

E. C. QUIGGIN MEMORIAL LECTURES 18

LARS BOJE MORTENSEN

**Meritocratic Values in High Medieval  
Literature?**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Edmund Crosby Quiggin (1875-1920) was the first teacher of Celtic in the University of Cambridge, as well as being a Germanist. His extraordinarily comprehensive vision of Celtic studies offered an integrated approach to the subject: his combination of philological, literary, and historical approaches paralleled those which his older contemporary, H. M. Chadwick, had already demonstrated in his studies of Anglo-Saxon England and which the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic continues to seek to emulate. The Department has wished to commemorate Dr Quiggin's contribution by establishing in his name, and with the support of his family, an annual lecture and a series of pamphlets. The focus initially was on the sources for Mediaeval Gaelic History. Since 2006 the Quiggin Memorial Lecture is on any aspect of Celtic and/or Germanic textual culture taught in the Department.

Meritocratic Values in High Medieval Literature?

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## Meritocratic Values in High Medieval Literature?

*Lars Boje Mortensen*

The question I want to open up, in a very tentative manner, in this short essay is mostly concerned with the period – so transformative for medieval literature – between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, in order to highlight the importance of the issue of what I, for lack of a better word, would term ‘meritocratic’ values, it will be helpful to begin by considering the theme from a post-medieval vantage point.

In the initial part of the *Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528 by Baldassare Castiglione, we find a discussion of the significance of the social background of the idealised courtier whose skills, attitudes, morals and character are to be discussed in detail by the many high-standing interlocutors in the dialogue. One of these, Count Lodovico di Canossa, makes the following point:

So, for myself, I would have our courtier of noble birth and good family, since it matters far less to a common man if he fails to perform virtuously and well than to a nobleman. For if a gentleman strays from the path of his forbears, he dishonours his family name and not only fails to achieve anything but loses what has already been achieved. Noble birth is like a bright lamp that makes clear and visible both good deeds and bad [...], and since their [commoners’] deeds do not possess such noble brilliance, ordinary people lack both this stimulus and the fear of dishonour.

After a longer expansion of this theme (also with reference to how the best breed of men is like the best breed of horses), another interlocutor, a young nobleman, replies:

So that our game may proceed as it is meant to, and to show that we are not forgetting our privilege of contradicting, let me say that I do not believe that nobility of birth is necessary for the courtier.

There are other causes for people’s station in life, he continues:

the first and foremost is Fortune, who rules everything that happens in the world, and often appears to amuse herself by exalting whomever she

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank and extend my gratitude to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic and to its previous and current Head of Department, Prof. Paul Russell and Dr. Rosalind Love, as well as to Prof. Máire Ní Mhaonigh, for inviting me to give this talk as the 2015 Quiggin Lecture. I am indebted for the opportunity to speak at the Department even when dealing with a more general issue and drawing mainly on other literatures than Germanic or Celtic, and I am very grateful for the feedback and other help I received.

pleases, regardless of merit, or hurling down those worthiest of being raised up. [...] Therefore, since this nobility of birth is acquired neither through talent nor through force or skill, and is a matter of congratulating one's ancestors rather than oneself ...

This objection is conceded as a valid point, but of little practical value, as the nobleman in any case, also by reason of his appearance and immediate social acceptance, is simply much more easily equipped to honour all the demands of being a perfect courtier, skilled in warfare, sophisticated behaviour, in music and letters and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the sixteenth century Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522-92), a Habsburg ambassador to the Ottoman court, made some famous observations in his letters (published 1581). He wrote that the Turks

do not measure even their own people by any other rule than that of personal merit. The only exception is the house of Ottoman; in this case, and in this case only, does birth confer distinction [...] Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will.<sup>3</sup>

Sixteenth-century authors were especially sensitive to the deeply unsettling question whether nobility should remain a prerequisite for good manners, learning, achievement and, in the last resort, for the privileges of honour and virtue. What was the balance between lineage, military exploits and ethos, on the one hand, and a thorough knowledge of law, letters and rhetoric, on the other? These issues were raised by trend-setting humanists in the fifteenth century and they took on an urgency in the sixteenth century when they became a common literary and intellectual theme. Apart from Castiglione's book, one finds the discussion surface in the works of Tasso, Cervantes and others.<sup>4</sup> It is known as the 'Arms and Letters Debate' and is epitomized in the modern proverb 'the pen is mightier than the sword'.<sup>5</sup>

'The topicality of the debate in the sixteenth century is related, among other things, to the fact that European noblemen at the time were as much in demand

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<sup>2</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, translated and with an introduction by George Bull (London, 1976 [1st ed. 1967]) pp. 54-56.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires*. [With a new introduction by the author] (New Brunswick, 1997) [originally 1982], p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, ch. 38; David Quint, 'The Debate between Arms and Letters in Gerusalemme liberata', in *Sparks and Seeds: Medieval Literature and its Afterlife. Essays in Honor of John Freccero* (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 241-66.

<sup>5</sup> See David Wacks, 'The Pen versus the Sword: What a Difference a Diaspora Makes', blogpost 2011 [<http://davidwacks.uoregon.edu/tag/arms-vs-letters/>] with references to Iberian examples of medieval forerunners of the debate.

behind their desks as on their horses to serve their own interests and their place in increasingly bureaucratic polities. Warfare had changed dramatically in the sixteenth century and framed knightly valour increasingly as a thing of the past and of the imagination.<sup>6</sup> Finally the number of rich and influential people without a long pedigree of noble ancestors and without a background in landed wealth had grown considerably since the later Middle Ages in the more urbanized parts of Europe, and their voice was increasingly heard. This was very clear in town governments, but also on the level of kingdoms with the late medieval rise of parliaments: the fact that the third estate was now also summoned and to some degree heard, obviously reflects the reality that the burghers represented such a large portion of dynamic societal wealth that they had to be co-opted for political consensus rather than just taxed and left without any influence or voice. Another highly visible sign in the late medieval and early modern period of hierarchy disorder was the constant stream of sumptuary legislation all over Europe (beginning in the early thirteenth century), intended, among other things, to keep nobility distinct in physical appearance.<sup>7</sup>

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, of course, also brought merchant wealth and the urban perspective to the forefront of *literature* – we only need to think of Boccaccio and Chaucer. To mention them is not to claim that they were exclusive mouthpieces for strictly merchant or bureaucratic values, but only to underline that the variety of roles, the quick pace of action, the fascination of the constant exchange of goods, payments, pranks, services and people in their works is at home in a world quickly moving in the direction of the ‘Arms and Letters’ dilemma. It is also easy to point to late medieval literature below the high canon that ignores the ideals of noble heroics and instead thematizes more unwarlike urban matters.<sup>8</sup> One example would be the high and late medieval treatises of instruction for town magistrates in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany, an overlooked genre in comparison with the better known mirrors for princes.<sup>9</sup> Among the more famous examples espousing urban morality one could mention the numerous texts from the Francesco Datini (c. 1335-1410) archives covering his long career as a merchant and husband, or, in the same housekeeping spirit, the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. David Quint, ‘Duelling and Civility in Sixteenth-Century Italy’, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 7 (1997), 231-78.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Kovesi Killerby, *Sumptuary Law in Italy, 1200-1500* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For the period 1348-1418 we now have the very comprehensive guide by David Wallace (ed.), *Europe – A Literary History 1348-1418*, 2 vols. (Oxford 2016).

<sup>9</sup> David Napolitano, ‘From Gown to Town: Professional Training for City Magistrates in Thirteenth-Century Italy’, in *Studentengeschichte zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit – Graduiertenkolloquium zum 625-jährigen Jubiläum der Universität zu Köln*, ed. Andreas Speer and Andreas Berger. [historicum-studies.net](http://historicum-studies.net) (2015); Id. ‘From Royal Court to City Hall. The Podestà Literature: A Republican Variant on the Mirrors for Princes?’, in *Mirrors for Princes in Antiquity and their Reception*, ed. Erik De Bom, Geert Roskam and Stefan Schorn [forthcoming in the Brepols *Lectio* series in 2017].

voluminous *Le Mésnagier de Paris* (1393), in which a rich burgher gives very meticulous advice to his young spouse on lifestyle and the practicalities of managing a burgher estate.<sup>10</sup>

In a long-term view much of this literature testifies to what Alexander Murray described so wonderfully in his 1978 book on *Reason and Society in The Middle Ages*: rationality in time-keeping, house-keeping, accounting and bureaucracy was continuously gaining new territory, and this was not due to internal developments within the nobility but to other forces.<sup>11</sup> The gradual rise of non-noble voices in politics and in a significant body of writing was apparent at least from the fourteenth century and it crystallised, as mentioned, in the introspective elite analysis under the name of the ‘Arms and Letters’ debate of the sixteenth century. We all know where it ended. The ideals of the Enlightenment and especially of the American and French revolutions were of course the end point for dominant aristocratic values in the old and the new world. The complete turning of the tables on the idea (though not yet the practice) of a privileged landed class was seen, for instance, in Thomas Paine’s works on *The Rights of Man* (1791-92) and on *Agrarian Justice* (1797); it is symptomatic that in his work the strong nexus to be broken is that between inherited landed wealth and the political power of the very few: without a new system of land ownership, there would no breach with the old order, nor could a broader political representation emerge.<sup>12</sup> In the same age Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) became the icon of social mobility, rationalization of time, entrepreneurship and individual merits; the novel rose to be the primary literary vehicle for the new class in power, and the medieval period, incidentally, now became so firmly located in the past that it was ready to be re-exoticized by the Romantics and by nineteenth-century nationalists all over Europe.<sup>13</sup>

It is within this bigger picture that I want to think about ‘meritocratic’ values in literature in the period from c. 1050 to 1250, two centuries one might claim saw the pre-history of such values or perhaps their very early history. A few definitions and clarifications must be made to begin with. First I take medieval ‘literature’ in the broad sense of everything written in books, including science, philosophy, law, theology, historiography, hagiography and more, and not just the canonical works deemed to be fictional or poetic enough for a modern literature course.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.istitutodatini.it>; *Le Mésnagier de Paris*, ed. Karin Veltschi (Paris, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine. Social and Political Thought* (Boston 1989).

<sup>13</sup> For a rich reading of the relations between the demise of the aristocracy and the rise of the novel, David Quint, ‘Noble Passions: Aristocracy and the Novel’, *Comparative Literature* 62, 2 (2010), 103-21.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this, in practice quite widespread, concept of ‘Medieval Literature’, see Paolo Borsa, Christian Høgel, Elizabeth Tyler, Lars Boje Mortensen, ‘What is Medieval European Literature?’, *Interfaces – A Journal of Medieval European Literatures* 1 (2015), 7-24 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/interfaces-4936>].



Secondly, both ‘meritocratic’ and its opposite, ‘aristocratic’, are modern categories. Apart from being a form of ancient Greek government, the ‘aristocracy’ as a term for a class was invented exactly at the time of its eclipse in the 1780s.<sup>15</sup> ‘Meritocracy’ is a Latin-Greek hybrid coinage from the mid-twentieth century, but ideas of a political system based primarily on merit rather than privilege of birth, of course, also go back to the Enlightenment. In recent years the content of the concept (if not always the word itself) has become more used and more charged, I believe, in our debates about inequality, encapsulated for instance by Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the 21st Century* (2014). It is precisely because of the present engagement with issues of privilege versus equality that I find it interesting to discuss the possible origins of meritocratic ideas, and in particular their relation to writing and literature. While ‘meritocracy’ may not be the perfect term, it should at least be as uncontroversial to employ it in historical analysis as when we speak about the ancient ‘economy’. Real historical understanding always results from a regimented and reflective exposure of modern concepts and narratives to those we find in the old texts, rather than a, to my mind illusory, surrender to pre-modern language as evinced by painstaking philology. The two should inform each other.

A final theoretical concern to be raised is that of teleology. Is there a danger of overemphasizing the small beginnings of a phenomenon that only much later became important in then unforeseeable ways? This is what we often criticize in national history-writing today. Here I think it is useful to distinguish between, on the one hand, a deterministic and ideological teleology which implies that the nation, or a national literary canon was always on its way, and on the other, what one might term an epistemological teleology which acknowledges, again, that all historical understanding, in a very fundamental sense, happens in hindsight.<sup>16</sup>

In this particular case, moreover, the danger is easily avoided because the domination of aristocratic values in medieval literature is so overwhelming that asking questions about meritocratic attitudes is, to begin with at least, a method of sharpening our understanding of aristocratic values; but it can also lead to reflections on the power of writing itself as an agent of change and about the educational and institutional contexts of literature in a predominantly aristocratic environment.

The plainly noble – or aristocratic if we prefer – values thematized and promoted in canonical texts like the *Chanson de Roland* or the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and many others deal almost exclusively with the competition

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<sup>15</sup> William Doyle, *Aristocracy – A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> The philosophical underpinning of this is found in the classic work by Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (including the integral text of *Analytical Philosophy of History*). With a new introduction by Lydia Goehr and a new conclusion by Frank Ankersmit (New York, 2007; based on the 1985 edition; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1964). The distinction between ideological and epistemological teleology is discussed in Borsa, Høgel, Mortensen and Tyler, ‘What is European Medieval Literature’ (as note 14 above).

within the warrior elite.<sup>17</sup> For the present purpose it is more relevant to turn to less canonical works, also to be able to include the perspective from the ecclesiastical elite. One such example is the Book of Manners (*Livre de Manières*) composed by Étienne de Fougères, chancellor of Henry II from 1157 to 1167 and subsequently bishop of Rennes (1168-78).<sup>18</sup> This French poem is usually quoted for its verses on the division of society into *bellatores*, *oratores* and *laboratores*, but in fact its social division is more complex. It is significant that the ‘we’ of the text covers both the warriors and the higher clergy (archbishops, bishops and abbots in turn). While there is a certain sense that the text comprises advice for all social groups, those for the burghers, craftsmen and peasants are definitely held in an ‘othering’ discourse. The craftsmen are mentioned but then ignored, and the burghers’ section is a long warning against their greedy, cheating ways. Interestingly, the peasants are also briefly dealt with, being told that they just have to toil to produce for the lords (lay or ecclesiastical) with little or no reward, and not even with particularly good prospects of salvation. This is stanza 173 about the peasants and ‘us’ (followed by a modern French translation):

Ne mangera ja de bon pain:  
nos en avon le meillor grein,  
et le plus bel et le plus sein;  
la droë remeint au vilain.

[Jamais il ne mangera de bon pain:  
c’est nous qui avons le meilleur grain,  
le plus beau et le plus sain;  
l’ivraie reste pour le vilain.]<sup>19</sup>

What is important here is not only the bluntness about the aristocratic order of the world, but that high ecclesiastics, like Étienne himself, are included in the landowning group. In early and high medieval Europe church leaders were almost always brothers, cousins or sons of prominent noblemen. To quote a classic comparative work by the political theorist John Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires*: ‘As long as the armed forces, the governmental bureaucracy, and the priesthood are relatively small institutions, they may be manned

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<sup>17</sup> For the *Song of Roland*, see David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility. Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 900-1300* (London, 2005), esp. pp. 29-37; for values in Chrétien de Troyes, see Joseph Duggan, *The Romances of Chretien de Troyes* (New Haven, CT, 2001), esp. pp. 93-132.

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Claudia Wittig and her thesis on German and French moral-didactic poetry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for this reference.

<sup>19</sup> Étienne de Fougères, *Le livre des manières*, ed. and transl. Jacques T. E. Thomas (Paris, 2013), p. 63.

exclusively by aristocrats'.<sup>20</sup> And when these institutions expand, as they did in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the top of those hierarchies would still be dominated by aristocrats. I stress this obvious point because in literary history the usual divisions between lay and ecclesiastical writing – and between vernacular and Latin – often have the effect of obliterating the fact that both lay and ecclesiastical leaders subscribed wholeheartedly to the aristocratic order and to landed wealth as the only legitimate source of income. The endowment of land to the church was just another, and often safer, way to keep the revenues within a certain group of aristocratic families (with other benefits too, naturally). I will return to this point below, but first I would like to provide one more textual example.

This is the remarkable Latin chronicle by Lampert of Hersfeld written in the 1070s, one of the main sources for the early stage of the Investiture Contest and a thrilling classicising narrative including scathing and ironic criticism of the ruling Emperor, Henry IV (ruled 1056-1105); this text is now finally available in a magnificent annotated English translation by I. S. Robinson in the Manchester Medieval Sources Series.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that Lampert hailed from high nobility, and that he shared, as Robinson says, a 'stridently aristocratic viewpoint', apparent, among other things, from his disgust of the *ministeriales*, the late eleventh-century non-noble professionals rising to important positions at the imperial court.<sup>22</sup> Henry IV is taken to task because he had 'excluded the princes from his friendship and had raised men of the lowest rank and of no ancestry to the highest honours.'<sup>23</sup> Lampert had enjoyed the absolutely best education at the school of Bamberg and had probably been taught by that towering figure, the hero of the work, Archbishop Anno of Köln (d. 1075), also, incidentally, the subject of one of the major early Middle High German works, the *Annolied* (c. 1080), an aristocratic and hagiographic vernacular poem promoting the same strong ideas of Empire as Lampert's chronicle. Lampert wrote as a monk of Hersfeld, but his work is an even more complete catalogue of aristocratic attitudes than the almost contemporary *Song of Roland*. A few quotations will illustrate his social views:

For this people [the Swabians] was most dear to him [Henry IV] and he had raised very many of them – who were descended from low-born ancestors and had virtually no ancestors at all – to the highest offices ...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (as in note 3 above), p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Lampert of Hersfeld, *The Annals*, tr. and annotated with an introduction by I.S. Robinson, Manchester 2015.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 335-36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

Describing later the urban uprising in Cologne in 1074, he is disgusted by the unreliability and fickleness of the common people (*levitas vulgi*).<sup>25</sup> Reading the pages of Lampert one also enters a world in which the aristocrats fighting each other always included bishops and abbots who had their own retinues and took the fifth commandment very lightly:

the king sent there William, margrave of the Thuringians and bishop Eppo of Zeitz, together with the duke of the Bohemians and the Bavarian army. But the Margrave and the bishop were the first to enter Hungary and [...] they engaged in battle with Bela and destroyed an infinite number of Hungarians.<sup>26</sup>

And in a later passage we see the abbot plainly as a lord of knights: ‘Then the abbot’s knights, who at that time were very famous, both for their wealth and their military abilities...’.<sup>27</sup> While the discourses of episcopal pastoral care, of church reform, of competing monastic ideals are certainly present too, it is striking in this text how easily the top layer of male aristocrats move from being lay, to becoming abbots, and then often ending up as bishops and archbishops, with women becoming abbesses, or marrying for alliances. At the end of the day, the clergy, secular or monastic, forms part of the endless aristocratic struggle for land and honour, while at the same time adding a spiritual distinction to their own or their allied families.

Such an aristocratic mindset was common to many high medieval Latin and vernacular chroniclers. Just to mention one other conspicuous example, from more than a century later: Saxo Grammaticus’ *History of the Danes* from around 1200, now available in a splendid new edition with a complete English translation by Peter Fisher.<sup>28</sup> Saxo was not a monk but a canon at the archdiocese of Lund coming from a family of warriors. His aristocratic ethos is evident throughout the chronicle: the virtues of bravery, fighting and honour are all-pervasive in the text, not least in the characterization of its commissioner and protagonist, Archbishop Absalon (another fighting bishop), the mastermind behind a series of expeditions against the pagans in Pomerania.

Thinking about social positions in such texts, I would therefore favour placing ecclesiastical values, not as separate, but as a subset of aristocratic ones. In this way landed wealth is the pre-requisite for honour and virtue, displayed either as military prowess or as closeness to God. Another feature shared by Lampert, Saxo and innumerable other aristocratic voices is their contempt for manual labour, and, especially, of the money-making and greed of merchants. We have already met this in the *Book of Manners* by Étienne de Fougères, and it is

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 222-24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 78-79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum – The History of the Danes*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, transl. by Peter Fisher (2 vols. Oxford, 2015).

completely standard in aristocratic societies; in fact, John Kautsky dedicates a whole subchapter to this phenomenon in his book.<sup>29</sup> This contempt is summarized in the oft-quoted statement in the main collection of Canon Law, Gratian's *Decretum* (c. 1150): 'Homo mercator vix aut numquam potest Deo placere' (A merchant can hardly or never please God).<sup>30</sup> Kautsky makes an important distinction between *traditional* aristocratic empires and *commercialised* aristocratic empires, relevant here because the resentment felt against traders (and craftsmen) is obviously voiced much more loudly when a critical amount of merchant wealth is visible. Kautsky regards the Roman Empire as commercialised, the Carolingian one as traditional, and the rise of urban wealth in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries as the beginning of a new commercialised 'empire' in Europe. This would fit well with the expanding and diversifying literary record of those centuries.

The contempt for merchants and craftsmen is a recurring feature in ancient literature. I had always found the way it is expressed in Horace (65-8 BCE) somewhat awkward, until I compared it to medieval attitudes. Both in the beginning of the *Odes*, the opening poem (1.1) to Maecenas (68-8 BCE), and the *Satire* 1.1 (also to Maecenas) the poet underlines the high nobility of his patron and his own position as quietly and contentedly seeking play, beauty and wisdom away from the cares of the world. He is far from the soldier, the merchant, the huntsman, the sailor and so on in their restless and greedy race, for survival, but ultimately for a despicable pecuniary gain. Now Maecenas was a leading Roman aristocrat, probably the richest man next to the Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE); he had inherited but also gained enormous wealth as Augustus's right-hand man as he had, in plain language, taken over land from their defeated enemies. Of course, Horace could not criticize that directly had he wanted to, but the correct reading of his failure to censure the avarice of the 1% of that age is rather that he and his contemporaries simply could not perceive amassing of lands as dishonorable and greedy. Lands were not as commodified and as visibly exchangeable as were merchants' goods, their value was not seen as the result of work, but rather as the result of the degree of honour and standing in the aristocratic power-game. It was virtuous to own lands, and although these possessions could be contested by other aristocrats, such struggles never reminded anyone about the petty gains of a sailor, soldier or merchant, deriving as they did from sordid work.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Contempt for Work and Money-Making', pp. 177-87 which is a part of chapter 8: 'Values and Ideology of the Aristocracy'.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. André Vauchez, "'Homo mercator vix aut numquam potest Deo placere": quelques réflexions sur l'attitude des milieux ecclésiastiques face aux nouvelles formes de l'activité économique au XIIe et au début du XIIIe siècle', *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public* 19, 1 (1988), 211-17.

When Horace and other Roman classics were beginning to be admitted into the medieval curriculum by mainly imperial cathedral schools around the middle of the eleventh century, one of his first imitators, known under the pen name of Sextus Amarcus (probably German, c. 1050), addressed the theme of riches in the third book of his *Satires* (now available in the wonderful Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library).<sup>31</sup> His attitude is remarkably similar to that of Horace: The obsession for riches is criticized in terms of gluttony, greed, luxury, and gold-hoarding as well as lack of giving to the poor, but not in terms of accumulation of land.

It is in the twelfth century really that texts begin to emerge which do not subscribe entirely to the aristocratic order, and in which I would trace the beginnings of more meritocratic values, although they certainly do not promote any specific alternative order. It is more like small and slowly growing cracks in an imposing building. One candidate is the satirical Latin beast epic, *Ysengrimus*, written by a cleric in one of the main blossoming urban centres, namely Ghent in Flanders in 1148. This extraordinary and complex literary text is now also easily available in the Dumbarton Oaks library. The target of criticism is exactly the abbot-cum-bishop figure that we came across in Lampert's pages, in the poem represented as the greedy wolf, Ysengrimus, who is being pranked and cheated again and again by the sly fox, Reynard, who at the end sets the wolf up to be killed by a pack of pigs. This peculiar text sets forth a complex set of literary and legal games, and I just draw out a few simple observations of relevance in this context. First the quick exchanges, in both a violent and a slapstick manner, and the turning of the world upside-down, make *Ysengrimus* one of the forerunners of the great urban literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Second, there seems to be no redeeming side to the land-owning greed of the abbot-bishop, no counter-example or instruction as to how such amassing of wealth in the name of the church might be justified. Finally, as Jill Mann points out in her introduction,<sup>32</sup> the clerical author of the poem is offering his services for future employment, and the brilliance of his work is a token itself of meritocratic attitudes connected to the professionalization of writing – a point to which I shall return.

My main example is the voluminous and spectacularly learned Latin chronicle by William of Tyre (c. 1130-1185/86) written in the Kingdom of Jerusalem between c. 1170 and 1184, when the *Chronicle* stops abruptly.<sup>33</sup> William was not of noble descent, but was a son of a, probably well-to-do, burgher of Jerusalem. He enjoyed the full education of the French and Italian schools in the

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<sup>31</sup> Sextus Amarcus, *Satires*, translated by Ronald E. Pepin (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 9, Harvard, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> *Ysengrimus*, edited and translated by Jill Mann (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 29, Harvard, 2013), p. xix.

<sup>33</sup> For William's life and work, see Peter W. Edbury and John Gordon Rowe, *William of Tyre. Historian of The Latin East* (Cambridge, 1988).

mid-twelfth century, including arts (where the classics were studied), theology and law. When he returned to the East around 1165 he began to climb the ladder of ecclesiastical offices as well as the royal administration, and he became directly involved with King Amaury (1163-1174) and was a teacher of his unfortunate successor, the leper king, Baldwin IV (1174-1185). During these years he became archbishop of Tyre (1175), and travelled officially on behalf of the Kingdom both to Constantinople and Rome, attending the third Lateran council in 1179. In the final power struggle around the weak and dying king, however, William was sidelined, not being elected as Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1180 and he might even have been excommunicated by the dominant party surrounding the king's mother, Agnes of Courtenay (c. 1136-c.1184). He must have died in 1185 or 1186 just in time to avoid seeing the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187.

William's own presence in the chronicle is very strong. Not only in the three complex prefaces of books 1, 16, and 23, but also in very assertive statements about his position, his education, and his advice to kings at various points in the chronicle, and he is consistently judgmental about people in high places who are sub-standard in learning, rhetoric and manners. His meritocratic attitude also comes across in a lengthy description of his own town, Tyre, where he praises the muslim merchants and even uses the word 'nobiles' about them:

13.5 Erant autem in ea cives nobiles et pecuniosi valde, quippe qui continuis navigationibus universas pene Mediterraneo Mari adiacentes provincias gratia commerciorum circueuntes peregrinis mercibus et multiplicibus divitiis urbem repleverant.

There were in Tyre many noble citizens of great wealth. Through their constant trading voyages to most of the provinces along the Mediterranean sea, these merchants had brought back vast riches and a great amount of foreign merchandise to swell the resources of the city.<sup>34</sup>

Such a straightforward praise of merchant wealth is otherwise rarely expressed in twelfth-century literature, but it is not surprising that it comes from the archbishop of a diocese that relied on it, and from a writer who owed his own education to the same resource.

His own educational profile was clearly very important for him to get across, and he does so most explicitly in his well-known autobiographical chapter in book 19:

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<sup>34</sup> William of Tyre, *Chronicon* 13.5, ed. R. B. C. Huygens, CCSL 63-63A (Turnhout, 1986), transl. E. A. Babcock and A. C. Krey, William, Archbishop of Tyre, *A History of Deeds done beyond the Sea*, (New York, 1943), vol. 2, p. 9.

In the same year [1165] I, William, by God's patience unworthy minister of the holy church of Tyre, author of this history, which I have compiled to leave something of the past to those who come after, after nearly twenty years in which I had most avidly followed In France and Italy the schools of the philosophers and the study of liberal disciplines, as well as the improving [salutifera] dogmatics of the celestial philosophy and the prudence of canon and civil law, returned home to the memory of my father and to my mother – may her soul now receive eternal rest – and was received with embraces. I was born in the holy city of Jerusalem, beloved by God, and was brought up there by my parents. During this middle period, in which I spent my adolescence across the sea in the [various] disciplines and dedicated my days to the study of letters in voluntary poverty, I was taught by the following distinguished doctors in the liberal arts etc.<sup>35</sup>

The subsequent name-dropping of teachers in the arts (including philosophy), theology, and law is one of the best contemporary mappings of the twelfth-century Renaissance in Northern France and Italy. Almost all the famous teachers are there, the philosopher Gilbert of Poitiers (c. 1085-1154), the theologian Peter the Lombard (c. 1096-1160), the jurist Bulgarus (1166) and many more. One looks in vain, however, for the most famous of them all, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), as he had died just a few years before William arrived in France. The autobiographical chapter ends with an account of how the author returned home and began his rise (in spite of some resistance) in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Kingdom, with the support of King Amaury whose confidant William became.

I believe we should read other things into William's intellectual self-promotion than a big ego. If we compare his display of philosophical and theological knowledge to similar features in another great twelfth-century chronicle, the *Gesta Friderici* of Otto of Freising (c. 1114-58) from the 1150s, the difference is striking. Otto blends into that work philosophical deliberations and very profound descriptions of the trials Gilbert of Poitiers and Abelard had to go through in the 1140s, denounced as they were by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Otto at no point brings his own person forward, although he must have studied in France and known many of the intellectual celebrities involved, but he simply explains the issues in an impersonal and distant manner. Otto's authorial I is never pushed forward, and it makes sense to link this to his social position: he was the uncle of the emperor (and had, by the way, gone from being abbot to bishop) and he was speaking with the voice of high nobility and on behalf of the

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<sup>35</sup> The autobiographical chapter was discovered by the editor R. B. C. Huygens in 1962 and is therefore absent from the English translation by Babcock and Krey; this translation is by G. A. Loud and J. W. Cox, and is published in *The Crusades – An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan Murray, vol IV (Santa Barbara, CA, 2006), pp. 1305-1308.



Empire. For Otto, supreme education was just a natural extension of all the other exclusive privileges enjoyed by him and very few peers, whereas for William of Tyre it was an acquisition which was crucial to his position.

In the control group to test for the peculiarities of William's textual self-promotion, there is an even more obvious text, namely the French adaptation of his Chronicle known as *Éracles*. This highly competent rewriting / translation was made around 1220, probably in Paris and connected to royal circles.<sup>36</sup> The changes made to William's text are many, including substituting an eastern viewpoint with a western one, and a consistent focus on French nobility and other French connections in the Chronicle. Although William is mentioned a few times as the author of the text lying behind the French chronicle, the text appears almost completely anonymized, like so many other aristocratic vernacular texts at the time (a good parallel is the contemporary Snorri's Saga of the Norwegian Kings, *Heimskringla* which is so anonymous that his authorship is still disputed). William's efforts at displaying himself and all his learning are all undone and effaced in *Éracles*, his learned excursus, classical and biblical lore disappeared, and we are left with a most aristocratic text focused on families, fighting, honour and the ideals of the *preudom*, all for a French noble audience who would then be able to see itself, its past and its values in the stories told.

Although writing in French (and in Old Norse) prose was undergoing a highly dynamic phase exactly at this moment, and represents an exciting new development in European literature, the broader social values expressed in this new medium were in essence the same as those in the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Chronicle* of Lampert of Hersfeld. It was a very important development that the knights now engaged directly with books, as described in Martin Aurell's admirable study *Le chevalier lettré*,<sup>37</sup> but in the context of our search for meritocratic values another contemporary development is much more pertinent, namely the rise of the universities.

One could say in a simplified form that the hallmark of a meritocratic educational system is examinations. This seems to be the main reason that the ancient and medieval Chinese, Confucian, bureaucracy is often characterized as meritocratic. And immediately when universities are discernible in our documents as formalized entities, at least from 1215 in Paris and soon after in Bologna and

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<sup>36</sup> On *Éracles*, its composition and dissemination, see Philip Handyside, *The Old French William of Tyre* (Leiden, 2015); for further comparisons between William of Tyre and *Éracles*: Mireille Issa, *La version latine et l'adaptation française de L'Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum de Guillaume de Tyr* (Turnhout, 2010) and Lars Boje Mortensen, 'Roman Biography in the Medieval West. Did Classical Texts Facilitate Complex Literary Portraits in the Middle Ages', forthcoming in Koen de Temmerman (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography* (Oxford).

<sup>37</sup> Martin Aurell, *Le chevalier lettré. Savoir et conduite de l'aristocratie aux XIIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 2011).

elsewhere, examinations are mentioned in the statutes.<sup>38</sup> The examination included a process for ascertaining that a series of formalities and regular attendance were honoured, and once the student was actually admitted to be examined in a *disputatio*, he was very likely to pass. But the principle itself was still an important new departure, and it does reflect the professionalization and the new market forces of higher education that emerged from the twelfth century and crystallized in the thirteenth century in a number of educational centres from Oxford to Cologne and from Bologna to Salamanca.

My last textual example comes from this environment, the *Studium* at Bologna exactly around the turn of the century. Boncompagno di Signa (c. 1170 – c. 1240) was one of the leading authors and teachers of *ars dictaminis*, the special type of written rhetoric that had developed in Italy from the eleventh century and which found an audience in the steeply growing number of lay notaries and legal officials. Boncompagno left a number of treatises among which the most interesting for a modern audience, perhaps, is the playful *Rota Veneris* (the *Wheel of Venus*), a fictional collection of love-letters meant as writing instructions for both women and men. My quotation, however, is from another text, the *Rhetorica Antiqua* (1215, 1226/7). I cite the translation by Ronald Witt, on whose magisterial book on the *Two Latin Cultures* I rely here.<sup>39</sup> Boncompagno looks back to the situation before his arrival in 1193/94 when the elaborate French, or Orléans style of writing Latin was influential in Bologna:

Before my arrival [in Bologna] a cancerous heresy raged among prose writers, because everyone who promised to teach prose writing sent letters that he adorned painstakingly with the elaborate works of someone else or with philosophical dictums. This furnished proof that the orator was skilled and thus untrained and ignorant people purchased gilded copper for gold. Because I criticized proverbs and condemned the use of obscure composition, the masters and their supporters maintained that I had no knowledge of literature. Nor did they ascribe to talent the fact that I wanted always to write quickly, but considered it a vice and a product of fickleness.

In our context there are at least two things to note here. First, the more efficient, quick and clear style promoted by Boncompagno and others, is definitely a response to a more demanding and faster-moving bureaucracy, lay and

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<sup>38</sup> Olaf Pedersen, *Studium Generale. De europæiske universitetens tilblivelse*, (Copenhagen, 1979), ch. 9. [English translation: *The First Universities: Studium Generale and the Origins of University Education in Europe* (Cambridge, 1997)].

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 386-87.

ecclesiastical.<sup>40</sup> Secondly his promotion of his intellectual persona – which made one critic talk of his ‘quarrelsome insistence on his originality’ – is evidently tied to the fact that he is on the market as a teacher. His writing skills should earn him his income, and therefore they needed to be stressed, as in the case of the author of *Ysengrimus*. William of Tyre, with his high-flying career as chancellor and archbishop, was not in an educational market in quite the same volatile sense, but he had seen the beginning of the expanding intellectual scene in Paris and Bologna in mid-century and he relied on his skills rather than his family lands or its military prowess for that career. In these three cases it makes sense to read strong authorial personas as a sign of meritocratic anxieties, whereas the most firmly aristocratic texts (Latin and vernacular) do not need such intellectual and authorial self-promotion and distinction (but might certainly display religious, military or political self-importance, though usually by proxy authors or scribes).

To sum up, we can go back to the importance of virtue or virtues. In modern moral philosophy, virtue ethics was considered a thing of the long gone past, until Alasdair MacIntyre tried to resurrect it in a famous book from 1981.<sup>41</sup> Since the age of Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin, for many good reasons, it has been either the Kantian duty ethics or the utilitarian or consequentialist ethics that have dominated the moral imagination – not least because the Enlightenment began to envisage a society in which the morality of *all* members mattered and should fit into the same abstract formula. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, were the perfect match for both ancient and medieval societies in which serious moral discourse only cared for the few who were in a position to possess, cultivate, and refine their virtues. What I am suggesting then is that in the period in question here (c. 1050–1250) the very strong link between landed wealth, honour and / or access to the divine, plus virtue began to show small cracks, as virtue could also be claimed by educated or skilled people who relied on resources other than lineage and land. There was no questioning of the virtue-paradigm in itself, on the contrary the thirteenth century saw a veritable industry of treatises on the virtues (including one by Boncompagno himself) which, on the learned level, was linked to a new engagement with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>42</sup> Virtue ethics were flexible enough to accommodate more than military valour, noble family, and exclusive upper-class piety.

There are at least two systemic social changes which had the effect that the remit of virtue ethics was to grow to include variants of those same virtues which

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<sup>40</sup> Faster writing in contemporary historiography is treated in Lars Boje Mortensen, ‘Comparing and Connecting: The Rise of Fast Historiography in Latin and Vernacular (Twelfth to Thirteenth Century)’, *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015) 25–39, [DOI: 10.1553/medievalworlds\_no1\_2015s25].

<sup>41</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> István Bejczy, *Virtue Ethics in the Middle Ages: Commentaries on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, 1200-1500* (Leiden, 2007).

were acquired in one or two generations, rather than just belonging to long genealogies of landed nobility.

The nexus between (1) landed wealth, (2) (military) honour / access to the divine through bishoprics and monasteries led by local aristocratic families, and (3) virtue was not at all broken in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but as mentioned above, the volume of other revenue reached a critical point. Therefore, a new connection emerged between (1) merchant wealth and bureaucratic income (mainly lawyers!) and (2) professional skills (substituting military honor and access to the divine) – which could also result in the acquisition of (3) virtue.

The second, and related development can be found in organisational principles. The dynastic, ‘embodied’ principle of social hierarchy was widely dominant. Lands and rights belonged to a lord because of his lineage and marriage: at the top of smaller and greater European polities and domains were nobles with family claims. The death of a spouse or a young heir could change the European map significantly, and while lordship was often contested by other lords, there is little doubt that blood links were the argument par excellence, descent was an unquestioned source of authority. Even when blatant invasions of foreign lands happened or were planned, they were always backed up by a dynastic inheritance claim, however tenuous. But some very respectable and rich organisations were not dynastic, for instance the Papacy and the mendicant orders with an elected general as their head. They were still institutions with a strongly embodied leadership as these were life-long appointments – the whole ethos and presence of the Papacy was concentrated in the body of the ruling pope. A more radical break with the embodied dynastic principle is found in the Italian communes of the twelfth century (including those who survived longer as republics), in the guilds, and the universities of the thirteenth century: their complex arrangements were experiments with new organisational principles through which abstract legal entities emerged. They would have their symbolic representation or their favoured saints, but they were not embodied in one living person.<sup>43</sup> This made leadership more collegial and it opened up a greater social space of merit as opposed to family privilege.

These two factors – one economic and one organisational – were crucial for the emergence of literary voices less concerned with the life and ideals of nobility (at war or leading local churches) and more interested in virtue as cultivated through education. There is furthermore a specific tie between such meritocratic values and learning, not least the art of writing itself. The rapid expansion of written culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries made it clearer that higher education need not be a noble privilege, and that writers from a humbler

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Chris Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World: The Emergence of Italian City Communes in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, 2015); the classic work on the ‘embodiment’ of high medieval social structures remains Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (with a new preface by William Chester Jordan, Princeton, 1997 [1st ed. 1957]).

background gained access to speak on behalf of the Great Tradition (the wisdom of antiquity, the Biblical and patristic age) and thus imparted authority solely on those grounds.

Finally, I would like to suggest that literature – within the parameters defined here – should not be seen as a mere reflection of changing attitudes. The proliferation of voices, attitudes and professions of writing, the rise of fiction and satire, the emergence of major vernacular literatures, a new engagement with writings from antiquity, the scientific genres of the universities and more – all this is a substance in itself, an emergent field, an agent of change. The diversification of voices and modes of writing are no doubt *framed* by an incipient commercialisation and urbanisation of European polities and by new organisational systems, but written discourses and the attitudes they foster and facilitate, including meritocratic values, are an active part of this change, not a reactive one. The power of literary education and writing had long-term unintended consequences for the aristocracy who embraced and employed it in the same period as it partly began to set other agendas.

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