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### War of Words: the Lay Discourse and Historical Writing in Geoffrey le Baker's Chronicle

Geoffrey le Baker. (2012). *The chronicle of Geoffrey Le Baker of Swinbrook*. Translated by David Preest; introduction and notes by Richard Barber. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

The writing of history in the fourteenth-century England has received a great amount of attention through the works of medievalists such as Antonia Gransden (2000), Beryl Smalley (1974), Chris Given-Wilson (2004), John Taylor (1987), and many more. However, a common point among academic works about the English Middle Ages is that they heavily rely upon documents that are mostly available only to those able to read Latin, Middle English, Anglo-Norman and many other languages not equally accessible to different level scholars and academics. In the last decades, a good deal of fourteenth-century chronicles were translated into Modern English, among them works such as *The Chronicle of Anonymus of Canterbury* (2008), *The Scalacronica* (2005) and *The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel* (2011). Such works, besides proving a good opportunity for students and researchers to get in touch with those texts, usually present indeed high-quality up-to-date bibliographical comments by their editors, amplifying thus the possibilities for medieval studies in a whole, as they shed new life upon texts that have received little or no attention outside the Anglophone academic world.

In the next lines, we would like to present some brief considerations regarding *The Chronicle of Geoffrey le Baker*. Little is known about Geoffrey le Baker (? – 1358?), besides the fact he was a secular clerk from Swinbrook, in Oxfordshire, and might have participated in some of the events that he describes in his narrative, that ranges roughly from a Scottish raid in northern England at 1303 up to the Battle of Poitiers at 1356 (Bruce, 1918: 6). In its the present edition, translated by David Preest, the historian Richard Barber was in charge for writing its introduction and notes. Barber worked with both internal evidence and those from Edward M.

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Thompson's previous edition to delimit key points in the text, such as who might have been Geoffrey le Baker and his major influences in chronicle writing, date, structure, context of composition and his audience, besides the possible patronage offered to the chronicler by his contemporary layman Thomas de la More (? – 1347?). Certainly, such data is fragmentary, as commonly it happens to be with medieval chronicles, and Barber's effort to put them together is quite noteworthy.

Baker's main concern is with war and politics, as it was for the majority of his contemporaries who lived in the turbulent period of wars against Frenchmen and Scots (Taylor, 1987: 3), although in rare moments he registers a few distinct events not related to belligerency, such as the apparition of a two-headed snake with female faces and large wings in the county of Oxford (Baker, 2012: 94). Apparently, the chronicle might have been intended to be divided into two parts, concerning Edward II (1307 – 1327) and Edward III (1327 – 1377) reigns respectively. The first part of that text, highly dependent upon Adam of Murimuth's account (c. 1274 – 1347), presents the point of view of a man who supports Edward II's legacy, depicting the dethroned king as victim of a cunning plot led mainly by the earl Roger Mortimer (1287 – 1330) and Isabella (1295 – 1358), Queen of England. Baker's attempts to convince his audience that Edward II was not a tyrant, term which he frequently used to describe the French kings, but instead a victim of bad counsels of people such Hugh Despenser (1286 – 1326), the son, who, having bewitched the king's mind, acted as a trusted adviser of the monarch, and deprived noblemen of their lands in his own advantage (Baker, 2012: 10 – 16). For such outrageous act, the barons rebelled against the laws of the land and the king's orders, but not against the monarch himself (Baker, 2012: 12 – 13).

Baker's accounts of the deposition of Edward II, his capture, transportation throughout the countryside and execution are worth of notice. If they cannot be fully relied on, it is interesting to observe the parallel between the deposed ruler's martyrdom and that of Jesus Christ, both killed at thirty-three years old. In the same manner as the messiah, Edward II endured several penances, such as hunger and thirst, as well as humiliation and envy of his enemies, but endured all of that due to his strong body disposition (Baker, 2012: 29). Fearing that he would not die a natural death and might return to punish the responsible for such crimes, i.e., Isabella, Mortimer and the powerful bishop Adam of Orleton (? – 1345), the latter's orders through a highly well elaborated rhetorical message to Edward II executioners to kill the king by violent death, but worrying to do not let any traces on the ruler's body that might lead one to think that such misdeed had been committed.

In the second part of his work, Baker strongly supports the claim of Edward III for the French crown and the rights of those fighting for the king and consequently for the kingdom, in a way that the Plantagenet feuds against the Valois became a matter of 'national' struggle of Englishmen against Frenchmen (Jones, 1979: 48 – 49). As a direct consequence, the chronicler presents a derogative depiction of the enemies, mainly the French kings, whom he insistently calls 'the crowded ones', 'tyrants', 'pseudo-kings', 'usurpers', 'so-called kings' (Baker, 2012: 48 – 49), and so on.

His descriptions of certain battles, such as Neville's Cross, Crécy and Poitiers are a lofty point in his narrative, as he conjoins official records and oral testimonies with the embellishment of rhetorical devices, moving aside from the heavily God associated results elaborated in monastic texts to chivalric attitudes and personal traits of the English noblemen, specially Edward III. This is probably due to the attempt to adjust it to his audience, the lay noblemen responsible for conducting the politics and war (Barber, 2012: XXV). The way history is conceived by Baker is a good example of how lay oriented chronicles were composed in fourteenth-century England. His work has a didactic purpose, that is to record the events, mainly the deeds of war, so that both present generations and those yet to come will learn how to behave in similar situations through the good examples offered by those writings. At the same time chronicles pleased the audience, they also were useful instruments for recording the bravery (and thus helping to spread the good repute) of noble families, as well as they shared chivalrous values esteemed by the knightly class, such as courage, loyalty, generosity and justice (Taylor, 1987: 157).

Nevertheless, in his register, Baker employs well-known devices of the historian craft in the period, such as the copying of official records and the register of oral testimonies, in order to pursue authority to his account. This is a characteristic that had been under development along that century, in which no longer the quotations of previous pagan and patristic authorities, like Cicero or St. Augustine, were the only or major sources for granting the truthfulness of the chronicle. We can observe from Baker's chronicle, although a cleric, a heavy reliance upon the contemporary and lay testimonies to regard what was worth to be recorded and remembered.

Besides all these points aforementioned, the present edition of the chronicle presents a major drawback. We sorely missed the face side printing of the original text, which would allow the reader to compare both narratives and be aware of the original terms employed by the chronicler. To cite only one example of how this may be of interest to historians, Baker notices that in 1351 a truce is under negotiation with the French, but it was broken when the same Frenchmen took the

castle of Guines, as, in his words, 'I shall describe in my *history* of the next year' (Baker, 2012: 100). Notwithstanding the apparent lack of contemporary consensus of terminologies to describe 'history' (Spiegel, 2002: 79), we can only infer what it might have been for those men from both the more general definitions dealing with that matter, such as the well quoted Isidore of Seville distinction between *historia* and *annals* (Seville, 2006: 67), and the analyses of internal evidence of texts such Baker's narrative.

In conclusion, Baker's lavish, lively-detailed writing style, in addition to his good narrative techniques meets the superb ability of David Preest to present a flowing translation and Richard Barber's knowledge of the most recent bibliography about the themes approached, which in the end makes this work of considerable importance for those interested in the historical writing in fourteenth-century England, besides Edward II's and Edward III's government and last, but not the least, the Hundred Years War.

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