

Analyzing History: Bertran de Born –*Innocent Poet or Inciter of Revolt*

While words are powerful tools that can invoke emotions ranging from jubilation to revulsion, could they be the cause of a rebellion against Henry II of England by his children and wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine? Could the words of a mere troubadour drive the revolt of a family against their king? The history of medieval Europe is a markedly violent period of history. Once commonly called the Dark Ages, medieval Europe is remembered for being split into many small duchies and counties that fought amongst one another while owing their allegiance to a king, rebellions such as these were neither uncommon nor very surprising usually.

Henry II was king of England, as well as lord over many duchies and counties on the Continent from 1154 to 1189. From an early age he was involved in the political turmoil that plagued Europe at the time. Son of Mathilda, the granddaughter of William the Conqueror and the only surviving child of Henry I, who insisted that though she was a woman, she had a claim to the throne of England, Henry II was thrown into the bitter battle between Mathilda and her cousin, Stephen, at the age of 14. Married to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1151, he led a military expedition against England in 1153 that eventually led to a peace treaty between himself and his uncle according to which he would inherit the throne of England upon the death of Stephen. Assuming the throne in 1154, he would rule over what would later be called the Angevin Empire.

Henry II's reign is well known amongst the numerous kings and queens of the British Isles. Shortly after his assumption, he set about restoring royal power and hegemony over Wales. Throughout his life, he reigned over (at various times), the kingdom of England, the duchies of Normandy, Brittany, Aquitaine, and Gascony, the counties of Maine, Anjou, Touraine, and Nantes, as well as part of Ireland. He is noted for having instituted multiple legal reforms in England, which have been credited with being the precursors to English Common Law. Turbulent relations between England and Rome eventually led to the death of his friend, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury after the king supposedly said, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" at which four knights set out to Canterbury to kill Becket.

Henry II had four legitimate sons who survived childhood, Henry the Young King, Richard the Lionheart, Geoffrey II, and John Lackland. The crowning of Henry the Young King as junior King of England in 1170 eventually led to the death of Thomas Becket. He was given control of Normandy, Anjou and Maine, while Richard was given Aquitaine and Poitiers, Geoffrey was given Brittany, with John having Ireland. In 1173, Eleanor, Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey, with the support of Scotland, France, and Flanders, waged a revolt against Henry II.

In 1173, three castles in the domain of Henry the Young King were given to John. Angered by this, many nobles pushed Henry to rebel as they saw a chance for profit for themselves. His mother shortly joined him, as she had been angry with Henry II for his involvement in the death of Thomas Becket. Normandy was attacked on all sides by the French, Flemish, and Bretons, and England from the north by the Scottish. Henry II's swift military action resulted in the deaths of many of the rebels

and the collapse of the rebellion. The family reconciled with Henry II upon their defeat though their rebellion caused much destruction and many lives to be lost across the empire. In 1182, Young Henry once again revolted against his family, which ended with his death in 1183.

Bertran de Born, born sometime in the 1140s in the Limousin in France, was a prolific Occitan troubadour and Lord of Hautefort. Bertran is known to have been married at least twice, though exact dates are unsure. He was the father of two sons, one of whom would also become a troubadour, though far less well-known and talented than his father. He is often blamed for the rebellion of Henry II's sons; his poetry is noticeably violent and regularly witty and sarcastic. Troubadours, usually known for their lyrical love songs known as *cansos*, wrote of a variety of topics that were usually required to be entirely unique. Bertran is known for the popularization of the *sirventes*, a song that takes the form of an existing song and turns the lyrics into a satirical political commentary. With his life spanning the later half of the 12th century and the early 13th century, he wrote at a time when troubadour poems were still relatively new and when records were less commonly kept. 47 poems are attributed to him although he many have written many more that have been lost with time.

At a time when violence was so very common, how could the lowly Lord of Hautefort be the cause of a rebellion that resulted in mass destruction and loss of life? He was not blamed for using tactics such as military intervention or political coercion, but simply for writing lyrical poetry. Through this poetry he is said to have

incited the rebellions of Henry the Young King. He is even accused of doing so in
Dante's Inferno:

I saw—and I say this with sureness,

For in my memory it's still a clear image —

A torso with no head, moving as if in harness

With the rest of the herd in its dismal passage;

A hand swung the severed head by its hair

Like a lantern, and with a glance at us the visage

Sighed: "Ah me!" and somehow produced a spare

Lamp out of itself; thus there now arose

A strange two in one and one in two. (How this pair

Could assume such a form, He who decreed it knows.)

At the foot of our bridge the shade raised high

Its arm with the swinging head in a pose

Which brought its words closer to our ear and eye.

"You—still breathing while you inspect the dead —

Look at this atrocious suffering, then try

To find a punishment worse than losing your head.
You should know that I'm Bertran de Born, so that you
Can bring news of me above; I'm the one who misled

The young king, who set father against son, and who
Acted more wickedly than Achitophel did with David and
Absalom. Because I sliced such close bonds in two

I now hold my brain dangling from my hand,
Cut off—alas—from its vital source
In the trunk. By observing me you can understand

How the law of retribution takes its course."

Dante's depiction of Bertran demonstrates that the belief that Bertran was the cause of the rebellion was present, even in the 13th century. Bertran, as depicted by Dante, acknowledges his role in driving Young Henry from his father and he recognizes the irony of his punishment. Bertran himself even admits in *Fuillhetas, vos mi preiatz qu ieu chan*, "by singing I have turned against myself more dukes, princes, and emirs than ever there were at the siege of Troy." While Bertran has a certain affinity for warfare as demonstrated by his poetry, it is often satirical and not literal and he therefore should not be blamed for such a rebellion, or at the very least, he should

not be the main cause. However, by reading his poetry, it is easy to see how one could assume he started the rebellions.

In *Lo coms m'a mandat e mogut*, he speaks of a tournament and his love of violence by saying, "...to make him a song that will chop a thousand shields, helmets, and hauberks and coats of mail, and pierce doublets and tear them..." He continues by displaying a level of arrogance rival to that of a king by arguing:

They will come to us there, the powerful men and the barons, the most honored companions in the world and the most celebrated; some will come there to make money, some to obey, some merely to please.

And as soon as we arrive, the tourney will start all over the field, and the Catalans and the Aragonese will fall fast and thick, for their saddlebows can't hold them up – we'll hit 'em damned hard, me and my mates! . . .

It is clear that he enjoys bloodshed and revels in the defeat of opponents. His level of self-confidence is also relatively high, though this could simply be due to the fact that he is hiding behind a song. Throughout much of his poetry, he makes war threats against his neighbors and enemies. During a period of peace he even states, "...Now since I'm not making war they say I've been up to no good." Warfare was in Bertran's nature; his writings almost make it seem like an integral part of his being.

Bertran was well aware of the power of his words. In *Pois als baros enoia en lur pesa*, he brings up the point that the peace between England and France is irritating the barons.

Since this peace the two kings have made irritates the barons in their thoughts, I'll make such a song that everyone will be impatient to fight, once it's learned. I don't like a disinherited king who stays at peace and loses his right, until he takes by force what he has demanded.

Through his words, he believes he can convince people to go to arms and fight for what they want, he is even certain that his song will make them willing to fight.

Arrogance is often shown in his poetry by his insistence at his own power and invincibility in war. During the rebellion, Bertran loses Hautefort and is upset by it. After the death of Young Henry, Henry II returns Hautefort to Bertran and he uses it to gloat and mock the other barons. In *Ges de far sirventes no·m tartz*, Bertran writes of high praise of himself, "so subtle are my wit and my art." He continues by provoking his neighbors to try to attack him, "of Autafort, I won't give him even a garden. Let whoever wants it attack me, for have it I must." The poem itself is a declaration of his power and strength as well as a testament to his love of warfare. "I'm so damn tough that the shreds of war cling to me." Amongst his taunts and threats, he reveals that peace does not pacify him, even if it is at his wish. War and bloodshed are necessary to his happiness.

A common theme throughout his poetry is the praise of Henry II and the rebellious barons. Frequently he calls upon the barons to rise against the king and when their rebellion fails, he calls them cowards. He insists that they are disinheriting themselves without protest. He even points out the fault of the kings and how they irritate the barons.

Bertran heavily supported the Young King and several of his songs are of praise and glory to Henry. He called for barons and kings alike to join Henry in the rebellions against his father and his brothers and he was devastated at his death. Upon the death of the Young King, Bertran wrote a song mourning his loss. This marked a change in Bertran's life at which he began to switch his allegiance to Richard.

Bertran holds contempt for rich men, especially "new money." In *S'abrils e fuoillas e flors*, he discusses his values of richness and worthiness by stating, "Rich men, I savor your carping, because you think you're worth so much that you expect people to praise you from fear, although you give them nothing." One also sees that Bertran's love for war is not strictly one of violence. He believes "a rich man never yet attained high merit, if joy and youth and worth weren't his backers." While he may greatly enjoy bloodshed, he gets some sort of self-worth and joy from it. Throughout the poem, he continues to criticize the rich men for their lack of nobleness and ability to show their power in a worthy way. He harkens to the days of chivalry, of knights who fought for love and honor.

His contempt for rich men leads him to declare his pleasure in seeing their fall, "it pleases me immensely when I see rotten rich people suffer, the ones who make trouble for noblemen, and it pleases me when I see them destroyed." Bertran displays his disgust at peasants who become rich through commerce and casts them out of noble society as they are pigs and do not understand the complexities and customs of the nobles. He even goes as far to say that peasants are selfish and no rich man should feel sorry for them.

Perhaps it is because he can hide behind songs or perhaps he is truly fearless, Bertran dares to insult and criticize royalty heavily throughout his *sirventes*. In *Pois lo gens terminis floritz*, he belittles Alfonso II of Aragon for his role in his having lost Hautefort and makes every attempt to slander his name. He is relentless in his denigration of Alfonso and his family. At one point, he proposes that the King of Castile do something to take power from Alfonso.

In *Molt m'es dissendre car col*, Bertran becomes so bored that he snaps at the barons for allowing themselves to fall so easily to Richard, at Richard, and once again at Alfonso. After only a year of peace, Bertran has grown weary and anxious for war. The Aragonese and Catalans lament because they have a miserable excuse for a king who prefers money to honor and glorified song to action, in reference to Alfonso II.

Towards the end of his life, Bertran begins to support Richard and praises him highly. For a while, he had wished Geoffrey be king, though he begins to admonish him for having abandoned the rebellion and returning to his father. After the siege of Hautefort, however, his allegiance begins to shift to Richard and he begins praising Richard for his courageousness and his courteousness. His admiration for Richard soon turns to blind loathing of other rulers, such as Philip of France who, by many accounts, led the country well during that time.

His desire for war grows stronger as he grows older. As tensions between Richard and Alfonso deepen, he writes *Miez sirventes vuielh far dels reis amdos*, in which he states:

If both kings are noble and courageous, we shall soon see fields strewn with pieces of helmets and shields and swords and saddlebows and men split through their trunks down to their breeches; we shall see horses running wild, and many a lance through sides and chests, and joy and tears and grief and rejoicing. The loss will be great, and the gain will be greater.

He knows that a war between England and Aragon would be costly to both of them, though he believes England could win at great cost, possibly even losing his own life. However, he seems content to lose his life in the name of England, perhaps to see Alfonso fall and England rise in power.

Fiulhetas, vos mi preiatz qe ieu chant, marks the beginning of Bertran's writing about the crusade. He praises Sir Conrad, who was defending the city of Tyre at great cost and without help from neither Richard nor Philip. He proceeds to criticize the kings for the slowness of their response and their inability to swiftly act upon the loss of Jerusalem. In *Ara sai eu de pretz quals l'a plus gran*, he wishes Philip and Richard to Saladin, though he admits his loyalty to Richard, he argues that he may criticize him still.

At the end of the crusade, Bertran rejoices upon the return of Richard and condemns the barons of Aquitaine for failing to uphold their treaties while the king followed through with his own. Even at the end of the wars, Bertran continues to describe battle scenes and his delight in killing other men. In his mind, barons who are disloyal should be singled out and stripped of power.

From the words that Bertran uses it is not difficult to understand, at least on

some level, how society at the time could blame Bertran. It is only human nature to blame others for problems and take credit only for successes. However, Bertran is a particularly easy target. Due to the fact that precise dating does not exist for his songs, it is unknown whether they were written before or after certain historical events. He clearly calls for rebellion and violence in his songs and his writings have shown that he thoroughly enjoyed challenging and admonishing other nobles.

Henry II and his sons ruled at a difficult time in history. English society was progressively changing. The peasants, or at least educated people outside the church were becoming literate and gaining their own thoughts, even the language was in the midst of evolving. The country was recovering from a civil war that had put friend against friend and nearly ruined the kingdom. Henry II was charged with restoring prosperity to a war-torn empire that expanded to include much of western France.

Throughout his reign, he made mistakes, as most kings would, though they would prove to be disastrous for him. The appointing of Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury could be seen as the root of the rebellions of his sons. Upon his death, his estranged wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine sees it as a bid for power and quickly convinces her sons to rebel. She is placed in prison upon the failure of the rebellion only later to be released and involved in another plot to challenge Henry's reign. He even oversaw the creation of the Common Law system in England.

Such changes were quite rapid during a time that was plagued by wars for the Holy Land and still recovering from the fall of Roman society in the 400s. As was common at the time, nobles were very concerned with their own wealth and power.

The creation of Common Law began to undermine not only royal authority, but also the authority of the nobles as peasants began to become educated and understood their subjugation.

Furthermore, the English lands in France were not entirely content to be ruled by the English. The people of Western France have a longstanding tradition of great pride in their cultures; many regions had their own languages, Breton in Brittany, Norman in Normandy, and Occitan in Aquitaine, along with several other languages. It would have been difficult for them to communicate amongst one another, it is even rumored that Richard himself did not speak English.

It is difficult to blame one person or to find a single source for the rebellion of Henry II's sons. From a time when history was recorded from biased points of view and many records were lost, it is nearly impossible to discern the feelings of the Plantagenets. From the displeasure of the nobles, the thirst for power of Henry II's sons to the love of war and discord of Bertran and the discontent of the people in France, there are many reasons for which one would rebel against Henry II and it is highly unlikely that Bertran's words were the source of the Young Kings rebellions. His words may have been the spark that ignited the rebellion, perhaps they fueled it, or perhaps they were a simple commentary of the time. Unfortunately, Bertran's legacy will always be plagued by this unfortunate accusation. It is not possible to produce absolute truths about his role in the 12th century and it most likely never will be. Therefore, it is imperative that historical evidence is explored and dissected as much as possible to reconstruct the most likely reasons of defiance and discover new ways to interpret the words of historians of the time in order to remove the

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bias often spun into such stories.

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