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Righteous rebellions and nobles as nuisances

The culture of noble resistance in medieval Europe

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Luke Sunderland, *Rebel barons. Resisting royal power in medieval culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xii + 308 p., index)

Luke Sunderland's work on rebel barons in *chansons de geste* is of great interest to historians of the medieval and early modern nobility. *Chansons de geste* were epic poems usually sung or recited recounting the heroic tales of heroes past. As such they provided *exempla* of moral conduct, though, as Sunderland keenly notes, not without space for contention as the recurrence of revolts and rebellious barons suggests. Despite the widespread popularity of narratives about rebellious barons throughout the Middle Ages, in contrast, noble revolts have only rarely received attention. Sunderland's work wants to redress this lacuna. Avoiding the pitfall of a utilitarian approach, which conceives of rebellions solely in terms of personal goals and ambitions of the main protagonists, Sunderland argues that research should focus on the culture of rebellion and resistance in order to understand underlying motives for actual revolts. With this aim Sunderland analyses an impressive corpus of *gestes*, chronicles, and political theory to lay bare contemporary conflicting ideologies. Indeed, one of the central tenets of this book is that *chansons de geste* provided an alternative literary space for exploring competing ideas, a space where nobles could oppose ideas forwarded in contemporary political thought, for example, in the works of Thomas Aquinas. In contrast to those models of princely sovereignty, nobles 'saw internal conflict as part of a healthy political order and revolt as a brake on sovereign power, preventing tyranny' (1). Sunderland, despite focusing on a largely Francophone corpus, is explicit that these works are not solely derived from issues arising out of developments in a French and Capetian context. In fact, the nature

of sovereignty and its universality was widely debated, flourishing too in Occitan, Italian, Burgundian and Flemish works, and debates therefore transcend the place of production as their dissemination further suggests. Thus, from the outset, Sunderland sets himself two tasks: 'to give a wider literary history of the rebel baron tradition, and to develop a more acute sense of its importance to political culture' (15).

Sunderland divides his book in six chapters, the first of which addresses medieval thinkers and their ideas on sovereignty. John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Marsilius of Padua struggled with the prospect of unchecked sovereignty and came up with differing solutions, all three, however, significantly limiting the scope for noble revolt. In chapter 2 Sunderland argues that despite the limited space allowed for noble resistance in political theory, in practice revolts were ubiquitous. It is important to note they were seen as correctives, restoring an ancient order, rather than overthrowing it. He argues *chansons de geste* provided the room for manoeuvre to justify such behaviour (56). Indeed, they 'envisage politics as a movement between opposition and reconciliation' (57). Turning from revolt to resistance in chapter 3, Sunderland distinguishes between them, arguing that where revolts originate from within the system, resistance is a means to avoid being included in that very system. Politics such as Occitania, Burgundy, and Brittany perceived themselves to be outside of the (expanding) Capetian realm. *Gestes* such as the *Aspremont*, *Girart de Roussillon*, and the *Chanson de la Croisade Albigeoise* all express support for independent principalities opposed to an all-encompassing France. Subsequently, in chapter 4 the centrality of the figure of Charlemagne and other members of the Carolingian dynasty in *gestes* is explored. Their centrality can be explained due to their plasticity as protagonists, functioning now as merciful king then as relentless tyrant, and anything in between. The right to rebel therefore is closely intertwined with the portrayal of the Emperor as ideal ruler or flawed character. In analysing feuding Sunderland enters an arena that is fraught with academic vendettas. In chapter 5 Sunderland argues that the feud functioned as an alternative form of justice opposed to absolute sovereignty. Through feuding nobles reasserted their independence. In the face of royal promulgation of litigation against feuding some *gestes* criticise such persecution by arguing the prince cannot transcend violence, but instills it, permeates it, participates in it and protracts it. He is an active participator *inter pares*, subverting the notion of a sovereign lawmaker transcending the law envisioned in political theory. Finally, in chapter 6 Sunderland addresses the recurring element of crusade as well as exile in the mythical East in later *gestes*. This chapter arguably fits somewhat uncomfortably in the book. Perhaps the progression in time and further solidification of royal power in France forced writers to come up with alternative solutions for barons to assert their position in society. Simultaneously, although the scope for noble revolt is reduced in these texts, the same concerns about the nature of sovereignty run through these *gestes* as much as their rebel baron predecessors.

Indeed, it is this continuous concern with and debate over the nature of sovereignty that may explain the lasting influence and popularity of *chansons de geste*. In the conclusion Sunderland advances three early modern political writers, Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes, who have defined our contemporary ideas of sovereignty and therefore our dismissive attitudes to medieval thought on the subject. It is a missed opportunity therefore that Sunderland un-

derappreciates the irony of Machiavelli's *The prince*. Indeed, does Machiavelli not precisely construe the prince as the archetypal scheming sovereign, exploiting, participating in and perpetuating conflict much as King Louis in *Raoul de Cambrai* or King Pepin in *Garin le Loherenc*? Machiavelli's other political works seem to underscore his preference for mixed government: when proposing France as a successful unified country, he seems more concerned to castigate the divisions of Italy than really to engage with France as a model state. His warnings against the nobility, furthermore, stem from a long Florentine tradition of antimagnate laws, the various attempts by the Florentine nobility to establish unopposed rule as well as the various murderous plots conceived and executed by noble factions in that city. In contrast, Bodin and Hobbes both support unchecked sovereign rule as the harbinger of order, both texts having been written during a time of civil war and, perhaps more importantly (yet unmentioned) religious dissent. Despite these fundamental differences, these texts do stand in the tradition of those medieval thinkers the rebel baron *gestes* were most critical of. It is one of the qualities of this book that it distills those relevant narrative elements on sovereignty that transcend the time-period discussed.

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With considerable flair Sunderland succeeds in unravelling the various elements of contention present in *chansons de geste*, how they relate to medieval political theory, and how they maintain their relevance in other time periods, either by being incorporated in other textual media as well as incorporating new topics from emerging genres. In a notable feat of authorship Sunderland manages nevertheless to reveal to the reader how, despite being separated into chapters for the sake of analysis, the various elements are intrinsically connected. All this mitigates but does not remove what seems to be the obvious shortcoming here: the difficulty of linking production and dissemination of rebel barons' *chansons de geste* to actual historical rebellions. As Sunderland himself carefully phrases, 'Our texts might indeed have helped prepare for rebellions.' Production and possession of manuscripts can at times be linked to rebellious nobles, but as a historian one would love to have evidence – if such evidence exists at all – for their actual use as justification of noble conduct. This book is therefore a tour de force in the literary history of the rebel baron tradition, yet the importance of that tradition to political culture remains implicit. Sunderland's conclusions are at times somewhat askew as well, due to his insistence on class as an explanatory concept. Feuding as an act of defiance against sovereignty by the noble class with the lower classes as downtrodden victims explains neither the ubiquity of feuding amongst those lower classes, nor their active participation in noble feuding. What this book does manage to do is reveal the presence of a widespread culture in which noble revolts could not only be conceived as righteous, but also justified through a variety of arguments engaging with notions of honour, the public good, and sovereignty that was ever threatening to collapse into tyranny. This will certainly act as a stimulus for the reappraisal of noble revolts.

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