

Robbing Churches and Pulling Beards: The Rebellious Sons of Henry II¹

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Throughout the medieval period, a young nobleman's behaviour could enhance, diminish or even destroy his attempts to establish an adult, masculine identity. Correctly displaying the expected or 'good' behaviour patterns would increase his image as a fully adult male, while displays of behaviour deemed to be 'bad' were likely to be seen in terms of immaturity, with the inevitable drop in masculine status. Sometimes, acts of incorrect behaviour could be excused, either because the motivation behind them displayed 'good' masculine reasoning, or on account of youth if the individual was under or close to the age of majority. In the latter case, while the behaviour might delay the development of a masculine reputation, it would do so with minimal damage to the young man's final standing as a royal adult male.

We are fortunate that the activities during their father's lifetime of the unruly sons of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry the Young King,² Richard (later King Richard I), Geoffrey of Brittany and John (later King John), are well documented. Unsurprisingly, many contemporary chronicles detail incidents of behaviours on their part that fell outside the accepted norms for men of their status. Perhaps the most notable examples of their poor behaviour are those of their two failed rebellions in 1173 and 1183. Only three of the four sons were involved in these rebellions. In the first, John, at just seven years old, was too young to join his brothers and, having been established as his father's favourite following the first rebellion, in the second he alone among the four brothers remained loyal to their father. However, as we shall see, this does not mean that John was by any means the best-behaved of the princes.

Whilst contemporary norms of the behaviour appropriate to adult manliness are, arguably, the root cause of both rebellions, youth was certainly an important factor in the

¹ This article was first presented as a paper at the Colloquium on *Bad Behaviour in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* organised by the Centre of Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury, 3rd December 2009.

² Henry, the second born and eldest surviving of the five sons of King Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine, was crowned in his father's lifetime in an attempt to guarantee a smooth transition of power. Because of this, he was known in his own lifetime variously as 'Henry III', 'the king the son' or most commonly 'Henry the Young King' to distinguish him from his father. Because he predeceased his father, he is never included in the sequence of English monarchs.

dispensing of fatherly forgiveness on the first occasion, as shall be seen. In 1173 the three older brothers rebelled against Henry in order to force him to provide them with the lands and power that were linked to the titles their father had already bestowed upon them. Without the land, they could not fulfil the major adult responsibility of providing for their households. When the rebellion was crushed, Henry was quick to forgive the sixteen-year-old Geoffrey and Richard, who was just one year older. William of Newburgh records that ‘very little question was raised about them, since their youth was their excuse’.³ The Young King, however, at the age of nineteen, must have already been deemed a man: he was required to give his father a pledge of good conduct and swear fealty to him as a subservient lord before he was formally forgiven. It would seem that this first rebellion did minimal damage to the reputations of the princes; all were swiftly brought back into their father’s favour, and youth served as a means by which this could happen without damaging Henry’s own reputation.

The second rebellion in 1183 serves as a backdrop to some individual incidents of bad behaviour by two of the three oldest sons. In January of that year, the Young King and Geoffrey had united with the rebellious barons of Aquitaine who were at war with Richard and had taken and occupied the castle at Limoges. Initially welcomed as liberators, the brothers were soon besieged, first by Richard and shortly afterwards by their father as well. The Young King and Geoffrey repeatedly offered to discuss peace with Henry but each time they did so dishonestly.⁴ Henry seems, however, to have been determined to believe his sons, as he attempted to deal honestly with them, only to be disappointed each time. The final straw appears to have come in March, when local feeling at last turned against them because they had committed an act that was, to many, unforgivable. In order to pay the mercenaries they needed to hold Richard and their father back, they robbed both the townsfolk who had welcomed them and, worse still, the shrine of St. Martial.⁵

Roger of Howden relates the incident in detail while explaining the level of dishonesty of which these devious young men were capable. He tells us that:

[Geoffrey] being again desirous to hold a conference with his father, came in perfect security to his father, and, deceitfully treating about making peace, requested of his

³ William of Newburgh, *History*, II, *The Church Historians of England*, vol. IV, Part II, trans. by Joseph Stevenson (London: Seeley’s, 1856), ed. by Scott McLetchie (1998), <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/williamnewburgh-becket1.html>> [Accessed 20 June 2009] (p. 43).

⁴ *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, ed. by William Stubbs, 4 vols, Rolls Series: Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores (London: 1868–71), p. 277.

⁵ Ibid.

father leave to enter the castle in order that he might prevail upon the king his brother, and the other enemies of our lord the king, to comply with the wishes of the king.⁶

We are told that Geoffrey, having entered the castle, then:

spoiled the shrine of Saint Martial, and carried off the other vessels of that monastery, both gold and silver, and then, returning with the booty, requested his father to prolong the truce till the next day.⁷

The truce was granted but, we are informed, on the same day Geoffrey, rather than honour it:

renounced the truce with his father as being at an end, and out of the proceeds of the sacrilege and robbery, of [...] Saint Martial, paid their wages to his Brabanters. The amount of this theft was, according to the estimate made by worthy men, fifty-two marks of gold and twenty-seven marks of silver.⁸

While Howden implicates only Geoffrey as the plunderer of the shrine, the fact that the Young King was present in the town and, given the level of deviousness in calls for peace that had previously occurred at the Young King's instigation, it is possible, but not likely, that Geoffrey was acting alone in this robbery. Perhaps it was because this was not the first time that Geoffrey had stolen from religious sites in order to pay his troops that Howden felt able to place the blame solely on Geoffrey's shoulders. Earlier in the same work, Howden makes a point of Geoffrey's light-fingeredness, informing us that he had repeatedly committed similar acts. For example, we are told that Geoffrey 'ravaged his father's territories', and that, as well as 'burning towns and villages to the ground [and] emptying the fields and sheepfolds', he also was in the habit of 'carrying off the ornaments of the churches'.⁹

The motivation behind the robbery of St Martial was a simple one: by rebelling against their father, the Young King and Geoffrey had effectively cut themselves off from their usual supply of money, and mercenaries need to be paid in a timely fashion. The immediate consequences for the two badly behaved princes appear to have been minimal; as we shall see, they continued their rebellion even after Limoges fell to Henry in May of the same year and the full consequences of their actions would come only after the rebellion was over. However, there was an attempt to quash the revolt on a wider level: the archbishop of Canterbury along with several bishops and (according to Howden) 'all the abbots and clergy of Normandy pronounced a sentence of excommunication against all who should prevent peace being made between the king and his sons'.¹⁰ Interestingly, we are informed that the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 277.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 278.

Young King was the sole exception to this sentence and although, frustratingly, we are not told why this was the case, one possibility is that they simply did not feel able to place such a sentence on a crowned king.

The relief of Limoges neither quashed the rebellion nor reduced the Young King's bad behaviour. Increasingly desperate for money, the Young King repeated Geoffrey's actions in other locations. After he left Limoges in order to raid Angoulême, the frustrated and angry people of Limoges refused to allow the Young King to re-enter the town upon his return. Still desperately short of money, he was forced to embark on a somewhat disorganised journey around Aquitaine, where he despoiled the monastery of Grandmont before travelling to St. Mary de Rocamadour, where he proceeded to strip the tomb of St. Amadour and steal the treasures of the church. This time, however, the while Young King may have escaped being punishment by his father, he would not avoid retribution from a divine authority. Howden, with his monk's prejudices, reports that the Young King 'in consequence of [...] rancour of mind' was struck down with a severe illness (which we now know is most likely to have been dysentery).¹¹ The Young King, aware that his illness was serious, sent a letter to his father begging his forgiveness, but Henry, finally made wary by the Young King's past perfidy, sent only a token to his eldest son and so the Young King died shortly thereafter at the town of Martel, still awaiting the forgiveness he sought. While the Young King did not live long enough to gain his father's forgiveness, Geoffrey was certainly more fortunate, although this took some time: he was clearly back in favour with his father by December 1184, when Henry sent him to Normandy. This was not a task one would expect to be given to either to such a troublesome son or to a man who was perceived as having failed to live up to society's expectations of him, given his sex and position. We have to assume, therefore, that any harm to his standing that Geoffrey had suffered had been repaired, at least in the eyes of his father, by the time he sailed for Normandy.

The actions of both the Young King and Geoffrey were ambivalent in the context of their burgeoning masculine reputations. On the one hand, their acts of theft were carried out in order to fulfil a role that was a significant responsibility for an adult male: they had to pay their men.¹² Failure to do this would lower both their ability to attract loyal troops at a later date and their standing as men who could provide for their own and their men's needs. On the other, stealing was behaviour that was in no way appropriate for a man of good standing and,

¹¹ *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 278.

¹² Vern L. Bullough, 'On Being a Man in the Middle Ages', in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 31–46.

in these cases, the behaviour was doubly inappropriate because the thefts were being perpetrated against the Church. As a crowned monarch and a ruling duke respectively, the Young King and Geoffrey were both expected to protect the Church: they had sworn oaths to do so and the breaking of any oath could and would expose an individual to a loss of status.¹³

In addition to this, both brothers had, during the conflict, committed the extremely dishonourable acts of lying, breaking their word and dishonouring their father. If a man had no honour, he was no man. The description of the brothers by contemporary chroniclers bears this out: Ralph of Diceto claimed that the world was a better place without the Young King, and William of Newburgh claims that only people's gullibility made them admire him.¹⁴ For Geoffrey, the observations are even more damning: Gerald of Wales uses feminising language when he states that 'his tongue is smoother than oil; his sweet and persuasive eloquence has enabled him to dissolve the firmest alliances and [...] throw two kingdoms into confusion' and adds that he was 'a hypocrite in everything'.¹⁵ Howden's opinion of Geoffrey is similar but he is far blunter, describing Geoffrey simply as 'that son of perdition [...] that son of iniquity'.¹⁶

The year after Geoffrey had been sent to govern Normandy, Henry II found a role for his youngest and, up to that point, most loyal son. Back in 1177, John, at the age of eleven, had been designated king of Ireland by his father. An application was sent to Pope Alexander for permission to do so and the application also requested a crown for John. The crown was eventually made and delivered to Henry, but John would never fulfil the role of king in what was Henry's most troublesome holding. He would, however, find that Ireland was not only to play a part in developing his adult identity several years later but was also to be the site of one of his more politically significant incidents of inappropriate behaviour. In 1184 when John was eighteen, Henry knighted him and, at the same time, created him Lord of Ireland.

Gerald of Wales reports that, around the time John was created Lord of Ireland, the situation there had become unstable: battles were taking place between the Irish and the Norman Lords and, following the death of one Roger le Pour:

¹³ David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France: 900–1300* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), pp. 71–79.

¹⁴ *Radulfi de Diceto decani Lundoniensis opera historica: The historical works of master Ralph de Diceto, dean of London*, ed. by William Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series: Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores, 68 (London: Longman & Co, 1876).

¹⁵ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topography of Ireland*, trans. by Thomas Forester, rev. and ed. by Thomas Wright (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 2000), p. 90.

¹⁶ *Chronica magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, p. 277.

a secret conspiracy against the English was formed throughout Ireland, many castles were destroyed and the whole island was thrown into confusion.¹⁷

It was into this turmoil that John was sent across the Irish Sea to stamp his authority on the Irish chiefs as Lord of Ireland just one year after his entry into knighthood. Gerald of Wales travelled with John and his entourage, which Gerald describes as ‘a retinue and outfit more sumptuous than profitable’, and recorded the events that were to prove John’s downfall in Ireland.¹⁸

The problems started as soon as the nineteen-year-old John made landfall in his new dominion. Gerald tells us that John was met at Waterford by a greeting party made up of ‘a great many of the Irish of the better class in those parts’. These were men whom Gerald describes as ‘having been loyal to the English and disposed to be peaceable’, explaining that they had come ‘to congratulate him as their new lord, and receive him with the kiss of peace’.¹⁹ It is here that things went badly wrong for John, as the behaviour of his companions left a great deal to be desired: in fact, it was downright insulting to their hosts. John’s friends and their accompanying Normans not only treated the Irishmen with contempt and derision but according to Gerald, they ‘even rudely pulled them by their beards, which the Irishmen wore full and long, according to the custom of their country’. We are not told explicitly if John participated in the wayward behaviour of his friends but nor are we reassured that he remained aloof from it, meaning that at the least we can assume that he did nothing to discourage it, and we *can* be certain that it was John who reaped the immediate consequences of such uncouth actions.²⁰

Again, it is Gerald who informs us of the action taken by the Irish chiefs in the greeting party. We are told that no sooner had they made their escape than they ‘withdrew from the neighbourhood with all their households’ and travelled immediately to the King of Limerick, the Prince of Cork, and the King of Connaught, where they are reported as giving ‘full particulars of all they had observed during their visit to the king’s son’. Their description of John was understandably unfavourable and it also reflected upon his adult status, as according to Gerald, ‘they said that they found him to be a mere boy, surrounded by others almost as young as he; and that the young prince abandoned himself to juvenile pursuits’. Further to

¹⁷ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Conquest of Ireland* trans. by Thomas Forester, rev. and ed. by Thomas Wright (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 2001), p. 78.

¹⁸ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Conquest of Ireland*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. as to quotations in this paragraph.

this, ‘they declared, that what they saw promised no mature or stable counsels [and] no security for the peace of Ireland’.²¹

John’s motives for allowing and possibly partaking in such obviously bad behaviour are not recorded. It might well be that on this occasion youth was the cause, if not the excuse for it; or perhaps it was simply the natural arrogance of his party, which consisted mainly of young men like himself, from privileged backgrounds and with no experience of facing the consequences of their actions. Given the outcome, it would seem that the personal consequence of John’s behaviour in Ireland was simply that he was not considered mature enough, indeed not man enough, to be lord of these proud men. This was something that Gerald hoped John would grow out of in time, pointing out that:

it is no disgrace to have enjoyed the pleasures of youth, but the shame lies in not bringing them to an end. Juvenile levity is excusable if the mature age be commendable; and that stage of life is blameless, if age sets bounds to indulgence’.²²

While John may have been later than usual in doing so, he did eventually manage to achieve the transition from being viewed as a youth to being viewed as an adult man.

The political consequence was far more serious. Upon hearing about John and his entourage’s insulting behaviour, the Princes of Limerick, Connaught and Cork were immediately deterred from making their planned submission to John as their overlord, and we are told that they then ‘resolved unanimously to resist the English’.²³ Moreover, they were driven to cease long-held and by now traditional hostilities with each other and become allies for that cause. The poor conduct in Ireland of John and his friends had succeeded only in creating a stronger enemy for Henry II. Unsurprisingly, John was not permitted to enter Ireland again during his father’s lifetime.

It seems, then, that youth was a viable excuse for bad behaviour among twelfth-century princes; it also seems, however, that ‘youth’ was a relative term in this context. The Young King was around nineteen years of age when his younger brothers were excused by youth for their part in the first rebellion but he was not: instead he was obliged to give his father a pledge of good conduct and swear fealty to him as a subservient lord before he was formally forgiven. This is in sharp contrast to the treatment of John at the same age: he was forgiven, with youth as the excuse for his abysmal and politically damaging performance of bad behaviour in Ireland. This could be because, as the youngest, John was permitted a longer

²¹ Ibid. as to quotations in this paragraph.

²² Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topography of Ireland*, p. 91.

²³ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Conquest of Ireland*, p. 78.

period of youth but as the eldest, the Young King was expected to set an example to his siblings, a pattern that is frequently the case in larger families even today.²⁴ Or it could be that the Young King, who deliberately led his younger brothers into open rebellion against their father, was deemed to be responsible for the actions of all, whereas John's behaviour was a case less of instigating the behaviour but more of failing to control his companions. One final explanation for the difference in the treatment, on the one hand, of the three oldest sons, and, on the other, of John could simply be favouritism on the part of Henry II, who was well known for preferring his youngest son over all of his others.

Finally, it appears that bad behaviour could actually stem from duty rather than waywardness. The Young King and Geoffrey, while attempting to maintain the loyalty and service of their mercenaries, were also trying to fulfil an adult obligation, that of paying their troops, when they displayed what was not simply bad, but both illegal and sacrilegious behaviour. This, however, had huge potential for backfiring: the attempt to enhance one's adult standing could in fact have the opposite effect and instead imply childishness. Therefore, young men could find themselves in a situation where they were facing a decision between behaving badly but fulfilling an adult role, or behaving correctly but failing to meet age-appropriate responsibilities. Under such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that on these occasions Henry II's rebellious sons could do no right.²⁵

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²⁴ For a comprehensive study of siblings and the effects of birth order in large families within today's society, see: Judy Dunn, *Sisters and Brothers: The Developing Child* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985) pp. 69–88.

²⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Katherine J. Lewis for her help with early drafts of this article.

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