose compilation in which the prose *Thèbes* is found begins with Genesis and its author maintains a serious, didactic, and moralistic tone throughout the work. *Thèbes* in prose carries an intrinsic worth and the weight of moral exemplum that a verse *roman* lacks. The use of prose in and of itself constitutes an attempt to endow the tale with its own internal validation.

The writer's editorializing in the form of brief interventions in the narrative is another strategy employed by the prose redactor in order to achieve that same goal. These narrative interventions serve a purpose similar to that of verse moralizations in other parts of the compilation, but they do so in a different manner.⁷ That purpose is to persuade the public to take the history of *Thèbes* seriously, to accept it as truthful, and, implicitly, to heed history's lessons as the narrator sees them.

The narrative interventions are of three sorts. The first type is one in which the narrator presents mutually exclusive options to the public and does not select one over the others. The second type involves the mentioning of a different version of events and the rejection of that alternate version for the reason that the behavior is not consistent with the character in question. In the third type of intervention, the narrator rejects a different version because it is false.

An example of the first type of narrative intervention occurs with the introduction of Tydeus:

Cis Tideus ot .ij. freres dont li uns ot a non Menalippus,
preus e cortois e sages, e li autres Meleager. S'en avoit l'un

Lynde-Recchia

ocis en une forest par grande mescheance. Li un dient e s'acordent que ce fu Menalipum e li autre Meleagram, e teus i a qui dient que ce fu un sien oncle.⁸

Here the narrator lays out three possibilities to explain Tydeus' exile: he had accidentally killed either a brother (of two mentioned) or an uncle. It is crucial here for the characterization of Tydeus as courtly and brave that he is not presented as a fratricidal character. The multiplication of options—in particular the final comment that “e teus i a qui dient que ce fu un sien oncle”—has the effect of diluting the wrong committed in such a way that the reader notes in passing the reason for Tydeus' exile without ascribing to him any fundamental character flaw. The narrator emphasizes Tydeus' innocence by describing the event in terms of “grande mescheance”; Tydeus did not wilfully commit fratricide, he merely presided at a tragic accident. At the same time, he implies that it does not matter whom Tydeus had accidentally killed, the sole matter of importance being the death itself and the resulting exile.

The careful presentation of options concerning Tydeus' misdeed gives one the impression that the narrator is impartial and honest. He thus demonstrates to his public that he is not simply rewriting unsubstantiated material without subjecting it to scrutiny. Lacking some kind of justification for one choice over another, the narrator will refrain from making an authoritative statement about the fatal incident. Paradoxically, this refusal to make an authoritative statement about whom Tydeus killed contributes to his stature as an authoritative historian. He is playing the role of the objective gatherer of information, one who values above all accuracy and truth-telling and whose devotion to this cause inspires our belief that this narrator is accountable and merits our trust.

The second type of intervention, in which the narrator mentions previously known versions and rejects them because they are inconsistent with his presentation of the character, is exemplified in the following comment, also concerning Tydeus. When Tydeus is sent to Eteocles' court as messenger for Polynices, the narrator explains:

Tideus ala tant qu'il vint devant le roi e si le salua mout hautement e lui et sa maisnee se come cortois e sages. Segnor, li auquant dient que Tideus vint devant le roi tot a cheval la ou li rois seoit au mangier encore. Me[s] ce me

Lynde-Recchia

samble qu'il ne le fesist mie, quar ce samblast vilainie e couardise e Tideus n'avoit nulle de ces .ij. teches quar il estoit plus cortois e li plus tres hardis de fin cuer e de corage qui fust, si com je cuit, adonc en trestot le roiaume de Gresse de son eage. E por ce fu ce voirs sans doutance qu'il son cheval laissa fors del huis de la sale. E si dist au roi quant il l'ot salué qu'il estoit messages de par son frere Polliniket qui a lui l'avoit envoieé par grant amistage.⁹

In this case the author insists on a certain aspect of his tale—the courtliness of Tydeus—and emphatically rejects the idea that he could have ridden his horse into the audience before king Eteocles because such behavior constitutes a grave breach of etiquette. Noteworthy is the manner of this rejection: *le auquant dient* is a margination of a different (verse) version of the *Roman de Thèbes*,¹⁰ the use of the phrase *ce me samble* invites the listeners to use their own logic along with the narrator's as the rest of the sentence unfolds—this would be villainous and cowardly and Tydeus was neither. The praise and the use of the superlative highlight the difference between the portrayal of Tydeus in the prose *Thèbes* as a noble, heroic warrior and that of Tydeus in Statius' *Thebaid*. In the latter text, Tydeus is bloodthirsty and violent, to such a degree that after having defeated one of his enemies on the battlefield, gruesomely, he bites into his skull.

Another example of this type of editorializing occurs when Jocasta and some of the barons meet with Eteocles and unsuccessfully attempt to persuade him not to commit perjury and to make peace with his brother:

A cest conseil dient li pluisor que Edippus fu lor pere, mes ce ne peust estre quar s'il fust bien en vie n'i venist il mie, tant les haoit il e tant voloit il lor grandes malaventures.¹¹

Here the narrator refers to a version of the story in which Oedipus is also present at this discussion, but this idea is rejected out of hand: Oedipus could not have been present even if he had been alive, because he hated his sons too much. As in the previous example with the phrase *li auquant dient*, the narrator undoes any authority the verse version might have by reducing it to a vague *li pluisor*. This intervention appears to have been inspired solely by the desire to condemn the previous version of the tale and reaffirm his own as superior: earlier on in the text, after his sons have trampled Oedipus'

Lynde-Recchia

mangled eyes beneath their feet, they cast their father into a pit where he is said to finish out his days in misery, and one has the sense that he is definitively out of the picture. He is mentioned here only in order to be negated, and there is no justification for the remark except for its value as support for the narrator's implicit claim that his history of *Thèbes* is more accurate than the others in existence.

Guy Raynaud de Lage noted that the remark about Oedipus shows how much these characters were real for the medieval writer and his public;¹² more important is that these comments serve a function in the establishment of the narrator as a trustworthy storyteller. His role here—unlike in the first case mentioned above where he declined to select one version over another, therefore maintaining an appearance of objectivity—is to sift through the historical “facts” as they have come down in various texts, and to present the true story.

In the first type of intervention, the narrator showed in an almost scholarly fashion that without absolute proof he could not guarantee which versions were accurate. Instead he focused on what he did know, which was that Tydeus accidentally caused the death of either a brother or an uncle. In the second type of intervention, his comments emphasize his knowledge of the character: since Tydeus was neither villanous nor cowardly he simply could not have come into the court without dismounting and following prescribed language and custom. It is a question of logic, for the historian must evaluate the pieces of information that come down to him against that of which he is certain. These interventions convince us, as the listening public, that we can place our faith in the narrator because he is telling us the true story. Furthermore, his emphasis on the correct characterization of Tydeus and Oedipus tells us that as a narrator he knows where his story is going, and his certainty is meant to inspire our own confidence in his relating of the tale.

The third type of narrative intervention concerns the rejection of a different version of events on the explicit basis that they are not found in the true story. Here he explains that he will not tell of all the battle scenes because they contain falsehoods:

Mes descrire lor batailles ne les aguais qu'il faisoient dedens
et de fors tant com il au siege furent n'est mie grans mestiers
que je vos descrie, quar asses tost por bel parler i porroie
dire mesonge qui ne seroit raisnable ne convegnable ne a
profit ne torneroit a nulle creature. Por ce lairai je a deviser

Lynde-Recchia

lor conrois et lor batailles. . . .¹³

A little further along, the narrator declines to relate an episode known to those familiar with the long version of the verse *Roman de Thèbes*:

*Que dou jugement de Daire si com li romans le conte n'est mie l'actorités veraie ne en auctorité certaine. Segnor, e bien sachés ausi que ne me veull antremetre de raconter le jugement de Daire le rous qui sa tor rendi a Pollinictet par quoi la vile dut estre perdue, quar trop en seroit longe la parole. E lonc d'auctorité setie; mais por beau parler est mainte choze contee e dite que n'est mie voire en tote traitie d'estorie. Por ce le lairai ester e maintes chozes a retraire qui as pluisors poroient par aventure plaie.*¹⁴

In each of these cases, the narrator expressly refuses to include material that he considers suspect. Concerning battle scenes, he rejects the *beau parler* for fear of the *mesonge* that it often contains. This phrase emphasizes the importance that the narrator places on truth—his primary objective—and again encourages the listener to place confidence in him. A lie brings good to no one, is not appropriate or reasonable; we can see that this narrator is dedicated to the goal of telling the true story which for him has a place in the divine history of creation, judgment, and salvation. As for the story of Darius, who held one of the towers of Thebes but who lost it to Polynices, he discounts it because it is not “en auctorité certaine,” which in this case probably refers to the Latin version. This passage is extremely useful for this discussion in that the author uses the term *auctoritas* in two different senses. His initial use of the parallel *actorités veraie* and *auctorité certaine* is in direct opposition to the *roman*: the vernacular verse is under attack here. But in the third use of the term (*E lonc d'auctorité seüe*) the writer seems to imply a general knowledge rather than a specific textual source. These comments underscore the compiler's devotion to veracity, his attention to sources, and his evaluation of the Latin text as being superior to the vernacular. He affirms his aversion to things related merely for the sake of a good story. Although such a narrative might please his audience, he will not relate such events. In asserting that the material in his history is true, as the material in other histories is not, and in declaring a high moral standard of truth and explicitly sacrificing entertainment to this more noble goal, the narrator

Lynde-Recchia

implicitly asks the public to believe that his work is different, that it is more true, more valuable, more serious than other histories.

In each of the passages mentioned above, the writer uses a narrative intervention in order to underscore his integrity and to establish an *auctoritas* that stems from the text itself rather than from an outside source. His use of the narrator's voice encourages the listener's suspension of disbelief, promising honesty when confronted with conflicting versions as in the first type of intervention, intelligence when scrutinizing a clash between behavior and character, and truth, even if it means losing a few embellishments to a good story. In addition to establishing the true meaning of the text, the interventions discussed above serve to establish a pact between the transmitter and his public, in which the narrator's judicious display of apparent sincerity, common sense, and honesty invites the faith and trust of his public, whom he gradually induces to adopt his point of view. Furthermore, the modulations and manipulations of the prose voice in the service of truth-emanent *auctoritas* help to endow the form with a prestige that will continue to wax throughout and beyond the thirteenth century.

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Lynde-Recchia

Notes

1. The *Roman de Thèbes* exists in short and long versions and in a third version referred to by its manuscript denotation, "S." It is the short version that is published as part of the Champion's Classiques français du moyen âge series. For more on the different versions of the *Roman de Thèbes*, see Aimé Petit, *Naissances du roman: Les techniques littéraires dan les romans antiques du XIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris-Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1985).
2. The early-thirteenth-century prose version of the *Roman de Thèbes* is found in an unpublished, anonymous historical compilation known as the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. The *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* remains unedited, with the exception of the Genesis section: see Mary Coker Joslin, "A Critical Edition of the Genesis of Rogier's 'Histoire ancienne' based on Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 20125," diss., U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980. For more about the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* and its different versions, see Paul Meyer, "Les Premières Compilations d'histoire ancienne," *Romania* 14 (1885): 1-81 and Brian Woledge, ed., *Bibliographie des romans et nouvelles en prose française antérieurs à 1500* (Geneva: Droz, 1954) 56-57 and its *Supplément 1954-73* (1975) 42. On the dating of the *Histoire ancienne*, see Guy Raynaud de Lage, "L'Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César et les Faits des Romains," *Le Moyen âge* 4th ser. 55 (1949): 5-16.
3. That is, "someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed" (A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholarly Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* [London: Scolar P, 1984] 10).
4. It is curious to note in passing that the writer does not mention Statius, whose *Thebaid* he adapted when creating this earliest Old French version.
5. It is thought that the writer used a verse *Roman de Thèbes* that was similar to the extant long version as a compositional source (Petit 2: 1187). His remarks about the episode of Darius the Red not being in the true *auctoritas*, cited below, demonstrate at the very least a familiarity with the plot of Statius' *Thebaid*, if not a direct knowledge of the text.

Lynde-Recchia

6. For this brief discussion I draw on Jeanette M.A. Beer, *Early Prose in France* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992); Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987); and Omer Jodogne, "La Naissance de la prose française," *Bulletin de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques* 5th ser. 49 (1963): 296-308.

7. Of the fifty-five extant manuscripts of this version of the *Histoire ancienne*, Bibliothèque Nationale ms. 20125 is important because it is the only one which contains a verse prologue and nineteen poems in octosyllabic rhymed couplets, varying in length from six to 146 verses, interpolated here and there throughout the text. In these relatively short verse sections the author identifies himself as such and is largely concerned with impressing upon his public the need to follow Christian precepts in their lives. The author's didactic intent can be seen, for example, in the following lines:

Segnor, or poés ci entendre,
Savior, retenir e aprendre
Que mout avoit de paine Rome.
De la parole est ce la some:
Qu'ansi certainement avoient
Cil qui par le mont habitoient
Quar en chascune region
Avoit male destruction
De batailles o de famines
Quar les gens n'erent pas aclines
A Deu servir ne aorer,
Ne ne se voloient pener
En null endroit de null bien faire.

(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale ms. 20125, f. 189a.

This and all subsequent transcriptions and rough translations are my own.)

(Lords, now you can understand here, learn, know, and remember that Rome suffered greatly. This is the essence of the tale. Those who lived all over the world certainly suffered in the same manner, for in each region there was terrible destruction from battles or famine, for the people were not inclined to serve and worship God; nor did they want to trouble themselves in any manner to do any good.)

Lynde-Recchia

The verse moralizations express the writer's Christian didacticism; this type of history was very close to theology (R. W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 2. Hugh of Saint Victor and the Idea of Historical Development," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser. 21 [1971]: 159), and its function was largely exemplary (Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991] 6).

8. B. N. ms. 20125, f. 95d. (This Tydeus had two brothers, one of whom bore the name Menalipus, worthy and courtly and wise, and the other Meleager. By great misfortune, he had killed one of them in a forest. Some say and agree that it was Menalipus, and others Meleager, and there are those who say that it was an uncle of his.)

9. B. N. ms. 20125, f. 99c. (Tydeus went until he came before the king and then he greeted both him and his household with much respect, as someone courtly and wise. Lords, some say that Tydeus came before the king on horseback to the place where he was still sitting at his meal. But it seems to me that he couldn't have done this at all, for this would have been villanous and cowardly and Tydeus didn't have either of these two flaws for he was very courtly and the most brave and noble-hearted and courageous who lived, as I believe, in those times in all the realm of Greece. And because of this it is true without a doubt that he left his horse outside the entrance to the room. Then he said to the king when he greeted him that he was a messenger for his brother Polynices, who had sent him to him in great friendship.)

10. As Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski noted in her study of this text, the prose redactor explicitly rejects the verse *Roman de Thèbes* as a source of dubious value in terms of its truthfulness ("Traditions of the Old French *Roman de Thèbes*: A Poetico/Historical Analysis," diss., Princeton U, 1980, 194-201).

11. B. N. ms. 20125, f. 111c. (Many people say that Oedipus their father was at this meeting, but this cannot be; for if he had been alive he wouldn't have come because he hated them so much and bore them so much ill will.)

12. He mentions the narrator's insistence on Tydeus' courtesy in "Les

Lynde-Recchia

'Romans antiques' dans l'*Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*' (*Le Moyen âge* 4th ser. 63 [1957]: 275).

13. B. N. ms. 20125, f. 114b. (But there is no great need for me to describe to you their battles and the ambushes in which they fought, inside and outside [of the city walls], as long as they were at the siege. Because quite easily, for the sake of a good story, one could tell a lie that would be neither reasonable nor appropriate nor would bring any good to anyone. On account of this I will leave off telling of their armies and their battles.)

14. B. N. ms. 20125, f. 114c. (*That the judgment of Darius as the novel tells it is not the true story nor in the authentic history.* Lords, know well also that I do not want to get involved in telling of the judgement of Darius the Red who gave up his tower to Polynices, on account of which the city was lost, because the tale would be too long. It is authoritatively known [and told], but in all histories, many things are recounted and said that are not true, for the sake of a good story. Because of this I will leave it alone, as well as many other things to be told which might by chance be pleasing to many.)