

War and Chivalry in the *History of William the Marshal*

John Gillingham

Ever since the *History of William the Marshal* was discovered in the late nineteenth century it has been universally recognized as a document of the very greatest importance: the earliest vernacular life of a layman in European history.¹ In Antonia Gransden's words, 'just as Jocelin of Brakelond gives a unique account of the life in the cloister', so the *History* offers 'a unique picture of the chivalric society'.² Thanks to the work of Paul Meyer, Sidney Painter, Jessie Crosland and now Georges Duby, there can be little doubt that, leaving aside kings and clerics, William the Marshal is better known than any other figure of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Yet, despite its fame, the *History* remains in some ways a curiously neglected source. This is because historians have come to the *History* knowing what they were looking for and confident that they would find it. For Painter it was the portrait of a 'typical feudal baron', the knight-errant who after years on the tournament-circuit finally settled down with his heiress wife to the life of the great landowner and, ultimately, elder statesman.³ For Crosland it offered a literary atmosphere reminiscent of the *chansons de geste*, 'when physical courage and loyalty were the two qualities most to be admired in a knight, and romantic adventure and the cult of the woman had no place'.⁴ For Duby it provided welcome confirmation of his views on the patterns of inheritance and marriage, and on the role of the *juvenes* in the shaping of aristocratic society.⁵ In Duby's case, indeed,

¹ *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, ed. P. Meyer (Société de l'Histoire de France, 1891 – 1901). Quotations from the text, and references to this edition will be given as *HGM* hereafter. I would like to thank Maurice Keen and Malcolm Vale for their kindness and generosity in reading and commenting on this paper. Although *The Poem of the Cid* is earlier, it contains far too many fictional elements to be regarded as a genuine biography.

² A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (London, 1974), 345.

³ S. Painter, *William Marshal* (Baltimore, 1933), viii.

⁴ J. Crosland, *William the Marshal* (London, 1962), 13 – 14. While it is true there is no 'cult of the woman' in the *History*, nonetheless William did go out of his way to help, not a damsel, but an old woman in distress during the fire at Le Mans which threatened to engulf her and her property: *HGM* 8753 – 72. Indeed it is worth noting that, as the *History* tells the story, conspicuous gallantry in the service of great ladies was crucial to the social ascent of both William and his father, John Marshal — William as escort to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1168, and his father as escort to the Empress Matilda in 1141. William may not have performed prodigies of prowess 'for love of a fair lady'; nonetheless, the chief reward for his good service was the hand of a great heiress, 'la pucelle' who, in the words of the poem, 'fu bone et bele': *HGM* 8303 – 4.

⁵ G. Duby, *Guillaume le Maréchal ou le meilleur chevalier du monde* (Paris, 1984). An English translation with the sub-title, *The Flower of Chivalry*, was published in the USA in 1985 and in the UK in 1986, but since the translation is a particularly poor one, I shall refer only to the French edition.

there is one occasion when, on reading the *History* and not finding what he expected to find, he simply invented it.

He expected to find that the day when William was made a knight was given its due prominence, and so he argues that the poet decided to make his narrative of a real battle — the fight at Drincourt — do service as a description of the chivalric exercise which must have been held to celebrate so great a day in the young warrior's life. The fact, Duby tells us, that the poet wrenched an engagement which really occurred in 1173 out of its proper place in the sequence of events, and put it instead in 1167, at about the time of the knighting, reveals very clearly just how determined the poet was to provide the proper setting for, and so emphasize the crucial importance of, the young man's entry into knighthood.⁶ Unfortunately, however, Duby got it wrong. The fight at Drincourt, as the poet describes it in 360 lines of verse, was between, on the one side, a party of Normans led by William de Mandeville and the young William's own lord, the chamberlain of Tancarville (who were defending the town of Drincourt), and, on the other, an invading force led by the counts of Flanders, Boulogne and Ponthieu.⁷ Now, if this fight really had taken place in 1173, as Duby asserts, then William the Marshal, by that time in the service of the Young King (Henry II's eldest surviving son), should have been fighting on the side of Philip of Flanders, the Young King's ally in the revolt against his father. In 1173 William would have been attacking the town, not defending it.⁸ The fact is that Duby's date, 1173, is the one year in which this particular fight could *not* have occurred. The evidence, such as there is, suggests that it actually happened in 1167, a minor incident — minor in the sense of not being noticed by any surviving chronicle — in a campaign noticed only by Gervase of Canterbury.⁹ In that case, of course, it occurred precisely at the point in time at which the poet's narrative suggests it occurred. In other words there was no deliberate chronological dislocation on the part of the poet, and equally, therefore, no peculiarly revealing insight into the chivalrous mentality.

There is, however, a revealing insight into the mentality of modern historians. Few of us, I hope, go quite as far as Duby, but we all tend to see in the *History* what we want to see. Quite rightly, we see William as a model of chivalry: that, after all, is how he is presented. He had been, said the archbishop of Canterbury, at his funeral, 'the best knight in the world', and, says his thirteenth-century biographer, 'the story of his life ought to encourage all good men who hear it'.¹⁰ Knowing perfectly well what a model of chivalry should be like, that is what we read into the *History of William the Marshal*, and in consequence we leave a great deal out. As an example of what I mean, let me cite the treatment of the work by one of the finest

⁶ Duby, 86–8. Here Duby re-interprets Meyer's view that at this point the poet's narrative had simply become hopelessly confused: *HGM* iii. 16, n. 2, and 34, n. 2. Also following Meyer, yet moving in a different direction, G. H. White dated William's knighting to 1173: *GEC* x. 358. On the other hand, Duby's suggestion that William may have been knighted 'anonymously', as just one of a group, is a very reasonable speculation.

⁷ *HGM* 805–1166.

⁸ As pointed out long ago by Kate Norgate, *The Minority of Henry III* (London, 1912), 64, n. 2; and then, following her, by Painter, 20, n. 19. For Duby's own assessment of his use of Painter, Duby, 47.

⁹ *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. W. Stubbs (RS, 1879–80), i. 203.

¹⁰ *HGM* 19,072, 19,162–4. And whatever Henry III, that fine judge of men, may have thought, this is how he continued to be perceived. But, as Richard Marshal may have discovered to his cost, it is not always an advantage to have a father who is a hero-figure. See Paris, *CM* iii. 43, 273–6; iv. 157.

historians of chivalry, Maurice Keen. After summarizing William's early career, his tournaments, his role as the Young King's 'tutor' in chivalry, and his journey to the Holy Land — all of this brings us to 1187 when William was about forty years old — Keen goes on to write that 'the details of William's subsequent career need not detain us'.¹¹ Why need they not detain us? After all, in one of Keen's favourite texts, the *Livre de Chevalerie* of Geoffrey de Charny, we are explicitly and emphatically told that those who distinguish themselves in 'the great business of war' deserve higher praise than those who shine in jousts and tournaments, for 'war passes all other manner of arms'.¹² So why do we not hear of William's subsequent career in the highest arena of chivalry, of his role in the Angevin-Capetian struggle — 'the great war', as the poet calls it (*HGM* 7365), which started in 1188 —, of his role as *rector regis et regni* in the civil war of 1216–17?¹³

Reading modern authors, one might be forgiven for believing that the *History* has little to say about war, so little attention do they pay to it. Thus Gransden describes the *History* as a work which 'belongs to the artificial world of the knights errant', 'less concerned with heroism in real battles aimed at actual military advantage than with displays of bravery at tournaments'.¹⁴ But this is not so. On my count, in a poem of 19,214 lines there are about 3150 lines dealing with tournaments, compared with some 8350 dealing with war — of which about 6800 describe the warfare of 1188 and after; they therefore belong to the details of William's subsequent career. Of course, it is true that those verses on tournaments possess rarity value. Other vernacular works describe warfare — Jordan Fantosme's *Chronique*, for example, or Ambroise's *Estoire de la Guerre Sainte*, or the *Histoire des ducs de Normandie* — but none contains anything remotely approaching the *History's* detailed account of tournament after tournament. So it is perhaps only natural that historians should have been bowled over by the passages concerning tournaments and in consequence think of William chiefly as a bachelor knight, a tournament champion.¹⁵ But they should not have forgotten to count what can be

¹¹ M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, London, 1984), 20–1.

¹² Charny's *Le Livre de Chevalerie* was printed by K. de Lettenhove in his *Oeuvres de Froissart*, I, parts 2–3 (Brussels, 1872), 463–533. 'ainsi comme l'on doit honorer bonnes gens d'armes et ainsi comme il appartient a eulx de si tres-noble oeuvre comme de fait d'armes de guerre qui passe tous autres, excepte Dieu servir' (p. 466). Charny goes on to distinguish jousts (individual encounters between *gens d'armes*), tournaments (encounters between teams of *gens d'armes*), and war: 'Et pour ce doit — l'en priser plus et honorer gens d'armes pour la guerre que nulles autres gens d'armes qui soient'; and this is because 'ces deux mestiers d'armes [i.e., jousts and tournaments] sont tous compris ou fait d'armes de guerre'. (Charny, 466; cf. 473).

¹³ Concentrating on the years before 1188 has the effect of emphasizing that period in William's life when he was the ideal young knight and minimizing that even longer period when he was the ideal mature knight. In general, historians of chivalry have been attracted to the type of behaviour appropriate to the young man — the knight errantry and the individualism — and in consequence have tended to neglect the more prudential behaviour of the knight with responsibilities. What the *History* makes clear is that although good knights were expected to behave differently at different stages of their career (*HGM* 11,247–56), nonetheless they all belonged to a single military society governed by a single code of honour. Within that society it was the experienced knights who wielded power and who, not surprisingly, were the ones to be listened to. Charny, 475: 'Car par raison ils en doivent miex parler, aprendre et conseiller que li autre, car ils ont veu et sceu, fait, este et essaie en toutes manieres d'armes'.

¹⁴ Gransden, 345.

¹⁵ On the basis of these passages Duby, 111–37, provides a fine analysis of tournaments. Cf. G. Duby, *Le Dimanche de Bouvines* (Paris, 1973), 111–28. It is as a tournament champion that the Marshal leaves his mark in R. Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry* (London, 1970).

counted, and the fact is that the *History* gives well over twice as much space to war as it does to tournaments. Thus Duby is quite right to say that the stage on which William and his fellows move is the theatre of war.¹⁶ Yet, though he then offers us a long and excellent analysis of tournaments, he says very little about war, and that little, as I shall make clear, is mostly rubbish.¹⁷

But if the historian of chivalry takes Geoffrey de Charny's order of priorities seriously, then should he not look carefully at the paragon of chivalry at war? As Maurice Keen writes, 'if ever a knight lived up to Geoffrey's principle of chivalrous prowess, it was surely William Marshal'.¹⁸ Yet, so far as I know, no historian of chivalry has tried to do so. Perhaps, it might be thought, because they have left that side of William's life to the specialists, to the historians of war. But if we look at Contamine, at Verbruggen, at Lot, at Oman, we find that they have not done so either.¹⁹ So we reach the curious conclusion that neither the historians of war, nor the historians of chivalry, nor indeed the modern biographers of William the Marshal have made any real attempt to investigate the Marshal's military career. It is all the more curious in view of the traditional opinion that medieval warfare was, in essence, knightly warfare.²⁰ All the more curious, too, in view of the considerable interest in the relationship between war and chivalry.²¹ For where could we hope to find out what a thirteenth-century writer thought knightly warfare was, or chivalry was, if not in the pages of the *History of William the Marshal*? This, then, is my intention in this paper: to see how war was perceived by an extraordinarily well-informed vernacular author, writing in the 1220s, and writing, I imagine, for an audience who themselves knew a great deal about war. Thus I am not so much concerned with what really happened as with what this author said had happened. Naturally, I too shall see in the *History of William the Marshal* exactly what I want to see.

I begin where Maurice Keen left off. The year is 1188. William has returned from the Holy Land and has entered the service of King Henry II: 'De sa maisne le

¹⁶ 'Ce fut entouré de guerriers que Guillaume vécut et agit. Ils occupent tout son souvenir': Duby, *Guillaume*, 68–9.

¹⁷ All we get are passing references to Montmirail, Arras and Milli (out of the 1400 lines which the poet devoted to the war of 1192–9), and a page on the battle of Lincoln, mostly taken up by William's pre-battle speeches (out of more than 2500 lines on the war of 1215–17).

¹⁸ Keen, 21. Charny's oft-repeated principle was 'Qui plus fait, miex vault.'

¹⁹ The only reference to William in P. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages* (trans. M. Jones, London, 1984), 216, is to the tournaments of his day. According to J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages* (trans. S. Willard and S. C. M. Southern, Amsterdam, 1977), 14, the *History* is 'very useful', but he attempts no analysis of it and uses it chiefly to illustrate tournament practice. He also claims (p. 16), on grounds which are not clear to me, that the author of the *History* failed to understand what happened at Fréteval (1194), when William was in command of a force which Richard I held in reserve. So far as I can see there is only one brief footnote reference (on Bouvines) in the whole of F. Lot, *L'Art Militaire et les Armées au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1946), i, 229, n. 8. As might be expected, C. W. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* (London, 1898), 407–13, merely used the *History* in his reconstruction of the battle of Lincoln. So did T. F. Tout, 'The Fair of Lincoln and the "Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal"', *EHR* xviii (1903), 240–65.

²⁰ E.g., the title of M. Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 1976), ch. 1, is 'The Wars of the Knights'.

²¹ See M. Vale, *War and Chivalry* (London, 1981). However, as its subtitle — 'Warfare and Aristocratic Culture in England, France and Burgundy at the End of the Middle Ages' — indicates, this is principally concerned with a different period.

retint / de ses hals consels le fist mestre'.²² Presumably it was his new position in the royal household which allowed William, in his turn, to recruit new servants, among whom was John of Early, the man whose memories or *mémoires*, or both, served as the basis around which a professional *trouvère* composed our history.²³ So, for several reasons, the year 1188 is an important one in the life of the Marshal. It is also the year in which he gave his first recorded advice on how to make war.

King Philip II of France has launched an attack on the castle and town of Gisors. It failed; indeed, in the course of it a charge of the supposedly invincible French knights, lances lowered, was twice beaten off by the spears of Henry's 'boen servant' — not the kind of thing that is supposed to happen in medieval warfare before the battle of Courtrai in 1302 — and the disgruntled Capetian army, after demonstrating its prowess by chopping down the famous elm of Gisors, withdrew into Capetian territory and dispersed.²⁴ As soon as he heard this news, William goes to speak to his lord:

Listen to me sire. Philip has divided and disbanded his troops. I advise you to disperse your men too, but to give them secret orders to re-assemble at a given time and place. From there they are to launch a *chevauchée* into the territory of the king of France. If this is done in force, prudently and promptly, then he will find he has to suffer far greater damage than the loss of one elm. This will be a better and a finer deed.

'By God's eyes', said the king, 'Marshal, you are most courteous ('molt corteis') and have given me good advice. I shall do exactly as you suggest.' And he did. He ordered his army to disband and then quietly to muster again at Pacy. It crossed the frontier and burned and ravaged all the land between there and Mantes. William des Barres and some other knights of the French king's household, then based at Mantes, did their best to prevent it, but they had been deceived by the initial manoeuvre and were hopelessly outnumbered. At the end of the day Henry's men marched into Ivry, loaded down with plunder and well-satisfied with themselves. The poet then reports a conversation between Henry and his warlike son Richard, in which they agree to give all the credit for this day's work to the Marshal's good advice.²⁵

In the very next episode, later that same year, Henry decided to surprise his enemies by launching a mid-winter attack from Chinon. His orders to his men were that they should ride day and night until they reached the vicinity of Montmirail; then they were to burn and destroy everything in sight, sparing nobody, seize the town, sack it and burn it. And, led by the Marshal, that is exactly what they did. On

²² HGM 7308 – 9.

²³ HGM iii. vii – xiv; Gransden, 346; M. D. Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and its Background* (Oxford, 1963), 306 – 8.

²⁴ HGM 7436 – 781, esp. 7738 – 69. The dispersal of the French troops is confirmed by William the Breton in *Oeuvres de Rigord et de Guillaume le Breton*, ed. H-F. Delaborde (Paris, 1882 – 5), i. 189.

²⁵ HGM 7782 – 852.

their return the Old King declared himself well-pleased with the results of their *chevauchée*.²⁶

And so it goes on. Sometimes it is William who is on the receiving end, as in 1218 when the Welsh prince, Morgan of Caerleon, ravages the Marshal's lands, burning (we are told) twenty-two churches in the process.²⁷ Whether, as on these occasions, we are given details, or whether we get no more than a casual, passing reference to the 'doing of damage', it is clear that the poet, like the authors of *chansons de geste*, regards these ravaging expeditions as the normal business of war.²⁸ It is clear, too, that the poet understood the dual function of the raid: to gain plunder and to put pressure on the enemy. In his own words, 'for when the poor can no longer reap a harvest from their fields, then they can no longer pay their rents and this, in turn, impoverishes their lords'.²⁹ It is clear, too, from the way he tells the stories of the Gisors and Montmirail episodes, that the well-organized *chevauchée* was one which took the enemy by surprise. The intention was not to seek out the enemy's knights and meet them in a head-on clash of arms. On the contrary, the aim was to send his armed forces in the wrong direction, and then, in their absence, to destroy his economic resources, the fields and flocks of his people. This was how the Marshal made war, and this is how the Marshal said war should be made. And note the poet's language. When the Marshal offered this good advice, he was 'molt corteis'.³⁰ This, in other words, is chivalrous warfare.

How does the Marshal's advice fit in with Duby's view that William 'was blessed with a brain too small to impede the natural vigour of a big, powerful and tireless physique'?³¹ It does not, of course, and Duby nowhere mentions this example of William's military advice. On the other hand, he does cite another case in which William had advice to offer. In 1197 Count Baldwin of Flanders was laying siege to a town (probably Arras) when King Philip approached with a relieving army. The Flemish barons recommended using the communal carts together with their militias as a kind of barrier fortress, a retreat before which the knights could safely offer battle to the French. William, however, opposed this. In his view the carts should be left behind while the knights moved out in battle array, ready to confront the enemy in open field.³² This, claims Duby, was the characteristic attitude of the true knight: temerity has dethroned prudence.³³ But this is a hopelessly one-sided

²⁶ HGM 7872 – 8048. Note the use of the word 'chevalchie' (line 8047, as earlier in line 7792) and the verbal form 'chevacha' (line 7835) and 'chivalchiez' (line 7886).

²⁷ HGM 17,748 – 864.

²⁸ I doubt if a line recurs more frequently than variants of 'maint ennui li fist et maint mal' (HGM 148, 282, 367, etc.). That the authors of *chansons de geste* also regarded ravaging as commonplace was pointed out by M. Bennett, 'The Status of the Squire: the Northern Evidence', in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood*, ed. C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (Woodbridge, 1986), 4. For further comment on the function of ravaging, see J. Gillingham, 'Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages', in *War and Government in the Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of J. O. Prestwich*, ed. J. Gillingham and J. C. Holt (Woodbridge, 1984), 78 – 91.

²⁹ HGM 659 – 69.

³⁰ HGM 7800.

³¹ Duby, *Guillaume*, 186. This judgment is at the heart of Duby's summing-up of the Marshal's career and reputation.

³² HGM 10,783 – 840.

³³ Duby, *Guillaume*, 107. He made the same point, on the evidence of the same episode, in Duby, *Dimanche*, 136.

interpretation of this incident. For one thing, leaving the carts behind is presented not as a bold gesture of defiance but as a tactical device; the role of the carts and their troops is to prevent the townspeople making a sortie and taking the besiegers in the rear. For another, when Philip's scouts reported the reception which Count Baldwin, in conformity with William's advice, had prepared for him, he decided to withdraw and leave Arras to its fate.³⁴ So is this an episode which illustrates chivalrous temerity? Or is it one which emphasizes knightly caution? The poet, incidentally, approved Philip's decision. For him, too, there was no wisdom in risking battle where one had no clear-cut advantage.³⁵ There is further evidence of the poet's own attitude to battle in his account of Bouvines. Once again we find the French under Philip retreating in order to avoid an engagement, and if this time they win the day it is only because the over-confident allies forced a battle before the bulk of Otto IV's forces had had time to come up. In doing this they had gone against the count of Boulogne's advice. 'Let them go', he had said, 'for the land will then be ours for the taking', and it is clear that the poet agreed. 'If they [i.e. the allies] had only waited until the morrow', he writes, 'then they would have won great honour.'³⁶ Contrast this with Duby's dictum on the knight: 'Honour compelled him to appear intrepid, even to the point of folly.'³⁷ One of the odd things about Duby's view of the knight at war is that it is at odds with his own analysis of the knight in training for war. For he points out that in tournaments victory was the reward not of ardour but of discipline.³⁸ Not that he seems to be aware of this contradiction; sadly, these days, Duby seems to be blessed with a brain too small to impede the natural facility of his tireless pen.³⁹

An episode which is peculiarly revealing of the pre-occupations of modern historians is the *History's* account of Richard I's campaign in the Beauvaisis in 1197. What all modern writers seize upon is the moment when the Marshal threw himself into the assault on the castle of Milli and went up the scaling-ladder like a young man.⁴⁰ Duby uses this remarkable display of courage and prowess by a man in his fifties and, in Duby's words, 'already creaking at the joints', in order to characterise the Marshal's good service in Richard's wars.⁴¹ But what he does not

³⁴ HGM 10,827-32, 10,867-81.

³⁵ HGM 10,882-90.

³⁶ HGM 14,746-800.

³⁷ Duby, *Guillaume*, 107. When medievalists say this kind of thing it is hardly surprising that a modern historian should write of the 'old chivalry of the feudal host in which every man charged for himself, concerned as much with personal honour as with victory': Howard, 16.

³⁸ Duby, *Guillaume*, 123. It is, of course, now conventional to emphasize the close similarity between tournaments and real engagements, and, therefore, the value of the sport as training for war — a point made by Roger of Howden in the twelfth century, Geoffrey de Charny in the fourteenth and, most recently, by Juliet Barker in the twentieth. See J. R. V. Barker, *The Tournament in England 1100-1400* (Woodbridge, 1986), esp. 17ff. One additional point could perhaps be made: that tournaments trained men to fight together in small groups of friends. For the importance of this in war, see J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976), 51-2, 71-2, citing the findings of the study of human behaviour in combat made by the US Army Historical Service.

³⁹ Harsh words perhaps, but no harsher than his own judgment on William Marshal, who is in no position to answer back. And given the astonishing achievement of Duby's early writings, the relatively poor quality of his recent works is doubly distressing.

⁴⁰ HGM 11,169-231.

⁴¹ Duby, *Guillaume*, 171.

point out is that William's actions were criticized as being foolhardy and inappropriate — and criticized by none other than Richard I, the king whom the poet calls 'le meilleur prince del monde'.⁴² At least both Painter and Crosland, in their much fuller accounts of this incident, do find space for Richard's criticism, yet neither they, nor (so far as I can see) anyone else has thought it worthwhile to set the incident in the context of the campaign.⁴³ And yet, again, the context is one of secret orders, an undercover muster and then a sudden attack, in this case by two columns operating in tandem. One column, under Richard's personal command, having taken Milli by surprise, was able to capture it by assault; the other column, consisting of the *routiers* under Mercadier's command, succeeded in capturing one of Richard's great enemies, the bishop of Beauvais, and took so many other prisoners that, according to the poet, there was no room anywhere to put one's feet.⁴⁴ Now the *History* reports all of this, but not modern historians. This suggests that the thirteenth-century view of knightly warfare was both more complex and more comprehensive than that of modern writers. Clearly, like modern scholars, our thirteenth-century author was drawn to the compelling image of the middle-aged knight on the scaling ladder, but unlike them, he did not allow that image to fill his mind to the exclusion of everything else.

As in these episodes, so also in many others. Time and again we hear of one commander trying to surprise his opponent. Indeed, the first military action in the *History* occurs when King Stephen raced to the relief of Winchester in 1141 and took the empress Matilda so much by surprise that she was forced to 'hitch up her skirts' and ride like a man.⁴⁵ According to the poet, Stephen's next coup was to surprise the garrison of Newbury. Here, indeed, the word 'surprise' occurs three times in the space of twelve lines.⁴⁶ Time and again the author emphasizes the rapidity of troop movements. A commander in a hurry might persuade his troops to press on after dinner, as when King Richard rode to the relief of Verneuil in 1194.⁴⁷ We hear, too, of night marches, as in the attack on Montmirail, and as used by William's father, John Marshal, to ambush Patrick of Salisbury's men outside Winchester in 1141.⁴⁸ Or by Henry II when, in 1173, he strove to capture his rebellious eldest son. Although Henry's swoop failed to capture the Young King, it created such a state of panic in the rebels' camp that they had to resort to the emergency measure of having him hastily knighted by the best man immediately to

⁴² *HGM* 11,247–56, 11,766. Curiously, Duby refers to Richard's reproach at Milli elsewhere in his book (p. 124) in his discussion of tournaments. But, as already noted, Duby allows discipline and self-discipline a far greater place in tournaments than in war. Similarly, although Duby mentions another occasion when William's rash actions (on the bridge at Montmirail) were criticized by the best knights present, Baldwin de Béthune and Hugh de Hardincourt (*HGM* 7996–8003), he goes on to draw conclusions which do not require him to modify his view of what constitutes 'proper knightly behaviour': Duby, *Guillaume*, 109.

⁴³ Painter, 111; Crosland, 78.

⁴⁴ *HGM* 11,106–280.

⁴⁵ *HGM* 183–225.

⁴⁶ *HGM* 200–11.

⁴⁷ *HGM* 10,453–63.

⁴⁸ *HGM* 299–354. In consequence Earl Patrick's men were not wearing armour when attacked and were routed, losing a great deal of baggage. But twenty-seven years later this lesson seems to have been forgotten, this time with fatal consequences for the earl. See below, 11.

hand, that is our hero.⁴⁹ All this was in accord with the maxim of Vegetius: 'courage is worth more than numbers, and speed is worth more than courage'.⁵⁰

Inevitably, then, we constantly find commanders haunted by the fear of being taken by surprise.⁵¹ Naturally, in these circumstances, the competent commander was acutely aware of the importance of good reconnaissance. The *History* contains several object lessons on how to carry out effective reconnaissance. In 1189, for example, Henry II, at bay at Le Mans, sent William out on patrol in the early morning mist; the Marshal made sure they got close enough to the Capetian forces to obtain accurate information about their numbers and disposition, and he resisted the temptation to pick up easy plunder so as not to jeopardise what was essentially a news-gathering mission.⁵² In another example we hear how in 1202 William Marshal and the earls of Salisbury and Warenne, having ridden out themselves to check information which their scouts had brought them — that Philip Augustus had given up the siege of Arques — at once decided that discretion was the better part and beat a hasty retreat when they realised that the Capetian, taking advantage of a concealed valley, had sent against them a well-armed intercepting force under the command of William des Barres.⁵³ One of the other lessons of that episode — that a good commander should check the accuracy of information coming in — is further developed in the account of how Richard the Lionheart, by good reconnaissance, using both local knights and his own eyes, was able to take Philip by surprise at Gisors in 1198 and come within a hair's breadth of capturing him.⁵⁴

It is against a background of assumptions like this that the poet tells the story of the climax of William's career, the war of 1216–17. When, on the very day of the child Henry III's coronation, William is informed of a threat to his own castle at Goodrich, he at once sends a force of knights, sergeants and crossbowmen on a night march to its relief.⁵⁵ During their march to Winchester in the spring of 1217, the earl of Salisbury and the young Marshal — for whom, of course, the *History*

⁴⁹ *HGM* 2024, 2038–9, 2161–2.

⁵⁰ Cited by Contamine, 252. On the use of Vegetius see Contamine, 210–11, and Gillingham, 'Richard I', 82–7, and the works cited there. Thus Ross was wide of the mark when he suggested that, even at the time of writing, 'Vegetius was hopelessly out of date': D. J. A. Ross, 'The Prince Answers Back: "Les Enseignements de Theodore Paliologue"', in *Ideals and Practice*, ed. Harper-Bill and Harvey, 165. Eternal common-sense principles — R. C. Smail's description of Vegetius's strategic maxims — do not date.

⁵¹ *HGM* 524, 12,235–40, 14,746. These lines refer to Stephen at Newbury in 1152, to Philip Augustus when withdrawing from Arques in 1202, and to Philip again on the eve of Bouvines. See also below, 10.

⁵² *HGM* 8381–478.

⁵³ *HGM* 12,251–314.

⁵⁴ *HGM* 10,924–11,012. Note also that William of Poitiers, himself an old soldier, in his life of William the Conqueror compares William favourably both with the great generals of antiquity and with modern commanders in that William was prepared to go out on reconnaissance patrol himself, instead of leaving it all to subordinates. Obviously there were risks, but accurate information was all-important. 'Fuit illorum et est ducum consuetudinis, dirigere non ire exploratores: magis ad vitam sibi, quam ut exercitui providentiam suam conservarent. Guillelmus vero cum viginti quinque, non amplius militum comitatu promptus ipse loca et incolas exploravit': Guillaume de Poitiers, *Histoire de Guillaume le Conquérant*, ed. R. Foreville (Paris, 1952), 168. Even in a tournament 'scouts' were useful, as when at the great tournament of Lagny (1180) the seneschal of Flanders kept a squadron of thirty knights clear of the *melee* until a knight sent him word of the precarious plight of the Young King: *HGM* 4935–51.

⁵⁵ *HGM* 15,352.

was written — take good care to avoid being ambushed.⁵⁶ Later that year, Prince Louis of France, because he feared a sudden attack on London, hastily abandoned his siege of Dover.⁵⁷ And as for the two critical battles of 1217, one of them, Lincoln, may have reminded the old man of his tournament years, but even a work in praise of the Marshal makes it clear that it was the brilliant reconnaissance work of Peter des Roches which created the decisive advantage. By finding a hidden entrance the bishop of Winchester enabled the royalists to take the French so much by surprise that their master of artillery was killed by men he believed to be on his own side.⁵⁸ The old man's last charge captures the imagination, but it was only the icing on the cake.⁵⁹ Incidentally, so far as I can see, it was also the first time since Drincourt in 1167 — exactly fifty years earlier — that William had charged into battle, so rare an event was the battle charge of the heavily-armoured knight. No wonder the old fellow was so out of practice that he forgot to put on his helmet.⁶⁰ Similarly, at least the way the *History* tells it, it was not audacity but deviousness which won the battle of Sandwich in 1217. By ensuring that his cog was lightly laden and therefore rode high in the water, William enabled his sergeants to throw potsful of blinding chalk-dust into the eyes of the unfortunate French.⁶¹

The use of this method, clearly with the poet's approval, raises the question of what was, or was not, considered unchivalrous. Just as the kinds of tournament tricks which Philip of Flanders employed seem to have been regarded as perfectly respectable behaviour,⁶² so also in war there was clearly nothing dishonourable about deceiving the enemy, particularly if it permitted one to ravage his lands without interruption.⁶³ Was anything unchivalrous? In a tournament it would appear that it was unchivalrous to make off with the prize which another knight had taken, especially when that other knight was William — though even this seems to have been a debatable point of honour.⁶⁴ And what about in war? In passing, the poet makes it clear, as one would expect, that it was dishonourable to surrender a castle all too readily, as the defenders of Carrickfergus did in 1210, and honourable to resist stoutly, as William de Silli did at Le Mans in 1189, and William Mortimer at Verneuil in 1194 and at Arques in 1202.⁶⁵ Equally to be expected is his disapproval of the anxiety of some of the French knights at Gisors in 1198 to save their own necks — behaviour all the more reprehensible because it jeopardised the safety of

⁵⁶ HGM 15,920–4.

⁵⁷ HGM 17,069–84.

⁵⁸ HGM 16,629–42.

⁵⁹ In his account of Lincoln, Duby, *Guillaume*, 182–3, goes straight from the Marshal's speech to the Marshal's charge. In this version there is no room for Peter des Roches, 'qui fu mestre cel jor de conseillier nos genz': HGM 16,998–9.

⁶⁰ HGM 16,597–604. More generally, on the rarity of the charge in a pitched battle, see Gillingham, 'Richard I', 80–1, 91.

⁶¹ HGM 17,381–404.

⁶² HGM 2723–9, 4821–916.

⁶³ For an explicit justification of both deception and ravaging by a fourteenth-century canonist, see Honoré Bonet, *The Tree of Battles*, ed. G. W. Coopland (Liverpool, 1949), 154–5. And as he puts it (p. 154), 'if sometimes the humble and innocent suffer harm and lose their goods, it cannot be otherwise'.

⁶⁴ HGM 3965–4284. For similar quarrels after real fights see M. Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1965), 164–6.

⁶⁵ HGM 14,276–8, 8878–86, 10,468–80, 12,044–55.

their king.⁶⁶ But there are only two occasions when the poet goes out of his way to call a course of action shameful. One was the killing of Earl Patrick in 1168, struck down from behind when he himself was unarmed.⁶⁷ The other takes us back once again to 1167 and to Drincourt — to William's first experience of war. As the count of Flanders moved up to attack the town, so the constable of Normandy prepared to move out. Seeing him go, the chamberlain, William's lord, called out, 'Sire, it would be great shame on him who lets this town burn.' Later on, the poet describes the constable's departure as 'villainous', and says why — because it put the town in great danger of being plundered and burned to the ground.⁶⁸ Undoubtedly it is true that the ensuing fight at Drincourt is described in language very like that used to describe a tournament — as Meyer, Crosland and Duby have all emphasized⁶⁹ — but it clearly was very much more than two teams of knights having fun by playing at war. A town and its inhabitants were to be saved from destruction, and it was this purpose which made the fight a notably honourable one. Equally, of course, there was nothing dishonourable about the intentions of the attackers. In a similar situation William would do exactly the same.⁷⁰ What was shameful was for the knight whose role it was to defend the people to fail to do so when the moment came.⁷¹ Fortunately no one behaved shamefully at Lincoln, but the message, made explicit in William's two speeches to his men, was still essentially the same one. They were fighting not only for their honour but also for their wives,⁷² their children and their land, even for the very existence of their country.⁷³ Thus, in William's last war, as in his first, we find the same message: war is not fought for the sake of individual gain, whether glory, reputation or material reward, but for

⁶⁶ HGM 11,025 – 30. Their headlong flight when Richard attacked 'like a ravenous lion' (HGM 10,993) was not what Charny called 'du beau retraire seurement et honorablement', in his section on 'comment l'en met sus une chevauchee pour guerrier et courre sus a ses ennemis': Charny, 473.

⁶⁷ HGM 1636 – 52. Contrast this with William's own behaviour when confronted by an unarmed Lionheart in 1189. 'By the legs of God, Marshal, do not kill me. That would be wrong for I am not in armour.' 'No, I will not kill you. I leave that to the Devil', replied the Marshal, running the future king's horse through with his lance and killing it on the spot. 'That was a fine blow', concludes the poet: HGM 8839 – 50.

⁶⁸ HGM 854 – 5, 1124 – 8.

⁶⁹ HGM iii. 18, n. 4; Crosland, 24 – 5; Duby, *Guillaume*, 88.

⁷⁰ What mattered was that the war should be a legitimate one. 'If on both sides war is decided upon and begun by the Councils of the two kings, the soldiery may take spoil from the kingdom at will': Bonet, 154.

⁷¹ E.g. Charny, 465, 512. For Ramon Lull's view that chivalry was instituted to discipline and defend the people, see Keen, 8 – 11; Vale, 22f.

⁷² One of the ways in which Duby minimizes the (admittedly small) role of women in the *History* is by consigning William's wife to the margins: Duby, *Guillaume*, 49, 167. But this is to ignore totally her role in William's council, particularly important when matters involving her own inheritance, notably in Ireland, were being considered: HGM 13,386 – 9, 14,095 – 100 (an interesting reversal of traditional male-female roles). And even in a vital affair of state — when William is deciding who should succeed him as Henry III's guardian — he calls the countess to counsel him: HGM 18,032. On the subject of the wife's role as adviser in *chansons de geste*, see P. S. Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin* (Chicago, London, 1985), 8 – 18.

⁷³ HGM 16,137 – 96, 16,277 – 310. And it was in the middle of the battle of Lincoln, as Duby, *Guillaume*, 68 – 9, rightly points out, that the poet places his profession of faith in the worth of chivalry. 'Que est donques chevalerie? / Si forte chose et si herdie / e si tres costos a aprendre / Que nuls malveis ne l'ose enprendre': HGM 16,859 – 62.

the common good — a thoroughly conventional message, and one which the *History* shares with the didactic treatises on chivalry.

If the proper purposes of knightly war were thoroughly conventional, so too, I believe, were the methods of knightly war. The kind of war William fought — and by definition this was the kind of war the best knights fought — was a war full of ravaging, punctuated quite often by attacks on strong-points but only rarely by pitched battles.⁷⁴ The *History* describes seventeen sieges but only three or four battles. Moreover, William in a remarkably long lifetime of warfare was present at only two battles.⁷⁵ If you had to fight then you fought hard, but always before you fought you tried to catch your enemy offguard, and often you preferred not to fight at all. This, of course, is not at all the impression which, as we have seen, continues to be fostered by the kind of nonsense that Duby writes on the subject. In reality, knights like William Marshal saw themselves as engaged in a deliberately destructive type of warfare, a warfare characterized by watchfulness, deviousness and sudden swoops. These are not the methods that we are inclined to associate with the word 'chivalrous'. We are inclined to assume that there is a contradiction, an inherent tension, between the ideals of chivalry and the nasty reality of war, and to sympathise, I suppose, with the words of the Limousin troubadour Girart de Bornelh, a contemporary of the Marshal:

I used to see the barons in beautiful armour, following tournaments, and I heard those who had given the best blow spoken of for many a day. But now honour lies in stealing cattle, sheep and oxen, or pillaging churches and travellers. Oh, shame upon the knight who drives off sheep, robs churches and travellers, and then appears before a lady.⁷⁶

But, with the exception of robbing churches, these are precisely the methods of making war which the *History* advocates. Read, for example, William the Breton's account (in other words, the victim's account) of precisely that raid which William Marshal advised Henry II to undertake in 1188.⁷⁷ If, as Malcolm Vale has pointed out, there is no sign of any tension between ideal of chivalry and reality of war in the mid fifteenth-century writings of Oliver de la Marche, equally there is no sign

⁷⁴ Cf. C. Gaier, *Art et organisation militaires dans la principauté de Liège et dans le comté de Loos au Moyen Âge* (Brussels, 1968), 216.

⁷⁵ The sieges are Winchester (1141), Newbury (1152), Limoges (1184), Le Mans (1189), Windsor, Nottingham and Verneuil (1194), Arras (?1197), Milli (1197), Arques and Mirebeau (1202), Kilkenny (1207–8), Rochester (1215), Winchelsea, Winchester, Mountsorrel and Lincoln (1217). The battles are Bouvines (1214), Lincoln and Sandwich (1217), and possibly, on the grounds that it might well have involved the greater part of the forces active in a particular theatre of war (i.e. eastern Normandy in 1167), Drincourt. I do not count Fréteval (1194) or Gisors (1198), since on both occasions Philip ran for cover and made no effort to fight. Nor do I count Gisors (1188), since neither Henry II nor Philip allowed the greater part of their forces to get involved in the fighting. See above, 5. Thus whether William was present at one or two battles depends on whether or not one counts Drincourt as a battle — and most historians seem to regard it as only a skirmish.

⁷⁶ *Sämtliche Lieder des Troubadors Girart de Bornelh*, ed. A. Kolsen (Halle, 1910) n. 65, pp. 414–15; cited by Keen, *Chivalry*, 233–4.

⁷⁷ Guillaume le Breton, *Philippides*, Book 3, lines 286–309.

of it in the *History* either. There is really no question, as is sometimes suggested, of the chivalric ethic being gradually eroded in the later Middle Ages by the increasing savagery of war.⁷⁸ Of course, this is what contemporaries believed. In the words of the fourteenth-century canonist Honoré Bonet,

In these days all wars are directed against the poor labouring people and against their goods and chattels. I do not call that war, but it seems to me to be pillage and robbery. Further that way of warfare does not follow the ordinances of worthy chivalry or of the ancient custom of noble warriors who upheld justice, the widow, the orphan and the poor. And nowadays it is the opposite that they do everywhere, and the man who does not know how to set places on fire, to rob churches and usurp their rights and to imprison priests, is not fit to carry on war. And for these reasons the knights of today have not the glory and the praise of the old champions of former times.⁷⁹

But the *History of William the Marshal* makes it crystal clear that, when on the offensive, at least one much-praised champion of former times went to some trouble to ensure that his wars were 'directed against the poor and labouring people and against their goods and chattels'.

All this, it seems to me, is to reinforce Maurice Keen's point that the tendency of chivalry was not to limit the horrors of war, but 'rather to help make those horrors endemic'.⁸⁰ This is partly because, as he says, chivalry presented knightly conduct in an idealizing light, and this therefore had the effect of prompting men to seek wars. In this interpretation the horrors of war are looked upon as an inevitable and regrettable side effect of going to war. But is it entirely right to treat them merely as side effects? Surely, what the *History* shows is not just that the chivalric ethic of the thirteenth century already took the horrors of war for granted. What it also shows is that 'pillage and robbery' were central to chivalrous war-making. The good knight regretted them only when it was his dependants who were the victims. When he was on the attack then pillage and robbery were not simply taken for granted, rather they were actually approved of as the right, the proper, the courteous way to make war by 'the best knight in the world', the man whose life was held up as a model for all good men to follow. Since these were the methods advocated by the 'patron saint' of chivalry, it is perhaps not after all surprising that, as Matthew Paris reports, when William's tomb in the New Temple was opened in 1240, his body was found to be 'putrid and, so far as could be seen, detestable'.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Vale, 157–61. Similarly, c. 1200, troubadour poetry cultivated at the court of Montferrat expressed a knightly ethos in which courtly and martial values were felt to be in harmony — and the latter dominant. See A. Barbero, 'La Corte di Montferrato allo specchio della poesia trobadoura', *Bollettino Storico Bibliografico Subalpino* (Turin, 1983), 641–703, esp. 664–89. I owe this reference to the kindness of Maurice Keen.

⁷⁹ Bonet, 189.

⁸⁰ M. Keen, 'Chivalry, Nobility and the Man-At-arms', in *War, Literature and Politics in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. C. T. Allmand (Liverpool, 1976), 45.

⁸¹ Paris, *CM* iv. 495.