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History as Moral Instruction:
John Lydgate's Record of *Troie Toun*

by

John Studer [*]

A student familiar to some degree with the classical story of Troy is likely to be surprised when he encounters Middle English versions of the story. He may find, first of all, that the supernatural elements have been removed, inasmuch as some medieval versions do not tell "how goddes fought in þe filde, folke as þe were," as one author complains that Homer did. Moreover, he may discover that the events of the classical story have been shifted, as it were, to a medieval setting, because often in Middle English versions the warriors of Troy are now referred to as knights, and incidents are related in which the only remaining classical elements are the names of persons and places. Emphases have been radically altered: Hector is the hero of medieval Troy, Aeneas is a traitor, and the Trojans are favored over the Greeks. Finally, the student may be puzzled at what can only be called the *attitude* of the medieval author, who regards his material as history and pauses to point out the lessons of his story to the reader.

This situation is especially true in John Lydgate's *Troy Book* (1412-1420), in which, for instance, characters are presented as historical models of good and bad behavior and are, sometimes, nearly abstracted into "types." More important, though, is Lydgate's continual emphasis upon the consequences of certain behaviors. He narrates the actions that have led to a character's downfall, then digresses to discuss the general consequences of such behavior, and finally returns to warn the reader to heed the character's fate; or he simply points out that the misfortunes are an example of, perhaps, the consequences of hasty, impulsive judgments. In short, Lydgate takes every opportunity to draw a moral from his story and frequently thrusts one into it. In a word, he has *moralized* the story of Troy.

While Lydgate's obvious purpose in the *Troy Book* is to instruct, the reasons for his alteration of the classical story cannot be completely understood without a knowledge of several influences and forces that preceded his century. Of course, the dominance of the Church in the Middle Ages is an historical commonplace as is the fact that much medieval literature was didactic. However, "medieval literature" includes the translations and re-tellings of such *classical* literature as had survived in the West, and to say that everything was done for the glory

of God and His Church in the Middle Ages is too simple an explanation for the subsequent alteration and moralizing of these classical stories. The complete explanation lies in several related and overlapping fields — in the development of allegorical interpretation, which provided a natural means of reconciling pagan literature to the Church-dominated society of the Middle Ages; in Biblical exegesis, which gave impetus and legitimacy to the allegorization of classical literature; in the necessary use of pagan writings in the Church schools, which further increased allegorization and turned it to more didactic purposes; and in medieval conceptions of classical fable and theories of poetry which in themselves were the result and culmination of these earlier influences. Briefly, these are the forces and tendencies that clearly have shaped Lydgate's *Troy Book* so that it serves as an example of the medieval use of "history" for the purposes of moral instruction.

This work, undertaken at the request of Prince Henry, is merely one of a long line of medieval re-tellings of the ancient story of Troy.[1] For a source, Lydgate chose Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (*c.* 1287), at the time considered to be an authoritative version of the legend.[2] In turn, Guido's book was an unacknowledged and unabridged translation of Benòit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troye,* a work that initiated the practice of recasting older classical materials in terms of medieval thought.[3] The ultimate sources for most medieval versions of the Troy-story, however, were the fourth- and sixth-century forgeries of Dares and Dictys, presumably based upon eyewitness accounts of the famous war.[4] Each contained an elaborate introduction establishing its authenticity, but, more importantly, each eliminated some of the elements of Homer's supernaturalism.[5] For example, Dares' pro-Trojan account depicts the Judgment of Paris as a dream[6] and radically alters many other well known Homeric details, making Achilles treacherous, Ulysses tricky and deceitful, and Aeneas traitorous, the latter betraying the Trojans to the Greeks.[7] The fact that Homer's works (except for a first-century Latin condensation of the *Iliad*) were not well known in Western Europe until the late fourteenth century perhaps makes less mystifying these frequent medieval distortions.[8] Nevertheless, Benòit, believing Homer untrustworthy, chose Dares as a source, occasionally supplementing this material with some of Dictys' observations.[9] Dares and Dictys' "eyewitness" accounts were accepted

[1] J. R. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English,* p. 110.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 107; also, W. F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate,* p. 43.

[3] G. A. Panton and David Donaldson, (eds.), *The "Gest Historiale" of the Destruction of Troy,* p. ix; Margaret Schlauch, *English Medieval Literature,* p. 181.

[4] Wells, *op. cit.,* pp. 106-108.

[5] N. E. Griffin, "Un-Homeric Elements in the Medieval Story of Troy," *JEGP,* VII (January, 1908), 35-36.

[6] *Ibid.,* p. 35; also, Margaret R. Scherer, *The Legends of Troy in Art and Literature,* pp. 15-16.

[7] Griffin, *op. cit.,* p. 35.

[8] Scherer, *op. cit.,* p. xiii.

[9] Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature,* p. 53; Scherer, *op. cit.,* p. 224.

by poets and historians, and Homer came to be regarded as a late, pre-judiced commentator on the side of the Greeks. [10] Furthermore, because several nations had adopted the legend of a Trojan origin, Dares' pro-Trojan version became highly popular, especially in England, where Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* was primarily responsible for the deep rooting of the idea of a Trojan ancestry in British minds. [11] Thus, Benoît's *Roman de Troye* and Guido's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* became major sources for later medieval accounts of the Troy legend. Guido altered the story to explain away certain pagan aspects of the narrative, and Lydgate further expanded Guido's material, putting it to didactic uses. [12]

Lydgate opens the Prologue to *Troy Book* with an invocation to Mars, asking for assistance in the composition of the work (1-45). [13] That he believes in the *history* of his tale is apparent in his enlisting Mars' help in obtaining Clio for a Muse (40). [14] He explains Prince Henry's desire "Of verray knyȝthod to remembre ageyn, / The worthynes . . . / And the prowesse of olde chiualrie" (76-78). One learns that this Prince also enjoys ancient stories containing examples of *vertu* worthy of imitation that ". . . eschewe / The cursyd vice of slouthe and ydelnesse" (82-83). Moreover, it is out of a strong sense of national pride and a faith in the power of the vernacular that Prince Henry has commissioned Lydgate to prepare an English translation of the *Troy Book:*

> [So that] the noble story openly wer knowe
> In oure tonge, aboute in euery age,
> And y-writen as wel in oure langage
> As in latyn and in frensche it is;
> That of the store þe trouth[e] we nat mys
> No more than doth eche other nacioun.

> (112-117)

Finally, Lydgate assures the reader that this version will be true and filled with examples of noble deeds worthy of emulation.

He discusses, next, the importance of ancient writers to society and cites the present history as one that has been compiled over the centuries by honest writers who told the truth so that men of succeeding ages would not be ". . . begyled / Of necligence thoruȝ forȝetilnesse" (147-155). He argues that, without old writings, "Dethe with his swerde" would have obscured the "gret[e] prowes" of past heroes and have "dirk[ed] eke the briȝtnesse of her fame, / That schyneth ȝet by

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[10] George Saintsbury, *The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory,* p. 169.

[11] A. E. Parsons, "The Trojan Legend in Britain," *MLR,* XXIV (1929), 253.

[12] J. S. P. Tatlock, "The Epilogue of Chaucer's *Troilus,*" *MP,* XVIII (1921), 642, fn. 3.

[13] Numbers in parentheses indicate lines in *Lydgate's Troy Book,* edited by Henry Bergen for *EETS.*

[14] Later (II.178), Lydgate deprecates his talents as a poet, complaining that "Clyo" came late to him in life.

report of her name" (171-176).[15] Furthermore, he is confident that the old books exploiting noble deeds may be trusted, because they ". . . represent / With-out[e] feynynge" the lives of heroes (177-178). Nevertheless, he warns the reader of a writer's great power:

> For after deth clerkis lityl drede
> After desert for to bere witnesse,
> Nor of a tyraunt the trouthe to expresse,
> As men disserue, with-oute excepcioun.
>
> (184-187)

Indirectly, he suggests that his version is "true." He recalls, as well, how writers in ancient times were honored (195-197) and how their efforts have preserved priceless documents from antiquity, otherwise lost to posterity (198-225). Finally, after alluding to the story of Thebes and its historian (226-244), he turns to the Troy-story, first naming its previous recorders (245-248), observing that the "dillygence of cronyc[u]leris" has preserved the truth of the tale, keeping it new, fresh, and so well reported that neither "deth nor age" can diminish its power (246-259).

On the other hand, he admits that, over the centuries, some men have falsified the story, transforming it in their poetry "Thoruʒ veyn[e] fables, whiche of entencioun / They han contreved by false transump-cioun / To hyde trouthe falsely vnder cloude" (263-265). At this point, he ridicules Homer, who departed from the truth by pretending that the gods helped the Greeks against the Trojans and fought among them like men (267-275). Nor does he trust Ovid, who ". . . poetycal-ly hath closyd / Falsehede with trouthe," tricking the reader with "mysty speche" (299-303). Moreover, he thinks that even Vergil distorted the facts, in part because he followed Homer (304-308). Finally, he is convinced that Dares and Dictys are trustworthy, having told the story so accurately that no discrepancies may be found in their accounts (310-316). Briefly, then, he traces the descent of the *true* story of Troy to Guido's version which he, in turn, identifies as his source (317-375). In a final plea to the reader to correct him when he errs, he closes the introduction (376-384).

From the beginning, Lydgate regards his material as "history," agree-ing with Prince Henry that a "noble story" is potentially a valuable source of moral instruction. However, he considers this history to be didactic in an entirely different way. For example, in his epilogue, where, after detailing miscellaneous statistics on the siege, praising his patron, and briefly reviewing his reasons for undertaking this royal commission, he alludes to the major "lesson" of work:

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[15] Judging from this statement, one would expect Lydgate to make a greater effort to present various characters as exemplars of behavior; however, while he praises some (Hector and Troilus), he does not recommend that they be imitated. Schirmer, *op. cit.*, p. 47, may be correct in thinking that Lydgate did not always share Prince Henry's point of view.

In þis boke . . . ful wel beholde
Chaunge of Fortune, in hir cours mutable,
Selde or nat feithful ouþer stable.

(V. 3546-3548)

After a catalogue of examples of Fortune's mutability to be found in the work, he asserts, once more, that "þer is nouþer prince, lord, nor kyng, / Be exaumple of Troye, like as ȝe may se, / Þat in þis lif may haue ful surete" (V.3565-3578). He concludes, therefore, that man should trust Christ alone, Who can turn a battle, make princes strong, cast down tyrants, and "taquite [each man] liche as he disserueth" (V.3579-3592). The lesson is perfectly clear: since Fortune is totally capricious, all worldly desires are transitory. Consequently, *be exaumple of Troye*, no man, regardless of his station, may think himself secure. [16] Hence, the entire Troy-story becomes an example of Lydgate's moral, being, as it is, the story of "Lordes, princes . . . / Sodeinly brouȝt in aduersite, / And kynges eke plounged in pouert" (V.3549-3551). It is a history of "Vnwar slauȝter compassed of envie, / Mordre execut by conspirasie" (V.3553-3554). It is filled with examples of "liggyng falshede and tresoun," of "kyngdammys sodeyn euersioun," and of the "rauysshyng of wommen for delyt" (V.3555-3557). Conceivably, the total narrative illustrates the moral that he wishes to stress as he frequently interrupts his tale to extract another lesson from "history." [17] When he resumes the narrative, he usually exhorts the reader to "take hede" of the unfolding example.

Because he rarely practices economy of expression, he is often criticized. For example, Bennett complains that, at the very mention of medieval stock subjects, Lydgate seizes the opportunity to pour forth his knowledge or indulge in ". . . trite and dreary moralizing with a seemingly unending series of examples." [18] Lewis is also conscious of an unbounded "fatal garrulity." [19] Schirmer observes that Lydgate takes every opportunity to moralize, "even at the cost of the narrative." [20] In all fairness to the poet, however, Ayers points out that these and similar comments are valid only if one assumes that Lydgate's main objective is always the story or that his primary purpose is always to narrate. [21] Since Lydgate's avowed intention is to instruct, one may hardly designate these expansive passages as digressions, much less censure Lydgate for including them. In fact, at times, the narrative is no more than a frame-

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[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48, notes Lydgate's "theme of transitoriness" and his digressions on Fortune, but mentions them separately, whereas the two are joined in Lydgate's argument.

[17] It is obvious from Lydgate's summary of his story that he considers the entire narrative to be a moral example, and, as stated above, the entire story could (with some difficulty) be read as such an example. However, the present study is concerned with Lydgate's use of his material — that is, with his actual practice of drawing a moral from specific incidents in the narrative.

[18] H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, p. 145.

[19] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 240.

[20] Schirmer, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[21] R. W. Ayers, "Medieval History, Moral Purpose, and the Structure of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*," *PMLA*, LXXIII (1958), 463.

work for moral instruction, a stock of historical incidents, as it were, from which to select examples of noble behavior. In writing thus openly with a moral aim, Lydgate clearly follows an ancient tradition of using classical themes for moral instruction.

His initial comments upon Fortune's power occur early in Book I, when Jason's forces, in quest of the Golden Fleece, land near Troy (I.72-732). Here, Lydgate is careful to explain that, although the Greeks meant no harm to the Trojans, merely wishing to pause for a short time in the course of their journey (I.733-740), it was "þe ordre of Fortunys myȝt" that moved the Trojans to fear the Greeks as agressors (I.750-758). The ultimate effect of this misunderstanding was the subsequent war ("þe cause of þis suspecioun / Hath many brouȝt vn-to destruccioun," I.759-760). Later, in a long introduction to Book II (1-202), he reinterprets these same events, observing, now, that, because Fortune is "blinde, fikel, and vnstable" (II.5), she guarantees peace to no men but destroys them at the height of their powers (II.7-11). Thus, he urges all men to shun Fortune (II.12-68). Repeating that Fortune will "ouercaste" whoever trusts her (II.69-72), he interprets the events of Book I:

> Sethe here example of kyng Lamedoun,
> Whom sche [Fortune] haþ brouȝ to confusioun
> For litel cause, and for a þing of nouȝt;
> Hir cruelte he haþe to dere a-bouȝt.
>
> (II.73-78)

Then, directly addressing the reader, he commands:

> Make ȝow a merour of þis lamedoun,
> And beþ wel war to do no violence
> Vn-to straungers, whan þei do noon offence,
> Whan þei com fer in-to ȝoure regioun.
>
> (II.83-87)

Because the Trojans' harsh treatment of the Greeks led ultimately to the destruction of Troy, he reminds one that strangers always should be kindly received (II.91-118). He reiterates that the conflict and deaths of those involved were the results of "smal occasion" (II.119-124). Thus, he makes Fortune responsible for Lamedon's fate, for the destruction of Troy, and for the Trojan war. This argument, moreover, is exclusively Lydgate's, as are most of his comments upon Fortune in the expansions of his source material.

Once again amplifying his source, in the episode of Priam's naval engagement with the Greeks (II.1786-1790), Lydgate rebukes Priam for lacking wisdom and prudence in choosing to fight (II.1797-1856) and warns, once more, that capricious Fortune always betrays those who trust her:

> As ȝe may se be example of Priamus,
> Þat of foly is so desyrous

To wirke of hede & folwe his oune wille,
To trouble, allas, þe calm of his tranquille.

(II.1879-1882)

Insisting that Priam's fate exemplifies the futility of war, he exhorts the reader to "late Priam alweys ӡour meror ben" (II.1883-1902). Later, after failing to dissuade Priam on numerous occasions from entering into the conflict, he blames Fortune for starting wars (II.2183-2304; 2908-2984; 3161-3211; 3267-3279). He laments that, because she has "turned hir whele vnstable," she has enticed the Trojans into a battle that will destroy them (II.3208-3291). He reflects, then, that wise and prudent counsel is vain, since "Fortune will haue hir cours alwey, / Whos purpos holt seyth ӡe or nay" (II.3295-3308). Again, he points out that human success is temporal, as illustrated in the successful Trojan expedition against the Temple of Venus (II.3819-3889) and in the removal of Helen to Troy (II.4097-4189). Here, Fortune has only "falsly gan to smyle" and, while she favors the Trojans at the moment, her blessing is only temporary, because they "litel wist" the fate awaiting them (II.4225-4269). Once again, it is significant that these and similar comments occur in Lydgate's expansions of his source.

Fortune also determines the outcome of specific minor events. For example, when the Trojans drive the Greeks from the battlefield, merely to spoil them before returning to Troy (III.1949-1958), Lydgate explains that it is Fortune who has prevented a Trojan victory, because the Trojans would have defeated the Greeks had not Fortune turned her wheel and blinded them (especially Hector) to the consequences of their withdrawal (III.1959-1996). He regrets that the Trojans lacked wisdom and prudence in not pressing their advantage while Fortune favored them (III.1997-2009), but he recalls that she always deserts those who once refuse her favor (III.2010-2026). He repeats that the Trojans might have triumphed over the Greeks has they not "reffused folily" to try their luck (III.2027-2035). On the other hand, his explanation of Hector's withdrawing the Trojan forces at the request of a Greek cousin (III.2125-2134) makes the preceding comments appear to be somewhat contrived, although it emphasizes, again, his desire to extract a moral from his narrative Later, when Achilles agrees to a scheme for killing Hector (III.2716-2718), Lydgate reflects upon the dangers of trusting Fortune, noting that Achilles must now beware that Fortune does not "loke on hym with a froward chere" and cause him "to falle hym silfe in ӡe same dyche / Þat he for Hector compassid haþ & shape" (III.2719-2729).

On two occasions, he refers to the story of Troilus and Cressid to illustrate his moral. In the first instance, he uses Troilus' sorrow over separation from Cressid as an example of Fortune's caprice:

Record on Troylus, þat fro þi whele so lowe
By fals envie þou hast ouer-þrowe,
Oute of þe Ioye which he was Inne,

> From his lady to make him for to twynne
> Whan he best wende for to haue be surid.
>
> (III.4082-4087)

In his second treatment of this story, he holds Fortune entirely responsible for the lovers' separation (III.4186-4233). Alluding to Chaucer's account of the earlier stages of this love affair, he argues that all went well with Troilus "Till Fortune gan vp-on hym frowne . . ." (III.4221), and draws from this incident a conclusion about the ephemeral nature of worldly things.

His treatment of the death of Ajax illustrates in a minor way this same concept.[22] When Ajax is fighting in the heat of battle (IV.3486-3501), Lydgate reflects that it is impossible to escape from Fortune's decrees, because she can

> . . . bring a man vnwarly to meschaunce
> Whan he best weneth to han assurance . . .
> Lik as it fel of worthy Thelamoun
> Þis same day. . . .
>
> (IV.6232-6234)

Later, in describing the Trojan celebration when the famous wooden horse is brought into the city (IV.6215-6221), he points out that, since woe and adversity always follow joy, one is foolish to trust present felicity:

> For worldly lust, þouȝ it be now blowe
> With pompe and pride, & with bost and soun,
> Anon it passeth: record of Troie toun . . . .
>
> (IV.6232-6234)

Finally, in two minor episodes, he uses the Greek triumph to repeat his warning that Fortune can easily turn against those who stand at the height of their powers. First, he follows his comments upon Fortune's caprice and the tenuous security of the Greeks in their victory (V.16-40) with a description of their envy over Ulysses' possession of a trophy from Troy (V.45-81). When the Greeks, on their return voyage, experience three days of perfect sailing weather (V.624-629) before a storm wrecks the fleet (V.640-656), he at once points out that Fortune may change when least expected (V.639-640).

The episode of Agamemnon's death is Lydgate's final illustration of the workings of Fortune. In a long passage preceding his description of the murder of Agamemnon, he regrets the "vnsur trust of al worldly glorie" and the "Ioie vnstable of veyn ambicioun" (V.1011-1013), concluding that fame, pomp, and triumphant honor are as transitory as shadows (V.1015-1018). Again, he observes that Fortune ("fals and

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[22] Lydgate also comments on Fortune in passing in II.2416-2417; IV.2683-2686; IV.4274-4276.

vnassured") is faithful to no man who sits highest on the "vnstable whele" (V.1019-1929), because she pulls down princes, dukes, great emperors, and all who "richest regne in her royal floures." He adds that the reader needs only to "take witnesse of Agamemnon, / Þat was so noble & myȝti in his lyve" (V.1030-1031), for whom "Reskus was noon . . ." (V.1043).

The *Troy Book* contains a variety of moral instruction concerned with Fortune's mutability and the ephemeral nature of worldly things. Viewed as sheer narrative, it is a verbose, dull, boresome work filled with bothersome digressions that fail to advance the story. In granting Lydgate his moral purpose, however, one sees the work as an example of the medieval use of "history" for instruction. Lydgate's method is direct, almost to the point of bluntness. He never hesitates to interrupt the narrative to discuss the workings of Fortune, to reflect upon the consequences of certain events, or to warn the reader to give serious consideration to the examples thus cited.

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