

Pagan Idols and Christian Anxieties in Medieval Troy Narratives

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IN HIS *TROY BOOK*,¹ John Lydgate describes the temple of Apollo at Delphi/Delos as symbolic of the pagan world of Greco-Roman antiquity.² The building itself is sizeable (“large”, “longe”), indicating both the physical space it claims and the cultural importance it holds. The emphasis on its age (“olde”) highlights that the Greek heroes, much like the medieval English reader, are engaging with an ancient religious tradition. More important than the sacred building, however, is the image it houses, to which Lydgate initially refers as a “statue”, then as an “ydole”:

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¹ Lydgate composed this poem, a translation and adaptation of Guido’s *History of the destruction of Troy* (“compyle, and after Guydo make, / So as I coude”: Lydgate, *Troy Book* prologue 109–10) between 1412 and 1420 at the behest of Henry (Henry V), the “worthy prynce of Walys” (Lydgate, *Troy Book* prologue 102). On Lydgate’s treatment of paganism in the *Troy Book*, see, e.g., Salih 2019, 33–72; on his engagement with imagery and idolatry more broadly, see, e.g., Gayk 2010, 84–122.

² There are some inconsistencies between the texts discussed in this chapter, but there is a general conflation of the temples and oracles of Apollo at Delphi and Delos. I therefore refer to them as Delphi/Delos throughout.

And in his temple large, longe, and olde,
 Per was a statue al of purid golde,
 Ful gret and hize, & of huge weizte,
 And þer-in was, þoruȝ þe deuels sleizte,
 A spirit vnclene, be false illusioun,
 Pat ȝaf answer to euery question—
 Nat þe ydole, dovmbe as stok or stoon.
 And þus þe peple, deceyued euerychon,
 Were by þe fend brouȝt in gret errour,
 To done worschip & swyche false honour,
 With sacrificise & cursed mawmentrie.

And in his [Apollo's] temple, large, long, and old, there was a statue [made] entirely of gold, large and tall, and weighty, and in it was, through the devil's deceit, an unclean spirit, a deceptive illusion, that answered every question—not, though, the idol [itself], dumb as stick or stone. And so the people, all deceived, were led into great error by the fiend, to worship and give such false honour through sacrifice and cursed mammetry.³

This cult-statue, so Lydgate tells us, is substantial in terms of both its dimensions (“ful gret and hize”) and its material composition (“al of purid golde” and “of huge weizte”). Yet despite its emphatic physicality, this statue is lifeless (“dovmbe as stok or stoon”) and not, as its pagan worshippers believe, a manifestation of the god Apollo. Instead, an unclean spirit (“spirit vnclene”), driven by the devil (“þoruȝ þe deuels sleizte”), inhabits the object. This spirit's ability to communicate deceives the pagan worshippers (“euerychon”) and ensures their continued devotion,⁴ expressed through “worschip”, “false honour”, “sacrifise”, and “mawmentrie”.

Factual description of pagan ritual in relation to cult statues (“worschip”, “honour”, and “sacrifise”) is here accompanied by Christian judgement: not

³ John Lydgate, *Troy Book* 2.5469–79. The Middle English text follows Bergen 1906; the translation is my own.

⁴ Though “euerychon” could be understood to mean all people, pagans and non-pagans alike, both the immediate context and the subsequent discussion of idolatry make it clear that this refers to pagans and other non-Christian worshippers only.

only is the honour given to the god and his statue “false”, but it also constitutes idolatry. Lydgate, however, does not here use the term “ydolatrie” or any of its cognates, but “mawmentrie” to express this. In so doing, he reflects a contemporary tendency in Western European literature and thought to amalgamate other, distinct religions into a single non-Christian one.⁵ Closely linked in the Christian mind from Late Antiquity onward with the pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world,⁶ the crime of idolatry is in the Middle Ages, at least literarily, superimposed onto contemporary Islam,⁷ either out of ignorance or out of wilful disregard for this religion’s own rejection of the use of images in religious contexts.

This passage from Lydgate encapsulates three different cultural and literary strands that run through medieval Troy narratives: first, the adaptation of classical myth to reflect contemporary cultural ideas and ideals, an overarching aspect of Christian reception of Greco-Roman culture; second, the use of Greco-Roman myth to explore differences between the pagan heritage of the classical world and its Christian heirs, and to reflect on specific issues defining and troubling Christianity; and third, the use of classical narrative to perpetuate and reinforce religious stereotypes through moralising interpretations, allegories, and false equivalences.

In what follows, I trace references to idolatry from their most basic forms in Dictys of Crete’s *Journal of the Trojan War* and Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troie*, via Guido delle Colonne’s highly influential excursus on the subject in his *History of the Destruction of Troy*, to Middle English variations on the theme in the anonymous *Seege of Troye* and Lydgate’s *Troy Book* with which this chapter began.⁸ Throughout, I focus on the verbal and descriptive markers that connote idolatry for a Christian audience, regardless of

⁵ See, e.g., Bray 1984.

⁶ As in Guido’s work, idolatry is here linked with Greece and Rome alongside Egypt and Assyria (*Troy Book* 2.5480–924; *History* 10).

⁷ The link with Islam is initially drawn implicitly through the figure of Ishmael, ancestor of Mohammed: “But as þe Iewes recorde of Ysmael, / Þat he was first þat mawmentrie fonde” (*Troy Book* 5510–1); compare Guido’s lines discussed below, p. 39–42.

⁸ This chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive study of all treatments of idolatry in medieval Troy narratives, but rather focuses on a few case studies that both illustrate the continued engagement with the subject through the Trojan myth and demonstrate the subject’s potential for fuelling religious prejudice and persecution.

whether or not the subject is explicitly addressed. Manuscript illuminations depicting pagan worship in medieval Troy narratives highlight the visual quality of these literary markers and illustrate the weight they carry for the Christian reader. The Troy narratives, I argue, serve as vehicles for Christian reflection on the concept of idolatry and on Christianity's complicated relationship with it. Once the connection between Troy narratives and pagan idolatry is established explicitly in Guido's work, it can then be exploited to link Greco-Roman paganism and Islam through the charge of idolatry,⁹ as is the case in the Middle English texts discussed here. Within the narrative world of medieval Troy, the cultural-linguistic link between idolatry and Islam, encapsulated in the term "mammetry" and its cognates, is then used to disparage two distinct religious systems with the same derogatory language and imagery.

2.1 IDOLATRY AND CHRISTIANITY

Before turning to the analysis of other literary treatments of the Troy narrative, it is important to contextualise their representation of pagan idolatry. The relationship between the divine, images, and human veneration of both has been a point of contention throughout the history of the Abrahamic religions.¹⁰ Though this chapter deals explicitly with Christian attitudes toward idolatry, the concept itself and its rejection are, of course, very much part of the older Jewish tradition, and are inherited by Christianity and Islam. Already in Late Antiquity, the physical remains of Greco-Roman antiquity, reminders of the pagan religions and cultures that had created them, fuelled Christian anxieties over the correct engagement with this past, especially with regard to the temples and cult statues associated with pagan religious practices, including idolatry.¹¹ Laws recorded in the *Theodosian Code* indicate that an effort was made to preserve these places and objects

⁹ See, e.g., Jones 1942; Daniel 1960, 338–43; Bray 1984; Camille 1989, 129–64; Flori 1992; Strickland 2003, 165–72; Akbari 2009, 200–47 on medieval representations of Islam as an idolatrous religion; on literary treatments of the Saracens more broadly, see, e.g., Turner 2019; cf. Scarfe Beckett 2003.

¹⁰ See Halbertal & Margalit 1992 for a detailed study of idolatry. Compare Rubiés 2006.

¹¹ For discussion of early Christian responses to the physical remains of the pagan past, see, e.g., Saradi-Mendelovici 1990; James 1996; Kristensen 2009 & 2013; Wiśniewski 2015.

of worship by stripping them of their religious associations and idolatrous potential, and by treating them as art for art's sake.¹²

While biblical narratives of idolatry tend to focus on the false image of the Judaeo-Christian god idols represent, the false worship of him they incite, and the creation of additional false gods they initiate,¹³ the early Church Fathers were often more concerned with the origins of idolatry and false worship in pagan religion. The ubiquity of the pagan heritage and the continuation of pagan religious practices and education in Late Antiquity allowed for a more distanced approach to the question of idolatry: using pagan narratives, beliefs, and rituals as exempla of false worship, the early Church Fathers were able to teach their Christian audiences about idolatry without necessarily focusing on their own practices.¹⁴ In his *Divine Institutes*, for instance, Lactantius first draws attention to the false religion of the pagans (Book 1), the origins of their erroneous beliefs (Book 2), and the mistaken ideas of pagan philosophy (Book 3), before introducing the truth, wisdom, justice, and worship of Christianity (Books 4–6) and the idea of a blissful life under God (Book 7).¹⁵ Augustine of Hippo, in turn, highlights the emptiness of the pagan idols and the pagans' mistaken belief that these idols host the deities they represent. The difficulty arising from these idols' emptiness is that pagan worshippers have no control over the spirits that ultimately animate the image: since the gods are false, the spirits entering their idols are not benevolent gods, but opportunistic demons,¹⁶ as Lydgate highlights in the opening passage.

The materiality of these idols, empty and lifeless as they are, is key to understanding medieval Christian attitudes toward idolatry. As in Lydgate's description of the statue of Apollo at Delphi/Delos, the richness of

¹² E.g., *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.8, 15, 19. See, e.g., Hunt 1993 (2010) for discussion of the code's role in "Christianising" the Roman Empire.

¹³ As Halbertal and Margalit demonstrate, idolatry can be considered from different angles: false beliefs about God can lead to idolatry, just as the worship of images can lead to false beliefs (Halbertal & Margalit 1992).

¹⁴ See Salih 2015, 15; see also Fradenburg 2002.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gassman 2020.

¹⁶ E.g., Augustine, *The City of God* 3.104–6, 120–2, 8.23–4. See Salih 2015, 18–9 for discussion. See Ando 2001 on Augustine's treatment of idols in a philosophical context. Compare Binder 2012 on Tertullian's approach to idolatry.

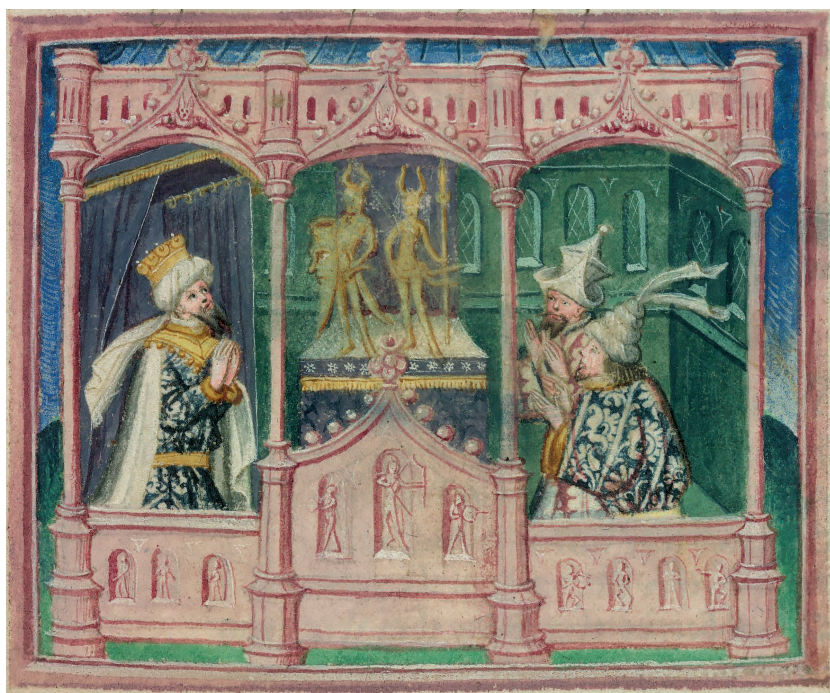


FIGURE 1: Lothbrok, king of the Danes, and his sons Hingwar and Hubba worship idols. Miniature from a fifteenth-century manuscript of Lydgate's *Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund*. Image: courtesy of the British Library Board, British Library, Harley MS 2278, 39r.

the materials, often precious metals, used to manufacture images of the divine is suggestive of their potential use as idols.¹⁷ Once it has been crafted by human hand, though, the image requires human interaction, such as the “worship”, “false honour”, and “sacrifice” in Lydgate’s narrative, to become an idol whose treatment constitutes idolatry. In the medieval iconography (e.g., fig. 1), the act of prostration before the idol and gestures of prayer directed toward it are common signs of idolatry; indeed it is the worshippers who tend to drive the visual narrative of idolatry,¹⁸ not the idol itself. In addition, medieval iconography visually supports the idea that evil spirits inhabit idols by giving these images demonic aspects, such as ugly faces and

¹⁷ Salih 2015, 17. See also Camille 1989, 27–49; Meier 2003.

¹⁸ Salih 2015, 22.

demonic expressions, even devilish horns, and, in some instances, by making them appear to move between panels in response to worship.¹⁹

For Christians, these pagan objects in many ways evoke biblical concerns over idolatry, neatly linking images, false worship, and false religion. At the same time, though, Christian ideas around the potential animation of these idols, their being entered and inhabited by demonic forces, suggest that they pose a threat not only to their intended pagan audiences, but also to Christian viewers. Indeed, a fundamentally human belief that images hold power over the viewer underlies much of this discourse.²⁰ As a result, movements to suppress idolatry are as often driven by a fear of the image and its power over the viewer and by a desire to strip it of this power, as they are by the impulse to denounce and dismantle the worship of images.²¹ Christians thus used pagan exempla to illustrate the dangers of idolatry, its association with devil worship, and its incompatibility with Christianity, but they also recognised that the dangerous and demonic potential of images required continuous active resistance from a Christian audience.²² Narratives, such as those of the Trojan War, served as reminders of the idolatrous practices of the religious other and simultaneously posed a religious problem for a Christian audience: the pagan past whose stories were being consumed by Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages was rife with false religion and worship, and thus needed to be treated with care and critical detachment.

¹⁹ Salih 2015, 20. See below pp. 33–4 and 39.

²⁰ On the power of images more broadly, see, e.g., Freedberg 1989.

²¹ E.g., Freedberg 1989, 378–428; compare Salih 2015.

²² Compare Constantine Manasses' treatment of the Troy narrative in his *Chronicle*, where King David refuses to join the Trojans fearing lest his people be driven into idolatry by the pagan allies: "But David did not give it [an alliance] to him [Priam], either because at this time he stood in battle array against tribes of alien speech, or because he loathed the Greeks and barbarians as those who did not know God, but were idolaters, and feared that the Jews would be led astray if they were to be sent by him as allies to those in Troy because they are by nature easily led towards evil" (1360–66). Cf. the medieval Irish narrative *How Samson Slew the Gesteda*, which has Helenus request support from Samson; see Ehrmantraut 2022 for discussion.

2.2 EARLY SIGNS OF IDOLATRY IN DICTYS AND BENOÎT

Emphasising the relative scarcity of references to divinities in Dictys of Crete, Dares the Phrygian, and Benoît is a commonplace in the scholarship on medieval Troy narratives.²³ All three authors clearly focus on the human action, introducing divinities only in the context of human beliefs and worship. These scenes, moreover, are described without much investment or commentary, drawing attention instead to the ways in which the human act of worship adds to the overall narrative. At the same time, even unimpassioned descriptions of basic pagan rituals involving cult-images are easily read as constituting idolatry by Christian audiences;²⁴ the cultural context of the reader in many ways defines how any interaction between pagan character and pagan divinity or statue is understood. In the case of medieval Troy stories, the earliest and, in many ways, most neutral examples still lay the foundation for later discourse on pagan idolatry in the narrative context of the Trojan War.²⁵

In his *Journal of the Trojan War*,²⁶ Dictys describes Chryses' approaching the Greek ships to negotiate the return of his daughter, Astynome. As priest of Apollo, Chryses trusts in the power of the god and in the Greeks' veneration of him, but still uses distinct paraphernalia to ensure his safety and respect:

Per idem tempus Chryses ... fretus religione tanti numinis ad naves venit, praeferens dei vultus ac quaedam ornamentorum templi eius, quo facilius recordatione praesentis numinis veneratio sui regibus incuteretur.

²³ E.g., Benson 1980, 4.

²⁴ At times, this reception is reflected only in the use of distinct vocabulary. The Middle Irish *Tógail Troi*, an adaptation of Dares' *The Fall of Troy: A History*, for instance, repeatedly uses terms such as "develish gods" and "idols" to refer to pagan gods and their cult images, and explains 'pagan' or 'heathen' cult- and burial-practices as distinctly non-Christian; see, e.g., Meyer 1980, 215–17. See Ehrmantraut (forthcoming) for a broader discussion of the treatment of the Olympian gods in the first and second recensions of *Tógail Troi*. Chapter 4 in this volume discusses another Middle Irish Troy narrative focusing on divine and fantastic elements.

²⁵ See below, p. 32–34.

²⁶ On the complex history of the work's composition and translation, see, e.g., Ní Mheallaigh 2013; Bär 2018; Gómez Peinado 2018.

At the same time, Chryses ... trusting in the *religio* of such a great divine power [Apollo] went to the ships, carrying before him an image of the god and some of the decorations of his temple, in order to instil more easily in the kings reverence toward him through the manifestation of his divine presence.²⁷

While Chryses is explicitly relying on Apollo's divine power ("fretus religione"), it is the physical manifestation of the god—his likeness ("vultus") and the decorations from his temple ("ornamenta")—that is emphasised here. Through bringing a physical reminder of the god's presence ("recordatio praesentis numinis") Chryses seeks to arouse the Greeks' desire to worship Apollo ("veneratio") and to honour his priest.

At no point does Dictys explicitly invoke the idea of idolatry,²⁸ nor does he use language that explicitly connotes idolatrous qualities to describe the statue. At the same time, his emphasis on the power of the image and the god's wealth as a driving force in the Greeks' religious behaviour would have resonated with late-antique and medieval Christian audiences, who would have seen in this description signs of idolatry regardless of the author's intention. Dictys' dispassionate description of pagan religious attitudes and practices—the respect afforded priests, the implied veneration of a god's image, the display of divine material wealth—is easily translated into a commentary on pagan idolatry: Chryses believes a lifeless object to hold religious power and anticipates its worship by other pagans. In treating the object as a manifestation of divinity, Chryses and the Greeks—with the exception of Agamemnon—imbue this object with power over them, believing it to be able to punish impious action. While Dictys does not describe the actual veneration of the image, the audience is primed to expect physical displays of worship, including the kneeling before and praying to the statue, as well as sacrifices made in the presence of the god's image.

The simple presence of pagan religious ritual in narratives such as this allows for, and may perhaps even be seen to invite, the exploration of pagan attitudes toward religious iconography and Christian responses to it. That

²⁷ Dictys, *Journal of the Trojan War* 2.28. The Latin text is from Eisenhut 1994; the translation is my own.

²⁸ To go into questions about the origins of Dictys' work or indeed his own religious affiliations is far beyond the scope of this chapter.

Dictys does not engage with the subject of idolatry himself is irrelevant, I would argue, when a Christian audience receives the text and interprets it within its own cultural parameters.²⁹ The enduring influence of the early Church Fathers' discourse on paganism, idolatry, and Christian responses to the Greco-Roman heritage looms large in the reception history of the Troy narrative and its depictions of religious observances. Even seemingly god-less retellings of the myth such as Dares' and Dictys' can thus serve to remind the Christian reader of the idolatrous tendencies of the received cultures and to encourage later writers to engage critically and extensively with the subject.

Indeed, in Benoît's *Roman de Troie*,³⁰ based as it is on the works of Dares and Dictys, we already see a slight shift in the language, moving closer to explicit signs and invocations of idolatry. Unlike most of the examples in this chapter, Benoît does not describe an idol associated with the god Apollo and its veneration by the Greeks here, but rather an image of Jupiter, held in the highest honour by the Trojans:

L'image al deu qu'il plus creient,
 Ou il greignor fiance aveient,—
 C'ert Jupiter li deus poissanz,—
 Cel fist faire li reis Prianz
 Del meillor or qu'il onques ot
 Ne que il onques trover pot.
 Grant seürté e grant fiance
 I avaient e atendance,
 Que par ço fussent defendu,
 Ne ja ne fussent mais vencu,

²⁹ The principle that the reader's horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*, i.e., the background a reader brings to a text) plays a central role in the creation of meaning is an influential one in classical reception studies; see, e.g., Martindale 1993 and Martindale & Thomas 2006. As Salih 2015 demonstrates, the ubiquity of the discourse on idolatry in the Middle Ages would have shaped the medieval Christian reader's horizon of expectation and therefore their understanding of such passages.

³⁰ The poem was written between 1154 and 1160.

Ne mais destruite lor contree:
Mais n'ert pas tel la destinee.

The statue was of the mighty god Jupiter, in whom their faith was strongest and in whom they had the greatest trust; Priam had had it made using the finest gold he ever possessed or could ever find. They had great trust and faith in it, and they expected that through it they would be protected and never again be vanquished or have their country destroyed. But that was not their destiny.³¹

This seems at first sight to be a foreboding pronouncement (“mais n'ert pas tel la destinee”) following a simple *ekphrasis* of the cult object and comment on its material and cultural value. It is a golden image of a supreme god which the Trojans believe will offer them protection. But these seemingly innocuous details conform to the kinds of tropes a contemporary Christian audience would immediately recognise as signs of idolatry: the object is crafted by human hand (“fist faire—reis Prianz”), is made of precious materials (“del meillor or”), and is believed to have powers of its own and through this belief is animated in the minds of its worshippers. Again, Benoît does not state that this worship constitutes idolatry, but writing in the cultural and religious *milieu* of twelfth-century France, he is undoubtedly aware of the weight of his language, as is his contemporary audience.

Manuscript illustrations attached to the *Roman de Troie* (e.g., fig 2) make the connection between descriptions of pagan temples and worship in the text and the sin of idolatry explicit. The cult statue is here represented conspicuously in golden colour and in a rather unusual seated position. It is of ugly, even demonic, appearance, and it appears to communicate with the worshippers through changing gestures. The human figures, in turn, are shown to worship the idol through prostration and gestures of prayer. Taking the narrative and its illumination together it becomes clear that a medieval Christian audience would easily have connected the coded language of the text, the distinct iconography of the illustrations, and the ongoing Christian discourse concerning idolatry in Benoît's work. At the same time,

³¹ Benoît, *Roman de Troie* 3123–34. The French text is taken from Constans 1904, the translation is from Burgess & Kelly 2017.



FIGURE 2: The Greeks worship Apollo. Miniature accompanying the text of Benoît's *Roman de Troie*. Illuminated manuscript dating to 1325–1330. Image: courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Français 60, 63r.

by relying on his audience's ability to recognise these verbal and visual cues rather than on offering his own explication, Benoît is able to maintain a sense of religious detachment and a focus on the romance narrative, while still drawing attention to the idolatrous nature of paganism.

2.3 SHIFTING THE FOCUS:

GUIDO'S EXCURSUS ON THE ORIGINS OF IDOLATRY

In his *History of the destruction of Troy*,³² Guido delle Colonne purports to follow the historical accounts of Dictys and Dares: "those things which [were related] by Dictys the Greek and Dares the Phrygian ... having been transcribed by me, Judge Guido delle Colonne of Messina".³³ As has long been recognised, however, Guido's main source for the Trojan War narrative

³² Guido completed the work in 1287 after working on it for less than three months, "that is from the fifteenth of September of the first indiction until the twenty-fifth of the following November" (Guido, *History* liber ultimus: "a xva uidelicet mensis Septembris prime iudiccionis usque ad xxv mensis Nouembris proxime"). The Latin text is taken from Griffin 1936; the translation from Meek 1974.

³³ Guido, *History* 1: "Ea que per Dytem Grecum et Frigium Darentem... per me iudicem Guidonem de Columpna de Messina transsumpta".

is Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, which he strips of its more narrative character and frames with historiographical notes and clear references to his sources.³⁴ Crucial to Guido's understanding of his role as historian is his sense of responsibility to dismantle, for the benefit of his readers, narratives that depict pagan worship and belief uncritically, a strategy that builds on the works of early Christian historians such as Augustine.³⁵

Guido's emphatic rejection of pagan worship runs through the work as a whole, but is particularly prominent in his excursus on the origins of idolatry in Book 10 of the *History*,³⁶ which interrupts the narrative of the Greeks' consultation of the Apolline oracle at Delphi/Delos, the same scene as in the Lydgate passage with which this chapter began. Yet even the introductory description of the island of Delos and its relationship with Apollo and Diana is indicative of Guido's "unfailing severe attitude toward pagan religious beliefs."³⁷ Before the Greeks even reach Delphi/Delos, Guido tells us that the pagans not only call Apollo a god ("hunc gentiles Appollinem deum esse dixerunt"), but also grant him various other names (Phoebus / "Febus", Ephoebus / "Efebus", Pythias / "Phytus") and identities (Titan / "Tytan", the sun / "sol"),³⁸ signalling that their belief is a false one ("errores"). Indeed, Guido links the oracle of the Pythia ("pythonisse") with the biblical story of the Witch of Endor,³⁹ drawing attention to the dark magic inhabiting the

³⁴ For a detailed introduction to Guido's life and work, see Meek 1974, esp. xix–xxi on his delayed engagement with Dares.

³⁵ Meek 1974, xvi.

³⁶ Where other versions, such as Joseph of Exeter's *Ylias* and the prose *Roman de Troie* include brief introductions to the subject of idolatry, Guido expands on it in unprecedented fashion, drawing on a variety of source texts including Isodore of Seville, Petrus Comestor, the legend of St Brendan, and the Bible (Meek 1974, xxv). See Fradenburg 2002, 35–40 on Guido's excursus in context.

³⁷ Meek 1974, xvi.

³⁸ Guido expands on this in his excursus, highlighting that pagan gods such as Jupiter and Mercury are named after planets and obtain additional power through that association: "Jupiter seu Iouis adeptus est nomen planete Iouis et illum gentiles coluerunt" (Guido, *History* 10).

³⁹ In the *Septuagint*, she is called the "ventriloquist of Aendor" (*engastrimythos en Aendôr*: I Samuel 28), highlighting the trickery of this kind of oracular figure. The Latin Vulgate, in turn, refers to her as "mulier pythonem habens in Endor", drawing a link to the Pythia of Delphi (compare Isodore, *The Etymologies* VIII.ix.7, 21). Guido is

pagan sanctuary and invoking the long-standing Judaeo-Christian rejection of it.

Before turning to Guido's treatment of Apollo's oracle and its manifestation in the form of a cult image, I wish to draw attention to the swiftness with which his sources pass over the scene. In his *The Fall of Troy: A History*, Dares describes the oracular consultation in two sentences: "When Achilles had arrived at Delphi, he proceeded to the oracle: and from the adyton came the answer that the Greeks would be victorious and take Troy in the tenth year. Achilles performed the divine rites (*res divinas*) as instructed."⁴⁰ All Dares offers his readers in terms of religious observation is that Achilles approached the oracle, learned its message, and performed divine rites as required. The reader is not even told what these "*res divinas*" constitute.

As could already be seen in the comparison between Dictys and Benoît, the *Roman de Troie* gives more room to the description of pagan temples, images, worship, and beliefs. The direct comparison with Dares shows that the French version already offers a few more hints of idolatrous behaviour, though it, too, does not comment on it:

Par le comun esguart de toz,
I vait danz Achillès li proz.
Patroclus meine ensemble o lui:
En Delfon vindrent ambedui.
Senz eschars faire e senz nul ris
Entrent el temple Apollinis;
O crieme e o devocion
Firent al deu lor oreison.
Un sacrefise apareillié
A Achillès sacrefiü.

clearly building on these existing associations between witchcraft and pagan oracles, but he takes it further by explicitly equating the two.

⁴⁰ Dares, *Fall of Troy* 15: "Achilles cum Delphos venisset, ad oraculum pergit: et ex adyto respondetur Graecos victuros, decimoque anno Troiam capturos. Achilles res divinas, sicut imperatum est, fecit". The Latin text is from Meister 1873; the translation is my own.

By general agreement, the worthy Achilles went to Delphi, taking Patroclus with him. These two men came to Delphi, where, without mockery or laughter, they entered Apollo's temple. Fearfully and devoutly, they made their supplication to the god while Achilles was offering a fitting sacrifice.⁴¹

Benoît describes the seriousness (“senz eschars faire, senz nul ris, crieme, devocion”) with which Achilles and Patroclus approach the oracle, but like Dares he keeps the interaction between worshippers and oracle brief (“frent al deu lor oreison, un sacrefise sacrefië”), though he does give room to the actual words of the god. The closest to a judgement we find in Benoît is his description of Achilles' response to the oracle: “He made obeisance to the god, thanking him and prostrating himself (*s'umelie*) before the altar”.⁴² While “*s'umelie*” is easily translated as “he prostrated himself,” it also carries the meaning of debasement and could thus be read as a Christian commentary on the act of prostration before a pagan god.

Importantly, the interaction with the god in both the Latin and the French text is unmediated by an image. Guido and, by extension, Lydgate thus introduce not only the subject of idolatry, but also the idol itself into this scene. Unlike Lydgate, Guido does not dwell on the temple of Apollo, but immediately focuses on the cult statue within, describing it with explicit language and identifying it immediately as an empty pagan image of great size (“maxima ymago”), the object of idolatrous worship (“gentilium colencium ydolatriam”):

In hoc igitur templo erat maxima ymago tota ex auro composita in honore predicti dei Appollonis. Que licet fuisset ex auro composita et in ueritate fuisset surda et muta, tamen secundum gentilium errores colencium ydolatriam (que principaliter apud ipsos inualuit, cum omisissent uerum cultum Dei ueri, qui in sapientia, id est in filio Dei, domino nostro Ihesu Christo, ex nichilo cuncta creauit) adhererunt diis surdis et mutis, qui pro certo homines mortales fuerunt, credentes et putantes eos esse deos, quorum potencia nulla erat. Sed responsa que dabantur ab eis non ipsi sed qui ingrediebantur in eorum ymagines dabant, qui spiritus immundi pro

⁴¹ Benoît, *Roman de Troie* 5791–800.

⁴² Benoît, *Roman de Troie* 5815–6 : “Le deu aore e sil mercie, / E devant l'autel s'umelie”.

certo erant, ut per eorum responsa homines in perpetuis errorum cecitatibus conseruarent.

In this temple there was a very great image all made of gold in honor of this god Apollo. Although it was made of gold, and in truth was deaf and dumb, still the pagans, according to their error, embracing idolatry (which chiefly prevailed among them because they lacked the true worship of the true God, who in His Wisdom, that is, in the Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, created all things of nothing), clung to the worship of deaf and dumb gods, who assuredly had been mortal men, believing and considering that those who had no power were gods. But the answers which were given by them were given not by them but by those who walked about in their images, who were surely unclean spirits, so that through their answers men were kept in the perpetual blindness of error.⁴³

The first note Guido strikes here is again that of materiality: the image is the product of human craft and conspicuous wealth (“tota ex auro composita”), a fact he repeats already in the second sentence. Next, he draws his reader’s attention to the fact that such objects, regardless of their worshippers’ beliefs, are lifeless (“surda et muta”) just like the gods they represent (“diis surdis et mutis”). When it comes to the statue’s role in the dissemination of Apollo’s oracles, Guido goes beyond the kinds of invocations of idolatry seen in his sources: he is concerned not only with the pagans’ mistaken belief in the object’s power (“gentilium errores colencium ydolatriam; credentes et putantes eos esse deos”), but also with the object itself: its very emptiness allows it to host unclean spirits (“spiritus immundi”) who move freely within the image (“qui ingrediebantur in eorum ymagines”).

The error of idolatry is linked with a lack of understanding of Christian religion (“cum omisissent uerum cultum Dei ueri”) and the truth it represents. Guido here makes explicit not just the fact that pagans commit idolatry, but also the idea that Christianity offers the only way out of this erroneous belief system and cult practice. In so doing, he highlights the importance idolatry and its rejection hold for Christian identity and self-understanding, and illustrates the imperative that Christians distance them-

⁴³ Guido, *History* 10.

selves explicitly from such practices and, by extension, from paganism more broadly, regardless of their appreciation for the cultural and literary heritage associated with it.

Illuminations from a fourteenth-century manuscript of Guido's text (figs 3 and 4) illustrate not only the material aspects of the cult statue and its veneration, but also the demonic core to which Guido attests: the statue appears to move between images and its changing gestures suggest communication. The idolatry of the pagans is thus depicted clearly, as it is in other illuminations, but the active demonic response of this particular statue is foregrounded. The error of the pagans is here shown to be self-perpetuating: by prostrating themselves before and praying to the idol, the pagan worshippers incite demonic spirits to take up residence in the empty image. The spirits, in turn, encourage the continued idol-worship by communicating with the pagans and thus keep alive their mistaken belief in the god Apollo, his oracle, and his image.

In treating this Delphi/Delos episode as indicative of the idolatrous nature of pagan worship and belief, Guido primes his reader for the excursus on the origins of idolatry, its association with the paganism of antiquity, and its refutation and elimination through Christ. The Trojan narrative is here reframed as a teaching tool: it instructs the reader in how to read pagan narratives critically and in how to use this reading to reflect on the differences between pagan and Christian ritual and belief.⁴⁴ As Guido's Christian audience already knows, the idols of pagan gods are at once empty and lifeless objects and powerful receptors for actual demonic forces who capitalise on the emptiness of the vessel and its veneration by worshippers. Guido's Apollo thus perfectly exemplifies the dangers and ambiguities inherent in idols and idol worship, and allows him to reflect on the complicated relationship between religious imagery and idolatry, and between idols, the gods they represent, and the demons that actually inhabit them.

The excursus, in turn, focuses on the origins of idolatry, though Guido actually begins with the end of the practice ("all the idolatry in the world ceased on all sides")⁴⁵ in the coming of Christ ("through the glorious coming

⁴⁴ Cf. Salih 2015, 15.

⁴⁵ Guido, *History* 10: "ubique terrarum ydolatria tota cessauerit".



FIGURE 3: The Greeks worship the idol of Apollo at Delphi/Delos. Miniature accompanying the text of Book 10 of Guido's *History*. Fourteenth-century manuscript from Venice, Italy; miniature by Giustino da Forlì. Image: courtesy of Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva, Cod. Bodmer 78, f. 29v.

of Our Lord Jesus Christ”),⁴⁶ emphasising the difference between the pagan origins and perpetuation of idolatry, and the Christian elimination of it. The end of idolatry is linked with the biblical narrative of the flight to Egypt, one of the centres of ancient paganism and idolatry.⁴⁷ It is only once the reader has been reminded of the role of Christianity in the dismantling of pagan religions that Guido turns to various origin stories, beginning with the biblical one, according to which Ishmael was the first to create an idol (“the Jews say Ishmael fashioned the first image from clay”).⁴⁸ Traditionally seen as progenitor of the Arabs and later of Mohammed himself, Ishmael and, by extension, the Ishmaelites are frequently associated with idolatry

⁴⁶ Guido, *History* 10: “aduentum domini nostri Ihesu Christi”.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Camille 1989, 1–24 on Egypt, idolatry, and the fall of the idols in visual representations and religious thought.

⁴⁸ Guido, *History* 10: “Iudei dicunt quod Ismael primo simulachrum de luto fecisse”.



FIGURE 4: The Greeks meet Calchas at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi/Delos. Miniature accompanying the text of Book 10 of Guido's *History*. Fourteenth-century manuscript from Venice, Italy; miniature by Giustino da Forlì. Image: courtesy of Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva, Cod. Bodmer 78, f. 31r.

in Jewish and Christian writings.⁴⁹ While Guido does not draw explicit links between idolatry and Islam, he will have been aware of contemporary representations of Islam as an idolatrous religion. Indeed, the early mention of Ishmael suggests that he, much like Lydgate, is invoking contemporary discourse about the alleged idolatrous nature of Islam and is inviting his audience to draw the same connection. The Jewish narrative about Ishmael

⁴⁹ For further discussion of the various links drawn between Ishmael, Islam, and idolatry, see, e.g., Hawting 2010; Grypeou-Spurling 2013, 239–88; Poorthuis 2013; Firestone 2018; Navarro 2022.

is then contrasted with its pagan counterpart in which Prometheus invents the clay effigy (“the pagans say dogmatically that Prometheus made the first image from clay”).⁵⁰

Interestingly, Guido draws a distinction between Ishmael’s and Prometheus’ creation of idols and the origins of their worship, between the empty object itself and its transformation into an idol through human error and adoration. The latter Guido situates in Assyria, where King Ninus first used an image not only to commemorate his father, Belus, but also to worship him as a god (“coluit tamquam deum”) and to force others to do the same (“coli mandauit”). It is the false belief that Belus was deified (“in celum esse deificatum”) and the worship of this idol that attracts an unclean spirit (“spiritus immundus”) who communicates with the Assyrians through the idol (“responsa petentibus exhibebat”).⁵¹ Following Ninus’ example, other pagan peoples then create their own gods from mortals (“fingentes homines mortuos esse deos”) and worship them through their idols (“gentiles processerunt ad ydolorum cultum”). The genealogies of the Greco-Roman gods presented by Guido are familiar from the writings of early Latin Church Fathers such as Lactantius, in which Olympians and lesser gods alike begin their lives as mortal men and women.⁵² Importantly, Guido highlights the relationship between the creation of images, especially those commemorating or celebrating mortal men and women, the worship of these, and the creation of false beliefs. Just like the idols before which they prostrate themselves, the gods represented by these idols are the creation of pagans;⁵³ idolatry is thus an entirely avoidable sin, but one that is deeply ingrained in the fabric of pagan antiquity.

⁵⁰ Guido, *History* 10: “gentiles autem primum Prometheum simulachrum de luto fecisse dogmatizauerunt”. Pagans are characterised as inherently lawless and idolatrous (“they were always without the Law ... serving idols from the first”: “semper sine lege fuerunt ... ydolis principaliter seruientes”).

⁵¹ See, e.g., Cooke 1927, 403–7 on Guido’s sources.

⁵² While Guido draws on a number of sources (see above, footnote 36), he does not always acknowledge them. Isodore’s *Etymologies* is one of his key references for the origins of idolatry (Meek 1974, xxvi). On the early Church Fathers’ euhemeristic approach to the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, see, e.g., Winiarczyk 2013, 148–54; Roubekas 2016, 115–37; DePalma Digeser & Barboza 2021.

⁵³ See, e.g., Camille 1989, 50–7.

Guido's excursus ends with a narrative return to Delphi/Delos. The oracular episode thus serves to frame and, indeed, to exemplify the history of idolatry, enabling the reader to comprehend the dangers inherent in reading uncritically stories about pagan antiquity:

Per demonum igitur ingressum in ydola surda et muta eliciebantur ab eis petita responsa que tunc gentilitas excolebat. ... Et per hanc dyabolica decepcionis astuciam deus Appollo responsa sua in dicta insula Delos petentibus exhibebat.

Demons, therefore, entered into deaf and dumb idols which the pagans then worshipped, and it was they who produced the answers being sought for ... Through the wiles of this demonic deception the god Apollo revealed his answers to the petitioners on the island of Delos.⁵⁴

In the end, Guido leaves no doubt in his reader's mind that the oracle of Apollo speaks to its pagan worshippers, but the mechanism by which this occurs, the demonic influence, is invisible to them and can only be recognised by a Christian audience. His reader is then to reflect on the origins of idolatry and on its link with the cultures whose stories are told in Guido's work, as well as on the power the Christian god and the obligation of Christian believers to denounce and dismantle idolatry.

2.4 ANCIENT AND MODERN RELIGIOUS FOES: IDOLATRY AS MAMMETRY

Unlike Lydgate's *Troy Book*, the anonymous *Seege* or *Batayle of Troye* relies not on Guido as a source, but rather directly on Dares.⁵⁵ The text, based on a minstrel song, is dated to the first quarter of the fourteenth century and retains characteristic features of the oral tradition from which it stems.⁵⁶ Where Guido chooses the episode at the temple of Apollo at Delphi/Delos to colour pagan ritual and tradition with Christian judgement and to discuss the origins of idolatry, the anonymous composer of the *Seege* retains the narrative detachment of Dares and Benoît, though he, too, has the idol

⁵⁴ Guido, *History* 10.

⁵⁵ See Barnicle 1927, xxxvii–lxxiv; Atwood & Whitaker 1944, xxi–lxxi; Scheijnen 2023, 346–50.

⁵⁶ Barnicle 1927, xxxiii–vii.

(“mawmet”) answer instead of the god or his oracle.⁵⁷ Unlike the work’s Latin source, the *Seege* has Dares,⁵⁸ not Achilles, visit Delphi/Delos on behalf of the Greeks:

Daries tok þeo tresour þat was fyn
And ȝaf hit to þeo temple of appolyn
And offrede as þeo maner was þo
And feol adoun on his kneoes bo.
“Lord appolyn, y by-seche þe
þat þou wole onswere me.
ȝef we schal to bataile wende,
How schole we spede at þeo laste eynde?”
þeo mawmet onswerde him afyn,
“Goþ and werreþ by leue myn
And loke þat ȝe no stunte nouȝt
Til troye beo to grounde y-brouȝt
And er þis ten ȝeir beon y-gon
Ȝe schole ouercomen heom euerychon.”

Dares took the treasure that was fine and brought it to the temple of Apollo, and he offered it as was customary and fell down to his two knees. “Lord Apollo, I beseech you to answer me. If we turn to battle, how shall we succeed at the end?” The mammet answered him well, “Go and war by my leave and see to it that you do not stop till Troy is brought to the ground, and before the tenth year is gone, you shall overcome them all.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Whether he is looking at Dares alone or alongside Benoît, he does not embellish the scene with a detailed description the way Guido and Lydgate do.

⁵⁸ The Arundel manuscript also has Dares (“darres”) interact with Apollo, the Egerton manuscript “Eufiras”, and the Harley manuscript Odysseus (“Eluxes/Eluxies”).

⁵⁹ *Seege* 998–1111. The Middle English (based on the Lincoln’s Inn MS) text is taken from Barnicle 1927; the translation is mine. The variations in the Arundel and Egerton manuscripts for this passage are not significant for the present discussion, but are referred to below where relevant.

As in earlier versions, the visit to the oracle involves a number of pagan rituals: the Greeks offer rich dedications or sacrifice to the god (“tresour þat was fyn... offrede as þeo maner was þo”), they appeal to him in prayer or through prostration (“feol adoun on his kneoes bo”), and they rely on and believe in his oracular response. Despite not offering an active commentary on these rituals as Guido does, the *Seege* author still introduces the language of idolatry and, more importantly, of “mammetry” into the brief and dispassionate account of his source text.⁶⁰ Even without drawing on the *History*’s excursus, the *Seege* demonstrates how easily the pagan rituals in this and other episodes are classed as idolatry by a Christian audience. Drawing the verbal link between pagan idolatry and Islam through the use of the term “mammet” and its cognates, the text further reflects how deeply engrained this cultural and religious understanding is in Middle English, as it is in Western European literature more broadly at the time.

The conflation of the Greeks’ paganism and contemporary Islam is not, however, restricted to such scenes of worship in the *Seege*. Achilles, for instance, though he does not take part in the expedition to Delphi/Delos, is consistently framed as the son of a witch (“his modur is a wyche, kan mukil schame”),⁶¹ as benefitting from her dark magic (“Achilles was baped in þe water of helle, / ffor-þy no myzte him no mon qwelle”),⁶² and as a follow-

⁶⁰ The three closest manuscripts use varying forms of “mammet” to refer to the statue of Apollo (line 1006: “mawmet” in the Lincoln’s Inn MS, “mament appolyn” in the Arundel, “mawment” in the Egerton MS), while the Harley manuscript—different in many ways from the three others—simply refers to it as “That Image of Appolyn”. See Barnicle 1927, xlv–lvi for more detailed discussions of the differences between the Harley manuscript and the other three, and of the tendency of the Harley manuscript to suppress narrative embellishments associated with the romance in favour of a more classicising brevity.

⁶¹ *Seege* 1201. The Egerton MS has: “His moder is a Wycche, can muche of shame” (*Seege* 1201); the Arundel MS simply has: “Strong he ys t kan moche schame” (*Seege* 1201); the relevant lines are missing in the Harley MS.

⁶² *Seege* 1463–4; compare 1344–9. The Egerton MS has: “Achilles was bathed in þe flum of helle, / þerfore myzt no man him quelle” (*Seege* 1463–4). The Arundel manuscript omits these lines and focuses only on the resulting hardness of Achilles’ skin; the Harley MS similarly omits this passage.

er of Mohammed (“y swere, sire, by god Mahoun”).⁶³ Both regular pagan ritual and belief, and dark magic are thus verbally linked with the prophet Mohammed, and Islam is equated with forms of idolatry and devil-worship. This idiomatic reference to the religious other perpetuates existing stereotypes and serves to connect the pagan religious elements of the Troy narrative with medieval Christian ideas about the mistaken beliefs and rituals of other contemporary religions. The *Seege* narrative thus becomes a reflection of the culture and religious *milieu* within which it was composed rather than a reflection of the culture and religious *milieu* of its source texts or, indeed, of the ancient world it represents.⁶⁴ Through language that reflects contemporary misrepresentations of Muslims or Saracens as idolatrous pagans and *vice versa*, the distinct religious cultures of Greece, Troy, and Rome are here used to perpetuate religious prejudice against Muslims, to other and to degrade them, and, by extension, to illustrate the superiority of Christianity.⁶⁵

It is in this cultural and religious context that we must read Lydgate’s treatment of the Delphi/Delos passage with which this chapter began. Lydgate’s discussion of the idolatrous nature of the consultation of the oracle and of the oracle’s response is obviously driven by his source text’s treatment of the subject. He follows Guido not only in the description of the statue, its worship, and its deceptive oracles, but also in the disruption of his narrative to include an excursus on idolatry. Yet, while Lydgate discusses idolatry along similar lines as Guido, he infuses his narrative with the same anti-Islamic language as the author of the *Seege*. His cultural context defines the way he views idolatry as a sin not only of the ancient pagan religions, but also of Islam.

⁶³ *Seege* 1334. The Arundel MS has: “By mahond mykyd mof myȝth” (*Seege* 1334); the Egerton MS has: “I swere, by my god Mahoun” (*Seege* 1334); and Harley simply has: “Be the trowth þat is myn” (*Seege* 1334). This passage is also discussed in chapter 1 of this volume. See Scheijnen 2023 for a detailed study of Thetis’ and Achilles’ representation in the *Seege*.

⁶⁴ Compare Scheijnen 2023.

⁶⁵ See also chapter 1.2 of this volume, where Scheijnen discusses such othering practices in more detail.

The *Seege* and Lydgate's *Troy Book* thus present us with different kinds of retellings of the Troy narrative, but they reflect both the influence of, and interest in, the material in medieval England.⁶⁶ Guido's *History* in many ways shapes the English reception of Troy in this period:⁶⁷ translated into English multiple times, it also forms the basis of Raoul le Fèvre's *Recueil des Histoires de Troie*, an English translation of which was the first English book printed by William Caxton and served as a key inspiration for Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.⁶⁸ When considering the treatment of pagan worship and belief in medieval English retellings, Guido's excursus on idolatry is undoubtedly highly influential in associating the theme with the Trojan War narrative. Indeed, Lydgate's reception of Guido reinforces this link, but also imbues it with contemporary language that goes beyond the Latin concept of *idolatria*; it broadens the story of idolatry to include not only its origins and manifestations in antiquity, but also its purported continuation in the Mohammedan worship or "mammetry". The *Seege* similarly creates and reinforces these cultural-linguistic links, but, so far as we know, without engaging with Guido's work. What these three works demonstrate, then, is that the potential for reading pagan worship in the Troy narrative as idolatry was always present in the works of Dares, Dictys, and Benoît. A Christian audience or author adapting the story could, and indeed would, imbue their narratives with additional meaning by using them to reflect on the religious other, as much as on their own beliefs.

2.5 CONCLUSION

The popularity of Troy narratives in the Middle Ages is representative of the interest and investment in the Greco-Roman heritage and its narratives more broadly. That various Western European groups and nations looked to the Trojan War narrative for their own aetiologies further fuelled a sense of continuity and connection between medieval Christians and the ancient Greeks, Trojans, and Romans.⁶⁹ This rich cultural inheritance, however, brought with it the weight of pagan religion, its rituals, and its beliefs.

⁶⁶ On Troy narratives in medieval English literature more widely, see, e.g., Benson 1980.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Simpson 1998.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Cole 1980.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Beaune 1991, 226–44, 33–345; Barlow 1995; Cohen 2004; Roeck 2004.

While Dares, Dictys, and Benoît for the most part remove the gods from their narratives, they do include scenes of worship and descriptions of their temples and images, showing how Greeks and Trojans alike look to the gods for advice, support, and protection.

A Christian readership, already in Late Antiquity, but especially in the Middle Ages, would have been able to translate such scenes and descriptions, however small or innocuous, into symbols of the false beliefs and idolatry of Greco-Roman paganism. Indeed, the ubiquity of discourses on idolatry and its association with pagan antiquity would have made a different reading almost impossible. The *Seege's* explicit language in the otherwise unaltered narrative of Dares' Delphi/Delos scene highlights that the signs of idolatry have always been present in the core texts and are therefore easily brought to the surface by an audience primed to identify them. Guido's and Lydgate's excursus, in turn, spell out the complexities inherent in the representation of pagan idolatry and Christian responses to it. They demonstrate that the identification and rejection of idolatry are ongoing processes and that Christian audiences must assess critically the stories of pagan antiquity they consume. Illustrations, in turn, serve as visual reminders of the demonic potential of pagan imagery, and of the dangers inherent in viewing it and engaging with it uncritically.

Medieval Troy narratives, much like other forms of Christian reception of the Greco-Roman world, thus can serve as vehicles for cultural and religious expression and reflection for both the author and the reader. In embedding Christian theories about idolatry in their Troy poems and histories, authors such as Guido and Lydgate draw attention to the differences between their contemporary Christian audiences and the Greco-Roman pagans whose stories they read. They emphasise that paganism and, by extension, any non-Christian religion is driven by false beliefs and expresses them through false worship, including idolatry. Importantly, the cultural conflation of pagan idolatry and "mammetry" in medieval England and Western Europe more broadly is superimposed onto some of these later Troy narratives, perpetuating and reinforcing contemporary religious stereotypes.

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