



Between Prophecy and *Plainte* in the *Roman de Troie*

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If we wanted to define human civilization in a single pregnant formulation, we could say that it's the formal power to transform into value that which in nature hastens toward death.¹

Taking his cue from the “eye-witness” accounts of Dares and Dictys, Benoît de Sainte-Maure “translates” the entire history of the Trojan War from beginning to end, indeed from multiple beginnings in the stories of Jason and the Argonauts and Helen’s abduction by Paris, to the successive endings in the deaths of individual heroes, the annihilation of Troy, and the victors’ unhappy homecomings.² As Greeks and Trojans fight their way through cycles of destruction and restoration, Benoît’s thirty thousand plus octosyllabic verses are scanned by the repeated

¹ Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale* (p. 214), quoted and translated by Harrison 2003: 71.

²Benoît admits to adding “a few good words” (*aucun bon dit*, 142), while maintaining complete fidelity to his sources, Dares’ sixth-century *De excidio Trojae*, his main source, and Dictys’ *Ephemeris belli Trojani*. Both are chronological and continuous surveys of the war based on the Homeric cycles elaborated since Antiquity from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

refrains of events predicted and lamented. A network of announcements, foreshadowings, and predictions anticipate in general and in detail the chronological sequence of disastrous actions to come, “à venir” in Benoît’s French, producing *Aventure*, one of the narrator’s key terms linked to the inevitabilities of *Destinee* and *Fortune*.³ Those anticipations are inextricably intertwined with a series of formal lamentations, set pieces of rhetorical display that connect personal and communal responses in the face of death and the dead one whose body lies before the mourners and unleashes their grief, confirming that what was to come has indeed arrived. Doomsday prophecies and dolorous “plaintes,” announced and pronounced by characters and narrator alike, together form a nexus that crisscrosses the whole trajectory of Benoît’s romance.

When seen in conjunction with one another, prophecy and lament offer a privileged view into the philosophy of history, human life, and art inscribed in the *Roman de Troie*, where the chain of cause and effect builds inexorably from one act of violence to the next, triggered by the mechanism of revenge and required by the code of chivalric honor that motivates both Greek and Trojan knights, the medieval avatars of Homeric heroes. If the narrator seems to flirt again and again with the possibility that actions might turn out differently, no sooner does he open some wiggle room to escape from Fortune’s downfall, than the force of destiny reasserts itself with an effect paradoxically all the greater to the extent that the unavoidable is so often tied, as the narrator remarks, to such small things, “si petite achaison” (10182):⁴ the misprisions of rumor, the attractions of a woman. The interlocking set of prophecy and *plainte* forces characters as well as readers to acknowledge what we all know from the beginning, what destruction, what death has always been there from the start, however much we (or they) seek to deny it. Human lives lost will not return when Troy is restored, and even that restoration will remain temporary, subject to a new round of destruction in the apparently endless cycle round Fortune’s wheel. Only the work of art that transposes event into monument can escape the losses incurred through the passage of time and the replacement of successive

³ Benoît’s adventure is not yet connected to the excitement of the unexpected, as it will be in later twelfth-century romance.

⁴ See also 17551, 19299; cf. 18174, 18189-90. The two editions referenced here are Constans 1968 and Baumgartner and Viellard 1998. Both editions use the same verse numbers.

civilizations.⁵ The claimed Trojan and Greek sources, already transposed into Rome's Latin, make way for Benoît's French translation; antiquity yields its riches for a new Trojan War, elaborately reinvented for the twelfth-century public associated with the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we can measure across the chain of literary treasures what remains and what inevitably changes. The goal of this study then is discover what the rhetoric of prophecy and lamentation, commonplaces of history and epic, essential building blocks in the architecture of Benoît's romance, reveal about this medieval story of Troy.

In the *Roman de Troie*, prediction and lament face each other like book ends, neatly placed around the events narrated: prophecies, dream visions, divine oracles look forward to future action; the mourner's *planctus* turns back toward the past and confirms prophecy's fulfillment. Together they furnish a series of parentheses within parentheses, successively opened and then gradually closed. Of course, the interplay of shifting perspectives in time is more complex, as it plays with and against the rigorously linear progress of the narrative, intertwining past, present, and future. Mourners also look toward a future bereft of the loved one whose death they would share; occasionally they even see death imminent and pronounce their lament in its expectation. From the characters' point of view, the sequence of events cannot jump the natural order of unfolding time, though the special insight offered by predictions might give them some advantage in anticipating what lies ahead, some knowledge to avoid the disasters announced. Instead, prophecy remains largely powerless on the level of action, powerful rather on the level of knowledge and emotion. It weighs heavily on the readers who share the author/narrator's omniscience from the very beginning. Prediction and lament fit together so snugly, over and over again, that our sense of foreboding grows ever stronger; fatality despite foreknowledge takes and keeps hold even when the narrator or characters hypothesize other possible endings. If the Trojans hadn't failed to burn the Greek ships, if Achilles marries Polyxena ...

To appreciate further why these tantalizing "ifs" can never materialize, I would like to sketch an overview of who speaks in the voice of prophecy and lamentation and, especially important, where or when the author/narrator deploys their performances in direct discourse

⁵ Benoît's *uevre* (literary work) is tied to the characters' *uevre* (action, event, exploit). On the "polysemous *uevre*," see Rollo 1998: 204-5.

to structure the rhythm of his narrative. Prophesying and lamenting are equal opportunity modes of speech: male and female characters appear in both categories, although Benoît's romance particularly favors the female representatives. Not surprisingly, these non-heroic, supporting roles feature women, while the heroes of war are necessarily men. But we may wonder if the performance of these speech acts does not require a kind of heroism that complements, as it comments on, that of the warriors.

Helenus and Cassandra, brother and sister among the sons and daughters of Priam and Hecuba, are both identified as diviners (*devins*, *deviner*—e.g. 2940-2, 2953-4), but Paris also claims a view into the future, thanks to the dream that is Benoît's rationalized version of the Judgment of Paris (3845-928). According to the not disinterested dreamer, the gods promise success for a revenge attack on the Greeks who destroyed the first Troy, killed Priam's father, and kidnapped his sister. The real diviners quickly correct this false vision with a triple, cross-generational round of baleful prophecies about the new Troy's destruction, should Paris marry a Greek woman. First Helenus speaks to the family of divinely inspired visions, sent to him three times (3961, 3946-82). Then, after Troilus rejects the warning as lying cowardice, Panthus recalls before the assembled counsellors that his father Euforbius, whose prophecies have already been verified, gave the same warning repeatedly before he died at the age of 360 plus years (4089-104). Finally, as the Trojans prepare to leave, Cassandra's voice rings out: Troy will be reduced to ashes, if the ships depart; death, ruin, and long exile await them all (4144-56). But three warnings sound in vain; in the narrator's words, Fortune was too much their enemy (4165-6). As the fatal action unfolds, Cassandra continues to berate the Trojans with her dire predictions of Troy's destruction, though each time she is locked away in a room so that no one can hear her cries.⁶ Her prophecies will be poignantly remembered when mourners lament the deaths of Hector and Paris, and they reverberate in the narrator's own ironic comments on the characters' *mesaventure* (4124), his frequent warnings to readers about deaths soon to be told. After Troy's ruin, Cassandra launches a new

⁶ The narrator reports two more of her speeches at considerable length, when Paris and Helen marry (4883-928) and when Trojans and Greeks bury the dead after the second battle (10417-46).

series about the Greek homecomings, thus extending her oversight of the action through the final phase of catastrophic events.⁷

The narrator's foresight is at once widest in scope and most specific in the detailed unfolding of ruin and death. The long summary of events (145-714) that follows his ample prologue operates much like the characters' predictions:⁸ he foretells the future for his readers in "brief words" (145) that occupy 570 verses, a monstrous amplification of the exordial topic announcing a work's subject. *Amplificatio* is Benoît's default mode. His summary outlines all the major events that will be retold, from Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, the first provocation in the chain of vendettas, to the realization of Ulysses' dream cryptically announcing his death at the hands of Telegonus.⁹ Every subsequent move is foreseen: "I will speak to you of Peleus ... and you will hear the prophecies ... and after how Tenedon was taken and by whom ...," and so on and so on. The forward thrust of the summary reaches to the very end of the romance and allows us to anticipate and then tick off each event as it occurs in the story. At verse 30301, with nothing more to tell, the narrator announces the epilogue (with some understatement) in the very next verse: "Here we will end in fitting measure, our book has lasted quite a bit" (*Ci ferons fin, bien est mesure:/Auques tient nostre livre e dure*, 30301-2).

Benoît is equally generous with specific reminders of each new disaster about to unfold. He undercuts Paris' great satisfaction with the raid on Tenedon and the treasure stolen from the Greeks (including Helen): "from now on folly grows" (*Dès ore engroisse la folie*, 4602). Sagitaire's valor will not last long (6905-6). By falling in love with Polyxena, Achilles has planted death in his breast (17538-9). Many more will die before the end of the day (14265-6), this last example a kind of leitmotif repeated countless times in the battle descriptions. But the pièce de résistance of the narrator's warnings is the death of Hector, announced three days and a thousand verses before Achilles actually strikes the mortal blow.

⁷ Except for her particular focus on Agamemnon's and Ajax's untimely endings, Cassandra's prophecies generally operate on a large scale and sketch out the major thrust of the action, once Paris leaves for Greece and Helen.

⁸ Cf. Gauthier 1992.

⁹ When the dream announces that his son will kill him, Ulysses tries to prevent the parricide by imprisoning Telemachus. Without knowing the existence of Telegonus, the son engendered with Circe, the father assumes that Telemachus is thus designated.

A! las, quel perte e quel dolor
Lur avendra ainz le tierz jor,
E cum pesante destinee!
Ne sai cum seit por mei contee,
Ne sai cum nus le puisse oïr.
Le jor deüssent bien morir
Que lur avint, ce fust bien dreiz;
Si angoissous e si destreiz
Furent puis tant cum il durerent.
Onques joie ne recovrerent
Ne je ne sai mie coment. (15237-48)

Alas! what a loss and what sorrow will come to them before three days, and what a heavy destiny! I don't know how it will be told by me nor do I know how anyone can hear it! The day that it befell them, they should have all died, that would have been fitting. They were so anguished and distressed for as long as they lived. They never recovered joy and I don't know how they could have.

Anguished tones of lamentation fill the narrator's prediction, which concludes with a recall of Cassandra's prophecy: "what the wise Cassandra said will now soon happen" (*Ce que dist Cassandra la sage/Avendra tot, des ore mes*, 15252-3). The fatal trap will soon snap shut, and the same exclamations will reappear in his comments, when Hector falls back from his horse, dead, livid and pale: "Alas! what a heavy destiny ... and what a heavy adventure" (*Ha! las! cum pesante aventure!.../E cum pesante destinee!*, 16231, 16233). What is to come has come with the force of malevolent destiny, and Benoît, knowing that recovery is impossible, shares the suffering of all Trojans in the tragic loss of their champion.

This dovetailing of prophecy and lament brings into focus one of the particular traits of Benoît's narrator who, unlike his characters, is able to operate in both modes of discourse. To be sure, the characters who announce the future also suffer grief, as described by the narrator countless times for all participants. But they do not mourn in the form of a *planctus*, lamentation in direct discourse that may accompany other traditional expressions of mourning: tearing out hair and scratching one's face, rending clothes, weeping and crying out, fainting, and so on. The

voice of grief as a rhetorical display is reserved for others—and shared by the narrator: Priam for his father and Troy after the first destruction; the narrator for Protesilas killed during the first battle; Achilles for Patroclus after the second battle; Paris for his brothers, Hector struck down in the tenth battle and Deiphobus in the twelfth; two sets of collective female mourners for Hector; Hecuba for two sons, first Hector and later Troilus, killed in the nineteenth battle; and finally Helen for Paris, killed in the twentieth battle. After Troy's fall, two examples occur when death is imminent: the narrator for Polyxena, the only female character whose heroic death as sacrifice merits a formal expression of grief and regret, and Telegonus for Ulysses, when he learns that it is his father he has mortally wounded (30200-15).¹⁰

The list gives some sense of how the author has spread a dozen laments judiciously throughout his narrative, from the pre-history of war (triggered by the first Greek incursion into Trojan territory during Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece), through all the major stages of the Trojan War's twenty-three battles, and on into the aftermath of Troy's destruction, followed by the debacles of Greek homecomings. Equal numbers are pronounced by male and female protagonists, five by men, five by women, but they are differently weighted not only in terms of the character of each gender's *plaintes* but also in relation to their placement with particular emphasis around two key deaths, Hector's at the center of the romance and Paris' as the last of Priam and Hecuba's sons.¹¹ If all laments share certain key features (the apostrophe to the dead, the vocabulary of affection and praise, sadness and suffering, Benoît's predilection for anaphora), there is one important element shared only by the three men who formally lament, and that is the link they establish between the pain felt before the corpse of a fellow knight and their call for revenge. In this respect, their lamentations are part of the relentless chain of cause and effect, the push for vendetta that fuels the entire cycle of destruction. Priam's lament addressed to his father, "good knighthood" (2892), the noble people of Troy, noble ladies and noble maidens, whose husbands, sons, brothers, nephews, and friends have been killed, sees no possibility of leaving behind sorrow and recovering joy without taking vengeance on the Greeks. Deiphobus specifically

¹⁰ See Huchet 1984, on the question of the dead father, "une obsession constante" in the *romans antiques* (91), and specifically on Ulysses' two sons (92).

¹¹ Their deaths are given special emphasis by their numerical placement in the tenth and twentieth battles.

requests Paris to avenge him against Palamedes to ease his death, and Paris readily agrees in his *plainte avant la lettre*. Achilles mourns his beloved Patroclus and sets into motion Hector's long sought after death, which not only comes at the midpoint of Benoît's romance but serves as its centerpiece.

What about the distribution of Greek and Trojan lamentations? Only three Greek deaths are mourned with rhetorical setpieces, two of them connected with the greatest heroes of Homeric epic: Achilles lamenting the death of Patroclus (as he does in the *Iliad*) and the son of Circe's lament for his father Ulysses, the now problematic hero projected by later tradition and highlighted with a good deal of ambivalence throughout the *Roman de Troie*. The first Greek death marked with a *planctus* is that of Protesilas (7519-30). Addressing the fallen warrior, the narrator regrets the prowess and suffering of the man who first took the port. But most especially, he honors and praises the Trojan who killed him: Protesilas inaugurates the series of many Greeks killed by Hector. "With you the one who will make a ruin of the Greeks inaugurated his career: during it, many will die by his right hand; it cannot be otherwise" (7527-30). From the narrator's perspective, prediction and lament once again interlock. And Benoît, writing for an Anglo-Norman king who traces his ancestry back to one of the heroes to escape Troy's destruction, shows more favor to the losing side whose greatness outshines that of the victors. Demonstrated in multiple ways, that favor also includes a greater focus on heroic Trojan deaths, six of which are highlighted by laments, including all those spoken by female mourners.¹²

Women's voices are traditionally associated with mourning and lamentation, and they are certainly privileged in Benoît's romance to give the keenest, deepest expression to the unutterable grief that accompanies the destruction of Troy and the death of their loved ones. In the context of war, mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters are the ones left behind to suffer the consequences of men's martial actions. The indirect victims of the contest and the killing are themselves unable to take up the sword of revenge. In this respect, the clerkly narrator's own use of the *planctus* resembles that of his female characters, removed

¹² Within the pattern of lamentations, two key figures are set above all the others: Hector first and foremost, regretted by male and female voices in two individual and two collective laments, and Paris, who performs two *plaintes* for his brothers before becoming himself the object of Helen's lamentation (the most rhetorically developed *planctus* in the romance, 22920-311).

from the exploits of war and yet registering its effects. Of course, the women are not immune to a desire for vengeance: after Troilus' death, Hecuba awakens from three days of coma to plot betrayal and seek revenge against Achilles through the arm of her son Paris. Within her lament for this last son, Helen gives a new twist to the motif by calling for Priam and Hecuba's vengeance to fall upon her, the cause of so much suffering. The anomaly of Helen's situation, the lone Greek lamenting a Trojan, will require further comment below. But in general, Benoît's female mourners gaze most intently at the face of death represented by the corpse that lies unmoving before them, forcing them to feel the pain of separation, the loss of a life, and the dread prospects for their own lives as they contemplate a future without the fallen hero.¹³

Those female voices intertwine with the narrator's in order to carry the weight of Hector and Paris' deaths, the heaviest blows that signal the end of Priam's Troy long before we arrive at the actual ending. Andromache's dream vision of her husband's death triggers an elaborate series of failed efforts by herself, Priam, and Hecuba to keep Hector off the field of battle where he is destined to meet Achilles' sword thrust.¹⁴ There are a number of striking elements in the narrator's representation of Andromache's role here. Her dream is the second of three prophetic visions reported by characters—and the complex features they all share become particularly clear in this example. On the one hand, these dream visions provide accurate predictions of a specific future action whose imminence is thus enhanced. On the other, none of the dreams are correctly interpreted by the dreamer (although each interpreter errs in a different way). Here Andromache suggests to Hector that by foretelling her husband's death the gods have offered him an opportunity to avoid what the dream reveals: the divine powers do not want him to die and thus order him not to fight that day (15313-24). That reprieve is nowhere evident in the action and her interpretation reflects primarily, as it does with Paris and Ulysses, a desire to change the course of destiny. Their visions of the future, more limited than Cassandra's general prophecy of Troy's destruction, fit precisely into the stream of detailed, "mini-predictions" constantly announced by the narrator. Alone among these prophetic dreamers, Andromache will share other characteristics with the narrator as well. I suggested earlier that those who foresee the future do

¹³ Cf. Croizy-Naquet's review of the tradition and the distinction between epic lament and female spoken lament in the *romans antiques* (1990: 77-8).

¹⁴ The Old French passage occupies seven pages in Baumgartner and Vielliard's bilingual edition (even numbered pages, 342-54).

not formalize their grief in *plaintes* but I must admit that Andromache acts as something of an exception to the general rule in two instances connected to Hector's death.¹⁵

First, when the narrator informs us that the gods tell Andromache what lies ahead "with signs and visions and interpretations [i.e. premonitory warnings of the future]" (15285-6), he dramatizes the announcement by anticipating her future loss and pain (15287-300). Andromache twice addresses her husband (15301-24 and 15468-84) in an effort to dissuade him from battle before and after he arms. At the prospect of his imminent death, she speaks of her grief with great intensity and anguish. Marvels are signs that demonstrate and admonish, so she wants Hector to know her dream, as well as her anguish (15301-305). Her own body is on the point of failing, such is her fear that she will soon see the body of her husband brought to her on a bier, since the gods have shown her that he will die this very day (15312, 15318). The language she uses imagines that future scene and, though the circumstances are different, her lamentation anticipates the premonitory laments of Paris and Telegonus when Deiphobus and Ulysses lie mortally wounded before them.

Hector is angered by his wife's request, and indeed that anger will grow to hatred when he realizes that Priam has sent out the Trojan army without him. The narrator describes Hector as "enragiez" (15402), enraged to the point that he tells his wife she has lost his love forever (15404-5—cf. 15453-4). "Enraged" is the very adjective used by Andromache to describe Hector in her second attempt to stop him from going out to battle, after Hecuba has fruitlessly begged her son through thirteen verses of direct discourse (15436-48) to think about the women he is leaving behind, defenseless, their hearts breaking, ready to die of grief. "Cruel heart, mad wolf, why don't you take pity for his sake?" (*Cruels de cuer, lous enragiez, / A quei ne vos en prent pitiez?*, 15477-8). Holding up their infant son, Andromache begs this mad wolf to take pity on his son, his wife, mother, brothers, father, on himself. The wife's plea reprises the mother's, as Andromache asks Hector why he desires death so soon, why he desires to abandon so quickly those who must perish without him (15479-84). Before the promised ending, the wife's

¹⁵ However correctly he anticipates his own desire to kidnap Helen, Paris presents a false view of the future when he interprets his dream to fit the Trojans' already expressed desire to seek revenge in an expedition against the Greeks. Thus I do not consider him to be an exception like Andromache to the general separation of prophecy and lament among the characters.

variation on a *planctus* combined with prophecy ends by echoing the narrator's own exclamations of pain at the tale he must relate: "Alas! what an evil destiny" (*Lasse! cum male destinee*, 15485).

Hector's refusal to heed reiterated warnings is explicitly motivated by his sense of honor and fear of shame, personal and public emotions that go to the heart of the Trojan War. Hector speaks several times of the shame he must avoid (15343ss, 15581), and his reaction is later confirmed by the Trojans who mock a man frightened by dreams (15683-5).¹⁶ In this scene, as Hector arms, his eyes glinting with anger, the narrator describes him as more fierce than leopard or lion (15558), animals traditionally deployed to describe knightly prowess. The comparison is more flattering than Andromache's mad wolf and translates the worthy qualities Hector personifies as the Trojans' primary defender. We are in no doubt that Hector occupies the apogee of the narrator's admiration as well as that of his countrymen and women. The long encomium of Hector's accomplishments (16815-48), which follows the description of his tomb and sums up his prowess without peer, recalls the praise Charlemagne bestows on his dead nephew in a famous *planctus* at the center of the *Song of Roland*. For a contemporary francophone public, the long list of Roland's conquests may echo in the enumeration of kings Hector killed with his own hands; the narrator cannot even list the more than 300 dukes, admirals, and captains he killed. If only Adventure, Envy, and Destiny hadn't intervened, if only Hector had lived two or more years longer, he would have destroyed his enemies (16840-3). Not even Achilles who killed him is Hector's equal. Indeed, the narrator insists here, as at the moment of death, on the stealth of that cowardly blow, slipped in when Hector is distracted by trying to capture a Greek king (16219-28, 16816-19). Neither Hector nor "the scoundrel" Achilles (16222) will meet death in a fair fight, "cors a cors" (16816), as if these great heroes cannot be brought down except through some devious ploy. Both Achilles and Hector are propelled to their encounter with death by the fury of their anger, exploded when they see the comrades they abandoned on the verge of defeat without their aid. The madness caught by Andromache's crazy wolf metaphor—a madness expressed by Hector in the sudden hatred of his beloved wife, by Achilles in the sudden forgetting of his love for Polyxena—seems to

¹⁶ Just so, Troilus condemned the first prophecy of Troy's destruction as cowardice coming from Helenus.

confirm the old saying that the gods first drive mad those they would destroy.

Andromache joins in the avalanche of mourning unleashed by the arrival of Hector's corpse in Troy. Here the narrator pulls out all the stops, orchestrates the sequence of laments like the antiphons of antique tradition, alternating choral responses and individual lamentations. First the maidens and ladies of the city perform as a chorus, saluting Hector in a double series of anaphores that praise his prowess as defender and mourn his loss (16329-39): they will soon be led away as captives; "your death is so savage that it is neither reasonable nor right for us to live on after you" (16348-52). Paris serves as a kind of *princeps planctorum* for the men. In his twenty-verse lament (16377-96), framed by the narrator's descriptions of his grieving father, brothers, and friends, Paris again highlights Hector as their defender, wonders who can hold up their standard as he did, before vowing to avenge him even at the price of his own death. Hecuba now arrives, accompanied by Andromache and Helen. They can hardly stand as they weep, beat their palms, sigh with tears running down their faces. Together they regret their "evil destinies" (16417-18) and lament briefly as a chorus: "Oh, Cassandra, yours and Helenus' prophecies are so very true, would they had been believed, then it would not have so ill befallen us. Alas, so wretched, how will we ever again be happy?" (16418-24). The voice of Hecuba continues alone for the next thirty-two verses (16425-56), before the narrator takes over to describe all the torment felt by Andromache, Helen, and Polyxena.¹⁷

As the leader of the female chorus, Hecuba speaks directly to her son's body. Hers is the fourth, the culminating *plainte* for Hector. She is a mother lamenting the loss of all joy, all love; her son and defender lost, in whom can she find delight, what can she expect from the future? The intimacy of their link is expressed here in the dialogue between *je* and *tu*, I and thou:¹⁸

¹⁷ Hector's wife has grieved so much all day she must be carried off; disfigured by her acts of mourning, she lies in her bed and thinks—or is it the narrator? free indirect discourse seems to move between their two voices—how Troy would still be safe if only her warning had been heeded. Now the dolorous destructions have come to pass and still will come (*Li dolerous destrüement/Sunt avenu e avendront*, 16477-8).

¹⁸ Theirs is a physical intimacy that connects Hecuba to the son born from her own body, a motif she does not yet articulate as such but will do so elaborately in her later lament for Troilus (21702-50).

“Filz, fet Ecuba, quel atente?
En cui avrai ja mes entente?
En cui sera mes mis deliz?
Trestoz mis joies est feniz,
Perdue ai ma deffensïon.
N’aveie amor se a tei non.” (16425-30)

“Son,” said Hecuba, “what expectation? In whom will I place hope anymore? In whom will I find delight? All my joys are finished; I have lost my defender. I placed all my love in you.”

Rhetorical embellishments of question and anaphora, rhyme and negation, carry the pain of her first reaction looking to the future and seeing nothing. “Son, sweet friend, ... dear son”—two further apostrophes move into a second phase (16431-9); *je* speaks to *vous*, the formal you, as Hecuba gazes at her son’s face, his closed eyes. She believes he is not dead, commands him to open his eyes and look at her, chastises the child who refuses to speak to his mother. The moment does not last long: “Dear son, you cannot open your eyes.” He can no longer return her gaze, share the living contact of a look exchanged. Now she can connect past and present: this marvel, this anguish is indeed the sorrow anticipated by her sighs, by the great disquiet of her wandering spirit; every day since the war began has been prelude to this moment. She looks more closely at her son’s corpse.

“Soz vos vei la terre vermeille
Del sanc qui del cors vos avale.
Ha! cum vei or cel bel vis pale,
Douz, biaux e proz, pius e rianz!” (16440-3)

“Under you I see the earth red from the blood that pours from your body. Ah! how pale I now see this beautiful face, sweet, handsome and smiling, filled with prowess and piety!”

Hector is now addressed by his personal attributes and public virtues: sweet, handsome, and smiling, filled with prowess and piety. But the list of adjectives used to personify him seem strangely displaced, after the blood pouring out of his body has turned red the earth underneath him, leaving his beautiful face pale. Hecuba sees that now and will continue to

embroider on what she can and cannot see, or rather sees and does not want to see, as she turns again to the future.

“Que fara mes li reis Prianz?
Qui li fara ja mes la rien
Por que il ait joie ne bien,
Confortement ne alegrance?
A! douz amis, quel atendance!¹⁹
Cum vos departez tost de nos!
Dreiz est que nos muirons o vos,
Que nos ne vos veions morir,
Ne par force çaien saisir
As enemiz—cui Deus maldie!—
Par cui avez perdu la vie.” (16443-54)

“What will Priam do from now on? Who now will do for him something that brings him joy or good, comfort or happiness? Ah, sweet friend, what hope? How soon you have left us! It is right that we die with you, that we not see you die, nor be seized right here by the enemies—God curse them!—by whom you have lost your life.”

The dialogue is now between *vous* and *nous*, we two, father and mother. In the *Life of Saint Alexis*, one of the earlier monuments of French literature, mother, father, and wife each have a *planctus* to speak their grief for son and husband. Here the father, fainting thirty times over his son’s corpse, is unable to utter a word of lamentation. But his wife now enlarges her mourning to include his. Priam’s future, like hers, can no longer have any cause for joy. The parents of a dead son, the king and queen of a Troy at the mercy of its enemies will have no comfort, no further happiness. Her questions furnish their own answers and make the son’s death, which they should not have to witness, a vision of their own future deaths when the Greeks will seize them right in their own citadel.²⁰

¹⁹ We can hear in this question and rhyme an echo of Hecuba’s opening line (16425). Cf. her lament for Troilus—no more “atendement” (21747)—and Achilles’s own use of *atendance* (17712). This related set of terms functions as a sort of leitmotif through which love stories parallel war stories in Benoît’s romance.

²⁰ Hecuba’s interjected malediction, asking God to curse the Greeks, will echo in her subsequent lament for Troilus, where she complains bitterly against the

Robert Pogue Harrison speculates, along with Vico and Hegel, on the trajectory traced in human history from the unarticulated vowels of animal grief to the stammering stops of consonants, the articulated language of human lament.²¹ He argues that “it is in the objectified death of the other ... that we must first look for the ground of the conjunction between language and death” (171). In Harrison’s view, Hegel’s “sublated or removed self” is located in the human corpse before whom we grieve and discover our own “‘negative self of desire’ ... the self’s impossible desire to reunite what death has separated” (65). In a brief study of both antique and modern laments, Harrison explains how this rhetorical act accomplishes the work of mourning, transposing grief from sign to symbol, that is from personal, annihilating emotion to public gesture. In that symbolic mode, the mourner moves from the expression of the negative self (“I want to die with you”) to the obligation of separation (“I must return to life”). In the face of the other’s dead body, the now “mortalized” self must acknowledge, as all humans must, that “death [is] the very condition and ground of life” (70). Benoît’s romance articulates this acknowledgment repeatedly through the interlocking mechanisms of prediction and lamentation, but it also demonstrates the resistances and difficulties his characters (and we humans) experience in accepting that obligation, most especially when confronted by the corpse of a loved one.

In Hecuba’s lament, she sees her son dead. Although she passes through a moment of illusion, wants to believe him still united with her in life, she soon sees (again) that they are irrevocably separated by the threshold of death. In Hector’s dead body, she can now foresee her own death and that of Priam who stands here not only as the other parent but as a figure of the soon-to-be-destroyed city of which he is king. The closing words of her *planctus* are keyed to irreparable loss: Hector has lost his life, and she will never see him again. What she sees before her is an empty corpse, not the living, laughing, courageous defender of his mother and all the other inhabitants of Troy who live now on sufferance in the expectation of their own deaths. Hecuba ends by invoking God not to curse his killers this time, but to request that she live no more. She does not accept the separation of death, still seeks the son she will never see again: may they at least be united in the absence of life.

gods, Mars, Jupiter and Pluto, who hate the Trojans and love their enemies, however many sacrifices she offers them (21715-40).

²¹ 2003: 55-71.

“Nel verrai ja, lasse cheitive!
Ja Deu ne place que plus vive!” (16455-56)

“I shall never see him again, miserable wretch that I am! May
it please God that I live no longer!”

With her final words, Hecuba faints over Hector’s body, effectively initiating her withdrawal from the living, leaving behind the formal language of grief.

But she will not die here, not yet; the mother will have time to grieve for other sons.²² Benoît brings Hecuba on stage to lament that other Hector, the son for whom she lived after Hector’s death, as she makes clear in her *planctus* (21741-6). Why did she give birth only to see her sons die? How can a mother forced to bear such grief not kill herself with her own hands (21705-14)? There is no future to expect (*Or n’i a mais atendement*, 21747). With Troilus dead, what was still a question when she mourned Hector—what expectation? what hope? (*quel atente? ... quel attendance?*)—is one no longer. Once again, Hecuba closes her lament longing to join her son in death.²³

The mother grieving for her sons is the very image of life’s paradox, life intertwined with death, the human condition pushed to the limit of suffering. The one who gives life bestows death with that gift but hopes never to see it, hopes only to see the side of laughter and delight, not unbearable sorrow when life given ends, against the natural order of things, before her own. Hecuba’s reiterated desire for death is not fulfilled until she has seen the death of her last child, Polyxena, sacrificed to Achilles’ vengeance, according to Calchas’ divine augury. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (XIII, 553-78), Hecuba’s grief now reaches the point where she can no longer articulate it with words but only the howls of a dog. Dictys, Benoît’s source here, alludes to her bodily

²² Hecuba’s grief for her sons is anticipated repeatedly: by Paris (18728ss), by a dying Deiphobus (19120), by the narrator, when he announces that Troilus will soon die (20660-4).

²³ In addressing Troilus, “Son” (“Fiz”) at the end of her *planctus*, Hecuba rephrases a number of motifs from her lament for Hector: she assures Troilus that her soul and spirit, which lived and delighted in him, will abandon the sorrowful body from which she desires escape and go to him (21741-51). Fainting over the body he has left behind, she remains unconscious for so long that no one thinks she can still live.

transformation only in the name of the place where she is buried, Cynossema, monument of the dog. In the *Roman de Troie*, filled with grief and anger (26554-5), “enragee” (26556) like her son Hector, Hecuba attacks her daughter’s murderers with insults, sharp knives, stones and sticks, until they finally tie her to a stake and stone her to death, burying her in a place called “Engrés” (26575), that is, ferocious, violent. The canine allusion is muted but not entirely erased.²⁴ In whatever version, it is as if this mother maddened by grief has retraced in reverse the fundamentally human trajectory from death to mourning to language, having run through that course too many times to bear. No further *planctus*, no transformation of private grief into public mourning, no preservation of being in human language, only removal, destruction, and death remain to unite her with the nothingness that her children have become.

But we must move back from this figure of maternal annihilation to witness at least briefly two other laments, one spoken by, one spoken for a woman, two other female figures, Helen and Polyxena, who fail to become the mothers who might carry on the Trojan line beyond the city’s destruction. First, Helen of Troy as she is named in legend, but of course she is not Trojan except by abduction from her Greek husband, by adoption through marriage to Paris. At 92 verses, her *planctus* for a fallen husband is the longest by far in Benoît’s romance (22920-311). It serves both character and author as a vantage point from which to look backward and forward over the entire course of the war, summed up and cristallized through Helen’s role in it, the war’s causes and effects laid bare in her person.²⁵ As the narrator pointedly observes, with Paris’ death what Cassandra promised is readily observable by all: “Des or veit hom les devinailles/Que Cassandra aveit pramis!” (22850-1).²⁶

Helen starts her lament in indirect discourse by regretting Paris’ prowess and beauty. It is indeed beauty that has made of these two lovers the perfect couple. Then Helen’s own words burst through, as if the

²⁴ The narrator reports reading in his source that Hecuba only feigned madness to make the Greeks kill her and put an end to prolonged suffering (26578-82). He offers his own lament that such a noble lady should meet so shameful an ending (26585-90).

²⁵ See Croizet-Naquet 1990.

²⁶ The term *devinailles* designates a divine prophecy in Benoît’s usage, but we can also think of “riddle” as it is used elsewhere: the riddle of what will finally bring down Troy as foreseen by Cassandra is solved when the last son dies and Priam buries the signs of his kingship with him.

narrator can no longer contain the intensity of her mourning. She speaks her grief directly to Paris: “In sorrow, tears and weeping, says she, beloved fair lord, I shall die, since I have lost you thus” (*En duel, en lermes e en plor./Fait el, biaux sire amis, morraill/Quant je ensi perdu vos ai*, 22920-2). Love and death are intertwined here, as they will be once again in the last twenty-three verses, when she fervently declares her love, calls upon death to take her, and begs Paris to accept her company. Benoît borrows from troubadour lyric the motifs of *fin’amor*, the lover dying for love, the vows of fidelity, but he makes those familiar words reverberate in a new light as Helen speaks her love to a dead Paris, ends her lament by asking his spirit to wait while she kisses “your face, your eyes, and your beautiful mouth” (23010-11). Love generally does not make a pretty picture in the *Roman de Troie* with its tales of Briseida’s betrayal of Troilus and Achilles’ fatal passion for Polyxena. However perfectly matched Paris and Helen may have been, the center and greater part of her lament acknowledges the tragic dimension of their attraction, not just for themselves, now waiting on the two sides of life and death, but for Priam, Hecuba, their children, and all of Troy. Only one corpse lies before her, but Helen can see in it so many others that have already died or will soon do so. Weighed down by guilt, Helen laments in large measure for herself as the cause of such destruction: why her? why was she born for such a destiny (22934)?²⁷ The hour her life began was cursed, and it will end in an even worse one (*En maudite ore comença./En plus male definera*, 22955-6). With these words Helen reprises the very same couplet used earlier by the narrator, right after his anguished forecast of Hector’s death (15261-2). He, too, spoke of a “male ore” beginning and ending even more badly, producing *malheur*, misfortune, from *mala ora*, the evil hour marked by the stars and their baleful influence over the doings of men. This is the fatality—Destiny, Adventure, Fortune—that hangs over all the participants, using their desires and volition to its own purposes, willy nilly. Helen is the personification of Benoît’s “little causes” that lead stupidly, nonsensically, but inexorably to big catastrophes. In his recital of the Trojan War, she is not even the first cause of strife between Greeks and Trojans, and yet she continues to bear the brunt of the gods’ (and history’s) charge. Helen’s expressions of overwhelming grief, her desire

²⁷ “If only this strange fruit of the father who engendered her had never been born” (22936-7). There is much to be done comparing the motif of birth in Hecuba’s and Helen’s usage (cf. the use of *mar* in the *Chanson de Roland*).

for death, her willingness to be sacrificed on the alter of Trojan revenge, all work to excuse her guilt and endear this faithful daughter of Priam and Hecuba to all those who witness her suffering—including the author Benoît, for it seems to me that Helen and Hector are his preferred hero and heroine among all the characters, if we judge by narratorial comments and overall arrangement of materials.²⁸ But however unfair, Helen's guilt will not disappear from the romance, and she will not get her wish to unite with Paris in death. It is not the abducted wife who will be sacrificed but a more innocent maiden whose loveliness rivals Helen's own.

When Polyxena's imminent death is announced, lamentation breaks out among the city's people. After giving an ample description of their collective sorrow, the narrator assumes the voice of the *princeps planctorum* to approve their reaction, praise Polyxena's great beauty, and regret that she will not pass it along to any descendants.

Las! quel damage e quel dolor!
 Ancor en fust le mont meillor
 Se de li fussent heir eissu.
 Ço qu'ert de bel i fu perdu:
 Sor autres fussent remirables
 E de beauté resplendissables
 Cil qui de li fussent estrait.
 Las! tant i ot doloros plait!
 Cum pesme mort e com haïe! (26457-65)

Alas! what evil and what sorrow! The world would at least have been a better place if descendants had been born from her. That which was beautiful was lost in her: above all others those who descended from her would have been worthy of admiration and resplendent in beauty. Alas! this is such a sorrowful affair! What a terrible and detestable death!"

Repeated exclamations show how the narrator shares in the common grief for an undeserved death (26466-70). When he mourns the loss of innocent life, however, it is not just Polyxena's but the lives of all those

²⁸ Consider the comparison with Briseida, the other woman who has changed sides. Helen may not occupy a lot of narrative space but her deployment at key moments is crucial (cf. Croizet-Naquet 1990).

who might have been born from her, the heirs who would have contributed their beauty to the city of Troy.

As Emmanuèle Baumgartner noted, Benoît presents Troy as the epitome of courtly civilization, uniting wisdom, love, prowess, and courtesy.²⁹ It is the loss of such extraordinary beauty that he laments, here and throughout his romance. Whereas Hecuba's overwhelming grief for her daughter leads to silence and death, the narrator's ability to sustain the work of mourning, turning past sorrow into public testimony for later generations, continues beyond Troy's destruction to announce the "destinees" (26597) of the victorious Greeks whose violence will soon turn back on them.³⁰ In the aftermath of ruin, Benoît follows Greeks and Trojans into a new generation, introduces yet another renewal of Troy, effected by Andromache's two sons, one born of a happier union with Hector, the other born from captivity with Pyrrhus. With Achillides, the grandson of the greatest Greek hero, and Laudamanta, the son of the unsurpassed Trojan hero, the future opens once again to hope and expectation (*bone atendance*, 29793). These two loving brothers, who grow up to become outstanding knights worthy of their forebears, together raise up the lineage that was destroyed and, thanks to Pyrrhus' son above all, restore Troy to great honor and joy, with Priam's line back on the throne.³¹

²⁹ Baumgartner 1989 and 1996.

³⁰ The Greeks' homecomings are destined to become "their great trouble and their great and fierce harm" (26595-6: "lor grant encombrier/E lor damage grant e fier"), punishment for their violations.

³¹ In these final gestures of Benoît's romance (followed only by the contrasting account of Ulysses' death at the hands of his son), we can see realized the program of Troy's restoration promised by Achilles in his bid to marry Polyxena (Baumgartner and Viellard 1998, pp. 426ss, 488ss, especially 22026-33). We can also see a return to the prior unity that should have brought together Greek and Trojan lines, all descended from Pelops, according to Antenor in the report of his peace mission to the Greeks (25028-35): "We all descend from the same lineage ... There should be great love between Greeks and Trojans" (25032, 25034-5). Like the lineage of Cadmus, those other brothers of an Œdipal past represented for a contemporary francophone public in the *Roman de Thèbes*, the Greeks and Trojans of Hector's and Achilles' generation have acted like fratricidal brothers, worthy descendants of the god-tempting, filicidal Pelops. With a new generation, their common ancestry can once again emerge, resuscitated and made whole in the lives and deeds of Andromache's Greek and Trojan sons. Cf. Crozet-Naquet 1997.

It may not be surprising then that, among all the female protagonists who predict and lament, it is only Andromache who, like the narrator, is able to cross the line between prophecy and *planctus*. Baumgartner sees Andromache as a figure for the city of Troy, since her portrait, given at the beginning of the war along with all the family portraits, is the only one to unite all the virtues Benoît associates with Troy: “She was very wise, she was very beautiful, she was very courteous/courtly, she greatly loved honor and prowess” (2950-2). Another virtue should be added to the list: fertility, abundance, maternity, the ability to create a new generation, produce a new, old line that restores what was lost. In this respect, Andromache serves as a figure of the author as well. In fact, Benoît shares in and shares with the constellation of female characters explored here their power to predict, their eloquence in mourning, their motherhood transposed as productivity, and even their beauty, as the author becomes a figure for his *oeuvre*, his work.

To sum up finally, death and restoration operate on three levels within and through the *Roman de Troie*: on the individual and family level, as we see with Andromache and her two sons; on the political level, if we remember Benoît’s Anglo-Norman public, first and foremost the English monarchs, descendants of the Trojan Brutus and founders of another new Troy; and on the literary level, when we consider how Benoît situates his work at the crux of epic, romance, and history, setting himself up as the successor to Homer’s poetic greatness and the historical truth claimed by Dares and Dictys. Thanks to the interplay of prophecy and lament, we have been forced to accept the finality of death that takes away each human born into life, whatever rebirths may occur for cities. We may still wonder if Benoît the courtier insinuates doubts about the future of the new empire founded by Henry II, an English restoration resurrected from the ashes of the previous generation’s civil war, and no doubt a glorious achievement but subject, as was Priam’s Troy, to the vicissitudes of rise and fall, the destiny of another rising power, the rival French monarchy which also claims Trojan ancestry.³² What of the romancer’s own achievement, his effort to bring back to life the monuments of the past, while at the same time making his own bid for literary posterity? Although Benoît rejected Homer as a model (and probably had no direct knowledge of his work), what stands out at the end of this study is the paradox of a twelfth-century author who, despite

³² Cf. Rollo’s argument (1998: 207-22). This cycle will continue to be a family affair.

anachronisms that place him and his francophone public in the context of a Christian society, has nevertheless managed to offer a view of history and human life that seems to me as profoundly and gloriously pessimistic as that conveyed by the pagan Homer's *Iliad*.³³ Such is the power of *translatio* and the continued necessity of acknowledging that we humans all share the inevitability of death. Such is the power of language that seeks to preserve what must be lost, whether in a mourner's lament or a medieval romance of the Trojan war.

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³³ On Benoît's deliberate use of anachronism see Petit 2002.

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