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George Duby's *William Marshal* Reviewed

by Karen L. Arneson

(Honors History 1100)

William Marshal, *The Flower of Chivalry* offers an opportunity to vicariously experience the life of a knight in medieval Europe. By putting flesh to facts, George Duby elevates one's understanding of life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries beyond that gained in the dry rhetoric of textbooks. The book is based on information gained through a *chanson de geste* commissioned by the dead Earl of Pembroke's (William Marshal) eldest son, also named William. The purpose of the *chanson de geste* was to immortalize Marshal by setting to verse the grand gestures, or actions, of his life. The *Histoire* of Marshal's life is written based on memory - the memories of "the good son," William, Jean the writer called "le Trouvere" and John d'Erley. It is on the memories of John, life-long companion and friend, that much of the poem is based. Duby assures us that "of this faithful memory, the relation is sincere. We can verify it" (37). Duby cites two other historians, Paul Meyer and Sidney Painter, as writers of works that offer extensive commentary on the text of the *chanson*. Nothing in the writing contradicts what is known of that time period, and what distortions exist are easily explained by the fact that the document is a "panegyric," which is a writing meant to lavish praise on the subject, as is the case in eulogies. Duby offers another explanation of the reliability of these memories. Referring to the illiteracy of that age, Duby writes, "...these men had to rely entirely on what their minds filed away, and hence were careful not to let this natural faculty atrophy, unconsciously training it by constant exercise..." (36). Beginning the story at the end, with Marshal's death, one can imagine the mourners sharing their memories, perhaps of those most recent; however, for the purpose of this review, we begin at the beginning.

William Marshal was born the fourth-son of John Marshal. He was the product of his father's second marriage to Sibylla. Marshal's father had been in the service of Stephen of Blois, King of England, having inherited the position of marshal from his father, Gilbert. It was this occupation that gave the family its surname. Stephen's reign caused political unrest. The previous king had no heir; but his only legitimate child, Matilda, contested Stephen's rule. Loyalties were divided. It was in the midst of this conflict that John Marshal decided to retire to Marlborough Castle in Wiltshire. Duby believes that John made two decisions that set the course for his son's life. The first was siding with Matilda and aiding her in a time of need; the second was putting away his first wife in favor of "marrying the daughter of a great house [Sibylla]" (61). William was Sibylla's second-born son.

For less than a decade of his life, William lived in the house of his birth, cared for by his mother, but soon that world would be replaced by another. As a son, not the heir, of a knight, William would be separated from his childhood home in what Duby describes as:

an extremely abrupt transfer to another world, that of cavalcades, of stables, of armories, of hunts, of ambushes and manly sports. Here the boys grew up, members of the troop of horsemen, youths mingled with grown men in military promiscuity. They already belonged, in their subaltern position, sharing the circumstances of servants, to the group maintained in his house by another master, responsible for educating them. (65)

When the time came, William's father sent him across the channel to live in Normandy with William of Tancarville, chamberlain and vassal of the king of England. William Marshal was one of a troop

of young boys that was raised on the chamberlain's manor. It was at this tender age that William began to distinguish himself. In a short time, he became a squire. He spent his days in service to the warriors, in preparation for his turn to receive his sword. His turn came eight years later at the decision of William of Tancarville. Although William Marshal was more than twenty, it was this ceremony (dubbing) that marked the end of his childhood and his entrance into adult society. The sword was more than just a tool; according to Duby, it was an emblem of the "right and duty to do battle" (69). Marshal's dubbing probably occurred in the spring of 1167, though the date is not recorded. Duby finds this oversight to be "a little surprising, for this day when childhood ends, when the grown man is admitted into adult society, is generally regarded as a crucial one; on this day, real life begins, and each knight remembers it as the finest of his existence" (69). Marshal was now one of an elite class, though he was yet to prove those qualities inherent to chivalry.

It seems Marshal began to exhibit those qualities of a chivalrous knight from the very earliest days of his knighthood. Indeed, his biographer mixes an actual battle with the *quintain*. Duby believes:

the poem's author, citing the uncertainties of memory with regard to such remote times, has sought to magnify this crucial point in the biography of a hero whom he chiefly displays as a paragon of chivalry. Of the usual rite occurring after the sword was bestowed, of that sort of fantasia, the *quintain* - a knightly exercise when all the new knights charge a dummy's lance to give proof of their skill - Jean le Trouvere has made an actual battle. (70)

Whatever the case, memory attributed great skills to Marshal from the beginning. The battle recounted occurred at Neufchatel-en-Bray, in Normandy. Marshal took part in defending the count of Eu against Flemish attack. He brought honor to himself in battle, and learned a valuable lesson during the feast that followed. William of Mandeville, a baron, asked Marshal for a gift. This seemed to confuse him. The text elaborates on the lesson the baron taught: "Naïve, the new knight protests he has nothing left; he did not seek to gain possession, but to deliver the town. He has lost everything. The table laughs, and he understands the lesson: he has his valor to sell. He learns thus that the first use of valor is to make a knight rich" (71). It is at this point in telling Marshal's tale that Duby reveals the symbolism of rebirth in connection to dubbing:

Before receiving their weapons, the young men stripped themselves naked and washed their bodies--as one washed the body of the newborn and of the deceased. For this entrance, this passage, was analogous to those others, to birth and to death. It was as if these men had come into the world a second time--and the only time, in truth, that truly counted. Hitherto, their gestation had indeed been occurring under cover; they had remained at nurse, as it were, under guardianship... With errantry began freedom, but also danger. (72)

Freedom was thrust upon William Marshal and his fellow-knights. The chamberlain, who had long cared for them, turned them out with nothing, save their swords, to begin the life of errantry. In this tri-functional society, Marshal became one who fought. But in his time, great battles were rare; most of the fighting was between landowners, the nobility, defending or extending their fiefs. With few real battles to fight, knights turned to tournaments.

Tournaments, or tournaments, were in essence mock battles. Battles were fought under the rules of chivalry, meaning killing or maiming was strongly discouraged in favor of capturing one's opponent to be held for ransom. Knights would band together in groups to face other groups of knights. Solitary knights were suspect and so it was important to attach oneself to a group of

"comrades." Duby states "the warriors shuddered at the thought of remaining alone; isolation covered them with shame. The knight whom we see riding without company cut a wretched figure, a man dishonored or banished..." (75). In the social climate of feudalism, without lords to fight for, the solitary knight had no honest means of supplying his needs. Politically, the errant-knight would be regarded with suspicion because his loyalties would not be evident. Marshal lived in a world of mutual dependence between lords and vassals. He was a skilled knight and proved his worth; but having been turned out by William of Tancarville, he sought to attach himself quickly to another powerful family. His natural choice was Philip of Salisbury, his mother's brother. He crossed back over the Channel and was received by his uncle. This was fortuitous for Marshal because Philip was an earl, immediately under King Henry II. It was through this connection that he had opportunity to become part of the king's household.

Philip was given the task of escorting and protecting Eleanor of Aquitaine (the queen) on a trip to the Continent where she had to deal with rebellious vassals. Marshal was a part of the escorting party. There was an attack by one of the rebel barons. Philip was mortally wounded. Marshal performed his duty by risking his own life to try to save his uncle though Marshal was wounded and taken captive. Because his duty was to the king's lieutenant, it was accounted to Marshal as though he had avenged the king himself. He was ransomed by Eleanor and taken into her household. Throughout his life, Marshal remained close to the monarchy, exhibiting an uncanny ability to ride out rebellions and remain on the winning side.

It was while acting as "young Henry's" master that William Marshal returned to France. The sons of King Henry II rebelled against their father and turned to their mother's family for support. The rebellion was ultimately subdued, the sons pardoned. No ill feelings were held against Marshal, who was only performing his duty to his young charge. Though they all returned to England for a time, young Henry's restlessness led them back to France. Here, in the country of tourneys, William's duty consisted of "conquering worth" (85). This pursuit of honor was guided by the ethics of chivalry. According to Duby:

[the knight's] ardor was entirely focused upon fulfilling the obligations of chivalry, upon respecting the rules of an ethic inculcated during adolescence and kept alive in their minds by all the stories and songs they listened to. Of this ethic, the chief constraints were of three kinds. (86)

The first was loyalty, the second, conduct and finally, generosity. Knights were to be loyal, first of all. They had to be men of their word. Loyalty could be complicated. With the multi-levels of lords and vassals, it became necessary to determine order of loyalty. It was understood that the first responsibility was to those closest to the knight. Throughout the book, we see Marshal exercising this loyalty with a wisdom that gained him much respect. Secondly, the conduct of knights was to be that of champions. Within the rules, one had to show courage. This conduct was showcased in mock battle as well as real. Duby extracts from the *Historie* an exciting episode which illustrates Marshal's bravery on the mock battlefield of a tourney. His king finds himself separated from his company save Marshal "who followed him closely, for he was in the custom of being at hand, in case of need..." (104). The poem's writer cast the spotlight on Marshal, helping us to understand the expected conduct of a knight:

*The others were holding in their hands
the king, each of them striving hard
to strike off his helmet...
The Marshal then came forward
and flung himself upon them.*

*So hard he struck, before, behind,
so bravely showed them his mettle
and so drove and so dragged
that he managed to tear away
the headstall of the king's horse
and with it all the harness, pulling.* (qtd. in Duby 104)

As the battle rages on an opposing knight raced back to the king's foe, Lord Herloin. The lord was encouraged to rejoin the battle by one of his company:

*In God's name," quoth he, "sweet lord,
see there, the king about to be taken.
Come, take him. Yours will be the prize.* (qtd. in Duby 105)

William saw the lord redoubling his efforts to win the prize and pressed on:

*Upon him, as in a battle,
they flung themselves to the assault
and he defended himself against them,
all that he strikes, he strikes down,
cracks shields, splits helmets.
So mightily did William Marshal fight
that none of those who were there
knew what had become of the king.
Later on, the kings was to say,
and all those who had seen him,
that never was such a feat seen
or heard of from a single knight,
finer than the Marshal's on that day.* (qtd. in Duby 106)

And finally, the third necessity was *largesse*. A knight must lavish his winnings on others in a great show of generosity. This was the means of establishing oneself as noble; and yet, it kept those that fought on a lower-rung of the hierarchy dependent on those above. William Marshal's successes brought wealth, but having learned this lesson early, he spent his gain on others.

There was perhaps one other consideration of adhering strictly to the code: to win the love of women. (86, 87) Women seem to have lived life behind the scenes in Marshal's day. A primary role was to bear children and nurture them in early childhood. Until William was eight to ten years of age, he inhabited a female domain. His mother and sisters loved him and cared for his needs as they carried out their domestic duties. Duby notes, when William was held hostage as a boy, "that it was his mother and his sisters that little William... first asked about from the household servant sent for news" (65). It was from this female universe that he was abruptly ejected into an apprenticeship that would prepare him for life, as described earlier in this essay.

Women were also useful in forming alliances between great houses. They seemed to be valued not for their own worth, but for what they might provide in raising a man's social status. This was the case in Marshal's story. He lived the life of a knight long past the time of most. He was fifty years old before he began to seek a wife. This he didn't do through courtship; no, in that day, gaining a wife was something akin to a business transaction. We see this illustrated in the exchange of the "damsel of Lancaster" for Isabel of Striguil. Marshal considered it to be great fortune to make the exchange because "Helvis of Lancaster meant only one knight's fief; Isabel of Striguil, sixty-five and

a-half fiefs" (121). Isabel was considered "a gift" given by King Richard. In the giving, we are told that:

Richard enriches him indeed, but above all transforms him. He changes William's level in the hierarchy of social conditions; he raises him to the rank of those whose power is active and stable. For in this period the only real power belongs to married men. A man has a thousand times more worth than a woman, but he has virtually none if he does not himself possess a legitimate wife in his bed, in the heart of his own house. (130, 131)

When William wed Isabel in 1189, he rose from the base of the social hierarchy (knights-errant) to the median-level of the barons. Although Marshal lived in a time when lineage was important, his own roots were not very deeply entrenched; his genealogy linked only to his father and one maternal uncle. Duby tells us "[A]s a matter of fact, this hero was a 'new man' and made it a point of honor to owe none of his glory to others" (58). It seems that Marshal was proud of having earned a noble wife and thereby a higher-rank in society.

As a knight, Marshal's concern was in maintaining beneficial relationships with peers and showing the proper reverence for those above him. In his new status, he had to maintain relationships on "two perpendicular axes," that is, to maintain peace with those equal to him, and then, to honor those above him, and to show benevolence to those below him (133). Marshal was careful to attend to those associations and he included God as one above himself to whom he showed honor.

Marshal was a Christian-knight and credited God for his successes in battle. Replying to the concerns of his friends for his safety, he is quoted to have said "God, may He be thanked for it, has since I am a knight done me good all my days; my courage now rests upon the certainty that He will continue" (qtd. in Duby 69). Perhaps it was this grace that stayed the hand of Henry II. William Marshal had sided with young Henry in rebellion against his father, the king. The young king died suddenly on June 11, 1183, leaving Marshal the responsibility of returning young Henry's dead body to his father, the king. Would Henry II be angry and take action against the rebels? Though matters could have been worse, the king's only action was to release Marshal from service.

Fortunately for Marshal, prior to young Henry's death, the young king vowed to set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Realizing he would not make the pilgrimage, Henry bequeathed his cross to Marshal and charged him with carrying it to the Holy Land. Released from service, Marshal saw opportunity in carrying out young Henry's request. Duby helps us to understand the benefits:

Aside from the benefits it would afford the soul and the pleasures expected from an excursion to faraway parts, it would offer the occasion, in these difficult times, to cover ground, to let time pass, and to see what was coming. And under the most favorable conditions: according to custom, crusaders preparing to take the holy journey were loaded with gifts of money, horses, and gear of all kind, for they appeared as proxies of all those who for the moment hesitated to take such a long journey. (117)

Once again we see William's amazing ability to come out on top. Before leaving, he stopped in England to seek the king's authorization to undertake this mission on behalf of the king's dead son:

[H]e now had good reasons to hope, if he survived, if he returned, to resume his place at the heart of the royal household - that of the old king. When he made his visit to Henry Plantagenet, seeking authorization to leave, the king had urged him not to delay: he had need of him. (118)

Arriving in Syria, Marshal spent two years in service to King Guy of Jerusalem. He returned to England, a Knight Templar, in 1187, shortly before the news that Saladin had overcome the crusaders at Hattin. So, while Marshal passed from serving only earthbound lords to become a holy Knight in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, it appears he was not actively involved in the battles of the Crusades. Apparently in his absence, all had been forgiven. King Henry II retained him once again. It was at this time of his life that Marshal began to feel his age. Having lived by the code of chivalry, he was an impoverished knight. He began to seek his reward - an arranged marriage. As already discussed, William Marshal married well. No longer was he part of the king's household. He passed from the lower-ranks of knighthood to the higher, titled ranks of nobility. William Marshal became an Earl.

The kings he had served were dead. The king of his married years, Richard, had gone on crusade and left the kingdom in the greedy hands of John Lackland. Here we see an example of the delicate balance maintained within the feudal system. Marshal was vassal to both, Richard, King of England and John, King of Ireland. He was called on by Richard to break with John, but would not. Without fear, Marshal was able to assert that "he had served in good faith, for the fief which he held from each of two lords on equal terms, not judging that, on the pretext of royalty, one prevailed over the other" (140). This scenario repeats itself in Marshal's life when John asks that he renounce his fealty to the King of France. Again, Marshal held firm. His actions always sprang from his identity as a knight. He always sought to remain loyal as loyalty defined within the feudal system. It was as this steadfast application of chivalry that caused Marshal to be greatly honored throughout his life. Up to his final years, Marshal was regarded as wise and capable. The dying King John recognized Marshal's capabilities and desired to leave his young son in Marshal's care. And so finally, after agonizing over the decision, William Marshal became regent not only over the young king, but the kingdom as well.

It was in this role that he divvied up the little money John had left, in order to satisfy those who served for the sake of money alone. In this act, perhaps, we get a glimpse of Marshal's understanding that chivalry was no longer the driving force for service; yet it did remain that force in his own life, as seen in the battle at Lincoln. In this final battle, representing England's interests, he met the King of France. On the eve of the battle, taking the place of the king, Marshal spoke to those about to fight:

To protect our valor, for us, for those who love us, for our wives and our children, for the defense of our lands, in order to win the highest honor, for the peace of the Church as well, for the remission of our sins, let us bear the weight of arms... You are the hope of the country... Behold, those men are in your hand. They are ours, if your hearts serve you boldly now, without fail. If we die, God will take us to His paradise. If we defeat them, we shall have acquired lasting honor for ourselves and our descendants. They are excommunicate, and those we strike down will go straight to hell. (150)

The victory fell to England, and in the manner of chivalry, Marshal escorted Louis of France to the coast. He was criticized, and years after his death, his actions were seen as betrayal by his former young ward, Henry III. Why had Marshal released the enemy rather than imprisoning him? The answer lies in his lifelong quest to become the flower of chivalry. Marshal's life-long accomplishments bear witness to his success. Duby's text demonstrates this:

It was to this excellence and to this alone, that he owed his extraordinary elevation. Thanks to that great indefatigable body of his, powerful and skilled in knightly exercises; thanks to that brain apparently too small to hamper the natural bloom of his physical vigor by superfluous reasoning: few thoughts and brief, a stubborn attachment to the rough-hewn ethic of men of war whose values abide in three words: prowess, generosity, loyalty. And thanks to his longevity above all, a miracle. (152)

It seems as if history was kind to William Marshal. He lived long remaining true to the code of chivalry; and only as his body lost strength, so did the code by which he had lived. William remained true to the end, able to "advance calmly toward death, proud of having been the instrument of the final, the fugitive, the anachronistic triumph of honor against money, of loyalty against the state--of having borne chivalry to its fulfillment" (152). The Marshal stood among those who opposed King John and imposed the Magna Carta. On that day in 1215, the English barons rose up and forced their king to sign the document meant to preserve feudal customs by binding their lord to the traditional legal constraints. But alas, John was not an honorable king and he violated the Magna Carta. He paid for his actions with his life. King John's crown passed to his son, Henry III and Marshal took up his final duty. Three years later, he died a loyal vassal, serving his king as regent. One of the last of a declining brotherhood, William Marshal was the flower of chivalry.

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