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WHAT IS WRONG AT THE ROYAL COURT? - THE LITERARY TESTIMONY OF *HUON DE BORDEAUX*

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Abstract: *Drawing from a variety of literary texts, and especially from the thirteenth-century Huon de Bordeaux, this study argues that the concept of medieval kingship was rather tenuous. More often than not, poets of courtly romances and heroic epics depict the king as a negative figure, evil in character, irrational, unpredictable, untrustworthy, and outright vicious and violent in his actions against detractors and opponents. We cannot universalise this phenomenon, but there is solid evidence for the existence of a long-term discourse on unfit kings who threatened the well-being of their subjects because of their tyrannical attitudes, administrative incompetence, and lack of wisdom. We regularly learn of deeply concerned court councillors who try to advise the king to pursue a different policy, to observe law and order, but they are disregarded and cannot prevent the king from committing serious mistakes and acts of violence which threaten the protagonists' very existence.*

Keywords: *evil kings, middle ages, Huon de Bordeaux*

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Introduction

Contrary to many modern popular opinions, expressed in movies, fairy tales, images, music, sculptures, and other media, medieval kings were not at all uncontested political figures, as much as some of them gained even a mythical status (Charlemagne, King Arthur, Emperor Otto, Richard Lionheart, etc.). In fact, medieval kingship was, to say the least, highly problematical, often seriously debated, profoundly criticized, even questioned, but not necessarily because people had already a sense of and desire for democracy. Historical records from across medieval Europe provide extensive data regarding serious conflicts, internecine strife, and actual civil war, whether we think of the serious conflicts in England

leading to the establishment of the famous *Magna Carta* in 1215, or of the profound tensions in the Holy Roman Empire when one dynasty replaced another. In fact, most of medieval history reflects the rather tenuous relationship between the kings and their barons, not to speak of the common folks, whether we think of the history of England, France, Italy, Denmark, Portugal, or Norway (Kern: 1948; Myers and Wolfram: 1982; Turner: 2005).

This paper is an attempt to addresses this topic from a literary-historical perspective because fictional texts from that time, often determined by the appearance of King Arthur and his court, do not necessarily, as modern readers tend to assume, support the assumption of the king being an ideal ruler. In fact, more often than not, the situation at King Arthur's court, or any other royal figure's, appears to be rather chaotic, violent, hostile, unjust, if not tyrannical (Sunderland: 2017). First, an examination of a selection of various texts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries - where the poets portray the king/emperor in truly negative terms – will be made. This will be followed by a detailed discussion of the anonymous *Huon of Bordeaux.* The paper will conclude with a few reflections on the implications for our modern understanding of medieval society at large.

Literary Examples from the Twelfth through the Fifteenth Centuries

We find clear evidence for the observation of evil rulers as early as circa 1000 in the Old Spanish *El Poema de Mío Cid*, King Alfonso VI having exiled the protagonist from his court as a result of El Cid having been maligned by jealous courtiers. In the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* composed in circa 1200, King Gunther essentially consents to the murder of Siegfried. In numerous Icelandic sagas like *Njál's Saga*, *Egil's Saga*, etc., and in one of the *lais* by Marie de France, in her "Lanval" (circa 1190), King Arthur badly disregards the foreign knight Lanval for no apparent reason (Marie de France, ed. and trans. Waters: 2018). Although he is a king's son, he is temporarily impoverished and does not receive any attention by Arthur or any support. Downtrodden, Lanval leaves the court and soon encounters a fairy outside in the meadow. She had been waiting for him for some time because she has fallen in love with him. The two enjoy each other, but when he wants to return, she imposes a taboo on him, banning him to reveal anything about her to other people. However, upon his return to the court, now with many riches from his maid, the other knights notice him again and now joyfully include him in their rounds.

At the same time, Queen Guinevere feels attracted to him and endeavours to seduce him. Quite parallel to the biblical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Lanval rejects her, emphasizing that he would not want to hurt his fidelity to the king. She then tries to provoke him, calling him a homosexual (though not in those specific terms), whereupon he puts her down, identifies his mistress as by far superior to the queen in her beauty, and escapes, although he has committed a transgression of the taboo the fairy maid had imposed on him. Guinevere then publicly accuses Lanval of having attempted to rape her, and laments so loudly that her husband hears about it. He immediately takes Guinevere's side and wants Lanval to be executed right away because he fails to defend himself properly and cannot produce any proof. However, the royal council delays the legal proceedings, begs the king to reconsider the judgment, but Arthur emerges as a rude, impulsive, unjust, and tyrannical ruler – in this regard perhaps a literary reflection of the English King Henry II, who had the Bishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, assassinated in 1170, at least commissioned this murder indirectly by implications (de Beer and Speakman: 2021).

Lanval, however, is finally rescued by his fairy lady who demonstrates through her appearance that she is, indeed, much more beautiful than the queen, who had lied about her alleged physical violation by the knight. Nevertheless, Lanval is so frustrated with King Arthur and his shameless court cabals and blatant injustice that he waits for the fairy when she departs, jumps onto the back

of the horse behind her, and disappears into the utopian world of the Middle Ages, Avalon. There is no respect left for this tyrannical King Arthur, who badly abuses his royal power to undermine the principles of law and to allow his wife to slander one of the best knights at court. We might well imagine that Marie had in mind to criticise badly the perversions of royal power in reality (Bloch: 2003; Kinoshita and McCracken: 2012).[1]

A contemporary Middle High German poet followed suit with this severe criticism of the vicious and revengeful ruler. In the anonymous *Herzog Ernst* (ms. B, circa 1220), Emperor Otto is misled by his nephew, Henry, Count of the Palatinate, in believing that his son-in-law, the young Bavarian Duke Ernst, intends to bring about a *coup d'etat*, a blatant lie to malign Henry's competitor for the emperor's favour. This then leads to a bitter military campaign pitting the older ruler against the young duke, and although Ernst tries everything in his might to resist evil-minded Otto, ultimately he has to depart from Germany to go on a crusade to the Holy Land. Because of tempestuous weather, he is driven far off course and enters the world of monsters, which occupies the entire second part of the narrative. The poet demonstrates extensive interest in the adventures which Ernst has to experience, which transforms the text into a solid piece of medieval literary entertainment. At the end, Ernst returns home and manages, through some trickery, to appease the emperor, who then embraces him again, thus completing the text.

There is explicit criticism of the evil emperor who is too subject to manipulations by the jealous courtier, who is intransigent to the advice of all of his councillors, displays utter fear and hatred, responds completely irrationally to the evil rumours spread by Henry, and pursues his military goals against Ernst with such violence that all of Bavaria is in danger of being destroyed by his troops (*Herzog Ernst*: 2019; see the editor's extensive commentary).

The situation is not much better with King Arthur in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (circa 1205), where the court is in a kind of uproar over personality conflicts and severe disagreements. One of the high-ranking members of the court, Ither, has caused a scandal and left, waiting for anyone offering him redemption. Tragically, Arthur allows the young stranger, Parzival, to go out and 'get' Ither's armour, as if it were freely available. Similar to the biblical episode of David and Goliath, the young man, who uses only a javelin, surprisingly succeeds in killing mighty Ither and thus to conquer his red armour, not knowing that he has killed his own uncle (Wolfram von Eschenbach: 2006).

Young Parzival later makes his way through the world all by himself and eventually has an opportunity to visit the court of the Grail, at castle Munsalvaesche. However, he fails to ask the one crucial question directed at King Anfortas, and thus undermines the hope for a generally happy future at least among the 'elite.' It will take the entire rest of this massive oeuvre for Parzival to redeem himself, which happens only after Parzival has been redeemed by his uncle, Trevrizent, has then met his half-brother, Feirefiz, and has taken him to King Arthur's court. No major events take place there, except that the Grail messenger Cundrie arrives to announce that Parzival's previous neglect to ask the question has been forgiven and that he is now entitled to return to Munsalvaesche and to ask the long-awaited question. There are no further negative features associated with King Arthur, but he appears increasingly as a negligible and passive figure whose presence is of no major consequence within the romance (Bumke: 2004).

The late Middle Ages witnessed a number of rather negative literary treatments of King/ Emperor Charlemagne, such as in Countess Elisabeth of Nassau-Saarbrücken's *Königin Sibille* (circa 1431) or in the anonymous *Malagis* (circa 1450) that underscores his rather pathetic character, his failure as a leader, and the fact that he is rather dangerous in his personal rancour and vicious persecution complex. We can thus identify an entire literary discourse on the figure of the king who tends to disappoint as a leader and who

defies all the ideals that we are otherwise normally presented with in medieval literature (Classen, *Charlemagne*: 2021). Granted, most poets appear to be reticent concerning the king's evil character, but a careful reading of the narrators' comments and the presentation of the royal figure within the literary context confirms the existence of this rather strong theme, which must have deeply resonated with the respective audiences.

Huon de Bordeaux

One of the most dramatic cases of an evil king can be found in the thirteenth-century French *chanson de geste*, the anonymous *Huon de Bordeaux*. This verse narrative proves to be too complex to deal with here in necessary details, but the portrait of King Charles (Emperor Charlemagne) deserves particular attention within our context. It has survived in three mostly complete manuscripts and in two fragments, and it subsequently inspired a whole series of related versions, *Roman d'Aubéron*, *Huon Roi de Féérie*, *Chanson d'Esclarmonde*, *Chanson de Clarisse et Florent*, *Chanson d'Yde et d'Olive*, *Chanson de Godin*, and the *Roman de Croissant*. In 1454, a rhymed version in Alexandrines appeared (only one manuscript), and then also a prose version (today lost), which became the basis of a printed version in the sixteenth century (first printed in 1513 and many times thereafter in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries). In circa 1540, John Bourchier, Lord Berners, translated the work as *Huon of Burdeuxe*, which in turn became the source for Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (circa 1595 or 1596). The original French work had also a deep impact on the epic poem *Oberon* by the German Christoph Martin Wieland (1780) (*Huon of Bordeaux*, trans.: 2021: xxi-xxii).

Very similar to *Herzog Ernst*, in *Huon of Bordeaux* the young protagonist experiences a series of misfortunes which deeply alienate him from his overlord, King Charlemagne, who appears to be a mostly unreliable, untrustworthy, inconsistent, and contradictory figure who repeatedly fails to live up to his own oaths and public pledges. The entire narrative, a king of *chanson de geste* faintly in the vein of the anonymous *Chanson de Roland* (circa 1160), is actually predicated on the phenomenon that the innocent hero faces an extremely hostile and highly volatile king who listens to traitorous advisors and judges according to their vile recommendations.

Tragically, Huon kills Charlemagne's evil and good-for-nothing son Charlot who had ambushed him with the intention of murdering him. Huon did not know about his identity and only defended himself, all of which had been secretly arranged by the evil courtier Amoury who wanted to ruin the king and to take over the rule of the country. The king is so infuriated about Huon's 'guilt' that he exiles him – this in close parallel to the historical events concerning the trial of Enguerrand de Couci in 1259 (Rossi: 1975: 296-315)[2] imposing a series of virtually impossible tasks on him which he would have to accomplish before he would be allowed to return home. Huon nevertheless accepts the challenge, so we learn much about his many adventures in the world of fairies (King Auberon), giants, Muslims, and other opponents. Ultimately, just as in the case of the Middle High German narrative, *Herzog Ernst*, Huon succeeds despite all odds and can thus return to France where the king finally receives him as his loyal subject, whereas Huon's brother, Gerard, who had badly betrayed him, is defeated and executed.

Leaving many of the narrative details aside, especially the world of fairies with its dimension of magic and secret (King Auberon), we recognize here the poet's attempt to project an utterly negative portrait of Charlemagne, though hardly in historical terms. He is already hundred eighty years old and would like to step down from his throne, but his barons urge him to continue as their ruler. Nevertheless, he suggests his beloved son Charlot as his successor, "[e]ven though he is worthless" (113). Indeed, Charlemagne is completely aware of the fact that

his son refuses to help his father (122) and that he associates carelessly with traitors (123), and thus would be a grave danger to the well-being of the kingdom. Worse even, Charlot had previously been instrumental in triggering a war between the royal court and Ogier the Dane, whose son he had killed with a chessboard (126-27). After relating of a series of military operations which had resulted in scores of dead men, all honourable and worthy, Charlemagne comments on his son once again, calling him not "worth a penny" (216). Although the chaotic and hostile situation is quite obvious to everyone, the king refuses to accept reality and still opts for his son as his own successor, which causes long-term suffering for himself, his dynasty, and for the French court, that is, for France at large. Only Huon succeeds in raising effective resistance against the king, but not in military terms; instead, he accepts the king's ruling and undergoes a long series of challenges in the exotic Orient and can thus demonstrate to Charlemagne his own innocence and the vile and traitorous nature of the evil members of the court.

Later, after Huon has killed Charlot in self-defence and has sought refuge at the king's court in Paris, the situation becomes even worse because Charlemagne at first promises publicly that Huon will be absolutely safe from any harm (1100). However, when he then learns that the young man had killed his son, Charlemagne ignores the guarantee and is about to stab him to death with his own hand (1299), which Duke Naimes explicitly calls an attempt to murder the knight (1304). In fact, Naimes has to call upon the king: "Conduct yourself as befitting a sensible man" (1312), and he reprimands him to control his excessive emotions (1324). Subsequently, Huon tries to defend himself, simply telling the truth about Charlot's treacherous actions, which justifiably led to his death, but Amaury creates a whole web of lies because he wants to take over the kingdom. In order to find out who is lying, Huon and Amaury must fight a duel against each other, a form of ordeal, although divine intervention in the church had already indicated that Amaury is a traitor and ought not to be trusted (1539) (Neumann: 2010).

In fact, everyone at court realises that phenomenon, God's messages are visible to all, exposing the latter (1657-60), but the king does not accept the obvious signals since he is living in an imaginary bubble and orders that the two men proceed with their ordeal, as if Amaury's arguments held any validity. However, he then imposes a new rule which goes beyond all laws and traditions (1741) and which is immediately identified by Huon and Naimes as an egregious "abuse [of] power" (1749). If the defeated person would not confess before his death, the other knight would be automatically exiled, a stipulation which makes a mockery out of such an ordeal, especially because it would be highly unlikely that the defeated opponent could survive the fight or find the time and energy to make a public statement regarding his true guilt. In fact, Naimes immediately speaks up against this new rule and relates what everyone feels about the king's manipulations: "You wrong these noble barons" (1761).

Even though Huon wins the joust and kills the traitor, who had actually confessed his evil deeds to his opponent, neither the court nor the king had heard it, so Charlemagne proceeds with his dictatorial and unfair strategy and sends Huon into exile for the rest of his life. Everyone is completely upset about this development, and Naimes goes so far as to exclaim: "What! Emperor, have you gone mad?"(2241). Huon himself severely charges the king: "'you are wrong!" (2261),and warning him that his judgments would never be accepted as trustworthy in all of France (2275), and characterising him as senile (2277).

Since no one can change the king's mind/ madness, Naimes and all the other barons furiously leave the court and can thus force Charlemagne to rescind his oath regarding Huon, but he imposes virtually impossible tasks that he would have to fulfill before he would allow him back to France and to receive his inheritance. This then launches the second major part of the

chanson de geste, which does not fall under our subject of discussion.

Not only the king, but some individuals at his court, even including Huon's own brother, prove to be untrustworthy, committing treason against Huon, a major theme in medieval historiography and literature (Tracy, ed.: 2019). But there is no more real justice to come from Charlemagne, as the intense reactions by Naimes and the other courtiers indicate, not to speak of Huon's protests against the king's abuses. Of course, Huon subsequently achieves all of his goals, but only with the help of the king of the fairies, Auburon, and others, and we can easily conclude that the anonymous poet drew a most negative portrait of the king.

The entire narrative could be read as a literary criticism of deplorable and miserable kings who are evil as a result of their character weakness, being the easy objects of court cabals directed against them. There is always a hostile party at court that would like to undermine the ruler and to destroy him; but since they cannot attack him directly, they attempt to target his wife, his trusted family members, or loyal advisors. The anonymous poet of *Huon of Bordeaux* highlights these problems perhaps more dramatically than most of his contemporaries, although those did not hold back with their critical remarks in a variety of texts throughout medieval Europe. We might have to agree with the opinion of Duke Naimes, for instance, who identifies the king as senile, if not mad. There is much wrong at the royal court of France under the rule of Charlemagne.

Conclusion

Throughout the Middle Ages, individual poets formulated astoundingly critical comments about the king or emperor in their texts. Neither Charlemagne nor Arthur, neither Emperor Otto nor other rulers were spared this biting criticism, which cannot have been just literary fancy. We cannot tell exactly how the various audiences responded to those political messages, but most examples discussed above enjoyed considerable popularity. The anonymous *Huon of Bordeaux* deserves particular attention for the intensity with which King/Emperor Charlemagne is described as a tyrannical ruler who is too old to make fair judgments, who reacts with excessive emotions to personal tragedy, who proves to be revengeful, filled with bitter hatred, and who is characterised by an astounding lack of judiciousness and skills as a ruler within a feudal system. In fact, both here and in the other examples we discover an entire discourse on the medieval tyrant who does not even deserve to occupy the king's throne (Classen: 2008; Newell: 2013; Newell: 2016; Vercamer: 2020).

First of all, we can recognize here a particular thematic branch of a literary motif aimed at criticizing the royal ruler for his cruel, unfair, and ultimately dictatorial measures and for his incompetence in political and judicial terms. When we attempt to situate these fictional narratives within their historical context – the charge of the king as a tyrant, as John of Salisbury formulated it in his *Policraticus* (circa 1159; cf. John of Salisbury: 1990), was already a common trope in the twelfth century – it seems highly unlikely that the courtly audiences of all of those texts, as different as each one of them certainly was (from a *lai* to a heroic epic, to a *chanson de geste*, to a courtly romance) would not have tolerated, if not welcomed, the often very explicit and sharp criticism of the king or emperor, if they would not have recognized parallels within their own lives in practical terms.

In 1400, for instance, the German prince electors condemned King Wenceslaus as incompetent and removed him from the throne. He disregarded their decision, although he was replaced by King Rupert of the Palatinate (Kuthan and Šenovský, ed.: 2019). If we can trust the literary documents and compare them with the historical narratives about many failed or even hated kings, we are on solid ground to recognize especially in *Huon of Bordeaux* a major fictional work which served exceedingly well to express strong criticism of a morally debased, ruthless, unfair, and tyrannical king.[3]

Altogether, the literary evidence strongly suggests that we must change our modern understanding of medieval kings, who were obviously often not strong, wise, or intelligent enough to live up to the public expectations and demands of their positions as leaders, and commonly resorted to unethical, even criminal, cruel, and vicious methods to maintain their power as kings. Little wonder that the path from medieval feudalism to modern democracy began already in the twelfth century (Morris: 2015; Classen: *Freedom*, 2021), with early struggles against terrible political leaders especially in fictional documents. We can thus realize the great importance of the literary evidence concerning the political discourse on the true nature of a worthy king according to fundamental ethical and philosophical standards already since the high Middle Ages. The post-medieval reception of *Huon de Bordeaux* might have been due primarily to the appearance of the fairy king Auberon, but the criticism of the cruel, unfair, and violent king remained a steady theme until the modern times, such as in Wieland's *Oberon* (1780; final version 1796; reprinted many times thereafter). Modern literature ever since has responded in kind, and the criticism of the tyrannical ruler has continued until today, unfortunately for probably very good reasons. Whereas previous research has focused primarily on the elements of the magical, on the history of reception, on the manuscripts containing *Huon de Bordeaux*, and other philological issues, the political criticism voiced by the anonymous poet has not yet been fully addressed. Within a broader context, however, we can identify this verse narrative as a significant contribution to the wider discourse on criticism of an evil or incompetent king during the Middle Ages.

Notes and References

1. For a critical analysis of "Lanval," see Classen: 2016
2. For the relevant document, see "The Trial of Enguerrand IV de Coucy Before Louis IX, 1259," trans. by Paul Hyams, online at: https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1259coucy.asp; for the original, see http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/~prh3/436/texts/coucy.html
3. See John of Salisbury's criticism of tyrannical King Henry II; cf. Nederman: 2005.

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