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Henry the Young King, 1155-1183

Matthew Strickland

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Henry the Young King, 1155-1183. By Matthew Strickland. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-300-21551-9. xxi + 472 pp. £30.

Henry, the Young King, is a figure who has often gone relatively unnoticed in the scholarship. The son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, he was crowned king in his father's lifetime in 1170 aged fifteen, and was dead by mid-June 1183 at the age of twenty-eight. Matthew Strickland's previous work on the political and military culture of the Medieval noble elite means he is well placed to study a figure previously largely known for his chivalric reputation, rather than his important political role. Strickland expertly addresses this imbalanced legacy, building on his previous work to argue that Henry's role in twelfth-century Angevin politics is not only more complex than has been previously considered, but is also crucial to understanding the nature of events at the time.

Barring the introduction, the chapters of the book are chronological in structure, covering his life from birth to death. The book is divided into three main parts: the first covers Henry's early life, including his education, marriage, coronation, and regency of England until 1172; the second considers the war of 1173-74 between Henry and his father, detailing Henry and the rebels' motivations and the consequences of their actions, namely the subsequent uneasy relationship between father and son through to 1177; and the third covers the years 1178-1183, and includes Henry's tournament career, his role in politics and diplomacy and, finally, the renewed conflicts between the Angevins until Henry succumbed to disease on 11 June 1183. The book concludes by reflecting on Henry's death, commemoration, and legacy, allowing Strickland to reiterate his importance politically and culturally within the twelfth-century Angevin world.

Strickland critically engages with overarching themes including the nature of kingship, and the intricacies of warfare between powerful and connected groups of European nobles. More specific themes include the close familial connections, particularly those between father and son, centring on the collapse of trust, leading to bitterness and rebellion. The author highlights the fundamental problem that underscores the contradictory nature of Henry's status: he was a king without a kingdom. Particular emphasis is placed on the rituals of trust; rituals that were embodied in acts of homage and repentance (as emblematic of Henry and his father's fraught relationship), as well as being indicative of Henry II's inability to effectively deal with his son's concerns. Strickland's book sits amongst other recent works of new central Medieval political history that emphasise the continuing importance of ritual, as well as law, in contemporary society. Alongside exponents such as Björn Weiler, Nicholas Vincent, and David Bates—following Gerd Althoff and

Timothy Reuter—Strickland strengthens the view that the twelfth century saw the development of written judicial and legal government, while still retaining powerful ritualistic elements.

Another key issue addressed is the question of why Henry II felt the need to crown his heir during his lifetime, an unusual decision considering the strength of his own position. Strickland points towards the recent civil war which foregrounded the matter of succession in Henry II's mind, suggesting that he was well aware of precedents amongst the Capetians, the Byzantines, the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and at home in England since, in recent memory, King Stephen had attempted to do the same for his son Eustace. This analysis is very convincing, but Strickland also suggests that Henry II's plans to embark on an expedition to the Holy Land acted as a catalyst behind his decision. Throughout, Strickland identifies Henry II's motives, seeing them as fundamental to his own ambitions for his empire and his son and heir; he thus shows how Henry II's desires shaped the Young King and dominated Angevin politics in this period.

Strickland's work is most innovative in its reassessment of the Young King's role and character. While offering few new insights into his tourneying career or the nature of tourneys themselves (which is unsurprising given the abundant and proficient work of scholars such as David Crouch, who Strickland himself points the reader to), more important is Strickland's assertion that Henry played a continuous and significant role in Angevin political and military affairs throughout his years on the tourney circuit. Strickland, demonstrating Henry's continued involvement in confirming his father's territorial grants and presence during Henry II's attempts at judicial reform, argues that the Young King's passion for tournaments did not preclude a concern for developing judicial procedures—he was certainly trained in them from an early age. This work thus provides a fresh perspective upon Henry as a well-educated, eager, and involved political figure as opposed to the one-dimensional tournament obsessive that he has often been portrayed as.

Certainly, Henry cannot be understood outside the context of his authoritative and overbearing father, but Strickland maintains a focus on the Young King's role in events. Important events of Henry II's reign, such as the murder of Thomas Beckett and the king's public penance at Canterbury, are treated with intelligence and clarity in which the trap of reiterating well-trodden ground is deftly avoided. The same can also be said for the imposing figure of William Marshal, whose role in the Young King's life is presented as significant but never overpowering. Moreover, Strickland is careful not to overstate Young Henry's role when there is little evidence from which to draw conclusions.

While it is a pity the publishers, presumably, insisted on the use of endnotes in such a large volume, as it makes following up references tedious, the book is written throughout in an engaging and rigorous style, drawing the reader into the fascinating intrigue of twelfth-century political culture without sacrificing academic integrity. Strickland's ability to marshal the source material into a compelling narrative can be seen throughout. For instance, chapter seven, which covers the lead up to the Young King's rebellion, includes the genesis of conflict, the motivations and actions of numerous players, a comprehensive list of the Young King's supporters, and an exciting description of Henry's flight from his father's control, all combined into a critical and engaging account.

While both Queen Eleanor and Queen Margaret's presence and involvement in events is thoughtfully addressed, the work might have benefited from more consideration of Henry's relationship with the women in his life. Though useful sources are admittedly scarce, Strickland's characteristically strong analysis, often relying on earlier precedents and examples when evidence is lacking, is not as prevalent when considering the subject of women. He does, however, point towards wider scholarship, particularly works on Eleanor by Jean Flori and Ralph Turner, while also cautioning against claims that Eleanor's favourite son was Richard, since evidence suggesting this favouritism only emerged after Henry's death. These are but minor complaints, characteristic of a reviewer failing to find any fundamental issues to critique. In renegotiating familiar source material, Strickland has provided readers with a fresh picture of an important Medieval figure who has long been deserving of such an excellent biography.

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