

H-France Review Vol. 10 (July 2010), No. 96

Richard Vernier, *Lord of the Pyrenees: Gaston Fébus, count of Foix (1331-1391)*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2008. x + 222 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$105.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84383-356-7.

Review by Craig Taylor, University of York.

In the summer of 1358, Gaston III, count of Foix and viscount of Béarn, returned with his cousin Jean de Grailly, the captal de Buch, from a brief crusade in Prussia. On the journey through France, they stopped at Meaux to rescue some aristocratic ladies from the hands of peasants taking part in the violent Jacquerie uprising that enveloped the Île de France in June and July. Then, upon arriving at his home in Orthez, Gaston announced that he had adopted a new *nom de guerre*, Fébus, the Béarnais spelling of Phoebus, that is to say Apollo, the sun god. It is not clear whether Gaston chose the name because of his golden hair, or simply because he was a passionate hunter who would subsequently write the most famous and successful medieval work on the subject, *Le livre de chasse*. Either way he prominently featured the new name in his war cry, 'Fébus aban!' (Fébus go forth), echoing his motto 'Toquey si gauses' ('Touch me if you dare' in Béarnais) that embodied the fierce independence that characterised his lifelong efforts to steer a careful course between the competing claims of the four kings of France, England, Navarre and Aragon, not to mention his life long feud with the counts of Armagnac and Albret.

The most famous and inexplicable incident in this story occurred just a few years later, in December 1362, when Gaston III sent his wife Agnès back to her brother Navarre and her family in Pamplona, claiming that they owed him 9,000 francs from her dowry. This was just three months after the birth of their only child, Gaston, and days after the count had paved the way to becoming the wealthiest man in the Languedoc by capturing dozens of prisoners at the battle of Launac, including the count of Armagnac whose ransom alone would raise 300,000 francs. In 1380, Gaston III paid the price for this extraordinary treatment of his wife when their son reportedly attempted to poison him at the instigation of his uncle, Charles II king of Navarre and subsequently died at the hands of his father. This story was reported in book three of Jean Froissart's *Chroniques*. In 1388, the famous chronicler of chivalry spent ten memorable weeks at Gaston's court at Orthez. He reported that the count slept during the day and dined at midnight, listening to chivalric tales like Froissart's new romance, *Méliador*, the story of an Arthurian knight who quested for the hand of a Scottish princess. Speaking to various members of the court, most notably the military captain and routier Espan de Lion, Froissart collected an extraordinary set of stories about the count's killing of his son Gaston and another man named Pierre-Arnaud de Béarn, not to mention a sleep-walking knight whose dreams were haunted by a bear and a baron of Béarn who employed a demon named Orton to provide news of what was happening Christendom.

In short, Gaston III Fébus lived a remarkable and dramatic life that sheds important light on chivalry and aristocratic culture in the fourteenth-century, not to mention the regional politics of Gascony and Languedoc as well as the course of the Hundred Years War. It is therefore surprising how little scholarly attention he has received in the English-speaking world, where there is no biographical study to match the important works of Pierre Tucoc-Chala, such as his doctoral research, *Gaston Fébus et la*

vicomte de Béarn, 1343-1391 (Bordeaux, 1959), and subsequent publications like *Gaston Phébus, un grand prince d'Occident au XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1983). Instead scholarly attention has focused principally upon Froissart's so-called 'voyage en Béarn' in 1388 and Gaston's two great written works, the *Livre des Oraisons* (1380) and *Livre de chasse* (1387-1391).

Richard Vernier is therefore responding to a tremendous gap in the market in writing a biography of Gaston III. Unfortunately, Vernier brings little to the table other than a decent summary of secondary sources such as the studies by Tucoo-Chala, Roland Delachenal and Jonathan Sumption's grand narratives of the period, and the more obvious printed primary sources like Jean Froissart's *Chroniques*. Like Vernier's previous book, *The Flower of Chivalry. Bertrand du Guesclin and the Hundred Years War* (2003), this is not a scholarly biography supported by research or even proper footnotes. Vernier is unaware of much recent work such as the doctoral research of Dominique Barrois (Lille III, 2004) on Jean I count of Armagnac, or by Justine Firnhaber-Baker (Harvard, 2007) on local warfare in southern France. Most astonishingly of all is the absence of any real discussion of Constance de Rabastens, a visionary whose importance in any understanding of Gaston's story is made clear by Jean-Pierre Hiver-Berenguier and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski.

What we are left with is a competent but dry narrative of the life of Gaston Foix, too often fleshed out by the imaginative additions that mark a more popular kind of history, and framed by some rather odd perspectives on fourteenth-century life that seem more in keeping with Victorian views of the middle ages. For example, we are told (pp. 30-31) that the French lost the battle of Crécy because they perceived 'reckless individual prowess' to be the 'duty and privilege of the knight' and that this was characteristic of a general 'failure of the spirit of chivalry' during the reign of King Jean II— notions that spring directly from the pages of Jean Froissart's *Chroniques* and other contemporary chroniclers and moralists. As in his previous work on Bertrand du Guesclin, Vernier is too willing to allow the literary sources to drive his interpretative framework. If there is a central framing device for this biography, it is the notion that Gaston III was an avaricious man, a stale and simplistic idea that betrays Vernier's deep debt to Froissart but also leaves the narrator hard-pressed to explain such odd decisions on the part of the count as going on crusade in 1357.

A most extraordinary and unnecessary error occurs at the end of the book, when Vernier broaches the subject of the treaty of Toulouse signed by King Charles VII and Gaston Fébus on 5 January 1390. This agreement poses many problems for the historian in explaining why Fébus would abandon his lifetime's work of securing the independence of Béarn from the French crown, in return for control of Bigorre, 100,000 francs and royal support for his plan to disinherit the rightful heir to his lands, Mathieu, viscount of Castelbon, in favour of Fébus' two bastard sons, Yvain and Gratien. Vernier adds to the mystery, though, by dating this event to 5 January 1389 (p. 181), unwittingly making it occur while Froissart was in Béarn and hence providing an extremely confusing and misleading context for the chronicler's stories and narrative of his visit to Orthez. The informed reader will also note a multitude of smaller errors and confusions, such as the author's flawed discussion of the Salic Law and the complex negotiations surrounding the treaty of Brétigny. From an editorial perspective, it seems odd to leave French and almost all Castilian proper names in their original forms while translating those of other peoples, not to mention the extremely unhelpful decision not to present a proper map of the region until page 76. Reconstructing the chain of events from this narrative is difficult, given Vernier's infuriating habit of referring vaguely to a name or an event pages before proper details are supplied.

In summary, this is not a scholarly biography and should only be used by researchers with extreme caution. It does at least have the merit of opening up the important life of Gaston Fébus to an English-speaking audience, but I do wonder how long a student or an interested reader would engage with the long, tortuous and sometimes repetitive narratives of Gaston's political machinations. The most interesting sections deal with Froissart's visit to Orthez and the death of the count's son in 1380, but there are certainly much better studies available in English and the serious researcher would do better

to consult the important new collection of essays *Froissart à la cour de Béarn: l'écrivain, les arts et le pouvoir*, edited by Valérie Fasseur (Turnhout, 2009).

Craig Taylor
University of York
cdt1@york.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172