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Historicity and Fictionality in Medieval Narrative

Literature today is made up of a relatively autonomous system “in which speech is defined from the outset as ‘speaking as if’ and everything said is subject to the stipulations of a fiction contract.” (Jan-Dirk Müller) For the European Middle Ages a pact of this kind cannot be shown to have existed, for lack of unequivocal evidence in regard to reception. What we do have comprises poetological rules and metapoetic statements by poets about their own and others’ works, statements, to be sure, which may in turn be suspected of fictionality. All the same, Walter Haug postulated in 1985 the ‘discovery of fictionality’ by Chrétien de Troyes in the latter half of the 12th century. In 2002, Dennis H. Green not only deemed, like Haug, most of the classical courtly romances to be purely fictional, but also concluded from certain older Latin works, such as ‘Ruodlieb’, that a “contract between author and audience [. . .] in a game of make-believe” had existed. This unleashed a scholarly furor and in some places even triggered a veritable medievalistic ‘pan-fictionalism’. This article argues for the existence of a medieval fictionality, altogether different, however, from its modern counterpart as regards the nature, aims and theoretical underpinnings of literary works.