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THE NORMANS ARE AN UNCONQUERABLE PEOPLE: ORDERIC VITALIS'S
MEMORY OF THE ANGLO-NORMAN REGNUM DURING THE REIGNS OF
WILLIAM RUFUS AND HENRY I, 1087-1106

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For medieval authors, the past was constantly in a state of flux. Engaging in a selective process of remembering and forgetting, chroniclers critiqued or idealized both the past and the present in an attempt to order their world. In addition, the function of a chronicle was to teach moral and religious lessons to secular and monastic communities. The composition of chronicles was not linear, but was rather a combination of original research and selective compilation of sources from many other authors. Chronicles were part of a vibrant and shifting historical conversation that sought to order worldly events. Historians are often able to reconstruct older sources long lost by trying to sort out where authors received their information. Thus the writing of history in the medieval period differed markedly from modern historical methods. This approach gave monastic chroniclers a valuable opportunity to construct their own interpretations of and commentaries on contemporary events. This essay is concerned with this process within one such chronicle, The *Ecclesiastical History* of Orderic Vitalis.

Orderic Vitalis (1075-1142) was born in Shropshire, England of mixed English and French parentage. At the age of eleven, Orderic's father sent him to the Benedictine abbey of St. Évroult on the southern border of Normandy. This region was often subject to the violent feuding of the local nobility. Consequently, Orderic was often hostile to the

members of the aristocracy who perpetuated violence in the area, and he praised men such as Henry I who restrained violent nobles. In addition, king Henry I visited St. Évrault in 1113 and endowed the abbey with property. From 1123 to his death in 1142, Orderic compiled and composed his most widely known work, the *Ecclesiastical History*, a four-volume chronicle of the main events and figures of the Anglo-Norman realm, the Norman kingdoms of southern Italy and Sicily, and the Latin kingdoms of the Levant.

This essay examines Orderic's portrayal of the three sons of William the Conqueror, as well as one member of the Anglo-Norman high aristocracy, in an effort to understand how and why his *Historia Ecclesiastica* recreates the nineteen-year period between the death of William the Conqueror and the ascension of Henry I as an age of violence, poor lordship, and ambiguous gender roles. Orderic derided Robert "Curthose" (1054-1134), duke of Normandy and eldest son of William the Conqueror, as an indecisive, rebellious, and indolent figure, yet he treated king Henry I (1068-1135) with great respect for his good lordship, decisive action, and maintenance of good order. William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror and King of England (1087-1100), is one of the more colorful characters in Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History*.¹ Somewhat a creature of extremes, William is often depicted by Orderic as a knight of great renown and courtesy, while simultaneously the very image of aristocratic debauchery. However, the most violent figure in Orderic's chronicle is undoubtedly Robert of Bellême (1056-1130), viscount of the Hiémois, Earl of Shrewsbury, and count of Ponthieu. Bellême's alleged cruelty, violence, and disregard for what Orderic perceives as proper authority

¹ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968-1980) (hereafter OV).

play a prominent role in Orderic's characterization of the Anglo-Norman realm in the years around 1100.

By utilizing the techniques of memory and gender studies, historians can now analyze Orderic's work as a piece which engages in a rich didactic and politicized reimagining of events in the Anglo-Norman kingdom at the turn of the twelfth century. In addition, using such methodologies allow scholars to better understand Orderic's ideas about aristocratic gender roles and lordship obligations, as well as ritual and political legitimacy and the role of violence in aristocratic relationships. Orderic defined an effective lord as an aristocrat who decisively restrained violent men, refused to give in to laziness or sloth, and heeded the counsel of wise peers. In *The Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic derided any male members of the nobility who failed to act in these ways by describing them with language and symbols that were gendered feminine. For Orderic, gender was performative, in that male nobles must constantly act out their masculinity. By analyzing the roles played by William Rufus, Robert Curthose, and Henry I, scholars can gain a much clearer understanding of the ways that gendered language and depiction can be used to engage in political commentary. In addition, a discussion of Orderic's overtly negative characterization of Robert of Bellême can shed new light on Orderic's beliefs about the proper role of violence in aristocratic culture, as well as his views on the consequences of ineffective lordship and the role of good lords in the restraint of violent men. Finally, an examination of the full extent of Orderic's perspectives offers scholars a better understanding of the precarious nature of Henry I's early reign and the extent to which Orderic had to justify his accession.

Although a case study of Orderic Vitalis may seem insular, knowing more about his perspectives offers a clearer picture of the ways that medieval monastic communities interpreted and reconciled the seemingly chaotic socio-political atmosphere of the world around them. For medieval chroniclers, the world was clearly demarcated into heroes and villains who received just rewards for their actions. A case study of Orderic Vitalis is a step toward clarifying and contextualizing this process, showing how Orderic dealt with unexpected and violent actions and political events. This project also deepens scholarly understanding of a time when the reforming clergy of the eleventh- and twelfth-century church began to apply its renewed moral imperatives to correct and comment upon the behavior of the aristocracy.

CHAPTER II

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Memory Studies

The recent development of the study of memory has created many new possibilities in interpreting medieval sources. Patrick Geary introduced memory studies to medieval scholarship, showing how monastic communities manipulated their chronicles and archives in order to justify or order past events to serve present needs, especially around the year 1000, long seen as a period of dramatic change in medieval society. Geary introduced the idea that all medieval sources are manipulated in order to create useful pasts to deal with present issues. Medieval chroniclers, scribes, and authors were ruthlessly presentist in their source composition, and this offered historians the opportunity to move beyond modernist interpretations of sources, and pay attention to the richness of medieval memory construction. Since Geary's landmark study, the field has

² Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

developed considerably, encompassing both aristocratic and monastic memory. Amy Remensnyder examines monastic foundation legends, arguing that the monasteries in southern France used constructed memories of their Merovingian and Carolingian foundations in an effort to make themselves accountable only to regal authority, undercutting the competing claims of the regional nobility upon the monastery's possessions.³ Elizabeth Van Houts followed Geary by arguing that medieval authors relied on oral tradition as well as source manipulation to deal with present conflicts or socio-political crises. Like Geary, Van Houts placed emphasis on the role of women as the bearers of familial memory.⁴ Constance Bouchard incorporated memory into her scholarship on family structure among the eleventh- and twelfth-century Burgundian nobility, arguing that the years after 1000 saw the aristocracy moving toward patrilineal inheritance not because of a millennial mutation, but rather due to increased success in creating and utilizing patrilineal inheritance and constructing a memory of patrilineal decent.⁵ Bouchard also used the episcopal *Gesta* from ninth-century Auxerre to evaluate how the episcopal see in Burgundy attempted to negotiate the differing episcopal traditions derived from Merovingian saintly *vitae*, creating a useful past that would impact the ninth-century present.⁶

³ Amy G. Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁴ Elizabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

⁵ Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Those of My Blood: Constructing Noble Families in Medieval Francia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: Pennsylvania): 59-73.

⁶ Constance Brittain Bouchard, "Episcopal *Gesta* and the Creation of a Useful Past in Ninth-Century Auxerre," *Speculum* 84 (2009): 1-35.

Drawing on the methodologies of memory historians, this study attempts to understand how Orderic Vitalis created his own memory of events in the Anglo-Norman kingdom at the turn of the twelfth century in an effort to retroactively justify Henry's unexpected ascension as king of England in 1100 and his summary defeat of his elder brother Robert Curthose in 1106. Doing so allows historians to understand that Henry's kingship was perhaps not readily accepted in the early years, and in the process this project also aids an understanding of Orderic's viewpoints about aristocratic conduct, the use of violence, kingship, and gender roles.

Violence and the Transformations Of The Year 1000

In 1953, Georges Duby formulated the framework of what scholars would later call the transformations of the year 1000.⁷ In his work on the Mâconnais, Duby argued that the turn of the eleventh century witnessed an increase in private power wielded by independent castellans and knights, following the collapse of the Carolingian courts. For Duby, the resulting increase in violence and private lordship was a key element of a feudal revolution. Scholars have taken Orderic's illustration of Robert of Bellême's alleged chaotic behavior as an indication of a new, violent variety of lordship practices which arose around the turn of the first millennium. Thomas Bisson modified Duby's thesis in 1994, arguing that violence was in effect lordship in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁸

⁷ Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* Bibliothèque Générale de l'Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953).

⁸ Thomas Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 6-42.

This assertion provoked a debate in which various historians attempted to reject or modify Bisson's conclusions. Debate was centered upon whether the mutations took place over the few decades surrounding the year 1000 or if the mutations were the result of a process taking place over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Dominique Barthélemy argued for a shift in the vocabulary used to describe violent behavior, while Stephen White critiqued Bisson for his inability to understand how intimately tied violence was to the dispute processing apparatus of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For White, the violent feuding of the eleventh- and twelfth-century aristocracy was a central means of healing injured pride and negotiating power relationships. Significantly for our purposes, Stephen White and Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier also argued that medieval authors used a common vocabulary to describe acts of violence, usually to condemn figures they wished to vilify.⁹ This assertion makes it impossible to take Orderic's descriptions into account without rigorous textual criticism. Orderic used such rhetorical techniques extensively in *The Historia Ecclesiastica*, and it is now clear that Orderic's account cannot be used as evidence of millennial change, precisely because his chronicle is so politicized. The 'Feudal Revolution' has largely been put to rest recently within the academy, with the conclusion being that the changes which took place in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were not as massive as once thought.¹⁰ Rather than use Orderic's account as clear evidence for millennial change, it is

⁹ Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier, "The Enemies of the Peace: Reflections on a Vocabulary, 500-1100," in Thomas Head and Richard Landes (eds.), *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000* (Ithaca, 1992): 58-76, and Stephen D. White, "Feudal Revolution," *Past & Present*, No. 152 (Aug., 1996): 205-223.

¹⁰ The main works proposing continuity in the debate on the mutations of the year 1000 are as follows: Dominique Barthélemy. "Feudal Revolution" *Past & Present*, 152 (Aug., 1996), pp. 196-205, Stephen D. White. "Feudal Revolution" *Past & Present*, 152 (Aug., 1996), pp. 205-223, Timothy Reuter. "The Feudal

necessary to look at the politics of his descriptions in an effort to understand his messages concerning the state of eleventh- and twelfth-century society. For Orderic, describing characters in his narrative as overtly violent suggests that their authority was illegitimate, rather than offering an indicator of millennial change in the expression of lordship.

Orderic Vitalis

Until very recently, Orderic Vitalis has not received extensive treatment by scholars as a dedicated subject of study. Although Orderic's chronicle is a vital source for the Anglo-Norman period, no one has completely mapped out his memory of events in England and Normandy at the turn of the twelfth century. In 1974, R. D. Ray argued that one of the key themes in Orderic's work concerned the ways in which royal ideology blended with theology in Orderic's narrative. Ray attributed the negative portrayal of the Anglo-Normans to a strong concern for proper ecclesiastical practice. For him, this was the dominant theme in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and Orderic thus judged the nobility on their success or failure to protect the church and ensure proper worship.¹¹ Ray also attempted a close reading of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* to argue that Orderic shaped his chronicle in response to the criticisms of his monastic brethren with St. Évrault.¹²

Revolution" *Past and Present*, 155 (May, 1997) pp. 177-195, Chris Wickham. "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present*, 155 (May, 1997) pp. 196-208, Dominique Barthélemy, *The Serf, The Knight, and the Historian*, trans. Graham Robert Edwards (Ithaca: Cornell, 2009), Richard E. Barton, *Lordship in the County of Maine, c.890-1160* (Woodbridge: Suffolk, 2004), Jeffrey A. Bowman, *Shifting Landmarks: Property, Proof and Dispute in Catalonia around the Year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2004).

¹¹ R. D. Ray, "Orderic Vitalis on Henry I: Theocratic Ideology and Didactic Narrative," in George H. Shriver, ed. *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Tradition: Essays in Honor of Ray C. Petry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1974): 119-134.

¹² R. D. Ray, "Orderic Vitalis and His Readers," *Studia Monastica* 14 (1972): 17-33.

More recently, Marjorie Chibnall's 1984 work on Orderic Vitalis and the society of eleventh- and twelfth-century Normandy and England serves as a fine introduction to contemporary aristocratic, ecclesiastic, and monastic social mores. It is the closest yet to a biography of Orderic Vitalis, contextualizing him and his work into the fabric of the world in which he lived. Amanda Jane Hingst published a study of the ways that Orderic wrote about his world, and the multilayered, yet fluid nature of geography in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The work in effect a refutation of the idea that Orderic's construction of the world outside St. Évrault is too insular to be worthy of analysis. Hingst offers new insight into the interactions of monks with the world around them, showing that the world itself could be written or constructed through the words. While these works give insight into Orderic's world and how he conceptualized it, they have not fully explored the politicized nature of his chronicle, and the ways in which it censures eleventh- and twelfth-century Anglo-Norman society while promoting and validating the political events which preceded and followed the Norman Conquest of England.

Henry I

Henry I deserves his reputation as one of the most influential English kings partly due to the extensive work done on his reign by eminent scholars. E. A. Freeman in the nineteenth century had a low opinion of Henry, deriding him as an overly cruel, sexually indulgent figure.¹³ But Charles Homer Haskins credited Henry with laying the foundations of administrative kingship, due to his active role in creating the rudiments of

¹³ E. A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1867-1879).

royal government and bureaucracy.¹⁴ Despite the praise of Henry's government, the dark pallor cast over Henry's reign by Freeman took a century to dispel.

C. Warren Hollister is noted for devoting his career to rehabilitating the tarnished image of Henry's kingship. In a series of articles from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, he made a passionate argument to contextualize Henry's actions within the bounds of normative aristocratic behavior. In 1973, Hollister refuted the notion that Henry had a hand in the death of William Rufus, arguing that Rufus's death was indeed the result of an accident rather than conspiracy.¹⁵ Five years later, Hollister showed that Henry's infrequent mutilation of criminals was not a symptom of the king's savagery, but rather an accepted peacekeeping measure condoned by a king who bound his barons to him in ties of friendship.¹⁶

In the same vein, a subsequent article dispelled the belief that Henry controlled his magnates out of intimidation and economic extortion. Instead, Hollister suggests that Henry's men were close to him due to ties of gratitude for past favors and the hope of future gain in the king's service.¹⁷ In 1986, Judith Green published an in-depth study of the government of England in Henry's reign, showing that innovations in justice, revenue collection, and law began in fits and starts from the beginning of Henry's reign, picking up speed in later decades.¹⁸

¹⁴ Charles Homer Haskins, *Norman Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918).

¹⁵ C. Warren Hollister, "The Strange Death of William Rufus," *Speculum* 48 (1973): 637-653.

¹⁶ C. Warren Hollister, "Royal Acts of Mutilation: The Case Against Henry I," *Albion* 10 (1978): 330-340.

¹⁷ C. Warren Hollister, "Henry I and the Anglo-Norman Magnates," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 2 (1980): 93-107.

¹⁸ Judith A. Green, *The Government of Henry I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

However, the work that cemented Henry's reputation as one of the most effective and innovative English kings was Hollister's magisterial biography of the king, published in 2001.¹⁹ While Hollister often notes Orderic's positive attitude toward Henry I, he does not fully examine this portrayal for the tenuous early years of Henry's reign. This is understandable, in that he dedicated his career to an analysis of Henry's political and institutional policies as well as his relations with the Anglo-Norman nobility. Yet a full analysis of Orderic's justification of Henry I is missing in the current historiography. Hollister's effort to redress the negative image of the third Norman king have inadvertently clouded the years of the early reign with optimism, when in fact the years before 1106 were rather shaky. This study fills this gap by attempting to understand how Orderic used his chronicle to justify Henry's accession, revealing the early years of Henry's reign and his efforts at consolidation to be much more contested affairs than previously thought.

William Rufus

Scholars have been greatly concerned over the last few decades with either confirming or revising the reputation of William Rufus, king of England from 1087-1100. E. A. Freeman initially argued for his homosexuality over a century ago, and John Boswell has repeated this thesis.²⁰ Frank Barlow viewed William's behavior as indicative of bisexuality.²¹ However, there is a tension within Orderic's history of William's alleged

¹⁹ C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. Amanda Clark Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

²⁰ E. A. Freeman, *The Reign of William Rufus* (Oxford, 1882) 1: 57, 2:502-3. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1980), 229-230. (hereafter *Boswell*,).

²¹ Frank Barlow, *William Rufus* (New Haven: Yale, 2000), 102-110.

sexual sin in that William was also capable of great knightly virtue. William's sudden death in the New Forest has been viewed by scholars as the proper end of one with such lascivious leanings. Rufus's death has also been the subject of some debate. C. Warren Hollister has strongly argued that Rufus's younger brother Henry was not involved in an assassination plot, but he is less concerned with Rufus's image than with Henry's reputation.²² Scholars have traced the shift in Rufus's historical image from the ecclesiastical censure of the twelfth century to the anti-Catholic and political focus of sixteenth and seventeenth-century historians, arguing that the eighteenth century saw a new reliance on the malevolent depictions of the monastic chroniclers, including Orderic Vitalis.²³ Emma Mason attempted to rehabilitate William by examining his political and ecclesiastical policies in view of twelfth-century intellectual and psychological mores, seeing William's depiction by Orderic and others as a reflection of monastic morality.²⁴

Both Barlow and Boswell seem to be skirting a larger issue. They cite Orderic's frequent injunctions against the morals of Rufus's court in order to make conclusions about the king's sexuality. Barlow himself admits that there is little evidence of his homosexuality, and Boswell uses Orderic's testimony to argue that the chronicler was obsessed with homosexuality. Pauline Stafford examined Rufus's conduct through the lens of gender, arguing that Henry's famous haircut at Carentan in 1105 was a direct refutation of accusations concerning his masculinity and Norman identity. In her view, Henry wished to disassociate himself from the effeminacy of Rufus's court by asserting

²² Hollister, "The Strange Death of William Rufus," 637-653.

²³ Thomas Callahan Jr., "The Making of a Monster: The Historical Image of William Rufus," *The Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981): 175-185.

²⁴ Emma Mason, "William Rufus: Myth and Reality," *Journal of Medieval History* 3 (1977): 1-20.

proper Norman conduct derived from his father while also associating himself with the Anglo-Saxon line through his marriage to Matilda of Scotland. This in effect created a new Anglo-Norman identity free from accusations of effeminacy. While I agree with and incorporate many of Dr. Stafford's points, I intend to concentrate my analysis on the socio-political memory creation that Orderic builds around Henry's haircut at Carentan, rather than its gender implications.

Robert Curthose

The first decade of the twenty-first century was kind to the eldest son of William the Conqueror. Until recently, scholars viewed Robert II "Curthose," duke of Normandy from 1087 until his imprisonment in 1106, as weak, ineffective, and rebellious, noted only for the administrative inefficiency and chaotic violence of his tenure as duke. E. A. Freeman wrote the first account of the Norman Conquest and its aftermath, and his overwhelmingly negative portrait of Norman culture and its contribution to English society held great influence over the scholarship of the early twentieth century.²⁵

Charles Homer Haskins echoed Freeman's position as early as 1918, in his magisterial account of the administration of Normandy.²⁶ C. W. David, in the earliest complete biography of the duke, argued that Curthose took no part in ducal government during the reign of his father.²⁷ David also followed Orderic Vitalis's depictions without

²⁵ Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*.

²⁶ Charles Homer Haskins, *Norman Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 62-76.

²⁷ C. W. David, *Robert Curthose: Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), 17-19, 141-150. For criticism of David's views, see R. H. C. Davis, "William of Jumièges, Robert Curthose, and

qualm, surmising that Curthose displayed “lust and laziness” in his disregard for keeping the peace in Normandy, especially regarding his inability to cow Robert of Bellême.²⁸

In recent decades, scholars have revised their view of Curthose’s career. This attempt has met with much success. The earliest dedicated effort came in 1981, when Stephanie L. Mooers argued that Curthose was unable to take advantage of both opportunities to obtain the English throne in 1088 and 1100 due to the fluctuations in his power base, networks of friendship, as well as the instability of the general political situation in Normandy and its environs at the turn of the twelfth century. Although he did manage to retain the loyalty of a few powerful and erstwhile friends, most notably the infamous Robert of Bellême, Mooers attributed Curthose’s failures to the slow withering of his household support from 1077 until his defeat at Tinchebray in 1106.²⁹ William Aird followed Mooers’s comments in a 1999 essay, examining the relationship between Curthose and his father through the lens of gender. He argued that the conflict between the two men resulted from tensions inherent between a hegemonic masculinity which sought to preserve the patrimony and hand it over to an heir undivided, and a subordinate masculinity which desired to establish an independent household, obtain a measure of political clout, and gain acceptance within the aristocratic community as a gendered adult male.³⁰

the Norman Succession,” *English Historical Review* 95 (July 1980): 597-606, Katherine Lack, “Robert Curthose: Ineffectual Duke or Victim of Spin?,” *The Haskins Society Journal* 20 (2009): 110-140.

²⁸ OV, iii. 98. “libidini pigriciaeque.” (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. I have included the Latin quotations in the footnotes for the reader’s benefit.)

²⁹ Stephanie L. Mooers, “Backers and Stabbers: Problems of Loyalty in Robert Curthose’s Entourage,” *Journal of British Studies* 21 (Autumn, 1981): 1-17.

³⁰ William M. Aird, “Frustrated Masculinity: The Relationship Between William the Conqueror and his Eldest Son,” in Dawn Hadley, ed. *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (New York: Longman, 1999), 39-55.

The same year, Judith Green called for a general revision of Curthose's political career, emphasizing the integrity of Robert's lordship throughout his tenure as duke of Normandy. She suggested that scholars view the period of Robert's rule in light of the constant politico-military pressures on the Norman marches, as well as the logistical and political interference of his two brothers in the affairs of Normandy during his rule.³¹ In 2008, William Aird published his biography of the duke, including the viewpoints of the revisionist scholarship of the last few decades.³² While he took care to engage in dedicated source criticism, examining the perspectives of his sources, he did not examine Orderic's constructed memory as a complete program.

Katherine Lack elaborated on several points not touched on by the earlier revisionists. She analyzed Curthose's involvement in the lordship of the Norman duchy before the Conqueror's death, concluding that Curthose had ample experience in ducal government at the time of his ascension in 1087. Lack also attempted to reevaluate the length and extent of Curthose's rebellions, suggesting that a duration of one year apiece is more appropriate than the traditional five. She concluded by giving an account of Curthose's crusade, altering the traditional view of Curthose as an inefficient commander and viewing his actions more positively.³³

The scholarship of the last decades did much to reconsider Curthose's ducal career, giving a more balanced view of his personality, administrative capability, and

³¹ Judith A. Green, "Robert Curthose Reassessed," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 22 (1999): 95-116.

³² William Aird, *Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, c. 1054-1134* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009).

³³ Katherine Lack, "Robert Curthose: Ineffectual Duke or Victim of Spin?," *Haskins Society Journal* 20 (2009): 110-140.

relationships within the aristocracy. However, a common theme within the historiography is the lack of any clear attempt to analyze and evaluate Orderic's description of Curthose as a man who fails in fulfilling his lordship obligations. Scholars relied on Orderic's work a great deal in their bid to reconstruct the historical narrative of the region, yet in their zeal to trace the eleventh- and twelfth-century origins of modern British institutions they simply reject his moral interpretations as mere monastic scruple. In taking such a positivist approach they missed the value of Orderic's *Ecclesiastical History* as a politicized document that contains a valuable commentary on the political upheavals of the Anglo-Norman realm at the turn of the twelfth century.

Robert of Bellême

The Bellême family has received much scholarly attention over the years. G. H. White traced the early history of the Bellême lords from the tenth through eleventh centuries, in an attempt to discover the Carolingian origins of the family line.³⁴ J. F. A. Mason closely analyzed the nature of the family estates from 1067 to 1102, paying special attention to the Domesday evidence. He took Orderic's depictions at face value, mentioning that Robert and his family were likely exceptionally cruel, while Robert himself was considered odd as well. Mason regards Robert's vicious reputation as obscuring much of his normalcy.³⁵ C. W. Hollister argued that Robert's possession of

³⁴ G. H. White, "The First House of Bellême," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fourth Series, Vol. 22 (1940): 67-99.

³⁵ J. F. A. Mason, "Roger of Montgomery and His Sons (1067-1102)," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, Vol. 13 (1963), 1-28.

great estates outside of royal control resulted in Robert being deemed unfit for inclusion in the political network of Henry I.³⁶ In analyzing Henry I's campaign against Robert in 1102, Orderic upholds his cruelty as a factor in Henry's attempt to isolate him from his potential noble allies.³⁷ Scholars have often used Robert's reputation for evil to make arguments about public order. Richard Kaeuper rightly asserts that his conduct is indicative of the level of violence among the whole knightly class.³⁸ Thomas Bisson places Robert within a quatrain of evil men in his arguments for oppressive affective lordship.³⁹

Kathleen Hapgood Thompson published a revisionist article in 1991, suggesting a fresh look at Robert's true place within the politics of the Anglo-Norman kingdom. She looked past Orderic's vitriol and argued that Robert was a fine soldier and an astute administrator, but a lackluster politician.⁴⁰ In a 1994 article, Thompson examined Orderic's portrayal of Robert, making the argument that Robert serves as a foil to the virtuous King Henry I.⁴¹ In her view, Robert acts as a fulcrum in Orderic's narrative around which issues of proper governance may turn. Henry is able to keep him well under wraps, whereas Robert Curthose lets him run rampant throughout Normandy.

³⁶ C. W. Hollister, "Henry I and the Anglo-Norman Magnates," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 2 (1979): 93-107.

³⁷ C. W. Hollister, "The Campaign of 1102 against Robert of Bellême," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill, Christopher Holdsworth, and Janet L. Nelson (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), 193-202.

³⁸ Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: 1999), 15.

³⁹ Thomas Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 142 (Feb., 1994): 31.

⁴⁰ Kathleen Hapgood Thompson, "Robert of Belleme Reconsidered," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1991): 286.

⁴¹ Kathleen Hapgood Thompson, "Orderic Vitalis and Robert of Bellême" *Journal of Medieval History* 20 (1994): 138-139.

Thompson argues that Orderic uses Robert as a way to depict Henry as a just and noble king, while simultaneously painting Curthose as a feeble duke who is unable to establish order in his own province. Thompson demonstrates quite effectively that how one deals with Robert determines one's worthiness.⁴² As a conclusion, Thompson argues that, "The dismantling of Orderic's interpretation...should now be extended to his portrait of Robert as a whole."⁴³ The fantastic accounts of the cruelties of Robert of Bellême should not be deconstructed, but rather examined more closely.

Kate McGrath has argued that Robert's chaotic explosion of anger following his banishment to Normandy is an example of aristocratic anger gone out of control. Orderic compares Robert to the dragon of the Apocalypse in the Revelation of Saint John.⁴⁴ McGrath associates this fierce anger with Satan. Her purpose is to show that these outbursts underscore notions concerning the proper place and level of anger in aristocratic society.

Most of these authors have placed Robert and his family within the events and politics of the Anglo-Norman kingdom. In this they have succeeded, but little attention has been given to Orderic's depiction of Robert and how it fit into his wider memory construction. Those authors who do deal with Robert merely attempt to discover his true role in contemporary events. They ignore Orderic's descriptions of his cruelty, violence, and oppression, believing that it has little historical value, or at least viewing them as a warped version of reality. In doing so, scholars have ignored other questions. Ultimately,

⁴² Ibid. p. 140.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 141.

⁴⁴ OV, vi. 31. See Kate McGrath, "The Politics of Chivalry: The Function of Anger and Shame in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Anglo-Norman Historical Narrative," in Belle S. Tuten and Tracey L. Billado, eds, *Feud, Violence, and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010): 66.

Orderic uses Robert as a mirror for the nobility of his day, showing them their sins, and the ultimate result of pursuing them.

A partial objective of this study is to address Kathleen Hapgood Thompson's call for a wider examination of Robert of Bellême's role not only as a didactic figure in the *Ecclesiastical History*, but also assess Robert's narrative function as a means of delegitimizing Robert Curthose's downfall and illustrating Henry's rise as the natural and correct turn of events within the heady power politics of the early twelfth century. Scholars have admirably, if incompletely charted Robert's place in Orderic's chronicle, preferring to focus on a reevaluation of his career. This project will move beyond these aims by deconstructing the didactic purpose of Robert's violent actions and examining how his monstrous depiction fits into Orderic's wider objective of legitimizing and solidifying Henry I's tenuous position on the English throne in the first years of the twelfth century.

CHAPTER III

ORDERIC'S MEMORIES OF WILLIAM RUFUS, ROBERT CURTHOSE, AND ROBERT OF BELLÈME, 1087-1100

William Rufus (1056-1100): The Fop

William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror and King of England (1087-1100), is one of the most colorful characters in Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History*.⁴⁵ Somewhat a creature of extremes, William is often depicted by Orderic as a knight of great renown and courtesy, while simultaneously the very image of aristocratic debauchery. I argue that Orderic's colorful description of William's vice is an example of memory construction which allows Orderic to make comments about the proper behavior and conduct of kings, while also presenting an interpretation of the state of the Anglo-Norman realm between the death of William the Conqueror and the ascension of Henry I. Debating William's sexual tendencies are therefore unimportant to this essay, and indeed may be impossible. Contrary to some scholars' views on the subject to be discussed below, Orderic is not concerned with the true sexual practices of King William. He is

⁴⁵ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968-1980) (hereafter OV).

constructing a memory of the reigns of the Norman kings. Orderic contrasts the wholesome morals and fashion of the Conqueror's court with the more libertine, effeminate style of Rufus's household. He does this to examine not only appropriate regal conduct, but also suitable and traditional Norman comportment.⁴⁶ Orderic's portrayals of the Norman aristocracy have often been viewed through frameworks of gender and masculinity, and although this is a useful approach, it obscures the wider use of gendered language as a method of political condemnation and commentary.

Orderic uses the bad morals of Rufus's court as a way to delegitimize and emasculate him, thus negotiating and nullifying the fact that Rufus was renowned as a chivalrous knight among his contemporaries. Much of Orderic's descriptions of Rufus's behavior as well as Henry I's are concerned with traditional Norman personal and social mores, as well as proper kingship, which Orderic derived from what he remembered as the more austere court of William I. For Orderic, effeminacy in men makes them morally dubious and weak rulers. Proper Norman authority finds its exemplar in William I, and its heir in Henry I. By taking into account the speeches of prominent churchmen, in particular the monk Fulchred and Bishop Serlo of Séz, Orderic's construction of the memory of Rufus and to a lesser extent of Robert Curthose can be contrasted with that of their younger brother Henry. While Rufus and Robert fail in adhering to Orderic's standard of proper kingship, Henry succeeds, and is symbolically linked to the Conqueror.

⁴⁶ A similar point has been made by Pauline Stafford, "The Meanings of Hair in the Anglo-Norman World: Masculinity, Reform, and National Identity," in Mathilde van Dijk and Renée Nip, eds., *Saints, Scholars, and Politicians: Gender as a Tool in Medieval Studies* (Washington: Brepols Publishing Company, 2005): 153-171. (hereafter Pauline Stafford, "The Meanings of Hair in the Anglo-Norman World.") Although this essay deals with many of the same themes and events, Stafford's thesis deals primarily with gender. This paper will focus on a different side of these actions, namely how Orderic uses them to define what constitutes proper Norman kingship and aristocratic conduct.

On describing William's accession to the throne upon the death of his father, Orderic illustrates well the contradictions in his character.

William Rufus, the young king of England, was shameless and lascivious, and too many of the people stood agog at his corrupt morals. He was domineering, audacious, and militant, he danced among the glory of many knights. He applauded the idea of knighthood and supported it readily due to worldly show.⁴⁷

Orderic cannot deny Rufus's chivalric accomplishments, but for him a good knight must also have pure morals. Success in war and courtly endeavors are not discouraged by Orderic, but he wishes to show that even if Rufus possesses knightly virtues and upholds them in his court, such an attribute is little more than empty showmanship if it is not backed up by moral temperance. Indeed, Orderic converts Rufus's one good attribute into a reprehensible one, and it becomes self-indulgent because it is not rooted in principles of self-control. As a man of charisma, Rufus's also draws many imitators, and here Orderic makes the point that the morals of the king and his court are one and the same. If Rufus was a righteous king, his court would share in his righteousness. Here, however, the reverse is true. It is also significant that Orderic records only one other instance of chivalric behavior by the king, during Rufus's siege of Le Mans in 1098. After the city falls, Rufus allows the prisoners to go free, saying, "Let me never believe that a good knight should violate his faith, because whenever this happens he will be deemed a despicable outlaw."⁴⁸ Orderic is not averse to showing

⁴⁷ OV, iv. p. 178. "Guillelmus Rufus Albionis rex iuuenis erat proteruus et laciuis quem nimius inhianter prosequabantur agmina populorum impudicis moribus. Imperiosus et audax ayque militaris erat et multitudine militum pompose tripudiabat. Militiae titulis applaudebat illisque propter fastum secularem admodum fauebat."

⁴⁸ OV, v. p. 244. "Absit a me ut credam quod probus miles uiolet fidem suam. Quod si fecerit omni tempore uelut exlex despicabilis erit."

Rufus's chivalric tendencies, but he only does so to emphasize his point that such sentiments are worth little unless they are supported by wholesome morals.

In his account of William's later rule, Orderic writes that,

"He never had a legitimate wife, but he did not hesitate to surrender inexplicably to obscene fornications and frequent adulteries. Polluted with shame, he was a damnable example of foul debauchery to his subjects."⁴⁹

Orderic never directly accuses Rufus of sodomy or homosexual activity, but he does attribute general sexual indulgence and corruption to him. The fact that Rufus never married is also part of Orderic's criticism, because it stands as further evidence of sexual excess and disrespect toward familial obligation. Orderic wishes to show that Rufus is not interested in dynastic stability, merely sexual pleasure. Although Orderic does not deny Rufus's accomplishments as a soldier, he illustrates that kingship also demands sexual self-control, domestic obligation, and the proper treatment of the church. In Orderic's view, Rufus is an ineffective king because he only excels in a single aspect of kingly behavior, disregarding the others.

Orderic later describes how abbot Serlo wrote to Rufus before his death, warning him of a vision that a monk of the monastery of Saint Peter of Gloucester witnessed in a dream. In the vision, a virgin throws herself at the feet of Christ, saying, "Take vengeance, I beg you, on William for my sake, save me from his hands for he does all unseemly things in his power to pollute me and oppress me greatly."⁵⁰ Once again it is not the king's sexuality which is at issue. The complaint to Christ of a feminized church

⁴⁹ OV, v. p. 202. "Legitimam coniugem nunquam habuit, sed ob scenis fornicationibus et frequentibus moechiis inexplabiliter inhesit, flagitiisque pollutus exemplum turpis lasciviae subiectis damnabiliter exhibuit."

⁵⁰ OV, v. pp. 284-286. "de Guillelmo precor uindicta me et de manibus illius eripe, quia turpiter quantum in ipso est me polluit, et immaniter affligit."

is a powerful image which serves to ultimately censure Rufus not only for depravity but also for harassment of ecclesiastics.

While there is no overt accusation of homosexuality in descriptions of Rufus's behavior, Orderic's depiction of Rufus's court associates the king with effeminate behavior and ambiguous gender roles. Orderic paints Rufus's court as not only a cesspool of depraved sexuality, but also a center for fashion. He effeminized the novel aristocratic customs current in Rufus' court of wearing the hair long and parted, with a short beard. He also connects the wearing of long robes, mantles, and curved-toed shoes to deviant conduct.⁵¹ During the Feast of St. Peter in Chains, a monk named Fulcred gave a speech to the people which Orderic uses as another more direct form of prophecy.

England is given as an inheritance to be trampled by the profane, because the earth is filled with sin. Her whole body is polluted with the manifold leprosy of villainy, and from head to foot is seized with the disease of evil. [...] Uncontrolled lust sullies earthen vessels and even golden ones, and insatiable greed devours whomever it can. Hark! A sudden revolution approaches. Not much longer will effeminates rule.⁵²

Orderic wishes to show that the perceived nature of Rufus's court is clear evidence of his unworthiness to rule as king. For him, the new fashions and moral laxity of Rufus and his retainers added a distinct and detestable feminine element at court. What is odious to Orderic is not homosexuality, although sexual indulgence plays a role in his critique. Orderic censures the royal court, and by proxy Rufus himself, for effeminacy. Orderic argues that such conduct results in a realm which is rotted with the sickness of sin. The best and worst members of the kingdom are infected by uncontrolled

⁵¹ OV, iv. pp. 186-188.

⁵² OV, v. p. 286. "Anglia prophanis ad conculcationem datur in hereditate, quia repleta est terra iniquitate. Totum corpus maculatur multiformis lepra nequitiae, et a capite usque ad pedes occupavit illud languor maliciae [...] Discincta libido uasa fictilia sed et aurea coinquinat, et insatiabilis auaricia quaeque potest deuorat. En subitanea rerum instabit immutatio. Non diu dominabuntur effeminati."

greed and lust. In Orderic's view, the sinful effeminacy of Rufus's court extrapolates itself onto the whole of England, and is a marker of illegitimacy and bad kingship. Further, Orderic's characterization of Robert Curthose as the ineffective Duke of Normandy under Rufus fortifies this accusation, and Robert is viewed as both a symptom of and participant in Rufus's debaucheries.⁵³ Because Rufus's court was contaminated by such vice, he is unworthy in Orderic's judgment to rule the Anglo-Norman kingdom. Depraved conduct is synonymous with bad government. Effeminate men cannot govern because they are as weak as women. In referencing an approaching revolution, Orderic is looking forward in time to Rufus's death and the ascension of Henry as king. Henry's coming reign is a change to better government because of his pure morals and decent conduct.

Orderic also clearly contrasts the more virtuous noble conduct of the Conqueror's time with the moral failings of Rufus's day. In the midst of his diatribe against the fashions and manners of Rufus's court, Orderic makes this contrast all too clear.

Now the fops rule everywhere in the world, they shamelessly indulge in wanton sodomy and filthiness. Wretched catamites, destined for eternal fire, curse shamefully. [...] Thus it stands after the fall of Pope Gregory, of William the Bastard, and of other men outstanding in piety. The wholesome tradition of our fathers was wholly abolished in all parts of the West. Those men, at the time of our fathers, were clothed with modest garments, well-fitted to their bodies. They were fit for horse riding and foot racing, and for all labors which reason endorses.⁵⁴

⁵³ OV, v. pp. 300-302, 309.

⁵⁴ OV, iv. p. 188. "Tunc effeminati passim in orbe dominabantur indisciplinate debachabantur sodomiticisque spurciciis foedi catamitae flammis urendi turpiter abutebantur. [...] Sic post obitum Gregorii papae et Guillelmi Nothi aliorumque principum religiosorum. In occiduis partibus pene totus abolitus est honestus patrum mos antiquorum. Illi enim modestis uestiebantur indumentis, optimeque coaptatis ad sui mensuram corporis. Et erant habiles ad equitandum et currendum, et ad omne opus quod ratio suggereret agendum."

These passages illustrate that Orderic is looking to the past for examples of proper and improper aristocratic conduct. His account of the divergence of moral standards from the reign of William I to William II demonstrates that Orderic has clear notions concerning the ways Normans were expected to behave. The nobility of the Conqueror's time were shorn and shaved according to the precept of the apostle Paul, who wrote, "Truly, if a man cherishes hair, he is disgraced."⁵⁵ One of the reasons Orderic describes the misdemeanors of Rufus's court is to impart in detail the specific ways in which his reign deviates from the more upright times of his father. According to Orderic, Normans should behave as they did in the years before and during the Conquest. The Bayeux Tapestry clearly depicts the more practical militant fashion of the eleventh century, the style Orderic would have in mind. They ought to wear their hair short and be clean shaven. Their leisure time should be occupied with riding, athletics, and other soldierly pursuits.

Apart from the accusation of sodomy and lascivious conduct, it is interesting that many of the behaviors and fashions which are viewed so unfavorably by Orderic are described in terms of their impracticality. Orderic also specifies that Rufus's knights do not appear in court with uncovered and shorn heads. Long hair was a hindrance to a soldier, and flowing robes would be unusable for those who practice athletics and horsemanship. "Burdened by these frivolities, only with difficulty can they walk quickly

⁵⁵ OV, vi. p. 64. Orderic is quoting 1 Corinthians 11:14 "Vir quidem si comam nutriat, ignominia est illi." Roger Gryson, ed., *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 1781. (All biblical quotations are from this edition unless otherwise noted.)

or do any kind of useful work.”⁵⁶ Orderic’s perception of traditional Norman conduct revolves around not only morality, but also the sobriety and simplicity of the Conqueror’s reign. He equated impractical and non-traditional dress with weakness and incompetent lordship. By commenting on the novel and sinful practices among Rufus’s courtiers, Orderic is also making the point that his father’s court was certainly devoid of any such moral misconduct, and thus was free of any hint of ineptitude. Orderic remembers the Conqueror’s reign favorably, and it is somewhat unsurprising that he remembers the reign of Rufus in comparatively disparaging terms. He makes this distinction to show that Rufus’s reign is not as austere as that of William I, and therefore less effective. For Orderic, it is essential for Norman kings and nobles to be good soldiers and moral men. Effeminacy and impractical vestment is the opposite of this.

In making such a distinction, Orderic reveals his belief that Rufus is a deficient ruler because his court fails to follow the rules of conduct prescribed by the Conqueror’s reign. Effeminate men are impractical and feeble, qualities which contrast with those of William I and his barons. Successful kings have no time for frivolities and are ready to act swiftly and violently in defense of their kingdom, something which feminine men cannot do. In light of his sinfulness and unsuitability for rule, Orderic views Rufus’s violent death in the New Forest as deriving from a divine act.

“Behold, the bow of celestial fury is bent against the reprobate, and the arrow swift to wound is drawn from the quiver. It will strike suddenly; let every wise man turn it aside by bringing his life into order.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ OV, iv. p. 188. “et his superfluitatibus onusti celeriter ambulare vel aliquid utiliter operari uix possunt.”

⁵⁷ OV, v. p. 288. “Ecce arcus superni furoris contra reprobos intensus est, et sagitta uelox ad uulnerandum de pharetra extracta est. Repente iam feriet, seseque corrigendo sapiens omnis ictum declinet.”

Thus Walter Tirel's arrow is described as God's punishment. By couching Rufus's death in religious terms, he is demonstrating God's disapproval of men assuming female gender roles. After the king is killed, Orderic closes the chronicle of his death with words which leave little doubt about the memory Orderic wishes to construct about the king.

However, mercenary knights, scoundrels, and common prostitutes were ruined upon the death of the adulterous king, and lamented his miserable end not through piety but out of vile outrage sustained by his wickedness.⁵⁸

No matter how much Rufus behaved as a model of chivalry and knightly prowess during his lifetime, his true retinue was filled with whores, reprobates, and hired men who cared little for the dead king, merely expressing disappointment that their benefactor was gone. Since Rufus failed to continue in the moral and upright traditions and conduct of his father's age, Orderic believes that he met an end that fit his behavior.

In the end, Orderic constructed Robert's image for a specific political purpose. He wished to show that the Anglo-Norman kingdom sank into a moral stupor exemplified by the effeminate conduct of the king and his court. Engaging in such polemic allows Orderic to blend the memory of the moral depravity of the royal household with the outbreaks of violence and rebellion that shook Normandy under the tenure of Robert Curthose as duke. The alleged sexually depraved, morally licentious, and feminine weakness of Robert's court and the pollution visited upon the Anglo-Norman realm because of such depravity is thus reflected in the violence and frequent rebellions within the duchy of Normandy. Such a two-pronged accusation by Orderic is very illustrative.

⁵⁸ OV, v. p. 292. "Stipendiarii uero milites et nebulones acuulgaria scorta questus suos in occasu moechi principis perdiderunt, eiusque miserabilem obitum non tam pro pietate quam pro detestabili flagitiorum cupiditate planxerunt."

The dark portrait of the Anglo-Norman realm at the turn of the twelfth century both prefigures and strengthens Orderic's effusive praise of Henry I's ascension in 1100 as the endpoint of a violent and immoral age, a return to the moral standard and good order of the Conqueror's reign.

Robert Curthose (1054-1134): The Prodigal Son

It is an unfortunate fact that during Robert Curthose's tenure as duke of Normandy, he rebelled against his father twice. After William refused to give him independent control of Normandy in 1077, Robert raided his father's domain until William made peace with his son in 1080, after William's defeat at the siege of Gerberoy in 1079. Robert Curthose's second rebellion began upon the death of Queen Mathilda in 1083, and he remained estranged from his father until the latter's death in 1087. Immediately after William's death, Robert participated in a rebellion of the Anglo-Norman nobles in 1088 who wished to uphold Curthose's claim.

In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic foreshadowed and exaggerated the perceived disorder of Curthose's rebellions during his ducal rule in Normandy from 1077 to 1106 both through prophecy and the predictions of William I himself. Orderic related that queen Matilda consulted a hermit in Germany concerning her son in the wake of his self-imposed exile from William's court in 1077. The hermit's prophecy described Normandy as a meadow surrounded by "a great herd of cattle" that desired to graze, "but a spirited stallion drove them all away."⁵⁹ When the stallion died, a "lascivious cow"

⁵⁹ OV iii, 104. "sed omnia fervidus sonipes abigebat."

ruled the meadow, allowing the surrounding animals to devour and destroy it.⁶⁰ The bovine image carried a definite feminine element in that twelfth-century authors often used the cow as a symbol of lustful feelings. Orderic used such images to provide a clear message that the death of William would usher in a period of great disorder in Normandy, in which all pretexts of proper conduct, piety, and order will evaporate in the wake of William's death. "Catamites and effeminate" would be in positions of authority, and "many thousands of men would perish by iron and flame..."⁶¹ Inserting William as the fierce stallion and his son as the lascivious cow showcased Orderic's belief that William's death will leave Normandy to an heir incapable of emulating the good lordship of his father or his ancestors by restraining the violence of the regional aristocracy.

In order to strengthen his illustration of Curthose as a lord unable to reflect the his father's lordship, Orderic emphasized his illegitimacy by employing gendered language in order to impart an element of femininity to Curthose's actions. Orderic frequently used adjectives that denote a feminine aspect, such as *mollis* (soft, pliable) and *pigricia* (lazy).⁶² Orderic frequently used these particular Latin words to describe Curthose's demeanor and personality, and he often employed feminine case endings to make it clear to his reader that Curthose did not live up to his father's image.

In a further reinforcement of Curthose's perceived failings, Orderic employed king William I himself as a mouthpiece. Deliberately using the biblical story of king

⁶⁰ OV, iii. 104-106. "vacca lasciuens." See William Aird, "Frustrated Masculinity," 54. William Aird argues that the cow is clear evidence that Robert was effeminized. This is certainly true, and it adds bite to Orderic's account.

⁶¹ OV, iii. 106. "catamitae et effeminate." "hominumque multa milia ferro vel flamma perimentur."

⁶² OV, iii. p. 106, OV, iv. p. 114, OV, iv. p. 146, OV, iv. p. 156, OV, v. p. 26, OV, v. p. 300. For an in-depth perspective on how Orderic uses emotions and entwines them with the aristocratic use of power, see Richard Barton, "Emotions and Power in Orderic Vitalis," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 33 (2011): 46.

David's son Absalom and the parable of the prodigal son as a precedent, Orderic depicted Curthose asking his father prematurely for access to his inheritance in the form of lordship over Normandy.⁶³ William's refusal is unsurprising, but his warnings do much to prefigure the causes of Robert's failings in the *Ecclesiastical History*. He warned his son to dismiss his youthful advisers. The consequences of giving in to their inexperienced counsel and resort to violence to secure his inheritance would be dire. "Recall what Absalom did, how he revolted against his father David, how evil befell Achitophel and Amasa and their other advisers and partisans."⁶⁴ Curthose dismissed William's warning, and like the prodigal son, choose to go into exile.⁶⁵ Such self-imposed exile symbolized for Orderic the turning point of Curthose's career. It is noteworthy that Orderic described him wasting his resources and taking loans, further illustrating him as the prodigal son.⁶⁶ Orderic portrayed all the duke's household men in unflattering terms, but heading the list is the vile Robert of Bellême:

Robert of Bellême...and many others mighty in means, distinguished for prowess and probity, great in arrogance, ferocious to their opponents and frightful to their enemies; these exceedingly impudent men entered into the greatest sin. The youth, [Curthose], was surrounded by such useless companions as he wandered in foreign lands for about five years.⁶⁷

⁶³ OV, iii. 98.

⁶⁴ OV, iii. p. 98. "Reminiscere quid Absalon fecerit, qualiter in Daud patrem suum rebellaverit, et quam male tam illi quam Achitophel et Amasae aliisque consiliariis et fautoribus suis contigerit."

⁶⁵ OV, iii. p. 100.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 102.

⁶⁷ OV, iii. 102. "Robertus de Bellismo...alique plures generositate pollentes, militari probitate insignes, superbia immanes, feritate contrariis hostibus terribiles, ac ad arduum nefas inchoandum nimis procaces. Horum contubernio Rodbertus tiro inutiliter stipatus est et externa per regna ferme quinque annis pervagatus est."

Orderic's allusions to the biblical stories of Absalom and the prodigal son are intentional. They showcased the twin options available to Curthose. Either he listened to the advice of his father and inherited Normandy upon William's death, or he heeded the youths of his household and continued to rebel. These biblical references of rebellion, reconciliation and parental conflict also show how Orderic molded his narrative to prefigure Curthose's eventual rebellion against William in 1079. Yet even at this point Orderic wished to show that Curthose had the option to repent and obey his father. After a lengthy description of the siege of Gerberoy in 1079,⁶⁸ Orderic related how William refused to forgive his son for rebellion, despite Curthose's supplications and admittance of error:

Which of my ancestors from the time of Rollo has tolerated such struggle from his child as I have? Consider William, son of the Rollo the Mighty, and Richard the third, duke of Normandy, and my lord and father Robert. Consider how faithfully the sons served their fathers even unto death...According to the divine law given by Moses such a sinner is killed, and with a similar charge Absalom was punished with the same death.⁶⁹

Despite his rage, William listened to the advice of his councilors and made peace with Robert Curthose. Orderic related that:

The shameless son contemptuously refused to follow or obey the father. Because of his laziness, the furious king reproached him openly with insults and reprimands. Because of this he withdrew from his father a second time, relying on his several accomplices.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ OV, iii. 108-112.

⁶⁹ OV, iii. 112. "Quis ex antecessoribus meis a tempore Rollonis talem pugnam a sobole sua peressus est ut ego? Guillelmum magni Rollonis filium et tres Ricardos duces Normanniae, dominum meum et patrem Rodbertum considerate et videte quam fideliter filii patribus suis usque ad mortem serviere...Secundum divinam legem per Moysen datam mortis reus est et reatu similis Absalon pari nece multandus est."

⁷⁰ OV, iii. p. 112. "Proterius enim iuuenis patrem sequi vel oboedire dedignatus est animosus vero princeps ob ignauiam eius crebris eum redargutionibus et conuiciis palam iniuriatus est. Unde denuo post aliquot tempus paucis sodalibus fretus a patre recessit."

Thus even before his father's death Orderic portrayed Curthose as a rebellious and disobedient son who refused to reconcile with William. By presenting Curthose as a second Absalom, Orderic clearly displayed the route he believed Curthose took in the last years of his father's life. In having William recall the filial obedience of the ancestral dukes of Normandy in contrast to his son, Orderic undermined the authority and legitimacy that supported Curthose's position as duke of Normandy. For him, Curthose was ultimately a reverse of the prodigal son, a man repeatedly exiled but never fully accepted back into his father's house.

Scholars have observed that Orderic exaggerated the duration of Curthose's twin rebellions against his father, citing the actual duration as around a year apiece. Indeed, Curthose was in back in his father's good graces by 1080.⁷¹ Orderic's emphasis on Robert's rebellions and his estrangement from his father was part of a larger program of vilification intended to show that Curthose's behavior consistently deviated from Orderic's notions of good lordship.

Poor Counselors, Unruly Household, and the Shadow of Robert of Bellême

It is one of Orderic's main concerns to present Curthose as a man incapable of ruling with a strong hand or seeking the advice of prudent elders. Thus, he exaggerated the duration of the rebellions of 1079 and 1088, while condemning Robert's invasion of England in 1101 as a third and final rebellion against Henry I. It is significant that Orderic showed Curthose driven by ill counsel against three crowned kings of the Anglo-

⁷¹ William Aird, *Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, c. 1054-1134* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009), 83. Katherine Lack, "Robert Curthose: Ineffectual duke or victim of spin?," *Haskins Society Journal* 20 (2009): 131.

Norman realm, thus illustrating him as a figure incapable of the conciliar lordship necessary to rule as king. This aspect serves as a consistent theme throughout. In addition, Orderic's diatribes against Curthose as an indolent duke stemmed from his inability to restrain both his own household and the barons of the duchy, in particular Robert of Bellême, who served as the embodiment of unrestrained aristocratic violence throughout Normandy during Curthose's tenure as duke. Indeed, a second theme of Orderic's chronicle was the increasingly overt role that Robert of Bellême played as a symbol of the increasing violence and disorder resulting from Robert Curthose's laziness and poor lordship.

In each of the descriptions of the rebellion of 1079-1080, "the evil counsel of youthful comrades,"⁷² and "troubled youths"⁷³ goaded Curthose to ask for the rights over Normandy. The Conqueror directly censured his son for this:

Elect honest counselors for yourself, and wisely avoid reckless men who goad you, shamefully driving you on to evil actions. Don't give in to the pleadings of petulant youths, but ask advice from Archbishops William and Lanfranc as well as other wise and mature noblemen.⁷⁴

In his descriptions of the rebellions of 1079, Orderic did not name the youths who incited Robert to rebellion, but it is significant that Orderic attached Robert of Bellême to Curthose's household both at that point, in 1088, and in the invasion of England in 1101, where Bellême took an active part in perpetuating the disorder.⁷⁵ Curthose thus failed to

⁷² OV, ii. p. 356. "ambitione iuuenili noxioque sodalium"

⁷³ OV, iii. p. 96. "Seditiosi...iuueni"

⁷⁴ OV, iii. 98. "Optimos tibi elige tibi consiliarios, et prudenter precave temerarios qui te stimulant impudenter incitant ad actus nefarios...Noli adquiescere petulantum persuasionibus iuuenum, sed a Guillelmo et Lanfranco archiepiscopus et aliis sophistis maturisque proceribus inquire consilium."

⁷⁵ OV, iii. p. 100, OV iv. p. 125, OV, v. p. 308.

follow an essential tenet of eleventh-century lordship; he choose not only to listen to the impetuous counsel of youths, but refused to consult the same men who occupied the Conqueror's inner circle. In addition, Orderic is always keen to associate Robert of Bellême with Curthose's household, in essence linking him to the most nefarious and disorderly magnate in the *Ecclesiastical History*. The central issue is that Orderic must disassociate Curthose from the memory of his father by emphasizing the frequency and duration of his rebellions, and in the process defamed him as unable to emulate his father's prudent lordship by heeding wise council and associating with violent lords.

Although Orderic praised Curthose for his prowess and rhetorical ability, he often chastised him for refusing to discipline his household:

The duke, of course, was daring and mighty, meriting praise for prowess and worthiness of speech, but reckless in his action...merciful to supplicants, carrying out justice toward evildoers in a feeble and pliant fashion.⁷⁶

Orderic brought this lack of restraint within Curthose's *familia* to the fore as an explanation for what he perceived as the incipient violent horrors visited upon Normandy under Curthose's negligent eye. Troops of violent men raided field and village; monks enjoyed no security and fell prey to "sons of depravity."⁷⁷ Likening violent men to wolf-cubs, Orderic cited their incessant infighting, castle building, and "crimes of arson, rapine, and murder."⁷⁸ For Orderic, Curthose's lack of discipline caused the whole province of Normandy to rot from within, leaving widows, monks, and the weak unable

⁷⁶ OV, iv, 114. "Erat quippe idem dux audax et validus, militiaeque laude dings eloquio facundus, sed in regimine sui suorumque inconsideratus...Misericors supplicibus, ac ad iusticiam super iniquos faciendam mollis et mansuetus."

⁷⁷ OV, iv. 146. "Filii nequam."

⁷⁸ OV, iv. 146. "Cotide...incendia rapine et homicidia." (Chibnall's translation)

to fend for themselves. Orderic then explicitly held Curthose to the standard of good order set by the Conqueror:

Thus, everything that had been done through the liveliness, devotion, and skill of a mighty ruler and his companions was ruined through the cowardly idleness of the duke. The land was devastated in a short time and decayed in profound poverty, vice, and chaos.⁷⁹

Orderic never drew the contrast between the lordship style of Curthose and his father clearer than he did here. Orderic explicitly linked Curthose's deficient lordship with the perceived decay of morality in the duchy. For Orderic, the behavior of the duke is the key to the health of the body politic. Because Curthose did not mold his rule after his father, the ancestral Norman lands themselves suffered. Orderic associated the decay directly with Curthose's failure to keep order.

Even in describing Robert's personal affairs Orderic could not resist depicting Robert as a man unable to restrain his household or act in a decisive manner.

Indeed, he did not refuse the company of idlers and prostitutes, but impudently wasted his applause on them. The duke was often without bread in spite of the prosperity of his domains, and due to his poverty of dress he was not able either to rise from the bed for midday prayer, or to go to church to hear the divine office, because he was naked. Prostitutes and rascals who knew his weakness constantly encircled him. They made off with his shoes, hose, and other garments with constant impunity.⁸⁰

This intimate portrayal of conditions within the ducal household offered the reader an explicit reflection of the conditions of the Norman body politic. The fact that

⁷⁹ OV, iv. 148. "Sic per desidiam ignavi ducis in breviisperiit, et in magnum egestatem ac perturbationem dedecusque cecidit, quicquid per vivacitatem, studiumque sollertis eri et fautorum eius actum est longoque tempore in Neustria propagatum est."

⁸⁰ OV, v. 308. "Et quoniam meretriciam atque scurrarum consortia non refutavit, sed eis impudenter applaudens sua dilapidavit inter diuitias ampli ducatus pane multoties eguit, et pro penuria vestitus usque ad sextam de lecto non surrexit, nec ad aecclesiam quia nudus erat diuinum auditurus officium perrexit. Meretrices enim et nebulones qui lenitatem eius scientes eum indesinenter circumdederunt bracas eius et caligas et reliqua ornamenta crebro impune furati sunt."

Curthose was unable to rein in the lowest rungs of society overtly attacked both the duke's ability and worthiness to rule. In this case Robert was a comical symbol of the faulty lordship in Normandy. In his nakedness he was laid open to attacks by robbers and ne'er-do-wells who rid him of his means of social display, thus depriving him of a vital, if cosmetic, element of his lordship. This buffoonish portrayal also stripped Curthose of any regal pretensions, since a man who was unable to reign in his own household cannot be expected to mitigate the disorder of the Norman duchy. Thus Orderic used this description to elicit a vivid biblical parallel, drawing from the gospel of Luke.⁸¹

Soon after the rebellion of 1088, Robert attempted to assert his lordship in Maine, a polity to the south of Normandy that had been claimed by the Norman ducal house even before the conquest of England. Orderic had Bishop Odo of Bayeux come to the duke at Rouen, asking him to reassert his father's claim to the county, entreating him to emulate the "greatness and virtue" of the Conqueror and Robert's Norman ancestors.⁸² Odo reminded Curthose of the violence in Normandy, pleading with him to chastise evildoers, aid the church, and cease his indolence. Orderic did this to compare Curthose directly with his father, and again to reiterate William's standard of lordship and restraint. Through Odo, Orderic rhetorically offered the prodigal son the chance to uphold the deeds and memory of the Conqueror.

After demanding that Curthose lead the Normans to subdue the Manceaux, Orderic curiously inserted Robert of Bellême into the narrative. After accusing the whole Montgomery-Bellême line of conspiracy, malice, and rebellion, Orderic had Odo give an extensive list of the families' holdings, reminding Curthose that his father was able to

⁸¹ Luke 16: 10.

⁸² OV, iv. 150. "magnanimitatem et vitutem."

restrain the ambitions of his nobles. For Orderic, part of Robert Curthose's failure as a duke was his inability to restrain the barons of his duchy, symbolized in the illicit activities of this powerful border family. Indeed, Orderic had Odo give Curthose a chilling reminder and a mighty exhortation:

Robert (of Bellême), whom you hold confined even now, heard about the death of the king, and in his conceit expelled your men from your strongholds, divested you of authority, and subjugated your castles. Consider all these things which I have said, and bestir yourself worthily as a good lord, for the sake of the peace of Holy Mother Church and for the defense of the poor and frail, crush opponents with bravery. When you have shattered the armies of the nobles who raise their heads against you, the others, having seen the downfall of their comrades-in-arms, will fear you and will attend to your rulings without question.⁸³

If Curthose succeeded in restraining Bellême, he would restore peace to Normandy, and monks would resume the holy offices. Orderic thus associated the misdeeds of the Bellême family with the general disturbances in Normandy from the time of the Conqueror's death. Indeed, he believed that the only way to maintain William's peace in the region was to quell the violent ambitions of the aristocracy, exemplified in Robert of Bellême. For Orderic, the deeds and influence of this particular border magnate served as a symbolic barometer of the disorder under Curthose's lordship, and ultimately became a symbol of Robert's failure to uphold the standard of good order and restraint maintained by his father.

In Orderic's view, Curthose was unable to listen to wise advisors, restrain violent nobles, maintain his household, or tame Robert of Bellême. These failings further effeminized Curthose because he stopped enacting his masculinity by upholding his

⁸³ OV, iv. 152. "Verum Robertus quem iam ligatum coherces mox ut regem defunctum audiuit municipes tuos de munitionibus tuis per superbiam suam expulit, suaeque ditioni ut exhereditaret te munimina subegit. Haec omnia quae dixi sapienter inspicere ac ut bonus princeps pro pace sanctae matris ecclesiae, et pro defensione pauperum debiliumque laudabiliter exurge et resistentes virtute contere. Confractis cornibus primorum qui ceruicem erexerunt contra te reliqui visa deiectione contubernalium formidabunt te, et iussis tuis famulabuntur sine contradictione."

lordship obligations. This is in marked contrast to Robert of Bellême, whom Orderic rendered as a man so violent that he stood above gender dichotomies, serving rather as a malevolent force whose purpose was clearly to warn against excesses in anger or aggression. Combined with Orderic's vivid illustrations of the loose morals of William Rufus's court, Curthose's deficient lordship serves as one of the many features of Orderic's black portrayal of the conditions in England and Normandy at the close of the eleventh century. However, Orderic also takes great pains to clothe his violent memories with a human face, as exemplified in his relentless vilification of Robert of Bellême.

Robert of Bellême - The Dragon of the Apocalypse

He was plain in nature, deceitful and changeable, great and strong of body, audacious and mighty in battle, without a doubt eloquent and unmerciful, inexplicable in his greed and forcefulness.⁸⁴

Robert of Bellême is renowned as one of the most unsavory magnates in the Anglo-Norman *regnum* of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Although violence among the aristocracy was common and even encouraged in this period, there is much about Robert which stands out. Orderic Vitalis certainly had no love for him, or for his mother, Mabel. When Orderic first describes the infant Robert being brought to the church of Séez to be baptized by Thierry, Roger, and other monks, Orderic warns his reader not to be fooled. The young boy is now well known for his cruelty to the *plebes*.⁸⁵ Orderic is not the only contemporary author to comment on Robert's actions. William of

⁸⁴ OV, iv. 159. "Erat enim ingenio subtilis, dolosus et versipellis, corpore magnus et fortis, audax et potens in armis. Eloquens nimiumque crudelis, avaricia et libidine inexplabilis."

⁸⁵ OV, ii. p. 48.

Malmesbury notes that he was known for his cruelty and deceit.⁸⁶ The partiality of Orderic has been well attested by scholars, most of whom have ignored his colorful descriptions of Robert's misdeeds, dismissing them as mere ecclesiastical moralizing.

I argue that the portrayal of Robert in *The Ecclesiastical History* reveals Orderic's criticism of the dark side of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Through him Orderic gives insight on his views of the origin of evil, as demonstrated in his attempts to demonize Robert's family and in particular his mother, Mabel of Bellême. Throughout his narrative, Orderic mentions Robert of Bellême with many of the violent and rebellious outbreaks from the beginning of Rufus's reign to the beginning of Henry's. Orderic does this to associate him with such disorder.

For Orderic, Robert of Bellême thus serves as an timeless embodiment of the inherent warlike violence of the Normans as a *gens*, which will erupt if not controlled. By doing so Orderic provides a valuable commentary on how the Anglo-Norman aristocracy should behave. Orderic achieves this by utilizing a discourse of opposites.⁸⁷ He often contrasts Robert with other figures whom he depicts more positively in order to throw Robert's evil into sharp relief. In short, the contrast between licit and illicit violence make the contrast, and the moral, all too clear. Norman aristocrats should only use violence to achieve proper goals, making sure to restrain themselves.

Examining Orderic's vile description of Robert allows us to better understand his views on proper aristocratic behavior within lay and ecclesiastical relationships, proper

⁸⁶ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors; completed by R. M. Thompson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 398. 1, 5-7.

⁸⁷ The discourse of opposites as a powerful theme in the twelfth century, a mutually sustainable dichotomy which allowed authors and theologians to reconcile contrasting viewpoints of the Church Fathers, as well as deal with the inherent paradoxes of Christian doctrine. For the nature of this theme of dichotomy, see Constance Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted: The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

kinship relationships, and the role of anger and emotional display. Robert's violent acts are thus part of Orderic's didactic agenda regarding the aristocracy. Orderic often accuses Robert of a surprising amount of self-awareness, in that Robert often knows that his actions are reprehensible, and in his guilt he shows fear. Orderic uses his fall from grace as a moral treatise, displaying what he believes to be the ultimate end of aristocrats who do not conduct themselves with restraint and respect toward their peers. Orderic's picture of Robert ultimately reveals the final end that such evil lords will reach, by describing Robert's fear of his intimates, and connecting him to the vision of Herlechin's Hunt. Finally, as an image of evil, Robert's symbolic value is intriguing. Orderic depicts Robert as nothing less than Satan in the visage of a knight due to his wild outbursts of anger. For Orderic, Robert is the very image of aristocratic evil.

The Montgomery-Bellême Family and the Memory of Evil

In describing the history of the Montgomery-Bellême lords, Orderic places an evil stain within the female line through his unfavorable depictions of William Talvas and Mabel of Bellême. Throughout his account of Roger of Montgomery and Mabel's activities, Mabel is always the source of evil actions and influence, while Orderic paints Roger favorably. Orderic believes that any sins committed by Roger result from the influence and unrestrained nature of his wife. After Mabel's murder in 1077, Orderic contrasts the sins of Mabel with the virtues of Roger's second wife, Adelais of Le Puiset. Roger's second wife is also instrumental in the correction of his own life. When describing the misdeeds of Robert of Bellême, Orderic hearkens back to the black nature

of his family line in order to delegitimize Robert's actions. Ultimately Orderic is attempting to describe the origins of Robert's foul behavior. The evil of the Montgomery family and Robert himself must originate from the female line, hence Orderic's preoccupations with displaying this taint through his grandfather to his mother. In placing the insidious traits and uncontrollable nature of the Montgomery lords firmly in the female line, Orderic is giving his own interpretation of the origins of evil.

Robert of Bellême's father was Roger of Montgomery, one of the great cross-channel magnates in the late eleventh century. He was vicomte of the Hiémois and later earl of Shrewsbury after the Conquest. He had remained in Normandy during the conquest to aid the duchess Mathilda. Upon William's return to England in 1067, Roger travelled in his entourage.⁸⁸ Roger's Norman lands were located in central Normandy, stretching into northern Maine and bordering the domains of the king of France. Roger's marriage to the infamous Mabel of Bellême secured the ever-tenuous lands to the south. William's conquest of England rewarded Roger with extensive estates in England, the largest being in the counties of Shropshire and Sussex.⁸⁹ Throughout Robert's life, he could draw on the vast landed wealth inherited by his parents, which contributed to his own influence.

Orderic describes Roger of Montgomery as a loyal, generous man. When Roger received his English lands from the Conqueror, Orderic described him as keeping a troupe of wise and modest men in his household. Three clerks are listed among this group, one being Odelericus, the father of Orderic. Roger figures in a list of the wise

⁸⁸ OV, ii. p. 210.

⁸⁹ OV, ii. p. 211.

bishops and lords of Normandy, and witnesses the Conqueror's charters granting privileges to St. Évrout and the gift of the estates of Robert of Vitot to Geoffrey Mancel.⁹⁰ Roger himself granted gifts and protection to St. Évrout, founded the abbeys of Shrewsbury, Troarn, St. Martin, and Séez.⁹¹ Orderic also cites his generous gifts to the churches of Almenèches, Cluny, and Caen. It is clear that part of Roger's good reputation derives from his ecclesiastical patronage, along with his constant and unswerving loyalty to Duke William, even in the precarious years of consolidation after the conquest. The fact that Orderic's father is included in Roger's household may also contribute to his portrait as a worthy *nobilis*.

Despite this flattering depiction of the Montgomery patriarch, Orderic places a clear element of evil within the family, rooted in the female line. William Talvas, the father of Roger's wife, Mabel, figures little in Orderic's early work. When he does appear, he is inviting William Giroie to his wedding. Suspecting no malice, Giroie arrives, and he is summarily mutilated, blinded, and castrated. Due to this, Orderic writes that William Talvas was hereafter hated by all, and later deprived of his holdings by his son Arnold.⁹² What is interesting here is that Orderic contrasts the evil deeds of Talvas with the virtue of William Giroie, whom he describes as "a knight surely well known to the world as one of the greatest, terrible to his enemies and faithful to his friends".⁹³ Deeds of unjust mutilation and a contrast with a better-behaved figure are themes Orderic

⁹⁰ OV, ii. pp. 38, 120, 262.

⁹¹ OV, ii. p. 54, 20-22, 48, 66-68, OV, iii. p. 142.

⁹² OV, ii. p. 14.

⁹³ OV, ii. p. 14. "Hic nimirum in saeculo miles fuerat magnae sublimitatis, hostibus terribilis et amicis fidelis."

frequently uses when describing Talvas's villainous daughter Mabel and her son, Robert of Bellême.

Under Orderic's pen, Mabel manages to rival her father in evil deeds. Admittedly, such horrid depictions are due to his preference for the family of Giroie, the patrons of his monastery, but in his criticism of Mabel he offers powerful diatribes against the practice of secular lords. Orderic begins by describing Mabel as a worldly, powerful woman known for bullying monks and harassing their monasteries. She did have respect for abbot Thierry of St. Évrour, and thus it was to him that she took the infant son Robert to be baptized in the church of Séez.⁹⁴ Orderic relates that she came to St. Évrour with a guard of one hundred knights, asking Abbot Thierry to provide for them. He rebuked her and asked why she had come "with such display to a house of paupers and warned her to restrain her foolishness; her response was inflamed by rage, 'Next time I will bring a greater number of knights with me.'"⁹⁵ Thierry warns her that she will suffer for such behavior. The strain visited on a monastery like St. Évrour must not be ignored, and here Orderic gives no indication that such an event was unheard of or even unusual.⁹⁶

It is worthy of note that Roger is absent in this account. Orderic also uses the command of troops to prove that Mabel gave herself to worldly vanities. The force that is exercised by Mabel in the form of her attendant knights is decidedly masculine, and part of Mabel's sin is the fact that she is expressing power through an unusual avenue.

⁹⁴ OV, ii. p. 48.

⁹⁵ OV, ii. p. 54. "et adomno Teoderico abbate redargueretur, cur cum tanta ambitione ad pauperes coenobitas venisset, eamque admoneret ut ab hac stulticia se coherceret. Illa inflammata respondit, 'Maiorem numerum militum adducam.'"

⁹⁶ Marjorie Chibnall has used this episode as evidence for the ambivalence of the aristocracy towards the reformed Benedictine houses of the late eleventh century. See Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis: Norman Monks and Norman Knights* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1984), 52.

Although known to respect Thierry, Orderic attributes an arrogant response to her in an accusation that she refuses to submit to the authority of men.

After her conversation with abbot Thierry, Mabel falls ill and is in great pain. As she passes through the house of one Roger Sowsnose, she demands that his infant child nurse from the breast that caused her the most discomfort. The child promptly dies, and Mabel recovers; yet she never returns to St. Évrout.⁹⁷ Orderic seems to be suggesting here that the child imbibed the disease which was tormenting Mabel, suggesting that she is unfit for proper motherhood. The act is a corruption of Mabel's maternal nature. The story is colored by Orderic's resentment, but there is an amount of foreshadowing here. Using Mabel's sickness to show that she is incapable of nourishing children illustrates a perversion of the proper role of women in society. A woman who does not ascribe to evil will be able to bear children without destroying them. God smote Mabel with an illness for defying abbot Thierry, revealing her inability to raise a normal child. As the reader soon learns, Such a cursed woman begets a son who inherits both his mother's malevolence and his father's virtue.

When William Giroie's son Arnold of Échauffour returns from exile in Apulia seeking an audience with Duke William, Orderic praises his "high birth and outstanding probity."⁹⁸ Although William promises the return of his lands, Mabel unsurprisingly attempts to poison him, which Orderic attributes to the natural hatred Mabel has for Arnold's father. Arnold is warned of foul play, and as a result her husband's brother, Gilbert, drinks the poison. Because Mabel ignores the divine judgment visited on her in

⁹⁷ OV, ii. p. 54.

⁹⁸ OV, ii. p. 122. "nobilitatem uiri et ingentem probitatem."

the form of her failure, she reveals the lack of self-restraint for which her son is known. Eventually Mabel succeeds in poisoning Arnold, incapacitating Giroie of Courville and William of Montmirail.

These episodes contrast with Mabel's behavior in relation to her husband. The couple gave the church of Séez to abbot Thierry in order that he might found a monastery there.⁹⁹ When alongside Roger, Mabel fulfills the traditional marital role without qualm. It is an interesting contrast that Mabel is known for inventing devious methods of harming the monks of St. Évrour, yet she refrains from open hostility, "since her husband Roger of Montgomery loved and honored the monks."¹⁰⁰ It is this respect which causes tension in Orderic's account. He wishes to depict Mabel in a dark way in order to foreshadow the nefarious deeds of her son, Robert. To do this, he counters her admiration for Thierry with tales of her treachery. Always Mabel is described as hating the Giroie family, while Roger is always shown to be rather aloof from the quarrels. Indeed, when Orderic first mentions this hatred, he describes it as stemming from "her father and herself and all her descendants."¹⁰¹

In 1061, Duke William drove Ralph of Tosny, Hugh of Grandmesnil, and Arnold of Échauffour from their estates, sending them into exile. The resulting disturbances in Normandy allowed Roger to incite the Duke against the sons of Giroie, and Orderic notes that "Roger of Montgomery and Mabel his wife made the most of the disorders of the time."¹⁰² Mabel is in this instance alongside her husband, and this is the only point in

⁹⁹ OV, ii. p. 48.

¹⁰⁰ OV, ii. p. 54. "Unde quia Rogerius de Monte Gomerici uir eius monachos amabat et honorabat."

¹⁰¹ OV, ii. p. 54. "pater eius et ipsa omnisque illius progenies diu perdurans odium haberunt."

¹⁰² OV, ii. p. 90.

Orderic's narrative where Orderic describes Roger as contributing to the turmoil. After the family of Girioe fell, Roger acquired new lands on Montreuil and Échauffour.¹⁰³ He is described as making life difficult for the monks of the region, but only due to the influence of his wife. When this is compared to the otherwise favorable image of Roger of Montgomery in *The Ecclesiastical History*, the corrupting influence of Mabel is clearly seen. Whether or not Mabel instigated the harassment of the monks is irrelevant.

What matters is that he must trace the origin of the evil deeds to Mabel and not to Roger. These two episodes illustrate not only proof of the real power held by women in this period, but also Orderic's use of Mabel as a dark stain on the otherwise admirable character of her husband. Roger shows no indication in the text that he is aware of the misdeeds of his wife. Orderic seems to be attributing one flaw to Roger; he is unable to control the vices and behavior of his wife. Mabel's unsavory depiction also serves as a prelude to the evil of her son, just as William Talvas served as a prelude to Mabel. Orderic cannot resist the temptation of using Mabel as a moral treatise. Her beheading in her bath by Hugh Bunel, whose lands she had confiscated, was seen by Orderic as clear evidence of divine working:¹⁰⁴

But in the end the just judge, who spares repentant sinners and sternly transfixes the impenitent, allowed that cruel woman, who was drenched in much blood and had violently disinherited many men and drove them to beg for alms in foreign lands, to perish by Hugh's sword.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ OV, iii, p. 134.

¹⁰⁴ OV, iii, pp. 134-135.

¹⁰⁵ OV, iii, p. 136. "Denique iustus arbiter qui peccatoribus pie parcit, et impenitentes districte percutit. Crudelem feminam quae multo sanguine madebat, multosque uiolenter exhaeredatos per externa mendicare coegerat. Permisit perire glaudio Hugonis."

In the aftermath of the murder, Roger married Adelais, the daughter of Evrard of Le Puiset. Orderic describes this woman as the stark opposite of Mabel. “The second wife was utterly unlike the first in character. She was remarkable for her gentleness and piety, and continually encouraged her husband to befriend monks and protect the poor.”¹⁰⁶ Orderic’s predispositions must be taken into account here, since his main issue with these two women turns on their treatment of monasteries. However, his comments on the nature of marriage are equally important. Mabel and Adelais are polar opposites in that Mabel bullies monks and persuaded her husband to do the same; Adelais encourages Roger to support them. This didactic purpose is further illustrated by the fact that after he extols the virtues of Adelais, Orderic writes:

Therefore, as was said before, the great man reflected on the many evils which he had inflicted on St. Evroult, and he was rightly eager to reduce his earlier guilt by amending his later life. A little later he manfully supported the monks, and he gave many things to them in Normandy and England.¹⁰⁷

Orderic concludes by describing a charter of liberties and gifts to the abbey, seemingly as much for Roger’s own guilt as in reparation for the damages done by his wife.¹⁰⁸ Orderic’s message is unsurprising. A wife must be firmly under the control of her husband, and he should not allow her to tempt him to evil. Mabel is evil because she wrongly performs masculine functions, and chides men such as abbot Thierry. She is also further evidence that evil springs from the female line, and the fact that Mabel is a woman does not make the situation any better. Her ultimate function within the narrative is to prefigure the bold malevolence of Robert of Bellême. In Orderic’s view, evil cannot

¹⁰⁶ OV, iii. p. 138.

¹⁰⁷ OV, iii. p. 138. “Praefatus igitur heros mala quae plerunque fecerat Vticensibus recoluit. Pristinosque reatus sequentis uitae emendatione sagaciter abolere studuit. Viriliter enim postmodum monachus adiuvit, et in Normannia et Anglia plurimas res illis erogavit.”

¹⁰⁸ OV, iii. p. 138-142.

spring up in a vacuum; it must have antecedents and certainly passes from parent to child. Orderic also makes it plain that such sins can and will be punished by God. Mabel's prominent sins, such as a corrupting influence over others, abuse and murder of innocents, forceful disinheritance, and disregard for one's peers are all performed largely by Robert of Bellême. Mabel, like her son, functions as a warning to the nobility, suggesting the result and punishment of wickedness. More importantly, her character reveals Orderic's view of proper and improper aristocratic marriage, while simultaneously foreshadowing the cruelty of Robert.

Having traced the strain of evil rooted in the family of the lords of Bellême, Orderic brings up this penchant for cruelty in order to delegitimize Robert, giving detractors, dukes, and kings more impetus to stand against him. When Odo of Bayeux visits Robert Curthose in order to spur him on against Robert, Odo describes the "violent men and outlaws"¹⁰⁹ who commit horrid crimes against the people of Normandy. None of these evildoers are given names, however. Orderic's real purpose is to associate the Bellême family with the disorders of Normandy. He calls up the evil reputation of Mabel's father, Talvas, in order to associate Robert in particular with the disorder.

Now you [Robert Curthose] hold [Robert of Bellême], Roger's firstborn, in prison. Now you will remain steadfast and unyielding in this contest as is seemly for a good duke. You will be able to expel the subversive sons of Talvas from your duchy. Their family is cursed. It nourishes evil and plots as if by right of inheritance. This is proved without doubt by their ignoble deaths. None of them came to a normal or common end; they are separate from other men. I surmise that unless you eradicate the son of Talvas now, I imagine he will become noxious and unconquerable.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ OV, iv. p. 150. "proterui et exleges"

¹¹⁰ OV, iv. p. 152. "Iam Robertum Rogerii primogenitum tenens in carcere, iam si pertinaciter ut bonum ducem decet perstiteris in agone. Taluacios subuersores de ducatu tuo poteris penitus expellere. Maledicta est prosapia eorum. Alit nefas et machinatur quasi ius hereditarium. Hoc nimirum horrenda mors eorum attestatur. Quorum nullus communi et uisitato fine ut ceteri homines defecisse inuenitur. Taluaciana propago nisi nunc eam eradicaueris. Adhuc ut opinor noxia tibi erat et inexpugnabilis."

Orderic accuses the whole family of deceits, plotting, faithlessness, and oppression.¹¹¹ He describes the many castles held by Robert's family as fortresses "built in pride" and "wrested by force or fraud from their lords or neighbors."¹¹² Orderic makes sure to note that after Robert has been dealt with, peace will spread throughout Normandy. Monks will be able to offer prayers for Curthose, and monks will perform the divine offices for the good of all the people. This implies not only that the prayers and offices were not taking place, but that the malevolent line of Montgomery, and Robert in particular, is responsible for the chaos. Orderic describes Robert in such a way in order to suggest that it would be a service to God to rid the land of him.

Robert of Bellême, Associative Violence, and Dark Side of the *Gens Normannorum*

Orderic frequently describes outbreaks of violence during periods of normal power transference. He associates Robert of Bellême with most of these incidents by purposefully inserting him as a participant into most outbreaks of violence or rebellion against legitimate authority. By doing so, Orderic uses Robert as a narrative device to censure the Anglo-Norman aristocracy, who would likely be somewhat familiar with aspects of Robert's conduct. Even Robert's legitimate acts of violence, such as his part in suppressing the Rouen Riot of 1090, and his feud with Geoffrey of Mortagne are described as chaotic and unnecessary. Robert often influences others to uncontrollable violence, just as his mother did before him.

¹¹¹ OV, iv. p. 152.

¹¹² OV, iv. p. 152.

In addition, Orderic often describes the Normans as difficult to control, capable of great violence, but also of great victories if led by a strong duke or king. Within *The Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic uses Robert of Bellême as an incarnation of this same Norman penchant for disorder and violence. Thus, Robert’s actions do not serve as an indicator of millennial mutation, but rather serve as a symbol of the misuse of Norman potential, and how far Normans can fall if they do not control themselves.

During the reign of William I violence was prevalent, but in Orderic’s account it is always used to good purpose to achieve concrete political ends. The infamous harrying of the North in 1069 is one of the most colorful incidents, yet William ordered the utter devastation around York in order to suppress rebellions and cement his authority in England in the uncertain post-Conquest years, however much Orderic may have disliked the rampant destruction.¹¹³ The Scandinavian invasion of 1069 of Sweyn Estrithson was the catalyst for a rebellion of unprecedented organization, supported by Saxon magnates. The coming of such a force also encouraged uprisings in Dorset, Somerset, Staffordshire and South Cheshire. William’s march to York involved devastation so severe that it had echoes in the Domesday survey in 1087.¹¹⁴ This episode is indicative of the presence of unrestrained violence in the careers of men admired by Orderic. Upon the death of William I, Orderic admits that the passing of such a great prince is but a prelude to the “vicious disorders” to come.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ OV, ii. pp. 230-232.

¹¹⁴ David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 220-222.

¹¹⁵ OV, iv. p. 108.

After William's death, closer to Orderic's own time, *The Ecclesiastical History* is dotted with small vignettes of violent and evil deeds. Such episodes following the death of William I typically describe outbreaks of plunder, abuse of monasteries and the church at large, arson, rapine, murder, the rise of unlicensed castles, and general open conflict.¹¹⁶ These sobering descriptions occur during any period of disorder, and become increasingly common within Orderic's narrative in the aftermath of William the Conqueror's death and the subsequent reign of Rufus. The death of a powerful king like William I is enough to send the aristocracy off to protect their holdings, and such would again happen upon the death of Rufus; no doubt Orderic treats this post mortem violence as a normal occurrence.¹¹⁷ In doing so Orderic tried to censure the aristocracy for their violent tendencies in the power vacuum following a transfer of power.

What is interesting about the majority of these cases is that Robert of Bellême is either involved directly in acts of violence against the church or the peasantry, or associated with them via his placement within Orderic's narrative. After Robert Curthose is denied any lordship of Normandy or England while his father is still alive, he leaves Normandy, accompanied by Robert of Bellême among others. Orderic held these men in low esteem. "...Immensely arrogant, ferocious and terrible against their enemies, and always undertaking deeds of great evil and boldness."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ OV, iv. pp. 102, 146, 148.

¹¹⁷ OV, v. p. 292, OV, iv. p. 102, 198.

¹¹⁸ OV. iii. p. 102. "superbia immanes, feritate contrariis hostibus terribiles, ac ad arduum nefas inchoandum nimis procaces."

When the Conqueror died in 1087, Orderic describes how “Just then, a change beyond measure was made suddenly in Normandy.”¹¹⁹ After this he wrote that when Robert of Bellême heard of William’s death, he quickly rode off to Alençon to drive William’s garrisons out of his castles. If Robert failed in putting his own men into these fortifications, he burnt them to the ground so they could not be used against him.¹²⁰ After Robert Curthose released Robert in 1088 from his first stint in prison for his part in the rebellion in the same year, Orderic blamed him for a whole series of disorders across Normandy. Orderic depicted Robert taking every opportunity to cause disturbances. He prevented the duke’s allies from aiding him and threatened his domains. He attributed to Robert such brutal crimes as butchery, torture, and inciting warfare, accusing him of giving no succor to the Church, and instead of aiding and supporting it, he plundered and ravaged.¹²¹ He seized the lands and castles of his neighbors, blinding, mutilating, and oppressing them. Orderic’s account of Robert’s evil deeds begins specifically and becomes increasingly generalized as he writes. “So immense suffering sprang up daily, vengeance or greed caused injury to be piled upon injury, crumbling all man’s property and driving the poor to starvation.”¹²²

Another detailed account of Robert’s evil can be found in Orderic’s account of the siege of Saint-Céneri. Robert threatened to destroy St. Évroul itself if the monks refuse to aid him in the construction of his castle, and all but requires the monks to submit to his

¹¹⁹ OV, iv. pp. 112. “Tunc in Normannia subito facta est nimia rerum mutatio.”

¹²⁰ OV, iv, pp. 112-115.

¹²¹ OV, iv. p. 158.

¹²² OV, iv. p. 158-160. “Sic immensa cotidie detrimenta crescebant et pro vindicta uel acquisitione damna damnis adiecta res mortalium conterebant, terrigenasque ad inediam minabant.”

lordship. Orderic also attests that the monks of Séez, Troarn, and Le Mans also suffered from Robert's cruel assaults.¹²³ In retaliation, Abbot Serlo of Séez excommunicated Robert. He also placed all of Robert's lands under an interdict so that monks could not celebrate the divine offices or bury the dead.¹²⁴ Robert was unaffected by this crippling spiritual blow, and Orderic noted that he even refused to heed the bishop's orders.¹²⁵ Orderic's description of Robert's nature and deeds is one of the most memorable of the *Ecclesiastical History*. He quotes Exodus in relating how Robert "unmovable, like Pharaoh" and "just like Ishmael" sent out armed bandits to harass monks, churchmen and the peasantry.¹²⁶ Orderic makes sure to illustrate how these assaults reduced the people to ruin.¹²⁷ After describing Robert's misdeeds and his strained relationship with his family and friends, Orderic goes on to tell how both Maine and Normandy were affected by Robert's violent acts. "Normandy was often disturbed by the evil gossip and disloyalty of this man, and the area around the county of Maine was destroyed by his brutality, stealing, killing, and burning."¹²⁸ The monks of Maine, St. Évroul, and other monasteries eventually attempt to placate Robert by offering him sums of money from tallages of their estates.¹²⁹ In Orderic's view, this is a key indicator of the flaccid authority of the King of England and the Duke of Normandy.

¹²³ OV, iv. p. 296.

¹²⁴ OV, iv. p. 296-298.

¹²⁵ OV, iv. p. 298.

¹²⁶ OV, iv. p. 298. "induratus ut Pharaon[...] Ipse sicut Ismahel..."

¹²⁷ OV, iv. p. 298.

¹²⁸ OV, iv. p. 300. "Diris conatibus et tergiuersationibus prefati Ianionis Neustria saepe turbatus est, et Cenomannica regio uicinitasque circumiacens prediis ac cedibus incendiisque feraliter profligata est."

¹²⁹ OV, iv. p. 300.

Orderic further associated atrocity with Robert in his description of Robert's rebellion in 1102. As Henry advanced toward the town of Shrewsbury, he passed through a forest dubbed *Huvel hegen*, or 'evil path.' Orderic described this area as one in which hidden archers would lie hidden and assault passerby. It is significant that Orderic positions this account of an evil forest just before Henry attacks one of the main centers of Robert of Bellême's power in England. Henry's actions are also noteworthy in that he fells many of the trees in the forest in order to make the road wider and safer for travelers.¹³⁰ Orderic's readers would not miss the symbolic force of this narrative. It foreshadows Robert's eventual downfall and imprisonment by King Henry, and it associates Shrewsbury with Robert's reputation for illicit violence.

When Henry expels Robert from England after suppressing the 1102 rebellion, Orderic blames the concurrent disorder in Normandy on him. First he relates how Robert "left a trail of burning and carnage behind him."¹³¹ He attacks his companions, ravages their estates, and tortures them in his dungeons. Villages and churches were decimated, and Orderic describes how no one was able to resist Robert without the support of a viable leader.¹³² In a prelude to the battle of Tinchebrai in 1106, Orderic again connects Robert with the disorders in Normandy. In Orderic's view, the fact that Robert Curthose made peace with Robert of Bellême as one of the reasons why Normandy sunk to such great depths. The rising of a whole manner of malcontents is associated with the reconciliation of the two men. Orderic writes that during this time not a soul provided for

¹³⁰ OV, vi. p. 28.

¹³¹ OV, vi. p. 30. "caedibus et incendiis uehementur aggrauauit."

¹³² OV, vi. pp. 30-32.

the Church as they should, leaving it to be consumed by neighbors “like a sheep left behind to the mercy of wolves’ teeth.”¹³³ When Curthose rekindled the friendship with his brother, Henry leaves for England, and the violence begins anew, at the instigation of Robert of Bellême.

I am not able to speak of the destruction brought by the savage men of the area. Soon the province was defiled by killing and rapine, and after staling valuables and slaying men, the burned the houses standing together. The poor fled France with their wives and children, and endured to the full great hardship in exile. Therefore the Normans, who had conquered the English and Apulians in their native lands, now mourning and miserable, labor and lament in the fields of France. In their fields which were reduced in solitude for lack of sowers, burs and nettles and other useless herbs completely filled the region and multiplied.¹³⁴

When Henry leaves for England, Robert of Bellême serves as the natural symbol of the inevitable disorder that breaks out. Orderic portrays Serlo, bishop of Séez, giving a speech to King Henry which, among a great description of the evils committed upon the Norman church and people, also mourns the burning of the church of Tournay by Robert. Before Henry’s crossing to Normandy to confront Curthose in 1105, Henry addresses his brother in a speech which illustrates Henry’s legitimacy while also perpetuating the feeble image of Curthose.

The Church of God used to be called a house of prayer, but you will now be able to view it shamefully filled with worldly things. [...] made a communal wine-cellar for lack of a protector. [...] The Church is made a sanctuary for the downtrodden.¹³⁵

¹³³ OV, vi. p. 56. “quos indisciplinate persequentibus uelut oues lupinis in dentibus ulto reliquerit.”

¹³⁴ OV, vi. pp. 58-60. “tunc pestilentes indigenae plus quam dici potest efferati sunt. Mox cedibus et rapinis prouinciam maculauerunt, raptisque praedis et hominibus occisis domos passim concremauerunt. Coloni vero cum uxoribus et liberis in Gallias fugerunt, et ingentes erumnas in exilio perpassi sunt. Sic nimirum Normanni qui se Anglos et Apulos uicisse in suis sedibus gloriabantur, nunc lugubres et miseri Gallicis in aruis laborabant et lamentabantur, in ortis uero suis qui cultore carentes in solitudine redigebantur. Cardui et urticae cum aliis inutilibus herbis omnia replebant nimiumque multiplicabantur.”

¹³⁵ OV, vi. p. 62. “Domus orationis olim dicta est basilica Dei, quam nunc potestis cernere turpiter impletam immunda suppellectili. [...] pro penuria iusti defensoris facta est apotheca populi. [...] Praesidium itaque uulgi facta est aeclesia.”

It would be difficult for Orderic to create a more stirring image of the abuses against the church under Curthose and Robert of Bellême. The church is the final refuge from violent men, and it is filled with secular goods not due to moneychangers, but to evil outside the church. When Robert of Bellême flees after his defeat at the hands of Henry at Tinchebrai, Orderic makes sure to include a description of the ever present outlaws' and malefactors' attempts to escape as well, even going so far as to disguise themselves for fear of discovery by the righteous ruler of England and Normandy.¹³⁶

When Robert conducted his feud with Geoffrey of Mortagne, Orderic extrapolated the violence of a comparatively normal aristocratic conflict to include all of Normandy, and one gets the impression that Robert himself is perpetuating this wider violence.¹³⁷ After the pacification of the Rouen riot in 1090, Robert is included in a group of nobles who capture citizens of Rouen and keep them captive in dungeons. Robert's men take captives as well, strip them of possessions and mistreat them.¹³⁸ In this case Orderic is associating Robert's men with the cruelty of their lord. Orderic puts this comment in the Pope's mouth, calling Robert one who "dominates the Normans."¹³⁹ Thus, Orderic even perverts Robert's acts of acceptable violence to accuse him of perpetuating excessive conflict. Orderic's lament follows this description that all the men of Normandy misuse their wealth to oppress others. He quotes the prophet Jeremiah to

¹³⁶ OV, vi. p. 90.

¹³⁷ OV, iv. p. 162.

¹³⁸ OV, iv. p. 226.

¹³⁹ OV, vi. p. 286. "Normannis dominabantur."

show how the Normans are sinking from a once-great height into a pit of violent disorder and depravity.¹⁴⁰

Due to Robert, “Now just like Babylon she [Normandy] drinks from the same cup of distress that she wretchedly used to intoxicate others.”¹⁴¹ In Orderic’s view, Normandy is sunk in evil itself, and it is certainly no mistake that Robert’s cruelties were positioned just before a colorful account of pan-Norman vice, atrocity, and cruelty.¹⁴² Readers of *The Ecclesiastical History* would well remember how Robert’s mother incited her husband to evil deeds. Robert’s evil poisons his men just as his mother’s vice infected Roger. Even acts which likely were not so out of control, like Robert’s feuds with Geoffrey and Rotrou of Mortagne, were invoked by Orderic to give Robert of Bellême’s taint of evil. Like his mother before him, Robert incites others to evil deeds, and his men are frequently associated with chaotic misdeeds.

Throughout *The Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic depicts the Normans as a people capable of great and noble deeds, as long as a strong ruler restrains them. These accounts are all rather formulaic, normally emphasizing the near invincibility of the Normans under optimum conditions, yet also illustrating the tendency of the Normans to rebel violently against their lords if left to their own devices.¹⁴³ Orderic also cites their innate proclivity to violence. He uses memorable language, describing how Normans “mutilate and devour themselves, for they desire rebellion, strive for sedition, and make all evil

¹⁴⁰ Jeremiah 51: 7.

¹⁴¹ OV, iv. p. 226. “Nunc sicut Babilon de eodem bibit tribulationum calice unde nequiter alios solita est inebriare.”

¹⁴² OV, iv. pp. 226-228.

¹⁴³ OV, iv. pp. 82, v. 24, vi. p. 456.

manifest.”¹⁴⁴ In one notable example, Orderic portrays Normandy as akin to a woman oppressed by her children and suffering under extreme labor pains.

But although Normandy was not disturbed from without, nevertheless she could by no means delight in peace and safety, because she was badly molested by her own sons, and suffered continual distress in the belly, as a woman enduring labor. [...] But because other struggles divide them one after another, they arm themselves to mortally wound each other's entrails; though they are victorious over other peoples they conquer themselves, and they are made a laughing-stock to their neighboring, watchful enemies. They mutually and mercilessly murder each other, so that their mother's eyes are frequently weeping.¹⁴⁵

Her sons have turned violent. Orderic compares the Norman potential for great deeds to that of Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar, the Persians and Medes under Cyrus, and the Macedonians under Alexander.¹⁴⁶ Orderic specifically points out the fact that a good duke or king would be able to bring out the full Norman potential for conquest. He does this in order to prove that William the Conqueror and Henry I restrain the Norman people and redirect their ferocity to better ends.

Orderic uses Robert as an avenue for illustrating this very fierceness of the Normans that he often describes. Orderic demonstrates this by the frequent outbreaks of violence, pillage, rapine, burning, and general disorder placed throughout his narrative. There are, however, instances where Robert behaves in an acceptably violent way, as when he enters into a feud with Geoffrey of Mortagne. Geoffrey burnt the village of Échauffour, scattering the inhabitants and carrying off loot, yet his deeds are acceptable

¹⁴⁴ OV, iii. 98, iv. p. 82. “Alioquin sese uicissim dilaniant atque consumunt. Rebelliones enim cupiunt, seditiones appetunt, et ad omne nefas prompti sunt.” vi. p. 456.

¹⁴⁵ OV, vi. p. 456. “Ast Normannia licet ab exteris non inquietaretur, pacis tamen securitate nequaquam fruebatur, quoniam a filiis suis nequiter uexabatur, et indesinentem angustiam uentris quasi parturiens patiebatur [...] Ceterum quia discordia ipsos ab inuicem segregat, et in sua uiscera letaliter armat exterorum uictores a sese superantur, et uicinis hostibus cum ludibrio spectantibus mutuis ictibus immisericorditer iugulantur, unde suae matris oculi crebro lacrimantur.”

¹⁴⁶ OV, vi. p. 456.

because he carries them out for a specific purpose. Orderic depicts Robert as participating in needless butchery and pillaging.¹⁴⁷ When Rotrou of Mortagne feuds with Robert, Orderic portrays the entire enterprise as a vicious display of violence between members of the aristocracy, affecting both the church and the poor.¹⁴⁸ What is interesting is that Orderic describes these episodes as being conducted in such a needlessly brutal manner. His persecutions and assaults on the church are also in direct violation of the Truce of God set forth during Orderic's account of William I's reign.¹⁴⁹ Orderic's purpose here is to portray Robert as the image of the darker qualities inherent in the whole Anglo-Norman nobility.

As Stephen White has forcefully argued, violence was an essential aristocratic prerogative that was used to settle disputes and claim rights to property.¹⁵⁰ However, Orderic does not elaborate on who is perpetrating the disorder and to whom, giving the impression that these periods of chaotic violence have no political motivation, cause, or goal. The descriptions of violent acts clearly indicate a perceived general disorder. The violence portrayed by Orderic often takes place during periods of dynastic change or periods of rebellion against royal authority. It is clear, however, that the random descriptions of violence without an executor found within the narrative are not signs of a widespread political or social mutation in the eleventh century. They are rhetorical devices used to discredit both Robert Curthose and Robert of Bellême, albeit indirectly.

¹⁴⁷ OV, iv. p. 160.

¹⁴⁸ OV, iv. p. 252; vi. p. 396.

¹⁴⁹ OV, iii. p. 32.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen D. White, "Feudal Revolution," 209.

Orderic's use of Robert ultimately comments on the Anglo-Norman aristocracy in several ways. He knows that this is a violent society and he knows that in reality Robert is not the only magnate who performs atrocious acts in the process of conducting feuds or disputes with their secular and ecclesiastical neighbors. His attribution of nearly every kind of illicit violence to Robert and his vilification of Robert's legitimate acts of violence is simultaneously a harsh criticism of the nobility. Orderic describes purposeful acts of destruction in order to make him more identifiable to his contemporaries, who would have been familiar with such behavior, and likely perpetuated similar deeds themselves. The explosions of banditry and destruction of secular and ecclesiastical property describe the normal pangs of power transference, but Orderic links them to Robert in order to demonstrate the true place of violence in aristocratic society.

In Orderic's view, violence must have a purposeful goal in order to be effective. For him, Robert is the physical embodiment of the darker, violent nature of the Normans which shows itself readily if not tempered by a strong ruler. He shows a great admiration for the great heights that the Normans are capable of reaching, and he cites their conquests in England, Sicily, Italy, and Antioch as evidence of this. In contrast, Robert's mistreatment of the church and his aristocratic and ecclesiastical peers serves as an illustration of how far the Normans are capable of falling if they give in to the temptation to violence and the harassment of the church. The description of his conduct and career in *The Ecclesiastical History* functions as a warning to the early twelfth-century nobility. This warning attempts to discuss the correct use of violence and the potential of the Normans for good or ill, but Orderic is also concerned with acceptable aristocratic

conduct in both war and peace, and he uses Robert to reveal the nature of divine punishment, penance, and repentance.

Robert of Bellême, Aristocratic Conduct, and Didactic Memory

Among the most vital issues that Orderic wishes to address in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* concern aristocratic conduct toward peers in both war and peace, aristocratic behavior toward kinship groups and within emotional communities. Robert of Bellême plays a central role in Orderic's exploration of these issues of conduct and societal roles. Orderic's use of Robert in this fashion serves the purpose of teaching wider lessons to contemporaries by using Robert as a narrative device. Orderic often adheres to a discourse of opposites when describing Robert's actions. He wishes to show that Robert is indeed a knight of great prowess, yet by his great worthiness he can fall the hardest. In addition, Orderic's picture is one of a man who breaks all the contemporary rules of aristocratic society, in both war and peace. In addition, Orderic illustrated Robert as a man with no empathy or respect for his secular and ecclesiastical peers or his family. Indeed, because Robert shatters all accepted rules of aristocratic social mores and displays wild outbursts of animal fury, Orderic depicts him as the knightly image of Lucifer.

Often Orderic engages in a narrative use of opposites in order to illustrate his points. Scholars have explored this medieval mode of thought to great effect.¹⁵¹ Orderic often positions depictions of Robert's unsurprisingly despicable deeds alongside other

¹⁵¹ Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted: The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth Century Thought*.

aristocrats whom he described in exemplary terms.¹⁵² Doing this allows for a compelling story, but also helps to hammer home Orderic's positions regarding noble behavior.

Orderic is well aware of Robert's virtues as a *miles*.¹⁵³ Although descriptions of his prowess are relatively positive in tone, Orderic often bookends his praise with detailed descriptions of Robert's horrible deeds, as if to dilute his merit with evil.¹⁵⁴ This in itself is evidence of Orderic's use of opposites to construct an image. An example of this can be found when Orderic describes Robert's excessive cruelties at the siege of Saint Céneri.

Certainly he was a great knight, potent in arms and tactics, ingenious, eloquent, and mighty, but everything was marred by his excessive pride and cruelty, and he hid the talents with which Heaven had endowed him under a sombre mass of evil deeds.¹⁵⁵

Here Orderic admits that Robert is capable of good deeds, but his pride and savagery completely overwhelm his potential for good. Satanic overtones are also put in place, in which Robert is discussed as a fallen knight. Repeatedly Orderic makes comments about his prowess. In 1097, when William Rufus conducted a war against King Philip of France for control of the Vexin, Robert is called "the first of knights."¹⁵⁶

Orderic is sparse in true praise of Robert, but because he admits Robert's virtue, he casts him in the mold of Lucifer. If Robert is a great knight, then he can fall the

¹⁵² OV, iv, p. 160, 228-232.

¹⁵³ OV, iv, p. 158.

¹⁵⁴ OV, iv, pp. 158-162.

¹⁵⁵ OV, iv, p. 298. "Miles quidem magnus erat in armis et acurrimus, ingenio et eloquentia cum fortitudoine pollenat, sed nimio tumore et crudelitate omnia polluebat, scelerumque nefaria congerie dona sibi diuinitus prestita obscurabat."

¹⁵⁶ OV, v, p. 214. "princeps militiae"

hardest. This notion of a Robert as a fine aristocrat who surpassed all his peers in virtue and dropped into great evil is a lesson in itself. By using such a discourse of opposites, Orderic illustrated that even the best men are still capable of great harm if they wish. The tension inherent in this discourse made the contrast between extreme virtue and extreme sin all too clear to Orderic's audience.

Robert's conduct in battle simultaneously displays the best and worst natures of the aristocratic chivalric ethos, and his conduct in battle is clear evidence of this dichotomy. A discourse of opposing forces is in place here; Orderic admits Robert's skill, and then maligns it. At times Robert is defeated by enemies who are more morally sound than he is. It is clear that Orderic is putting great effort into depicting him darkly, even though much of his military activities are rather practical. In 1091, when Robert Curthose besieged Courcy, Orderic depicts Robert as a monster who fought with trickery and violence.¹⁵⁷ He is renowned as a master of siege craft, which would have been invaluable to medieval commanders. During his feud with Geoffrey of Rotrou, Robert is illustrated as not wishing to engage in open battle with Geoffrey, preferring to stay behind fortifications, paying no heed when his enemies ravage his lands. Robert is acting practically in this passage,¹⁵⁸ as sieges were preferable in an age when open battle could have devastating consequences for a commander. Orderic reduced Robert's advantages in that he suggests that Robert is a coward. No doubt Robert's contemporaries would see little cowardice in preferring siege warfare to open battle.

¹⁵⁷ OV, iv. p. 232.

¹⁵⁸ Kathleen Hapgood Thompson, "Robert of Bellême Reconsidered," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1991): 283.

Orderic imparts evil to Robert's otherwise legitimate military practices by writing that he built a siege machine on Christmas, burning it after Robert's forces fled the siege of Courcy.¹⁵⁹ He also immolated civilians in the church of Tournai.¹⁶⁰ By tainting Robert's conduct in warfare with trickery and atrocity, he describes Robert as a man who disregards the rules of war set down by the Church and aristocratic society. Burning civilians accomplishes no tangible military objective, and constructing siege towers when fighting is prohibited shows deliberate contempt for ecclesiastical precedent. In Orderic's view, Robert is a great soldier who paradoxically shows little restraint in accomplishing his aims in war. In Orderic's view, Robert of Bellême's tactics in war as well as his general behavior were full of trickery and deceit. Before Tinchebrai in 1106, Robert Curthose warns King Henry to quickly take Falaise, "Truly, Robert of Bellême may confuse you by some trick and, by fortifying this mighty castle before you do, he will oppose you for some time."¹⁶¹

At Courcy Robert's enemies drove him back after he conducted "every kind of trick or manly deed."¹⁶² When Robert attempts to take Saint Céneri, he is called a "lurking soldier"¹⁶³ by Orderic. When he finally takes the fortress, he burns everything within it.¹⁶⁴ Helias of Maine defeated Robert in the Sonnois on the River Riolt after

¹⁵⁹ OV, iv. p. 232.

¹⁶⁰ OV, vi. p. 62.

¹⁶¹ OV, vi. p. 90 "ne Robertus de Belisimo te surreptione preueniat aliqua, et firmissimam munitionem preoccupans per nonnulla tibi resistat tempora."

¹⁶² OV, iv. p. 232 "dolus et viribus."

¹⁶³ OV, iv. p. 292. "uafer insidiator."

¹⁶⁴ OV, iv. p. 292.

Robert attacked him in an ambush.¹⁶⁵ When Henry travels with his army to Shrewsbury and enters the *Huvel hegen*, Orderic depicts it as a place where evil men could lie in wait to treacherously throw missiles at the army.¹⁶⁶ Robert also attempts to trick Henry by promising to surrender his fortress of the Dive.¹⁶⁷ Henry later discovered the trick and took Robert into captivity. During the conflicts in Maine in 1097, Robert encourages William Rufus to attack Le Mans in January, which Orderic notes is not the war season. Robert assures William that the garrison of Le Mans was scattered and did not expect him to attack.¹⁶⁸ William's assault results in great suffering on both sides, and Orderic puts Robert and his cruel garrisons at the center of this conflict.

After Tinchebrai, Robert reconciles with Henry on the advice of Helias of Maine, although Orderic notes that his surrender was insincere.¹⁶⁹ This particular treachery is reiterated at Robert's eventual trial.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, it seems that Robert's only real act of true loyalty is his support of William Clito as an heir to the Norman ducal throne. Robert supported Clito because he was Curthose's son, and Robert of Bellême was always Curthose's ally. "As a result some lost the blessing of the powerful king who ruled over them, and in many ways made themselves suspects."¹⁷¹ Yet even this legitimate act of loyalty is barely described by Orderic, and is cast as a move against Henry's authority.

¹⁶⁵ OV, v. p. 226.

¹⁶⁶ OV, vi. p. 28.

¹⁶⁷ OV, vi. p. 80.

¹⁶⁸ OV, v. pp. 232-234.

¹⁶⁹ OV, vi. pp. 96-98.

¹⁷⁰ OV, vi. p. 178.

¹⁷¹ OV, vi. p. 164. "Unde nonnulli potentem sceptrigerum qui tunc dominabatur eis offendebant, seseque suspectos pluribus modis faciebant."

Orderic's thus attributes to Robert great military skill and ingenuity along with an element of cowardice and trickery.

Mutilation, torture, and imprisonment were all acts for which Robert was infamous, even in times of peace. Orderic goes so far as to label him twice as a "relentless executioner," who tortured men.¹⁷² Although he cites no victims, Orderic accuses Robert of mutilating fellow aristocrats.¹⁷³ When Orderic describes the exactions of Robert of Bellême against St. Évroul, he enters into a detailed description of Robert's mutilations and tortures. He writes that Robert mutilated prisoners by cutting off their hands and feet, while taking a sadistic pleasure in introducing new methods of torture. He even links Robert to the deeds of Nero, Domitian, and other evil men. Robert laughs at the critics of his actions, joking with his cronies as he tortures his victims. Ransoms hold no appeal for him, and he greatly prefers torture and mutilation to increasing his wealth.¹⁷⁴ A similar account of Robert's maltreatment of prisoners is given when Robert was banished to Normandy after the rebellion of 1102.¹⁷⁵ At the siege of Courcy, Robert insults Gerard, bishop of Séz, by imprisoning his servant, Richard of Gaprée. The bishop laid an interdict on Curthose's whole army, which eventually procures the boy's release.¹⁷⁶ During William Rufus's siege of Le Mans, Orderic notes that there were over

¹⁷² OV, iv. pp. 158, 300. "inexorabilis carnifex"

¹⁷³ OV, iv. p. 160, v. p. 30.

¹⁷⁴ OV, iv. p. 298.

¹⁷⁵ OV, vi. p. 30.

¹⁷⁶ OV, iv. p. 234-236.

three hundred prisoners in Robert's dungeons.¹⁷⁷ Orderic is not the only twelfth-century chronicler to comment on Robert's sadism.

Having taken [the count of Mortain's] little godson as a hostage, in return for some moderate offense of the father he blinded him, tore out the eyes of the miserable child with his own impious nails. He was full of hypocrisy and flattery. He would deceive the simple-hearted with his serene visage and affable speech, while those who knew of his malice quaked in their fear; for there was no greater indication of future calamity than a pretense of eloquent words from him.¹⁷⁸

C. Warren Hollister has effectively argued that acts of mutilation were the prerogative of royal authority, and he also points out that Robert's pleasure in torture and mutilation was indicative of an evil personality.¹⁷⁹ In addition to this, Robert usurps Henry's authority by performing acts of mutilation, and this makes Henry's eventual capture and imprisonment of him righteous. His treatment of prisoners shows Orderic's preoccupation with painting Robert as a man with no compassion or empathy.

Likewise, Robert shows no regard for his aristocratic and ecclesiastical peers, and he treats his family with indifference. Indeed, Orderic writes that he was, "intolerable to loved friends and subordinates."¹⁸⁰ In the chaos of the power vacuum after the death of the Conqueror, Robert drives the royal garrison out of not only his own castles, but also the castles of his lay neighbors, "for he did not recognize an equal to himself."¹⁸¹ Orderic

¹⁷⁷ OV, v. p. 234.

¹⁷⁸ William of Malmesbury *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom, R. A. B. Thompson, R. M. Mynors, (Oxford University Press, 1998) 398. 1, 5-7. "tum in hoc, quod puerulum ex baptismo filiolum, quem in obsidatum acceperat, pro modico delicto patris excecavit, lumina miselli unguibus nefandis abrumpens; simulationis et argutiarum plenus, frontis sereno et sermonum affabilitate credulos decipiens, gnaros autem malitiae exterritans, ut nullum esset maius futurae calamitatis inditium quam pretensae affabilitatis eloquium."

¹⁷⁹ C. Warren Hollister, "Royal Acts of Mutilation: The Case Against Henry I," *Albion* 10 (1978): 332.

¹⁸⁰ OV, iv. p. 298. "intolerabilem familiaribus amicis et clientibus faciebat."

¹⁸¹ OV, iv. p. 112-114. "sibi pares dedignabatur."

also writes that he went to great lengths to control his peers, wearing them down with repeated attacks.¹⁸² Orderic often links this power grasping to Robert's pride, claiming that he had power far beyond all that was normal for a man of his origins or background.¹⁸³

Orderic also accuses Robert of depriving his peers of their own estates. The future King Henry I took the fortress of Domfront from Robert, and held it against his brothers because they had deprived him of his inheritance. Yet Orderic plainly associates Robert with this injustice by making him one of Henry's enemies.¹⁸⁴ Robert deprives Hugh of Nonant of his lands, and they were later restored to him after he surrendered Rouen to Henry I on Robert Curthose's orders.¹⁸⁵ Orderic relates that Robert held both Domfront and Bellême because he refused to allow anyone to share his power or wealth.¹⁸⁶ Henry I later recalls all the nobles whose property was seized and returns their estates to them.¹⁸⁷ Robert's lack of concern for his social equals is in direct contrast to how the aristocracy was supposed to treat the church and their own families. Orderic's descriptions of Robert's coldness towards his contemporaries have a shock value which instructs readers on the proper relationship between an aristocrat, his kin group, and the church.

Ecclesiastics are not safe from Robert's abuses either, as is clearly illustrated from Orderic's portrait of his treatment of Mother Church. "He never protected, provided for,

¹⁸² OV, iv. p. 158.

¹⁸³ OV, iv. pp. 228-230.

¹⁸⁴ OV, iv. p. 292.

¹⁸⁵ OV, vi. p. 92.

¹⁸⁶ OV, vi. p. 398.

¹⁸⁷ OV, vi. p. 180.

or supported Mother Church as a son ought to, but like a stepson attacked and looted her.”¹⁸⁸ During his feud with Rotrou of Mortagne, Orderic slanders Robert by claiming that he frequently violated the peace of God, tearing apart his children like wolves in the flock.¹⁸⁹ Robert’s actions toward St. Évroul are understandably the most well documented. As stated above, Robert threatened to burn the abbey if the monks would not aid him in the construction of new castles. He lays the church lands in his dominions to waste, and as a result the monks almost starve.

The monks of Troarn, Le Mans, and Séez bore witness to his cruelties as well. Robert also burned the cloister of Almenèches, and scattered the nuns. Orderic knew of this because one of their number, Emma, came to live at St. Évroul after the abbey was destroyed.¹⁹⁰ Abbot Serlo seems to be the only man who dared to defy Robert’s atrocities against the church. This is understandable, given Orderic’s high regard for the abbot and his career.¹⁹¹ Serlo excommunicated Robert twice,¹⁹² and only one of these was heeded. Robert also persecuted Ralph, abbot of Séez. Orderic makes sure to present him as “a cheerful, gentle, and loveable man.”¹⁹³ Robert burned the church of Tournai, along with forty-five victims within.¹⁹⁴ Eventually, Robert acted violently toward Serlo after he has been elected to the episcopacy of Séez; he assaults the archdeacon John due to his

¹⁸⁸ OV, iv. p. 158. “Sanctam aecclesiam non ut filius matrem honoravit, adiuuit atque vestivit, sed velut priuignus nouercam deturpauit, oppressit ac spoliauit.”

¹⁸⁹ OV, iv. p. 252.

¹⁹⁰ OV, vi. p. 36.

¹⁹¹ OV, vi. pp. 338-339.

¹⁹² OV iv. p. 234; vi. p. 46.

¹⁹³ OV, vi. p. 46. “iocundum et facetum amabilemque uirum”

¹⁹⁴ OV, vi. p. 62.

support of the bishop.¹⁹⁵ This disregard for churchmen is not only indicative of a simple lack of respect, but is also Orderic's way of justifying Robert's eventual fall. The senseless slaughter of innocent villagers and the scattering of nuns is a way for Orderic to emphasize the proper way for the aristocracy to treat the church by showing the many ways in which Robert fails to do so.

Almost unsurprisingly, Orderic describes Robert as treating even his own family with contempt.

Robert indeed, surpassed his brothers in wealth and tyranny, and forcibly disinherited them. He invaded all the patrimony of his ancestors in Normandy and Maine and kept sole possession of it for a long time.¹⁹⁶

Robert also has no regard for his son William, nor his wife Agnes. Agnes is little more than his slave girl whom he keeps locked up in the castle of Bellême. Eventually she was aided by a chamberlain, and went to stay with Adela the countess of Chartres.¹⁹⁷ She never went back to Robert, staying on her ancestral lands in Ponthieu.¹⁹⁸ These passages reveal that Robert has no respect for either his secular or monastic social equals. Despite this, Orderic's descriptions of Robert's misdeeds are decidedly asexual, in stark contrast to King William Rufus.

In order to summarily exclude Robert of Bellême completely from the bounds of acceptable aristocratic relationships and elicit a vivid biblical parallel, Orderic attributes

¹⁹⁵ OV, vi. p. 144.

¹⁹⁶ OV, iv. p. 158. "Robertus enim ut diuitiis sic tirannide omnes fratres suos superauit, et omne antecessorum suorum in Normannia et Cenomanico rure patrimonium exhereditas fratribus inuasit, et longo tempore solus optinuit."

¹⁹⁷ Kimberly A. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois: Countess and Lord, c. 1067-1137* (Portland: Four Courts Press, 2007), 172-173. LoPrete argues that Agnes' flight to Adela's court was due to the fact that it was a convenient and safe retreat. Agnes could also garner support amongst the regional nobility against her husband.

¹⁹⁸ OV, iv. p. 300.

wild outbursts of rage to him. When Robert is expelled from Normandy after the rebellion of 1102, Orderic enters into a revealing discussion about the excesses of his conduct, particularly in regard to his display of anger.

Like that dragon about whom John the apostle wrote in the Apocalypse, who was thrown from heaven and vented his rabid fury by persecuting the dwellers of earth, the fierce agitator of England eagerly embraced the Normans with fury. He preyed upon and burned their estates, and tortured to death or transfixed knights and any others who he was able to capture. He was so cruel that he chose to torment his prisoners rather than enrich himself on ransoms offered for their release.¹⁹⁹

Scholars have made the perceptive argument that this description indicates the border between acceptable and unacceptable levels of aristocratic anger.²⁰⁰ However, this passage also serves as a brief and powerful summary of all Robert's malevolent behavior. In using a satanic allusion, Orderic gave all Robert's prior deeds a diabolic pallor. This casts the lord of Bellême in the image of a knight completely corrupted by his sins. Thus, the best of his knightly traits are put to depraved use. Robert is a fallen knight who uses his prowess to oppress and torture anyone who lies within his diabolical grip. He refuses to hold his peers for ransom, and sadistically tortures them, rather than profit in a more humane way. It is significant that Orderic places this passage only three years before

¹⁹⁹ OV, vi. p. 30. "Nam sicut draco ille de quo simnista Iohnnes in Apocalipsi scribit, de coelo proiectus in terrigenas rabiem suam feraliter exercuit. Sic seuus lanista de Britannia fugatus in Normannos furibundis irruit. Rura eorum prediis direptis ignibus conflagrauit, et milites uel alios quos capere ualebat usque ad mortem seu debilitationem membrorum cruciatibus afflixit. Tanta enim in illo erat seuitia, ut mallet captis inferre tormenta, quam pro redemptione illorum multa ditari pecunia."

²⁰⁰ See Kate McGrath, "The Politics of Chivalry: The Function of Anger and Shame in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Anglo-Norman Historical Narrative," in Belle S. Tuten and TraceyL. Billado, eds. *Feud, Violence, and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in honor of Stephen D. White* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010): 66. McGrath argues that this scene is the single instance of Orderic using satanic allusions to malign Robert. I agree with this conclusion, but I argue further that Orderic is also using it as a sort of summary of Robert's repeated violation of accepted aristocratic conduct. For Orderic, Robert is the knightly version of Satan. For the role of anger in the maintenance of aristocratic relationships in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, see Richard Barton, "'Zealous Anger' and the Renegotiation of Aristocratic Relationships in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century France," in Barbara Rosenwein, ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 153-170.

Henry I's crossing to Normandy in 1105 and his subsequent victory at Tinchebrai in 1106. Doing this further legitimates Henry's invasion, and casts the king as the slayer of the dragon that pollutes Normandy with its evil.

A careful reading of the *Ecclesiastical History* reveals that Orderic charged Robert with almost every kind of sin. Orderic reveals this further in the fact that Henry later charges Robert with forty-five unspecified offenses by Henry I in 1112.²⁰¹ Doing this allows Robert to function as a tool within the narrative. Orderic uses Robert's malevolence as a mirror to the aristocracy of his day, showing them sins that they too are capable of committing. The powerful imagery and vivid descriptions that Orderic uses reveal his ideas about the final consequences for those members of the nobility who continue to engage in such improper behavior in times of war and peace toward their peers and kinship groups. Ultimately, Robert of Bellême's constructed image suggests to the reader that if the Devil took the form of a knight, he would be identical to Robert.

Knightly Sin, Penance, and Redemption

Having painted Robert thus, Orderic uses his eventual downfall and imprisonment by Henry I as a way to examine the eventual fate of evil, as well as offer sinners a glimpse of how to absolve themselves and avoid such an end. The memorable story of Orderic indirectly ties Herlechin's Hunt to Robert of Bellême, and the episode is a poignant window into the nature of eventual punishment in store for men like Robert. Writing after Robert's imprisonment, Orderic is able to position the events of Robert's career in order to make statements regarding knightly penance and redemption.

²⁰¹ OV, vi. p. 20.

Later in his narrative, Orderic imparts Robert with a sense of paranoia, in an effort to show that sinners lose the loyalty of those around them. Robert's crimes and behavior are described as becoming increasingly more erratic in the lead up to his capture and incarceration by Henry I. Orderic wishes to show that evil will always meet an ignoble end, but he also believes that even the worst members of the aristocracy can achieve salvation. He does this by including the penitential confessions of the deceased knights William of Glos and Robert, son of Ralph the Fair. These two knights offer accounts of the violence they conducted in life, and their punishments give a foreshadowing of the fate that awaits Robert of Bellême.

Even though Orderic describes Robert as showing relative disdain for others, he occasionally enters into bouts of fear and guilt, as if he is wary lest he be reprimanded for his evil. The first instance of this fear is Orderic's attempt to paint Robert as a coward.²⁰² Orderic, in his description of Robert's many foibles, has this to say.

Terrible to many men, he feared many men; and because he knew many urging and stinging suspicions, he labored night and day in terrible fear, and he trusted in the faithfulness of other with great difficulty.²⁰³

This fear is certainly a rhetorical device which Orderic uses to illustrate the extent to which a person who participates in numerous misdeeds begins to lose the loyalty of their closest friends. Robert's anxiety is a clear message that even those who seem invincible should have concern for their behavior, and ought not to act without impunity. He also wishes to show that the loyalty of one's followers is directly tied to the morality

²⁰² OV, iv. p. 160.

²⁰³ OV, iv. p. 298. "Terribilis multis multos metuebat, et quia plures conscientia mordaci stimulante suspectos habebat, nocte, dieque meticulosus in erumnis ubique laborabat, sibique vix aliquem fidum credebat."

of the leader. The fact that Robert is suspicious of others is a clear indication that his behavior is unacceptable within aristocratic circles.

Orderic's writings on the siege of Courcy in 1091 are prelude to one of the most memorable events chronicled in *The Ecclesiastical History*. A priest named Wachelin was traveling back to the village of Bonneval in the night of January first when he was witness to a stunning vision. He heard hoof beats coming up the road, which he believed to be knights of Robert of Bellême's *familia* riding to the siege. By referring back to Robert, Orderic intended to return all of his evil deeds to the reader's mind, before discussing the penitent speeches of William of Glos and Robert, son of Ralph the Fair.

Instead of Robert of Bellême's household, it is the host of the dead known as Herlechin's Hunt. A large man carrying a mace obstructs Wachelin's passage, and he bears witness to a great procession of bandits, noblewomen, monks, prelates, and knights. Orderic described each of these groups suffering in some terrible way. All were wailing in agony for the sins they committed in life. The crowds of raiders carrying loot urge each other to hurry along, while nails that protrude from their saddles repeatedly wound the women. The churchmen ask Wachelin to pray for them, bemoaning their fates. Exotic Ethiopians and dwarves color the procession, while a grotesque demon drove the bandits. Yet, the final group were the most striking.

See, after this followed a great host of knights, in which no color was discernable but blackness and flickering fire. All rode upon large steeds, armed completely as if they were galloping to war and carrying jet black banners."²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ OV, iv. pp. 240-242. "Ecce ingens exercitus militum sequebatur et nullus color nisi nigredo et scintillans ignis in eis videbatur. Maximis omnes equis insidebant, et omnibus armis armati velut ad bellum festinabant, et nigerrima vexilla gestabant."

After attempting to steal a horse from the troupe of damned knights, Wachelin is stopped by a group of them and is accosted by one William of Glos, who begs the priest to carry a message to his wife. William is tortured by the fact that he misappropriated the property of a man who refused to repay a loan. William gave the wretch's property to his own heirs, and now suffers the torment of having a mill-shaft put around his neck which weighs as much as Rouen castle.²⁰⁵ Wachelin refuses to carry any message to William's wife, and the knight grabs him by the throat and bitterly threatens him. Wachelin recognizes another knight, Robert, son of Ralph the Fair, after some difficulty. His explanation of the nature of his punishment is instructive.

...and for the sins by which I was burdened I bear great punishment. The weapons we carry are burning, and they torment us with a powerful smell, heavy with intolerable weight, burning with an indistinguishable flame.²⁰⁶

Robert thanks Wachelin for saying a Mass for the dead at his ordination, since it rid Robert of the burden of his shield. This passage also serves as a warning to the aristocracy, giving a frightful vision of the terrors to come should they not refrain from sinful behavior. It is no coincidence that Orderic mentions Robert of Bellême at the outset of his retelling of Herlechin's Hunt.²⁰⁷ His objective is to identify the most evil man in the Anglo-Norman kingdom with a fantastic description of the punishments of

²⁰⁵ OV, iv. p. 244.

²⁰⁶ OV, iv. pp. 246-248. "et pro peccatis quibus nimis oneratus eram immania supplicia pertuli. Arma quaeferimus ignea sunt, et nos foetore teterrimo inficiunt, ingentique ponderositate nimis opprimunt, et ardore inextinguibili comburunt."

²⁰⁷ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 14-15. Kaeuper mentions the fact that Orderic mentions Robert before Herlechin's Hunt, but argues that he is the 'classic offender.' (p. 15) Kaeuper uses this episode as an indication of the level of knightly violence, and this is a lead up to his wider argument about public order. Constance Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave & Noble: Chivalry and Society in Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Bouchard's book give a fine survey of many of the major themes and issues surrounding knightly violence, Christian teaching, and chivalry.

Hell. In fact, Ralph the Fair's son offers a description of his sins that would strongly remind the reader of Robert. When Wachelin asks him what the bloody mass hanging from his heels might be, and the knight's answer is chilling.

“It is not blood, but fire, but it is a weight which I bear as if I were carrying Mont Saint-Michel. Because I employed bright, sharp spurs to hastily pour forth blood I am justly condemned to bear this enormous load on my heels...”²⁰⁸

Orderic's message is clear. The indiscriminate and eager use of violence earns eternal punishment. Mentioning Robert before entering into a story of knightly damnation returns Robert's malicious actions to the reader's mind. Orderic wishes to illustrate that Robert will suffer the same fate, no matter how mighty he appears to be in life. Yet he also makes sure to inform his audience that frequent prayer and supplication before God have the potential to free the dead from the burden of their sins.

Writing from his perspective in the aftermath of Robert's final imprisonment in 1112, Orderic illustrates Robert's career as a chaotic tailspin following the forty-five charges laid against him by Henry I. After this, Robert all but goes berserk, and many of his most famous crimes take place. His expulsion from England following the rebellion of 1102 is seen by Orderic as the cause for great evil in Normandy.²⁰⁹ He disinherits his relatives, and as a result his family and friends abandon him. At this point he enjoys the loyalty of scarcely anyone.²¹⁰ He burns Almenèches, harasses abbot Ralph of Séez,²¹¹ and

²⁰⁸ OV, iv. p. 248 “Non est sanguis sed ignis et maioris michi uidetur esse ponderis quam si ferrem super me Montem Sancti Michahelis. Et quia preciosis et acutis utebar calcaribus ut festinanter ad effundendum sanguinem iure sarcinam in talis baiulo enormem...”

²⁰⁹ OV, vi. p. 32.

²¹⁰ OV, vi. p. 34.

²¹¹ OV, vi. p. 46.

gathers allies to combat Henry.²¹² He tries to trick Henry into accepting the fortress at the Dive, but Henry eventually captures him.²¹³ Orderic then describes how a desperate Robert meets with Henry's ally Helias, count of Maine. Robert swears that "[he] will scarcely allow the man who has bound my lord in chains [...] to rule Normandy in peace."²¹⁴ Helias replies that Curthose deserves to be imprisoned, because he allowed Normandy to fall into banditry and chaos. Helias offers Robert a way out. If he will reconcile himself to Henry, all will be well. Robert capitulates, but later goes back on his word.²¹⁵ When Henry ultimately captures Robert and tries him, Orderic offers a venomous summary of his doings.

He was powerful, ingenious, greedy and cruel beyond measure, an implacable oppressor of God's Church and His poor, and, if the truth were told, unequalled for his great malice toward the divine law in the whole Christian era.²¹⁶

It is significant that Orderic has Robert's trial and incarceration take place at Bonneville, thereby linking the knightly punishments of Herlechin's Hunt with Robert's ultimate downfall. Orderic paints Robert as a man who refuses to submit to royal authority, even when fairly tried and condemned. Orderic's treatment of him serves as a way to illustrate that the greatest men fall hardest, and that all those who commit iniquity and refuse to give in and seek forgiveness for their sin will face severe and inevitable punishment.

²¹² OV, vi. p. 58.

²¹³ OV, vi. p. 82.

²¹⁴ OV, vi. p. 94. "sustinebo, ut in pace dominetur Normanniae, qui dominum meum immo suum nexuit in carcere."

²¹⁵ OV, vi. p. 178.

²¹⁶ OV, vi. p. 178. "Erat idem potens et versutus nimiaeque auariciae et crudelitatis, aecclesiae Dei pauperumque oppressor impacabilis, et si dici fas est temporibus Christianis in omni malicia incomparabilis."

In the final analysis, Robert of Bellême fills many roles in *The Ecclesiastical History* of Orderic Vitalis. It is clear that Orderic used him within the chronicle as a way to explore themes regarding the origin and inheritance of evil, and the function of violence in aristocratic society. He also uses Robert to emphasize his ideas about proper conduct within aristocratic relationships, and the correct avenues for penance and repentance. Orderic paints Robert as an embodiment of the inherent proclivity of the *gens Normannorum* toward violence and disorder if they are not restrained. Indeed, he is an image of knightly evil in almost every way. Robert of Bellême's ultimate function is to reveal to the nobility an image of their darker nature. Orderic traces Robert's evil throughout his kin group, and roots it in the female line. He attaches Robert to every imaginable kind of evil. The wider aristocracy surely committed many of Robert's evil deeds, and they make Robert more identifiable to them, as well as reinforce Orderic's moral agenda. Using a discourse of opposites, Orderic often positions Robert next to more righteous nobles in order to offer an example of correct behavior. Having done this, Orderic connects Robert to his description of Herlechin's Hunt in an effort to offer a way for nobles to repent of their sins and seek forgiveness.

Ultimately, Robert of Bellême serves as the embodiment of the perceived disorders of an age. For Orderic, he is the primary symptom of the rampant disorder alleged in the years after the Conqueror's death. Orderic's purpose in crafting Robert's image in this way is thus not only didactic but politicized. Along with William Rufus and Robert Curthose, the wicked heir of the malevolent line of Talvas must be removed in order to usher in a new period of peace and order built from the memory of William I.

How Orderic builds the memory of this cleansing of England and Normandy by Henry I is one of the main themes of *The Historia Ecclesiastica*.

CHAPTER IV

HENRY'S INVASION OF NORMANDY: THE CONQUEST REIMAGINED

Rufus's Death and the Restoration of Norman Conduct

Orderic viewed the start of the reign of Henry I as a turning point, in which the image of court and king return to the traditional Norman standards. The memory of this transition is accomplished by Orderic's description of a speech given to Henry I by Bishop Serlo of Séez on the eve of the king's crossing to Normandy in 1105. This speech and the actions which follow it demonstrate Orderic's attempt to distance Henry from the vices of Rufus, while also imparting legitimacy to Henry's rule in England and Normandy. Indeed both Orderic and Henry seem determined to graft the militant and stern image of the Conqueror onto the new reign by both symbolic and practical means.

Orderic's retelling of Bishop Serlo's sermon against the state of the Anglo-Norman kingdom and the morals of the aristocracy is similar to Orderic's earlier diatribe in many ways. He repeats the association of long hair and curled shoes to effeminacy and softness, while equating such an appearance to the prophecy of John the Revelator on Patmos.²¹⁷ The speech should be taken as a reflection of Orderic's views and a tool for his purposes, since it is impossible to know whether the words were spoken by Serlo

²¹⁷ OV, vi. p. 66. Revelation 9: 7-10.

exactly as Orderic retells them. Here the symbolic link between libertine fashions, effeminacy, sin, and weak kingship is expressed in even clearer terms. Serlo addresses Henry and his barons thus:

And since we are not able to amend all the sins which are concealed, it is fitting to cut off with the sword of the spirit those which are done openly against God, and sever them from us according to God's mandate and the precepts of the Holy Fathers. All of you wear your hair according to women's custom, which is not seemly for you who are made in the image of God and ought to take confidence in your strength like men.²¹⁸

The bishop wishes Henry to remake himself and his court in a new image concordant with that of the apostle Paul's command. If the feminine locks are cut, the sin which they symbolize will also be destroyed. If this is done, the hidden cancer of sin which flourished during Rufus's reign can move toward forgiveness and reform. Serlo makes it plain that those who wish to participate in Henry's Norman campaign against Curthose must be able to cast off femininity and weakness with the sword of the spirit, a decidedly masculine image. This is noteworthy because Rufus himself repeatedly fails to uphold the standards of lordship prescribed by Orderic. Cutting their hair enables Henry's nobles to take on proper ancestral Norman masculinity and strength, something which both Rufus and Curthose never possessed. The bishop reminds Henry and his household that as creatures made in the image of a masculine God, they must show themselves to be men through their appearance, so that their sin may wither through the physical stamp of their repentance. Orderic has Serlo quote Paul's letter to the Corinthians in order to

²¹⁸ OV, vi. p. 64. "Et quamuis omnia quae culpabiliter in occulto aguntur no possimus ad purum emendare, ea saltem quae in proptulo contra Deum fiunt gladio spiritus decet resecare, et a nobis secundum mandata Dei et sanctorum instituta patrum omnimodis amputare. Omnes femineo more criniti estis, quod non decet uos qui ad similitudinem Dei facti estis, et virili robore perfrui debetis."

hammer his point home.²¹⁹ Orderic is not against feminine behavior, but he takes issue with effeminacy manifesting in the wrong place.²²⁰ If aristocratic men cannot act according to accepted conduct, then they cannot summon the might necessary to restore effective rule in Normandy. In effect, Henry and his men must liken themselves to a sort of reverse of Samson, Judge of the Israelites. They gain the mightiness of God by shaving their heads.

In addition, those who adopt feminine styles do not merely transgress gender expectations. They are perverting the correct twelfth-century avenues for repentance.

It is not for charm or sweetness that penitents are instructed not to shave or cut their hair, but so that those shaggy criminals who appear before God with interior sins may walk outwardly hairy and unshaven before men, and proclaim by their outward deformity the sins of the man within [...] Behold, they convert what should be the squalor of repentance into an exercise in luxury.²²¹

Serlo and Orderic worry that the new style of the court might ultimately confuse the sinful with the penitent. In Orderic's view, the true merit of a man must be expressed in his outward visage, and to confuse such is to disrupt the order of society. The reversing of gender roles in the form of long hair is reserved for men who wish to show their sin to the world. Thus the nobles of the court who cast off the new fashions show themselves to be repentant and wholesome, the opposite of a penitent. Orderic is here using a discourse of opposites. Good men who look like penitents must destroy their sin by cutting their

²¹⁹ OV. vi. p. 64. I Corinthians 9: 14-15.

²²⁰ This point is argued in Constance Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted: The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 135-136.

²²¹ OV. p. 64, 65 "Penitentibus non pro decore seu delectamine iniungitur, ut non radantur nec tondeantur, sed ut sicut criminibus hirsuti et interius incompti ante Deum apparent. sic exterius hispidi et intonsi coram hominibus ambulent, et deformitatem interioris hominis per exteriorem ignominiam demonstrent [...] Ecce squalorem poenitentiae conuerterunt in exercitium luxuria."

hair, so that they might truly repent and adopt the ancestral masculine might of their fathers.

The actions of the king as reported by Orderic following Serlo's words reveal a transformation both physical and figurative.

When [the haircut] was done, the happy king sat among his barons, and the courageous bishop drew scissors from his knapsack without further ado, and first he shaved the king with his own hands and immediately afterward many of his companions and barons. The entire household of the king and those roundabout were eagerly shorn. Fearing a proclamation from the king, they cut their precious hair, and they crushed the formerly luxuriant locks as vile sweepings beneath their feet.²²²

It is difficult to know for certain whether this event took place precisely as Orderic attests. If it did, then it is noteworthy for the fact that both Henry and Orderic recognize the symbolic force of Serlo's deed. In having his hair and that of his magnates cut, Henry is distancing himself from the vices of his brother's court. He and Orderic are both hearkening back to the militant fashion of the Conqueror. Orderic believes that this act imparts legitimacy to Henry's rule, which was bitterly contested in 1106 by Henry's older brother, Robert Curthose. It is significant that Orderic paints the haircuts of the barons as stemming from free will, lest they look recalcitrant by waiting for a royal command. A discourse of opposites is also in place, in that by stamping their locks into the mud, the Norman aristocracy undergoes a moral rejuvenation. In rejecting their vanity, they gain the strength and right to conquer Normandy in Henry's name. It is also evident that Henry I would recognize the symbolic effect of such an act; he is thus somewhat complicit in his own memory construction.

²²² OV, vi. p. 66. "His itaque sictis rex cum optimatibus cunctis exultans adqueuit, et alacer episcopus continuo de mantica forpices extraxit, et prius regem ac postmodum comitem proceresque plurimos propriis manibus totondit. Omnis familia regis et conuenientes undecumque certatim attonsi sunt et edictum principale formidantes preciosos olim capillos praeseuerunt, et amicam dudum cesariem ut uiles quisquilias pedibus conculcauerunt."

Henry I and his nobles are thus remade in the image of the Conqueror, and the crossing to Normandy in 1105 is painted by Orderic as a new Norman Conquest. What is significant here is that after Rufus's fall in 1100 in the New Forest, Robert Curthose's status as a weak duke in Orderic's narrative is brought into play. Robert is cast as the final exemplar of deficient lordship whom Henry must conquer if he is to reestablish proper Norman standards of kingship. The reputation for effeminacy and weakness naturally falls to Robert Curthose, who is frequently described by Orderic as a weak ruler throughout the *Ecclesiastical History*, and whose deficient lordship is partly to blame for the immorality of the Anglo-Norman court.²²³ Pauline Stafford has argued that the Norman Conquest set a precedent for feminizing the conquered Anglo-Saxons.²²⁴ This point can be taken further in that it strengthens Orderic's association of Curthose's defeat at Tinchebrai with William's defeat of the Anglo-Saxons forty years earlier. In defeating his brother, Henry reestablishes proper Norman kingship over a realm sunk in weakness, effeminacy, and poor lordship since the death of William I.

Writing after the fact, Orderic also recognized that Henry's later victory over Robert Curthose at Tinchebrai in 1106 took place on September 28, the exact same day as William I's landing in England in 1066. William of Malmesbury also notes the dates and the forty year gap between them.²²⁵ This reinforces the symbolism of Orderic's depiction; it would not be lost on him. In Orderic's view, Henry's reign and the rule of his nobles will be as far removed from Rufus's as is possible, both practically and symbolically.

²²³ OV, iv. p. 146, v. p. 24, OV. v. p. 308.

²²⁴ Pauline Stafford, "The Meanings of Hair in the Anglo-Norman World," 164.

²²⁵ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors. Completed by R. M. Thompson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2: 475. This connection was also noted in C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 30.

Henry's court will be as morally sound and strongly ruled as Rufus's was weak and effeminate. One gets an image of Rufus as akin to a contemporary Esau, whose hairiness is linked to his undeserved birthright.

To drive the image home, Orderic concludes his account of Henry's crossing with an event which carries as much symbolic force as Henry's haircut.

During the final week of February [in 1106,] an extraordinary comet appeared in the west. Trailing its long tail toward the dawn it sent fears into many hearts, and for three weeks it glowed red at night and drew out many of the secret words of men.²²⁶

Few images could link Henry's campaigns in Normandy with William's Conquest of England so well as this one. A similar comet can be seen in the Bayeux Tapestry as a foreshadowing of William's defeat of Harold at Hastings. Similarly, Orderic uses a comet in a similar role, foretelling Henry's victory over Curthose at Tinchebrai. By placing a comet as a herald of Henry's successful campaign, Orderic is remembering the events of 1105-1106 as a second Conquest, placing the events within his own clearly defined notions of political change. Such a symbolic linking of the two Conquests serves as a clear indication by Orderic that Henry is stepping into the mantle of his father's kingship. The heavenly bodies also foreshadow periods of peace, prosperity, and order, and Orderic's memory of the peaceful rule of William I is thus grafted onto his son's accession, connecting the peace of William I's reign with the ensuing reign of his son. Since Orderic writes during the reign of Henry, he is in a position to know the extent to which Henry provided relative peace in his thirty-five year reign. At each end of the

²²⁶ OV, vi. p. 68. "Nam in ultima Februarii ebdomada mirabilis cometes in Hisperiae partibus apparuit, longissimosque crines in eoas partes emittens multorum corda terruit, et per tres septimanas sero rutilans multa de secretis hominum uerba elicuit."

disruption of Rufus's rule, Orderic symbolically links two periods of good order within his narrative.

Henry I's Ascension – The Reimagined Conqueror and the Second Norman Conquest

Interestingly, Orderic began actively comparing Robert Curthose to his brother Henry, and thus, to his memory of William the Conqueror around the time of Henry's ascension as king in 1100. In Orderic's eyes, the reign of Curthose served as a foil to that of William I. Upon the accidental death of Rufus in 1100, Orderic initiated an active program of comparison that serves to delegitimize Robert Curthose's claim to kingship precisely because he failed to meet the standards of that kingship built in Orderic's memory. Specifically, he wished to legitimize Henry I by depicting him as a son who correctly reflected the standard of regal justice and piety set by William the Conqueror. In effect, Henry was the new William, whereas Robert was the perpetual prodigal son, eventually condemned literally and symbolically to prison. Orderic reinforced this view by illustrating Henry's invasion of Normandy in 1105 as a second Norman Conquest, and the culminating conflict at Tinchebrai as a trial by battle.

Orderic hinted at the eventual success of Henry's claim to the throne earlier in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, when Orderic had William ask his youngest son wait patiently for the time when he would come to dominate over all his brothers, yet Orderic did not start actively comparing the two until Henry took the throne.²²⁷ Orderic later employed his pen

²²⁷ OV, iv, 94.

to ideologically strengthen Henry's rapid coronation in 1100, which was performed quickly following Rufus's death and during Robert's absence on the First Crusade. Since the church and aristocracy of the Anglo-Norman realm could potentially view Henry's coronation as fraudulent, Orderic began demonstrating that Henry was a better heir to the kingdom and memory of his father than Robert Curthose, creating a useful past which melded with the chronicle of Henry's victories over and imprisonment of his brother.

When Robert Curthose invaded England in the wake of Henry's coronation in 1100, Orderic downplayed it as little more than a rebellion (with Robert of Bellême in attendance) against Henry's legitimate authority. Indeed, he began to compare the two brothers as distinct opposites, initiating his attempt to damn Robert Curthose's claim to the throne:

Robert of Bellême...and many others settled on the course of betrayal, and encouraged the duke's faction initially in private and afterwards openly. The foolish duke did not even guard his own dominions, but unwisely tore it apart due to a desire for the lordship which his more active brother inherited.²²⁸

Orderic noted that Henry possessed great energy, and he wrote that the rebellious barons revolted in fear of him.²²⁹ By illustrating Henry as sole possessor of the English kingdom and the Norman duchy even as Robert still ruled it as duke, Orderic symbolically associated Henry with the undivided Anglo-Norman kingdom held by William the Conqueror and invested him with William's ancestral, supra-ducal authority.

The culminating event for Orderic was Henry's capture of Curthose at the battle of Tinchebrai in 1106. As well as being a concrete victory over Curthose's troops, the

²²⁸ OV, v. 308. "Rodbertus de Belismo...allique plures decretum prodicionis sanxerunt, et partes ducis prius clam postea palam adiuuarunt. Imprudens vero dux sua domina non seruauit, sed pro cupiditate regni quod calidior frater possidebat insipienter distraxit."

²²⁹ OV, v. 308. "metuentes."

chronicle of the conflict itself was as much an ideological piece in which Orderic delegitimized Robert Curthose and depicted Henry as the true reflection of and heir to William's kingship. Orderic did this by setting up the conflict as a trial by battle.²³⁰ When Henry crossed to Normandy in 1105 and laid siege to the town of Tinchebrai, Orderic justified the invasion and Henry's defiance of his elder brother by claiming that Henry "took up something greater than a civil war for the sake of peace in the future."²³¹ In the prelude to the battle, Orderic had Henry chastise Curthose in order to reveal to him the consequences of taking ill counsel and refusing to restrain violence against the church in Normandy. "You occupy the earth as a barren tree, and offer no fruit of justice to our Creator."²³² This admonishment was a clear follow up to William I's earlier warning to Curthose, and Orderic used it to associate Henry with his father. Henry's summation of Robert's misrule in Normandy was a précis of Orderic's viewpoint:

You hold the title of duke only up to a point. You are openly derided by your household, unable to avenge the dishonor of your injuries. Under your auspices, bloodthirsty sons of iniquity mercilessly destroy the Christian poor, and even now they empty many churches in Normandy empty of their parishioners. Seeing this, I am enflamed with the zeal of God, who rules us. I wish to pour out my soul for the safety of my brothers and the beloved land of my ancestors...I am not laboring out of greed, but from good will.²³³

²³⁰ The trial by battle and its nonviolent counterpart, the ordeal, was a part of the customary legal apparatus of medieval Europe in the late eleventh- and early twelfth-centuries. Contemporaries believed that the victor in such a trial had God on his/her side. For the function of the ordeal and trial by battle in medieval law, see Stephen D. White. "Proposing the Ordeal and Avoiding It: Strategy and Power in Western French Litigation, 1050-1110," in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), 89-123. For the history of this custom, see Robert Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²³¹ OV, vi. p. 84. "bellum plus quam civile futura pro pace suscepit."

²³² OV, vi. 86. "Tu enim terram ut arbor infructosa occupas, nullumque iustitiae fructum Creatori nostro." (Chibnall's translation.)

²³³ OV, vi. 86. "Dux quidem nomine tenus vocaris, sed a clientibus tuis palam subsannaris, nec tui contemptus iniurias ulcisceris. Crudeles ergo iniquitatis filii sub umbra tui nequiter opprimunt plebes Christianas, iamque plures pene hominibus uacuas in Normannia fecerunt parrochias. Haec videns zelo Dei

Here Orderic suggested that the title of duke of Normandy was entwined with the proper expression of lordship obligations. Since Curthose failed in his duties, Orderic rhetorically stripped him of his title. By doing so, Orderic destroyed any doubts that Henry would be victorious in the coming trial by battle at Tinchebrai. Yet Orderic's insistence that Henry was invading out of good will toward the people of Normandy also revealed that Henry's actions were politically risky and thus worth legitimizing.

Henry demanded that Curthose cede the castles and rule of Normandy to his hand, promising that Curthose would receive income from the royal treasury and authority over half of Normandy. True to form, Curthose took the bad advice of his counselors and ignored Henry's warnings just as he ignored William's.²³⁴ During the battle itself, Orderic made sure to place Henry at the forefront of the battle line, leading Normans and English on foot. In contrast, Robert was not placed among the troops at all, likely an attempt to show him as a coward. Orderic likely did this to show Henry's confidence, reinforcing his image of Tinchebrai as a trial by battle. For Orderic, the turning point in the battle was the decisive charge of Helias of Maine. "Because of this, Robert of Bellême began to flee, and the broken army yielded to the victors."²³⁵ The man who had been an ever-present member of the ducal household since the rebellion of 1079 finally deserted, an illustration both of Robert of Bellême's ultimate disloyalty to his erstwhile friend and the final blow to Robert Curthose's power. At the conclusion of the battle

qui nos regit inardesco, animamque meam pro salute fratrum et dilectae gentis patriaeque ponere efflagito...me ista moliri non pro cupiditate, sed pro bona voluntate."

²³⁴ OV, vi. p. 86-88.

²³⁵ OV, vi. 90. "Quod videns Rodbertus Belesmensis fugam iniit, et dissolutum ducis agmen victoribus cessit."

Robert Curthose was captured, and upon encountering his brother Henry the duke offered telling words:

Traitor-Normans led me astray with their deceit, away from your counsels, my brother, which would truly have been for my salvation if I had followed them. So hasten now...lest Robert of Bellême defeat you treacherously, and seizing the mightiest castles he might resist you for quite a while.²³⁶

Orderic had Curthose admit that his position was illegitimate. It is at this point, after Robert of Bellême had fled his company, that Curthose was able to admit to taking ill counsel. Orderic thus presented an image of Curthose as a suppliant after many years of defiance and rebellion against legitimate authority. Because he continuously acted as a prodigal son and refused to cede his claim to Anglo-Norman kingship, Orderic stripped the duke of all legitimacy and rights to the Anglo-Norman throne by reimagining his defeat at Tinchebrai as a trial by battle. Thus, Curthose was making his final supplication not only to Henry, but also to the image of William I as reflected in the just and pious kingship of his younger brother. Curthose did not hesitate to obey his brother as he never obeyed William, releasing the Norman castellans from their bonds of fealty to him,²³⁷ and accompanying the king to Rouen. Orderic wrote that although Henry imprisoned his brother for twenty-seven years, he provided him with all the privileges appropriate to his station, thus allaying any fears that Henry acted as a tyrant by confining his brother.

Orderic spent a great deal of ink in the aftermath of Tinchebrai justifying Curthose's incarceration. He did this initially by contrasting the features of Henry's lordship in Normandy with that of his brother:

²³⁶ OV, vi. 90. "Proditores Normanni fraudulentis suis me seduxerunt, et a consiliis tuis frater mi quae vere michi salubria fuissent si sectatus ea fuisssem...Nunc igitur mi festina...ne Robertus de Belismo te surreptione preueniat aliqua, et firmissimam munitionem preoccupans per nonnulla tibi resistat tempora."

²³⁷ OV, vi. p. 92.

Meanwhile, the same man (Henry) strongly ruled the duchy of Normandy with the kingdom of England, and was always eager for peace even to the end of his life...at no time did he relax the initial vigorous severity of justice. He skillfully brought down the highborn castellans, rebellious townsmen, and arrogant tyrants who opposed us. At all times he mercifully cherished and protected peaceful and humble religious men. He always strove for his peoples' peace, and sentenced transgressors with hard and rigid laws.²³⁸

The true heir of the Conqueror upheld Orderic's criteria for proper kingship just as his father did. Like William, Henry ruled a united Anglo-Norman kingdom long divided between William Rufus and Robert Curthose. Where the ambitions of powerful and violent lords such as Robert of Bellême characterized Curthose's impotence in Normandy, Henry's leadership was peaceful and the kingdom bound by law. Indeed, Orderic wrote that Robert of Bellême was himself imprisoned for life in 1112.²³⁹ Ecclesiastical activities took place as normal, the king maintained justice. Orderic was clearly showing the contrast between Robert Curthose and Henry, using the resultant peace after Tinchebrai to add legitimacy to Henry's position.

Lest there was any doubt as to the legitimacy of Henry's status as the new William, Orderic had Henry defend his imprisonment of Curthose to Pope Pascal II when the pontiff travelled north to negotiate the Investiture Controversy between Henry and Anselm of Canterbury. Pascal demanded that Robert be released and given lordship over the duchy of Normandy. Henry's answer was a neat summary of his justification for his actions, as well as Orderic's final attempt to link the king with the memory of William the Conqueror. Henry's defense also served to tie together many of the perceived failures

²³⁸ OV, vi. 98. "Ipse interea ducatum Normanniae cum regno Angliae fortiter gubernavit, et usque ad vitae suae finem semper paci studuit...nunquam a pristino robore iusticiaeque severitate decidit. Egregios comites et oppida nos et audaces trannos ne repellarent callide oppressit, placidos vero et religiosos humilemque populum omni tempore clementer fouit atque protexit...pacem subiectus plebibus semper quiesiuit, et austeris legibus legume transgressores rigide multavit."

²³⁹ OV, vi. 178.

of Robert Curthose, and it cemented the king's claims within a constructed legal framework. In a sense, Orderic was defending Henry's actions to his audience, while Henry simultaneously defended himself to the Pope. Orderic, and likely Henry himself, couched the case not in defense of an illegal takeover, but rather as the final restoration of a kingdom long divided:

I did not divest my brother from the duchy of Normandy, but I reclaimed with arms the inherited lordship of our father which my brother...did not hold, but he allowed disloyal robbers and blasphemous rascals to devastate it.²⁴⁰

The imprisonment of Robert Curthose was thus couched as a legal repossession of ancestral land by its rightful claimant, and definitively won in a trial by battle at Tinchebrai. Orderic again brought up the theme that it was Robert's poor lordship and inability to keep good order which made him an illegitimate claimant to his father's lands. For Orderic, Curthose's poor lordship and the subsequent decay of Normandy under his rule resulted in his defeat at Tinchebrai. Orderic depicted Henry as the rightful heir because he restored Normandy to the peace it enjoyed during the reign of the Conqueror, "I conquered with costly wars the other castles held by tyrants."²⁴¹ This hearty defense of Henry's actions could result from the fact that the king believed his position to be somewhat untenable, requiring Orderic to justify it by recasting Henry's campaign of 1105-1106 as a second Norman Conquest, and Henry himself as the new William.

²⁴⁰ OV, vi. p. 284. "Fratrem meum ducatu Normannia non privavi, sed haereditarium ius patris nostri armis uendicaui quod non frater meus...possidebant, sed pessimi predones et sacrilege nebulones miserabiliter deuastabant."

²⁴¹ Ibid. 286. "aliaque oppida tyrannis pugnando compressis conquisiui."

Similarly, Orderic derided Robert of Bellême as a symbol for the corruption of ducal power in the region during Robert Curthose’s reign. “Robert of Bellême and other villains ruled the Normans, and by the fancy of the duke prelates and all churchmen along with many people were dominated.”²⁴² Serving here as the ritual usurper of ducal power, Orderic indirectly blamed Robert of Bellême for the alleged misfortune in Normandy before Henry’s invasion. Based on this perspective, Orderic stripped Curthose of all legitimacy. Because he did not personally govern his domains, allowing violent men to abuse the church and the peasantry, he was unworthy of kingship. According to Orderic’s account, Henry was able to persuade Pope Pascal II, therefore gaining papal approval of his invasion of England, as his father did in 1066. This was part of Orderic’s larger project of making Henry’s invasion of Normandy in 1105 appear as a reflection of his father’s Conquest of England. Not only does the *Historia Ecclesiastica* cement Henry’s position on the Anglo-Norman throne, but it presented his claim as a legal case against his brother made before the pope in order to dispel any hostility or suspicion concerning the legitimacy of Henry’s kingship.

In Orderic’s view, Curthose was an ineffective ruler due to the fact that he was unable to follow his father’s example of good lordship and maintain order in the duchy by disciplining his household, restraining the violent Robert of Bellême, or heeding the advice of good counselors. After Rufus’s death, Rufus’s image as a bad king naturally transfers to Robert Curthose, and Henry’s victory at Tinchebrai is cast as a second Hastings, a victory over the prevailing weakness and effeminacy of the Anglo-Norman court in the aftermath of William the Conqueror’s death. To do so, Orderic illustrated

²⁴² OV, vi. p. 286. “Rodbertus quoque de Belismo alique scelesti Normannis dominabantur, et sub imaginatione ducis presulibus omnique clero cum inermi populo principabantur.”

Curthose as a rebellious, incompetent, irredeemable version of the prodigal son, while simultaneously shaped Henry I into a second William the Conqueror. Orderic's reimagining came to a climax when he illustrated Henry's invasion of Normandy in 1105 and Curthose's downfall in 1106 at the battle of Tinchebrai as a trial by battle and reinforcing his memory of the battle as a second Norman Conquest.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Orderic Vitalis was not merely summarizing events in England and Normandy at the turn of the twelfth century. He clearly fashioned his chronicle in order to justify the death of William Rufus and the ascension of Henry I in 1100 as king of England, rather than his older brother, Robert “Curthose.” Orderic’s depiction of William Rufus, his court, and the succession of Henry shows a clear attempt to construct a memory. He accuses Rufus of effeminacy by linking the fashions of his court with political weakness and withered masculinity. The descriptions of the degenerate morals and lordship of Rufus’s court is not a marker of the king’s homosexuality, but a way to delegitimize his rule in a prelude to the moral and legitimate reign of Henry I. Orderic illustrated Rufus’s failings as the direct opposite of the austerity of the Conqueror’s rule in an attempt to demonstrate that Rufus did not rule as a king should.

Orderic’s chronicle also functioned to delegitimize Robert Curthose due to his perceived failings in reflecting the efficient personal lordship of his father, William the Conqueror. Orderic reinforced his verdict by inserting prophetic visions within his narrative that foreshadowed the inevitable disorders in Normandy under Curthose’s rule. Orderic also had William the Conqueror warn Robert of the consequences of refusing to take good counsel. Robert continued to disobey and rebel against his father, refusing to

heed good counsel from experienced lords, which exacerbated the violence in Normandy. Orderic depicted Curthose as an unredeemed prodigal son who refused to reconcile with his father. Curthose was unable to keep the violent ambitions of his barons in check, and Orderic personified the rising violence in Normandy within the satanic image of Robert of Bellême. Bellême was perpetually present in Curthose's household and was eventually blamed directly for the lack of order in the duchy. In addition, Orderic described Curthose using adjectives with feminine case endings and gendered symbols to reinforce his ultimate illegitimacy as duke.

As a prodigal son, Robert Curthose ultimately failed to exemplify the standard of order and lordship upheld by Orderic's memory of William the Conqueror. In order to reinforce Henry's position as the new William within the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Orderic had him summarize and defend his position to the pope, an act which was in itself a reflection of William's own acquiescence to papal authority in the prelude to his invasion of England in 1066. Orderic thus remade Henry not only as a reflection of his father's effective lordship, but Orderic also painted the invasion of Normandy in 1105 as a new Norman Conquest. This established Henry as the ruler of a united Anglo-Norman kingdom, which remained divided since his father's death in 1087. This united kingship served as the final link associating Henry with William the Conqueror.

Similar to his earlier diatribes against William Rufus and Robert Curthose, Orderic attributed nearly every kind of illicit violence to Robert of Bellême and his vilification of Robert Curthose's legitimate acts of violence is simultaneously a harsh criticism of the nobility. Orderic associates the frequent chaotic violence toward of secular and ecclesiastical property to describe the normal pangs of power transference,

but Orderic links them to Robert in order to link him to the disorder, using him as a narrative device embodying the frequent violence and breakdown of order which occasioned every transfer of power in the Anglo-Norman realm until the accession of Henry I.

In Orderic's view, violence must have a purposeful goal in order to be effective. For him, Robert is the physical embodiment of the darker, violent nature of the Normans. In contrast, Robert is an illustration of how far the Normans are capable of falling. The description of his conduct and career in *The Ecclesiastical History* functions as a warning to the early twelfth-century nobility. This warning attempts to discuss the correct use of violence and the potential of the Normans for good or ill, but Orderic is also concerned with acceptable aristocratic conduct in both war and peace, and he uses Robert to reveal the nature of divine punishment, penance, and repentance.

Robert of Bellême's ultimate function is to reveal to the nobility an image of their darker nature. Orderic traces Robert's evil throughout his kin group, and roots it in the female line. He attaches Robert to every imaginable kind of evil. The wider aristocracy surely committed many of Robert's evil deeds, and they make Robert more identifiable to them, as well as reinforce Orderic's moral agenda. Using a discourse of opposites, Orderic often positions Robert next to more righteous nobles in order to offer an example of correct behavior. Having done this, Orderic connects Robert to his description of Herlechin's Hunt in an effort to offer a way for nobles to repent of their sins and seek forgiveness.

Although the perceived failures and sins of William Rufus, Robert Curthose, and Robert of Bellême each have different didactic functions in Orderic's narrative, the three

men and their interactions blend together in a complex structure of criticism, political commentary, and symbolic justification. Ultimately, Orderic was trying to illustrate what he remembered as the dominant character of the late eleventh century. This lax age is in turn bookended by what Orderic sees as two great periods of order and proper conduct, the reign of William I and that of his youngest son, Henry I.

Henry's seizure of the throne in 1100 marks the end of Orderic's black descriptions of the main events and powerful figures who held authority in the wake of the Conqueror's death. For Orderic, Henry is the new William, and he goes to great pains within *The Ecclesiastical History* to solidify this theme. Orderic's descriptions of bishop Serlo's sermon and the haircuts that Henry and his barons receive links Henry to his father. The scene is symbolic of Henry's perceived moral superiority over his brothers, to which Orderic attests, writing decades later. Henry's haircut and the comet that followed it is a strong hearkening to the fashion, morals, and lordship of the Conqueror's reign in an attempt to associate Henry's beginning reign with them.

For Orderic, Henry I excelled in maintaining and reflecting the Conqueror's standard of lordship and maintenance of peace. From the moment of his coronation in 1100, Orderic used his chronicle as a weapon to push Henry's claim to the throne by actively comparing Curthose and Henry to the memory of their father. He used the rhetorical speeches of both men in the prelude and aftermath of the battle of Tinchebrai to paint Henry as a peaceful, righteous, and legitimate king of the Anglo-Norman realm, while Curthose was ever the prodigal son who ultimately reconciled not to his father, but the image of the Conqueror reflected in Henry.

In the final analysis, it is important to view Orderic's *Historia Ecclesiastica* not only as an effective propaganda piece, but as study in monastic perception of the actions and values of the Norman aristocracy of the post-Conquest period. Examining Orderic's writings gives valuable insight into his beliefs about the restraint of violence, aristocratic lordship, and the legitimacy of kingship. To their peril, scholars have avoided a clear analysis of the ways in which Orderic created a useful past through *The Ecclesiastical History*. Orderic's work is not only a description of politics and warfare in the Anglo-Norman kingdom, but a useful example of an author who uses his own memory of the past to give order to present events.

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