Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment

Gossman, Lionel

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Many of the earliest printed editions of texts—classical or medieval—had simply been reproductions of contemporary manuscripts, and in this sense had constituted no more than an additional phase in the manuscript tradition. By the seventeenth century variant readings of classical texts were being collected with unflagging enthusiasm, but in published editions they were usually relegated to the notes. The texts themselves were taken over lock, stock, and barrel from a manuscript of accepted authority. At the turn of the century, however, Richard Bentley questioned this undiscriminating faith in the value of the written tradition and proposed a method of "conjectural criticism" which rested on careful examination of the texts themselves and above all on the editor's knowledge of the linguistic and historical background of the text in question.

Bentley's method was characteristic of the Enlightenment. It subordinated the search for an authoritative text, objectively present in some one manuscript, to the search for a correct text which the critic should be able to reconstitute by analyzing the inner structure, style, meter, and language of a work or author. Bentley's suggested emendations to Étienne's *textus receptus* of the New Testament, in the *Remarks* upon Anthony Collins' *Discourse of Free-Thinking*, are revealing. He first adduces linguistic and historical arguments to support his conjectures, and then, deferentially since he is dealing with a sacred text, hints that a diligent search among the manuscripts might show that his conjectures could in fact be substantiated by written evidence. Bentley is cautious, but

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the trend of his criticism is clear. "'Tis plain indeed," he wrote, "that if emendations are true, they must once have been in some manuscripts, at least in the author's original; but it does not follow, that because no manuscript now exhibits them, none more ancient ever did."2

Of the three criteria outlined by Hermann Kantorowicz for the recensio and emendatio of manuscripts—the literary criterion (der literaturgeschichtliche Massstab), the criterion of the manuscript tradition (der überlieferungsgeschichtliche Massstab), and the psychological criterion (der psychologische Massstab)—it was thus the first which dominated the best textual criticism in the eighteenth century.3 The evidence of manuscripts was used to support the conjectures of the more confident editors or to provide the timid with material from which they could make a selection. The psychological criterion can be discounted entirely.4

The pre-eminence of the literary criterion is not surprising. Just as to Locke and the empiricists ideas in the mind were no longer identical with the objects they were thought to represent, so to scholars and historians the past was no longer unproblematic, a series of events without any mystery. On the contrary, the past had to be reconstructed painfully and critically from the debris that was left behind and, at the same time, the elements of the debris—the facts—acquired significance only as they were set in relation to other facts. As the past lost its immediacy, its different aspects were increasingly difficult to deal with in isolation from each other. It was not enough to check the authenticity of the document reporting an event; to be credible and intelligible the

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3 Hermann Kantorowicz, Einführung in die Textkritik (Leipzig, 1921), pp. 9-36. Kantorowicz remarks (p. 14): "Der literaturgeschichtliche Massstab führt zur Bevorzugung derjenigen—überlieferten oder nicht überlieferten—Lesart, die der Sprache und der Sache nach die größte geschichtliche Wahrscheinlichkeit der Richtigkeit für sich hat. Er misst also nach der 'Richtigkeit' der Lesarten, sie mögen 'echt' sein oder nicht."

4 Although in the opinion of modern scholars the psychological criterion is not the least important (cf. Giorgio Pasquali, Storia della tradizione e critica del testo [2d ed.; Florence, 1952], pp. 471-72; also A. Dain, Les Manuscrits, pp. 37-51), nobody in the eighteenth century, it seems, had realized that a method of criticism could be evolved from systematic research into copyists' errors, with the possible exception of a group of German Protestant scholars, who had hit on the notion of the lectio difficilior. (Pasquali, pp. 10-11.)
event had to be consistent with the wider patterns of nature and, in a more limited way, it had to fit into an historical pattern of causes and effects. In the same way, Bentley felt that the word could not be treated as an isolated problem. Its environment had to be taken into account—the general patterns of the language of which it was a part, and the particular patterns of the individual style characterizing one user of that language, the author. Textual emendation thus became part of general linguistic and cultural history; the whole structure of a work or even of a language and a culture was invoked to explain the smallest parts, even as the parts were sought out in order to reconstruct the whole.

Sainte-Palaye did not go as far as Bentley did. His task was not to improve a tradition of scholarship, but to found one. Nevertheless, his methods were similar to Bentley’s in that they derive from that historical consciousness which was common to all the men of the Enlightenment.

The early editors of medieval texts, on the whole, either printed directly from a contemporary manuscript or touched up and modernized their model when they had to work from a manuscript of some antiquity. As Sainte-Palaye pointed out, the literary heritage of the Middle Ages was not regarded with anything like the respect and awe granted to the works of classical antiquity, but continued to live and evolve until about the seventeenth century. Sainte-Palaye was not the first to draw attention to the interest of medieval French texts, but he was the first to approach them in a truly historical spirit and to point out that they posed the same problems and required the same kind of treatment from scholars as classical or medieval Latin texts. Having argued that the historian cannot take the Renaissance editions of medieval French texts at their face value but must look behind them to the manuscript sources, he went on to warn that late manuscripts are just as subject to error and inaccuracy through the ignorance of copyists and

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5 ‘Notice de deux MSS du Livre intitulé Le Jouvencel,’ MAI 26:700: “Je ne parle pas des livres Grecs et Latins, auxquels des Savans du premier ordre ne dédaignoient point d’employer leurs soins et leurs talents, afin qu’ils parussent avec toute la correction et la fidélité qu’ils méritaient; je parle de nos anciens auteurs Français, pour lesquels nos premiers Imprimeurs ne se croyaient point obligés d’emprunter des secours étrangers: persuadés qu’un manuscrit qu’ils avoient découvert, et dont l’écriture et la langue leur étoient en quelque façon familières, n’avoit pas besoin de plus grandes lumières pour en risquer l’impression, ils l’imprimèrent souvent sans avoir su ni le lire ni l’entendre.”
scribes as the early printed editions are—as he claimed—through the ignorance or indifference of printers. The scholar, he concluded, cannot be satisfied with the examination of one manuscript: “Je crois devoir recommander également aux Savans qui voudront connoitre les écrits de nos anciens auteurs, et à ceux qui voudront les publier, non seulement de ne point se fier aux anciens imprimés, mais de ne point se contenter de la lecture d’un seul manuscrit et d’en conférer le plus qu’ils pourront les uns avec les autres.”

From the collation of manuscripts two results could be expected: first, that all the elements of a text could be reconstituted in their entirety, and second, that the text could be restored to its original form. In the case of collections like the troubadour poems, the Chansons of Thibaut de Navarre, or the Fabliaux, each manuscript contained a different selection of works, and Sainte-Palaye’s primary aim was to recover as many items as possible from all the available manuscripts. While he duly entered variants in the margins of his copies, he did not attempt to reconstitute correct readings on the basis of the manuscript tradition itself. It is unlikely that this restraint was due to any feeling that the manuscripts he possessed or had examined were equally valid and authoritative editions of the text, that is to say, that there was more than one exemplar. Such an idea is too sophisticated to have been held by an eighteenth-century medievalist. Quite simply Sainte-Palaye had no material basis for preferring one reading to another. When he did query the texts, his proposed emendations were in reality independent of the manuscript tradition—marginal queries and suggestions are found even when he was working from a single manuscript—and they were grounded, like Bentley’s emendations, in the editor’s knowledge of the author and his medium. Sainte-Palaye’s studies of the style and language of the Old French authors, his attempt to distinguish the various phases through which Old French passed, and the changing forms and meanings of its vocabulary are completely in line with this approach to the texts. But it is unlikely that he would have incorporated his emendations

6 MAI 17:787.

7 In a short appreciation of Dacier’s edition of Froissart, Molinier states that this was the aim of much textual work in the eighteenth century. (Sources de l’histoire de France, 4:16.)
in a text which he intended to have published. For the most part, indeed, he was querying the work of the scribe who had copied the manuscript for him, and though this implied the right to emend, it is not certain that Sainte-Palaye would have used it. On the whole, he employed the methods of internal criticism as Mabillon had done, in order to detect interpolations and major structural alterations to the text by later hands and to date his manuscripts. The notices of manuscripts which he continued to compile until the end of his life bear witness to the sureness with which he combined the evidence of language and style with more strictly palaeographic evidence to date a manuscript and spot changes made to it by later copyists.  

Nineteenth century scholars commented on the soundness of Sainte-Palaye’s criticism. In 1867–68 J. Brackelmann published Sainte-Palaye’s transcription of the Berne manuscript (no. 389) of the Chansons of Thibaut de Navarre and drew attention to his attempt to restore the proper order of the verses of one of the songs (“C’est dou conte debair e docenin son ganre”), which had obviously been copied incorrectly in the manuscript. Although Sainte-Palaye did not solve the problem, Brackelmann declared, he pointed it out, and Brackelmann contrasted his approach with that of Paulin Paris, who had published the poem in the form in which it stood in the manuscript without so much as commenting on the question of the verse order, even though he had in fact consulted Sainte-Palaye’s transcription of the manuscript.

Bentley had argued against Collins that far from leading to uncertainty and justifying Pyrrhonism, a large number of manuscripts, containing a large number of variant readings, provided a surer means of reconstructing an original text than a single manuscript. “If there had been but one manuscript of the Greek Testament at the restoration of learning about two centuries ago,” he asked, “... would the text be in a better condition then, than now

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8 Additional notices of MSS in Moreau 1474, fols. 345-402; Moreau 1723, fols. 92-93; Moreau 1725, entire volume.


10 Paris’s edition of this song in Histoire litteraire de la France (1856), 28:773. It was also published in the same order of stanzas by C. Hofmann in a paper read to the Bavarian Academy. (Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie zu München [1867], 2:486-527.)
we have 30,000 (variant readings)? But Bentley did not have in mind that the manuscript tradition itself could be studied historically. Sainte-Palaye was in a similar position. In a number of cases—Froissart’s Chronicles, the troubadour poems, the Fabliaux; the Chansons of Thibaut de Navarre and several thirteenth century romances—he gathered together with considerable success all the versions, written and printed, on which he could lay hands.

But, having done so, he found himself confronted with the problem of recension. Since Lachmann, scholars are accustomed to construct a genealogical table or tree (stemma) of the entire written tradition and to establish the relationship between the different manuscripts of a tradition on the basis of their origin. This method of work was unknown to the scholars of the eighteenth century. To many of them the age of a manuscript still constituted the best guarantee of its reliability. This was not an unreasonable supposition in the case of medieval manuscripts. Since they had long been regarded as part of a living tradition, they had constantly been modernized with respect to language, to style, and even to content.
for the benefit of later generations of readers. The tendency to modernize medieval manuscripts has been pointed out by many modern critics, but eighteenth century scholars like Sainte-Palaye or Capperonnier were quite aware of it.\textsuperscript{16} Again, unlike the classical scholar, the medievalist might hope to discover a manuscript contemporary with the Urschrift, even a direct apograph of it. Respect for the age of a manuscript was not therefore altogether unjustifiable, particularly if the author and his date were known. Closely associated in the mind of the eighteenth-century medievalist with the notion of age was the notion of quality. A good manuscript was one which had been copied faithfully and which had suffered few alterations, interpolations, and stylistic or linguistic corrections. A bad manuscript was almost invariably a late one, which had been altered to suit the requirements of a later generation of readers. The idea of the good manuscript was the counterpart in textual studies of the idea of the reliable historical authority. Faced with the need to assess each historical testimony on its merits and to discard the idea that all classical historians were canonical authorities, many scholars at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century had tended to look for a convenient measuring-rod, and after carefully investigating the reliability of a number of sources, usually lighted on one which they considered superior to all others and could apply with confidence on all occasions. We have already observed how Bouhier selected Herodotus, and Sainte-Palaye Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in this way.

How was a text established on the basis of these two closely related criteria of age and quality? Careless editors, like Lenglet du Fresnoy, for instance, might work from a printed edition, making arbitrary corrections here and there on the basis of manuscripts in their possession, which they referred to vaguely as "ancien" or "très ancien" but of which they rarely gave an adequate description.\textsuperscript{17} Others, more scrupulous, like Capperonnier, would reject


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Le Roman de la Rose, par Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun dit Clopinel, revu sur plusieurs Editions et sur quelques anciens manuscrits} . . . ed. Lenglet du Fresnoy (Paris, 1735).
late manuscripts out of hand and take as their basic text the oldest manuscript available.\(^\text{18}\) The weakness of this method of basing a text on an authoritative manuscript became apparent, however, when editors were confronted with a number of more or less equally “good” (that is, linguistically convincing) manuscripts of approximately equal age.

At this point editors usually resorted to the methods of the classical scholars: i.e., the selection of one manuscript for the text, and the piling up of variants in the notes. This was by and large the method followed by Lévesque de la Ravalière for his edition of Thibaut de Navarre, and there is little reason to doubt that if Sainte-Palaye had published the poems of the troubadours in a complete edition he would have used the same method. The idea that it was possible to base a text on a study of the relations between the manuscripts had occurred to no one. The *recensio*, as it became known to nineteenth-century scholars, was never practiced by the medievalists of the eighteenth century. The best editions were preceded, not by a classification, but by an “Examen” of the manuscripts.

Sainte-Palaye’s series of studies of Froissart includes such an examination of the manuscripts of the Chronicles. This examination reveals an acute sense of language and of style, and the ability to use this sense in order to advance beyond the concept of antiquity; it also shows up the limitations of Sainte-Palaye’s method.

In general Sainte-Palaye accepted the common criterion of antiquity. Thus, he wrote of two manuscripts of the first book of the Chronicles (Bib. Reg. 8318, 8331, now B.N. 2641, 2662, Luce A8, A18) that “quoyqu’il manque plusieurs choses dans l’un et dans l’autre, l’ancienneté doit leur faire donner la préférence.”\(^\text{19}\) On the other hand, his feeling for the linguistic and stylistic character of a manuscript led him to reject this criterion on occasion in favor of what is implicitly a criterion of origin. Discussing a manuscript of the third book of the Chronicles (Bib. Reg. 8325, now B.N. 2650) he remarked: “Ce manuscrit qui n’est que du milieu du XV siècle est celuy où le langage du vieux temps est le mieux conservé: apparemment il a esté copié sur quelque autre plus ancien, et meilleur que ceux qui nous restent ... C’est encore l’ancien langage

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\(^\text{19}\) ‘Jugement de l’histoire de Froissart,’ *MAI* 13:574–75.
qui me porte à regarder le manuscrit 8329 (now 2654), quoyqu'il ne soit guère que de la fin du XV siècle, comme le meilleur que nous ayons pour le quatrième volume." Sainte-Palaye did not push this reasoning any further. As it stands, however, it is sufficient to demonstrate that he was dimly conscious of the question of the filiation of manuscripts.

The idea that a late manuscript might stand closer to the Urschrift than a number of older ones, arrived at on the basis of a Bentleian type of criticism, implied that a more refined kind of external criticism might be applied to the manuscript tradition than that used by the seventeenth-century scholars, but there was no theory behind this insight and no attempt to develop it systematically. This is clear from the way Sainte-Palaye dealt with the Froissart manuscripts, treating them on the whole singly, in isolation from each other, or simply listing them without comment. It is hard to see how he could have established a text of the Chronicles, if that had been his intention, on any other principles than those currently followed by his contemporaries. His discussion of the famous Breslau manuscript of the Chronicles, which had recently been rediscovered, and for which extravagant claims were being made, reveals how far he was from abandoning the conven-

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20 Ibid., p. 575.
21 In a letter to the Dutch scholar D'Orville of August 1, 1732—immediately before Sainte-Palaye read his paper on Froissart—Jeremiah Markland made a similar observation to that of Sainte-Palaye: "You were mentioning a MS Proper- tius which you have . . . You seemed to think that it is of no great value; it is possible that it may be very modern, and yet taken from a good copy." Markland expresses his opinion "that modern MSS often help us out where more ancient ones leave us in the dark," respectfully and deferentially, as if he were putting forward a new idea. Markland's letter is printed in Euripides' Supplices Mullieres, cum notis Jer. Markandi integralibus (Oxon, 1811), pp. 295-96. I am indebted to Professor G. Giarrizzo for drawing my attention to it.
22 On the Breslau MS, see A. Schultz, Beschreibung der Breslauer Bilderband-schrift des Froissart (Breslau, 1896); A. Linder, Der Breslauer Froissart (Berlin, 1912). These works deal mainly with the miniatures, but have useful historical introductions. According to Sainte-Palaye, it was claimed that the Breslau MS "décloît par tout la mauvaise foi de Sauvage qui dans son Édition de Froissart avoit corrompu tous les anciens mots, les noms propres et les noms de lieux, altéré et perverti tous les faits et tellement tronqué cette précieuse histoire qu'on y reconnoissoit à peine la dixième partie de celle qu'on trouvoit dans le MS de Breslaw." (Bréquigny 48, fols. 292-93.) Sauvage's edition had been judged unsatisfactory even by some contemporaries, and a new edition was planned in 1563-65 by the Antwerp printer Christophe Plantin. This would have used the Breslau MS, then at Schoonhoven, South Holland, to correct the text of Sauvage. (Cf. G. Raynaud, 'Une édition de Froissart projetée par Christophe Plantin,' Mélanges Julien Havet [Paris, 1895], pp. 515-19.) Sainte-Palaye did well, how-
tional treatment of the manuscript tradition. He questioned the authority of this manuscript on two main grounds—antiquity and conformity. The Breslau manuscript, he declared, “ne remonte guère au delà de la fin du XV siècle et ... il est par conséquent d’une médiocre autorité.” The combined weight of “plus de 40 MSS de Froissart que j’avois maniez et dont plusieurs devaient estre d’autant plus fidèles qu’il n’y avoit pas lieu de douter qu’ils n’eussent esté faits les uns pour le Roy et les autres pour la Reyne d’Angleterre à qui il paroissoit que l’auteur mesme les avoit présentez” was, understandably, even more damning. The Breslau manuscript would have to be regarded, therefore, with great caution: “On ne se persuadera pas aisément que le seul Manuscrit de Breslaw contienne seul des différences si considérables.” These comments were made in 1735, before he had received any but the scantest information about the Breslau manuscript. Shortly afterward he took steps to obtain a collation of this manuscript with Sauvage’s edition of the text. Unfortunately the most valuable part of a paper he prepared on the results of this collation has been lost, but from what remains of it, it would appear that he had not altered his opinion. For the first book of the Chronicles, the only manuscripts he knew were of the first, unrevised version of the work (“A” manuscripts in Luce’s edition), but for the second book, of six manuscripts he consulted, four represented the revised version (“B” manuscripts in Luce), and the Breslau manuscript also fell into this category. The idea that there might be two

ever, to insist that early editors should not be criticized glibly (Cf. Lenglet du Fresnoy on Sauvage in Méthode pour étudier l’histoire [Paris, 1713], 2:104), and that the value of their work must be assessed only after careful examination of their methods and sources.


24 A directive indicating which passages he wanted to have collated is in Bréquigny 48, fols. 288–91.

25 Bréquigny 48, fols. 292–93: “Je dis alors (i.e., in 1735) dans mon Mémoire que je persistois dans mon sentiment jusqu’à ce qu’on nous eust fait voir quelqu’un de ces passages importans du MS de Breslaw qui manquoient dans l’Edit. de Sauvage. Enfin nous avons eu toutes les prétendues additions ou augmentations de ce fameux MS. Je les ai soigneusement examinées. Et si je ne me trompe, voici le jugement qu’on en peut porter, aujourd’hui avec une pleine connoissance de cause ...” The MS breaks off at this point, but it is clear that Sainte-Palaye had not altered his previous opinion. Sainte-Palaye’s assessment of the Breslau MS was accepted by Dacier and by Buchon in the early nineteenth century; cf. Chroniques de Froissart, vol. 1, Preface, pp. xiv–xvi. (Collection des chroniques nationales françaises [Paris, 1824–28].)

26 See Appendix 2.
stages of Froissart’s text and two manuscript traditions never en­
tered Sainte-Palaye’s head, however, and he could not, therefore, appreciate the importance of the Breslau manuscript. Those who claimed that the Breslau manuscript invalidated all the others showed, of course, no greater understanding.

Although mistakes were made, the tremendous breakthrough in understanding and methodology accomplished by the scholars of the eighteenth century commands respect. Their textual criticism, based on their knowledge of the general structures—historical, linguis­
tic, stylistic—of which any given text, passage, or word was a part, was often of a high order, and if their understanding of the material aspects of textual tradition was limited, they at least did not suffer from the obsession with them which afflicted many scholars in the nineteenth century. They remained thoroughly conscious of their responsibility as critics. It is interesting that in recent years a number of scholars have shown themselves increas­
ingly critical of the recensio as it was practiced in the nineteenth century and have re-emphasized the importance of confronting every element in a manuscript with the totality of our knowledge of the language and the literary and cultural traditions to which the text belongs.27

Within its historical limits, Sainte-Palaye’s work on medieval texts was particularly valuable. He was probably the first scholar in France to study texts in the vernacular with the care that had hitherto been reserved for classical texts, combining exhaustive ex­
amination of all the elements of the tradition—which in the case of

27 In a famous article published in 1928, Joseph Bédier declared himself totally skeptical of the possibility of any truly scientific study of manuscript tradition, and advocated a return to the methods of the humanists—i.e., publishing the text of a ‘good’ manuscript with a minimum of alteration. (‘La Tradition manuscrite du Lai de l’Ombre,’ Romania [1928], 54:161-96, 321-56.) A more moderate view has been put forward recently by the English classical scholar George Thomson. In words reminiscent of Bentley, Thomson declared, in his 1938 edition of the Oresteia, that “whether a particular reading is true or false is a question to be decided in the light of the whole body of the linguistic and literary evidence, which is independent of the authority of particular MSS. Our opinion of the relative value of the MSS must be determined by that evidence and cannot be used to override it” (2:361-62). As a modern scholar, however, Thomson naturally rejects the critic’s ‘feeling for style’ as a valid criterion and looks rather for help to scientific study and classification of errors and to improved application of linguistic controls as well as of our knowledge of the traditional themes and ideas of the culture of which the text in question is part. (Cf. ‘Marxism and Textual Criticism,’ Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Gesellschafts-und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe [1963], 12:43-52.)
medieval works especially, he realized, must include early printed versions as well as manuscripts— with the careful internal criticism which Bentley and the English school had developed to a high degree of refinement.

Sainte-Palaye had the foresight to see that early printed editions are worth consulting for readings which they may have preserved from MSS subsequently lost. He praises Sauvage because "il a eu la précaution de rapporter en marge l'ancienne leçon toute défectueuse qu'elle étoit." (MAI 13:560.) This respect for all the elements of the written tradition is characteristic of his approach. At the same time he set great store by translations and carefully listed all the translations of Froissart which he knew of, believing that they could help to identify place and proper names.