ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2020 VII

Rebel Barons: Resisting Royal Power in Medieval Culture

Luke Sunderland

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

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WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Rebel Barons: Resisting Royal Power in Medieval Culture. By Luke Sunderland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-19-878848-5. 320 pp. £60.00.

This new book by Luke Sunderland, professor at Durham University and a scholar of medieval Francophone literature, examines aristocratic resistance to royal power as evidenced by the corpus of *chansons de geste* composed in contested sites within the French and English orbit in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries. *Rebel Barons* is a good addition to the scholarly literature on noble revolt in the Middle Ages. It is an important corrective both to national literary history (drawing on texts originating and being copied in Burgundy, Occitania, the Low Countries, and Lorraine) and to earlier pro-monarchical state-centred views of noble revolt, which imagined rebel barons as greedy and self-interested actors who impeded a progressive process of state formation.

Sunderland presents the rebel baron narratives, in *chansons de geste* and related genres, as testifying to aristocratic political and ethical ideals: of rebellion as an expression of political discontent, tending towards reform; of resistance as a brake on royal power, hindering its decline into tyranny; and of noble violence as safeguarding the common good and public order. The *chansons de geste* outlined, Sunderland argues, an alternative ethics. They taught "the nobles not just to rebel, but how to rebel: they argue that particular types of rebellious action, under specific circumstances, do not equal treason" (57). In his chapter on resistance, Sunderland strives to distinguish resistance from revolt, locating the former in areas of contested French political domination. He demonstrates how *chansons de geste* promoted in these areas can be read as offering up resistance to Capetian claims of sovereignty and overlordship.

The sheer number of sources used by Sunderland speaks to the ambitious scope of his study, which includes thematical studies of revolt, resistance, feud, and crusade. By approaching literary texts from a principally historical perspective, asking questions about the political and ideological implications of the production, reception, and consumption of these texts, Sunderland manages rewardingly to discuss them from an interdisciplinary standpoint. It must be said that his constant combination of contextual and intertextual interpretations offers new ways to read these texts. Sunderland often points to situations wherein a specific aspect of a *chanson* would have spoken to the interests of the audience, and thus gives attention to the reception history of the works.

Yet, there is an apparent lack of references to essential historical literature relevant to the study at hand. The framework for many interpretations builds mostly upon the work of other scholars of literature,

such as Sarah Kay or Sharon Kinoshita. Among historians of the social aspects of nobility and medieval political history, there are scholars who have made important contributions to the field and who are not referenced by Sunderland, including David Crouch, Jean Flori, John Gillingham, and Malcolm Vale. On the other hand, those who are present are used fruitfully (for example, Paul Hyams and Stephen White), but they almost exclusively come into play in the chapter on feud, which hints at a slight imbalance in the work as a whole.

Theoretically, Sunderland's book is eclectic. This is, sometimes, to his advantage, because the concepts studied in the separate chapters might beg different approaches. Nonetheless, one might expect more stringency from a comprehensive study of particular material and topics. Initially, he focuses on sovereignty in medieval political theory and in modern theorists Derrida and Agamben.

There are, in my view, some problems with his reading of the political potential of the texts. At several points, Sunderland points to the presence of ideas from contemporary political theory in the *chansons*. However, it remains unclear how he imagines the migration of concepts from political theory to literature. Sometimes the lack of clarity springs out of inconsistency or contradictions in the author's thinking. He states that nobles "attacked" concepts such as "the body politic, the just war, and the common good (or at least the royalist use of them)" (17). At other points, he shows how they negotiated and contested the meaning of these concepts, or even "claimed to protect" them (9). Relatedly, it seems odd to study feuds as structural and norm-governed phenomena in *Raoul de Cambrai* and the Loheren cycle only to state towards the end of the analysis that the texts do not "address the problems of feud *per se*, but the problems of feud gone awry" (209).

Nevertheless, Sunderland definitely manages to demonstrate the polyvalent ideological possibilities inherent in *chansons de geste*, thus making it clear that a genre does not uniformly imply a single reading. In line with the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony, Sunderland recaptures voices that have often been silenced, but that are present in many of these texts, singing their song of resistance. In this, he can be claimed to contradict himself—or rather, his choice of theoretical framing in Frederic Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*)—having stated that each genre "symbolizes a particular social antagonism" and that the rebel baron narratives act as symbolic solutions to this antagonism (5–7). The idea that a genre is bound to a particular antagonism, a specific social order, or a firmly established ideological positioning, goes against the idea of polyphony and generic hybridity.

The multiplicity of voices within the *chansons* has a correlative in the multiplicity of genres that incorporate the rebel baron narratives. In some

cases, we might be better served to speak of hybrid genres or hybrid texts, for an important aspect of Sunderland's study is its approach towards the interaction between history and fiction in these texts. In effect, genres were far from stable, and narratives could drift between genres—when a narrative was famous, albeit fictional, chroniclers left it out at their own peril—meaning that neither genres nor specific narratives were unilaterally tied to a specific subject position.

When it comes to form, there are certain features Sunderland could have altered in order to bolster the readability of the book. In terms of the place of medieval political thought in a strict sense (John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Marsilius of Padua), their role could have been restricted to serving as a contrastive and enlightening element to assist in the interpretation of the political content of the *chansons*. Sunderland's introduction to the political thought of these well-known figures is lengthy and makes the initial sections of the book overlong, losing some of the momentum that could have carried the reader from the relatively brief introduction to the actual study of the *chansons*. Furthermore, in the final chapter before the conclusion, on crusades, the connection to the rebel barons and resistance to royal power is tenuous at best.

All in all, Sunderland has written an interesting book, but one that could have been sharper in its design and more precise in its conclusions. The study does bring out a number of crucial characteristics in a literary genre—including many lesser-known exemplars—that proves to be more political than many might have imagined. Despite these criticisms I highly recommend it.

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