CHAPTER 2

LATIN AND FRENCH AS LANGUAGES OF THE PAST IN NORMANDY DURING THE REIGN OF HENRY II: ROBERT OF TORIGNI, STEPHEN OF ROUEN, AND WACE

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There was no shortage of interest in the past in Normandy during the reign of Henry II. Although Latin was the conventional language employed by historians writing about the past, the vernacular became an important medium. The juxtaposition of Latin and French raises various questions about patronage, authorship, audience, and gender. These can be explored through a study of the work of three contemporary Norman historians in particular: Robert of Torigni, monk of Bec (ca. 1128–54) and abbot of Mont Saint-Michel (1154–86), Stephen of Rouen, monk of Bec (d. after 1170), and Wace, born at Jersey, educated at Paris and Caen, and later canon of Bayeux (d. after 1174). All three were clergymen: two monks and one secular clerk. All three were excellent Latinists, well versed in Latin historiography and court documentation, but only Abbot Robert and Stephen wrote, as far as we know, exclusively in Latin, while Wace used the vernacular. Yet, while Stephen and Wace preferred verse, Abbot Robert’s work is in prose. The close connection between Henry II’s mother, Empress Matilda (d. 1167), and the monastery of Bec no doubt explains the personal knowledge of her revealed by the monks Robert and Stephen. Did they write as a result of her request or in expectation of patronage? Either way, a good knowledge of Latin on Matilda’s part need not only be assumed but can be proven by other evidence. To what extent she may have been responsible for the choice of prose or verse and the
selection of past events to be recorded are similarly intriguing questions. Wace, on the other hand, did endlessly appeal to King Henry II and Queen Eleanor (d. 1203) for gifts, money, and support. These requests are woven into his vernacular verse-history of the dukes of Normandy. Are they simply to be explained by his position as a professional writer who lived off the proceeds of his literary skills? One theme that runs across all three works is that of filial war and fraternal strife. Abbot Robert and Wace are concerned with the wars between the sons of William the Conqueror (1035–87). Robert praises Henry I (1100–35) as a victimized brother who ultimately triumphed as king and duke, while Robert Curthose (1087–1106, d. 1134), the rebellious eldest son and negligent brother, is rehabilitated by Wace. Stephen attributes Henry II’s survival (his brothers Geoffrey (d. 1158) and William (d. 1163/4) had predeceased him) as “unicus filius” [an only son], to the exceptional support of Empress Matilda. The theme of fraternal strife can be explained by reference to Henry II’s troubles with his sons, Henry the Young King (d. 1183), Richard I (1189–99), and Geoffrey (d. 1186) during their rebellion in the early 1170s. The queen mothers, Empress Matilda and Queen Eleanor, provide a marked contrast in the Norman narratives. While praise is heaped on the former, the latter is virtually ignored. Hence only an evaluation of Empress Matilda’s command of languages will be presented in this chapter.

**Patronage**

The three aforementioned Norman historians do provide information, at times tantalizingly ambiguous, about literary patronage as a contractual relationship between a patron who requests a work to be written, or translated, and an author who does this in return for remuneration. The most explicit statement in this context concerns the potential rewards of writing history from the point of view of the author, and comes from Robert of Torigni in his letter to Gervase, prior of Saint-Cénery, asking him to write a history of Count Geoffrey of Anjou as duke of Normandy and count of Maine (ca. 1144–51). In this letter, written not long after the count’s death in September 1151, Robert sets out the advantages, as he sees them, for Gervase. He argues that not only would such a work bring Gervase fame, it would also bring him Robert’s gratitude and indebtedness, and, most importantly, it might bring him the not-inconsiderable favor of the young duke Henry II. At the time Robert was himself prior of Bec and the author of the updated *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* to which, as he explains in the letter, he added a book on Henry’s grandfather, Henry I. Presumably, therefore, what Robert holds out as advantages for Gervase reflects in some measure his own experience as redactor of the *Gesta*