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Luke Sunderland, *Rebel Barons: Resisting Royal Power in Medieval Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. x + 308 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-878848-5

Review by G.E.M. Lippiatt, University of East Anglia.

There is a long tradition in medieval political historiography tracing the growth of the modern state out of the centralizing kingdoms of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Often, this narrative takes for granted the positive character of this development: centralized royal power saves society from the anarchic and private interests of violent barons, creating a unified and peaceable state in which the king guards the rights of his subjects as an impartial court of final appeal.[1] This story, however, has been challenged by more recent work which has questioned, for example, the exclusively “selfish” political character of medieval barons and even the emergence of the “state” in the Middle Ages.[2] By exploring the “rebel baron” *chansons de geste*, Luke Sunderland has made an important contribution to this debate, not only arguing that alternatives to the evolving “state” were cogently advanced and defended in medieval literature, but also disputing the assumed benevolence of this evolution in the first place.

Sunderland frames his study of baronial literary approaches to power in terms of “sovereignty,” the title of his first chapter and an unfortunately anachronistic term that seeds problems in his argument to which this review will return. He never defines this term, preferring instead to talk around it by reference to the theories of postmodern thinkers Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida. For these men, sovereignty is the violent and animalistic character of the king, who simultaneously defends and preys upon his subjects. Fortunately, Sunderland does not overly color the rest of his account with this interpretation, turning instead to three medieval thinkers from the twelfth through the thirteenth centuries that he claims represent a “royalist” perspective on political resistance to monarchy, in contradistinction to the “aristocratic” attitude of the rebel baron epics: John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Marsilius of Padua. These men, Sunderland claims, argue for a strong, central, and divinely ordained authority in the person of the king, a figure whose power is almost without limit and who commands the obedience of his subjects.

This is, according to Sunderland, the source of a philosophical stream that will eventually flow into absolutist Renaissance theories of sovereignty. However, the rest of his book is interested in a different tributary of political thought, in which the Francophone aristocracy conceived of itself as the guardians of liberty against arbitrary royal power. Therefore, his second chapter

explores the different ways in which *chansons de geste* justify noble revolt in the face of royal overreach. Indeed, Sunderland argues, these works propose a moral imperative to rebel in the face of tyranny, a theme with particular resonance in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (precisely the period where Bisson located the resolution of his medieval “crisis”) as King Philip II Augustus of France brought effective centralization to bear on his previously centrifugal kingdom. Such dependence on a single individual was dangerously susceptible to corruption, and therefore Charlemagne’s imagined empire became a fictional laboratory, in which poets writing for aristocratic audiences could explore different ways in which nobles might protect the common good when faced with a wicked, petty, or neglectful ruler. Armed harassment of the emperor in *Les Saisnes* or *Girart de Vienne* or the establishment of a parallel hierarchy in *Gui de Bourgogne* compel Charlemagne to return to good government while preserving his authority through a ritualized reconciliation (Sunderland very helpfully provides plot synopses to all the works discussed in an appendix). The aim of aristocratic revolt is conservative rather than radical: correction, not revolution. Even the extreme violence of *Renaut de Montauban* and the *Chevalerie d’Ogier*, which enjoyed renewed popularity during the Armagnac-Burgundian conflicts of the Hundred Years’ War, ends with the preservation of royal power, however reformed. Such limited objectives are even more justified if the king himself can be exculpated from tyranny by blaming flatterers and traitors in his court, as in *Gaydon* or numerous historical examples, such as the failed coup against the regency of Blanche of Castile or the temporarily more successful Montfortine takeover of the administration of King Henry III of England. The most radical outcome of these chansons is that of *Hugues Capet*, composed amidst the dynastic instability of the fourteenth century, in which the eponymous noble hero becomes king himself. However, this is only in the violent aftermath of the extinction of the royal line, and the monarchy is reestablished rather than transformed. On the evidence of these songs, barons did not see themselves as an alternative to kingship, but rather as an integral component of its right functioning; they were therefore required to intervene violently to correct its tyrannical tendencies—especially, it must be said, if it were their own privileges or interests that were being tyrannized.

Resistance frequently took on a geographical dimension as well, as barons who stood outside of the simplistic and anachronistic “feudal pyramid” contested attempts to bring them under royal authority. In this context, there is less need to preserve the position of the king, who is an outsider; he may remain a tyrant, while the hero stands defiant in his independence. Though they may cooperate with the Carolingians, the Girarts who serve as protagonists in *Aspremont* and *Girart de Rousillon* (as well as the latter’s subsequent reworkings in Latin hagiography and fourteenth-century Burgundian propaganda) jealously guard their autonomy, reacting violently to Frankish claims of imperial domination. This autonomy is a sort of Schrödinger’s cat, however: Sunderland points out that its existence is entirely debatable until the resolution of the conflict, which will retroactively be either confirmed as heroic defence or crushed as villainous treason (p. 113). The incorporation of the Languedoc into the kingdom of France is a sterling historical example of this, and one that spawned its own contemporary epic poem in the *Chanson de la croisade albigeoise*. The brazen continuator of the *Chanson* decries French attempts to impose foreign lords and customs on the Midi under the guise of the Albigensian Crusade, preserving a radically different conception of the shape of “France” than the hexagon that immediately appears in our modern minds.

The strangeness of this vision of France is matched by the treatment of the figure of Charlemagne in the *chansons de geste*. Following the hugely influential thirteenth-century

Grandes chroniques de France, the Charlemagne that dominates the imagination of the Matter of France is a positive model of Capetian kingship. Sunderland, however, argues that this is to diminish the legacy of the rebel baron material and its impact on other chronicle traditions, which yields a more sinister picture of the emperor, deployed as a counterweight to Capetian claims of political supremacy. Even the Oxford version of the *Chanson de Roland* reveals an ambiguous royal figure: he allows disunity to fester amongst his barons, relies on the advice of a traitor, and finally acts unilaterally by dismissing customary baronial counsel in the judgement of Ganelon. These ambiguities would be emphasised in later rhymed versions of the Roncevaux material, and the popular Latin *Pseudo-Turpin* letter would likewise highlight the emperor's moral shortcomings. Works composed on the edges of Capetian space, such as the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* or the fourteenth-century Franco-Italian *Geste Francor* and Liègois *Myreur des histors* take more comical or critical attitudes towards the Charlemagne legend. Even the *Grandes chroniques* concede the general belief that Charlemagne was only narrowly spared the torments of hellfire. Through this chapter, Sunderland decentres the Oxford *Roland* within the tradition, revealing the contest over Charlemagne's legacy that continued throughout the Middle Ages as his memory was used as a debating ground for the proper exercise of royal power.

The pretensions to centralized power represented by the legendary Charlemagne were a challenge not only to the liberty of barons to meaningfully participate in government, but also to their right to resolve conflict among themselves through the mechanism of the feud. Sunderland nuances anthropological claims for the positive role of feud in medieval society, pointing to criticism of the real cost of "wars without end" within feuding epics such as *Raoul de Cambrai* or the long-lived Loheren cycle. However, in contrast with royal attempts to restrict feuding from the thirteenth century, these poems depict the king not as outside and above aristocratic violence, but as in the middle of it, frequently an invested participant rather than impartial judge. Furthermore, the prosecution of intra-baronial wars was a mark of class, representative not only of nobles' distrust of royal justice but also of their distinction from burghers and peasants. This distinction not only protected their privileges, but also cast them as the guardians of a greater good, that of communal honor.

In order to transcend both vertical revolt against the king and horizontal feuds with fellow nobles, the crusade offered an ideal means of realizing baronial values. Sunderland here contributes to an emerging field of using vernacular texts to better understand the appeal and understanding of the crusade among aristocratic circles.^[3] He concludes that overtly crusading texts such as the First Crusade cycle as well as later works in the Matter of France tradition such as *Huon de Bordeaux*, *L'Entree d'Espagne*, and *Huon d'Auvergne* all provide a counterpoint to clerical understandings of the crusade, as the "East" (the non-Christian otherworld that can also be found in Muslim Spain) becomes a region where it is simultaneously possible to escape and extend feuding and opposition to royal power. In this *terra nova*, the wronged noble can create a utopian, Christianized, and baronial space. Thus crusading supplies a crucial vehicle for the expression of aristocratic self-identity, even if it is often more mixed with secular concerns than its clerical authors may have intended.

Sunderland ends his book with a brief discussion of the legacy of political thought in the early modern period, when monarchy began to enforce its domination of public life. In comparison with his medieval "royalist" thinkers, he examines three early modern counterparts: Nicolas Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and Thomas Hobbes. These men, particularly the latter two, argue for

sovereignty as a radical power above the moral limitations suggested by John of Salisbury and Thomas Aquinas and illustrated by the rebel baron poems. The essential role of the king in ensuring peace and prosperity almost absolves him from the possibility of tyranny, and this tradition would emerge victorious in the modern period.

Of course, as Sunderland illustrates by underlining the continuing production of rebel baron manuscripts into the sixteenth century, the image of the aristocracy as the guardians of liberty against royal tyranny would not end with the Middle Ages: it motivated the Fronde of the seventeenth century, and would endure until the French Revolution, when the *parlements* were first supplanted and finally killed by the more bourgeois Assemblée nationale. But while republican governments have shown themselves to be capable of even more centralisation and little less tyranny than the royal administrations they replaced, the independent authority of the nobility, existing in some way outside of the State, was definitively extinguished, crippled by the construction of Versailles and euthanized during the night of 4 August 1789. One of the achievements of Sunderland's book is to draw back the veil of historical hindsight to glimpse, in the lively colors of literature, a coherent alternative to the apparently determined path of political history.

Sunderland's reliance on a postmodern concept of "sovereignty" to ground his discussion of baronial resistance to tyranny therefore undermines rather than strengthens many of the points he makes. He is of course right to be cautious of presentist and teleological readings of history that see the Middle Ages as "a primordial soup out of which the modern state will victoriously emerge" but his attempt to avoid them by making sovereignty a perennial rather than contextual political problem ends up falling into the same trap (pp. 29, 41). Rather than rely upon the twentieth-century Agamben and Derrida, with their readings of medieval literature that frequently run against the grain of the text, he would have been better served by paying closer attention to his supposedly "royalist" medieval thinkers. As Sunderland notes, John of Salisbury and Thomas Aquinas both treat the issue of the bad ruler by denying him the title of king, arguing that he is instead a tyrant (pp. 33-4, 42, 56, 96).^[4] There is no sovereignty here, nor any need for it: the moral character of the ruler defines his office. He cannot be both a good and a bad king at the same time, *à la* Agamben and Derrida. This is crucial to understanding the allowance that both John and Thomas make for resistance to tyrants, an aspect of their "theory" that Sunderland recognizes but does not adequately synthesize with the material in his rebel barons' narratives (pp. 61, 68, 71). For example, in *Les Saisnes* and *Girart de Vienne*, the idea of Charlemagne's death is abhorrent even to those barons in rebellion against him. Instead, their victories rehabilitate the tyrant, reforming him into a responsible king; the barons' self-imposed restriction of the conflict mirrors exactly the politics of John or Thomas (pp. 61, 68, 71). The problem is not "sovereignty": the king's superiority is vital, and even the revolting nobles cannot conceive of society without it. The question explored by these poems, and admirably analysed by Sunderland, is how to correct the king when he becomes a tyrant, while still preserving his authority. This reviewer was frequently left feeling that Sunderland's argument would be more convincing if it were freed from the postmodern anachronism constraining it and instead allowed to breathe in the context of contemporary political thought, which displays a remarkable harmony between the attitudes of at least earlier medieval intellectuals and the "rebel baron" poets.

It is a testament to Sunderland's research and perception, therefore, that the anchor of "sovereignty" does not drag his ship under. Far from it: his book is a remarkable collection of

sources woefully underused (and likely little-known) by historians, presented to create a convincing argument for political engagement by Francophone barons throughout the High and Late Middle Ages. In many ways, this is a worthy successor to Achille Luchaire's *La société française au temps de Philippe-Auguste*, which first attempted to synthesise the actions and attitudes of the *chansons de geste* with political and social realities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [5]. Its unfortunate reliance on anachronistic theory aside, this is a valuable work of interdisciplinarity which will prove important to literary critics and historians alike.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Joseph R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) and, more recently, Thomas N. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[2] See, for example, G.E.M. Lippiatt, *Simon V of Montfort and Baronial Government, 1195-1218* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Andrew Willard Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Academic Publishing, 2017).

[3] See, for example, Stefan Vander Elst, *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Linda Paterson, *Singing the Crusades: French and Occitan Lyric Responses to the Crusade Movements, 1137-1336* (Woodbridge, Suff.: Boydell and Brewer, 2018).

[4] Sunderland likewise follows the common but facile assumption that Thomas' invocation of "public" authority in just war necessarily means "royal." In a world without sovereignty, public authority could be located in many places, including bishops, town consulates, and, yes, barons. Instead, for Thomas, public authority must only, as Sunderland himself acknowledges, "[protect] justice and the common good" (pp. 178, 211). When this is recognised, the "blind spot" Sunderland perceives in medieval political theory evaporates (e.g., pp. 42, 99). See Jones, *Before Church and State* (cited above), chapter 14 for a brilliant reinterpretation of Thomas' discussion of authority in the context of thirteenth-century politics.

[5] Achille Luchaire, *La société française au temps de Philippe-Auguste*, second ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1909); translated by Edward B. Krehbiel as *Social France at the Time of Philip Augustus* (London: John Murray, 1912).

G.E.M. Lippiatt
University of East Anglia
G.Lippiatt@uea.ac.uk

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