

THE DEMANDING DRAMA OF LOUIS THE PIOUS

by Courtney M. Booker

Ivan Gobry, *Histoire des Rois de France: Louis I^{er}, Premier successeur de Charlemagne* (Paris: Pygmalion/Gérard Watelet 2002) 254 pp. + appendices, including a genealogical table, chronology, biographical notices, and brief bibliography.

“Louis the Pious, who is also called the Debonair, presents the melancholy spectacle of a man essentially good by nature, full of lofty intentions, amiable and magnanimous in private life, quick to repent when he had done amiss, and quicker to forgive injury, yet wanting in vigor and resolution, easily relying on the advice of others, and destitute of the worldly wisdom which would have enabled him to choose his advisers well. Men of his character are numerous in every age; they are doomed to suffer themselves and to bring suffering on others; and when they are born, as Louis was born, to hold the reins of government, their life is apt to be a tragedy.”¹ This is a characterization of Carolingian king and emperor Louis the Pious (778–840) made not by Ivan Gobry but by Lewis Sergeant more than a century ago. Unfortunately, there is little in Gobry’s new biography of Louis, *Histoire des Rois de France: Louis I^{er}, Premier successeur de Charlemagne*, that differs from Sergeant’s vivid, inveterate portrait.

For example, Louis’s “want of vigor and resolution,” “lack of worldly wisdom,” and “reliance upon the advice of others” are character flaws also invoked repeatedly by Gobry to explain the particularly problematic course of the emperor’s reign: “le sentimental Louis” (36); “Louis était timide, emprunté, éloigné” (91); “Louis le Pieux était certes faible, mais influençable” (202).² In stark contrast, those surrounding Louis, such as his sons Lothar, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald, or his courtier Gombaud, are often characterized as astute, influential, and energetic (as manifested either in terms of their boorish obstinacy or gallant fortitude): “prince Louis, qui était plus

¹ L. Sergeant, *The Franks, from Their Origin as a Confederacy to the Establishment of the Kingdom of France and the German Empire* (London 1898) 298–299.

²Additional examples: “sous l’influence de cette épouse maléfique” (35); “Louis était un sentimental” (48); “avec l’indécision et les caprices du nouvel empereur” (102–103); “compliqué et hésitant” (103); “son indécision” (110); “la faiblesse de Louis le Pieux” (219).

sauvage et plus inculte” (199); “Lothaire était fort et déterminé (202); “l’infatigable Gombaud” (203); “Charles, qui avait l’esprit plus chevaleresque” (233).³ Yet, for Gobry, the principal “bad influence” upon Louis was unequivocally the emperor’s ambitious and recklessly domineering second wife, Judith: “cette épouse dominatrice” (150); “Judith, ambitieuse adroite mau politique aveugle” (198); “Judith connaissait la faiblesse de son époux” (198).⁴

In other words, to account for historical actions and agency—as well as their absence—Gobry often follows an ahistorically “psychological” template: “la psychologie de Louis le Pieux” (179); “Judith, d’une psychologie beaucoup plus fine que celle de son époux” (196); “l’astucieux père connaissait aussi la psychologie de ses fils” (229). This practice amounts to Gobry either inferring an ostensibly common meaning from an eclectic assemblage of reports about events, or simply accepting and repeating a medieval interpretation of the motives at work behind them.⁵ Thus, he sees Louis’s problems beginning only with the emperor’s marriage in 819 to his “willful” and “nefarious” second wife. Glibly following the scathing typological characterization by Louis’s enemies of Judith as another Jezebel, Gobry ignores the fact that the emperor’s troubles had in fact begun the previous year with the revolt and subsequent murder of his nephew King Bernard of Italy.⁶ The striking vision reported by a poor woman of Laon leaves little doubt about the outrage caused by this act of vengeance.⁷

³Additional examples: “Gombaud ... astucieux et influent” (202); “Charles était tenace” (235); “Charles les accueillit avec courtoisie” (236); “Charles était un stratège” (237); Lothaire, avec l’obstination qui lui était propre” (240); “Charles refusa énergiquement” (242).

⁴Additional examples: “l’ardente Judith” (226); “On ne sait si l’ambitieuse impératrice eut conscience de l’influence néfaste qu’elle exerça sur son débonnaire mari, et des maux qu’elle causa par son obstination” (247); “l’ambition de cette femme” (253); “L’ambition de Judith” (253).

⁵For the many problems involved in writing early medieval biography, see J. L. Nelson, “Writing Early Medieval Biography,” *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000) 129–136; J. L. Nelson, “The Voice of Charlemagne” in R. Gameson, H. Leyser, eds., *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2001) 76–88; and R. Schieffer, “Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der biographischen Darstellung frühmittelalterlicher Persönlichkeiten,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 229 (1979) 85–95.

⁶G. Bühner-Thierry, “La reine adultère,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, X^e-XII^e siècles* 35 (1992) 299–312; E. Ward, “Agobard of Lyons and Paschasius Radbertus as Critics of the Empress Judith,” *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990) 15–25; and T. F. X. Noble, “The Revolt of King Bernard of Italy in 817: Its Causes and Consequences,” *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 15 (1974) 315–326.

⁷P. E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, Neb.

Yet, it is the emplotment of Louis's reign in particularly *dramatic* terms that predominates Gobry's narrative, and consequently predetermines his pattern of analysis, such as it is. For example, various individuals are often found to be "playing roles" (33, 58, 128, 136, 142, 151, 168, 207, 227). Now, ordinarily one would understand this expression as nothing more than a figure of speech. But throughout the book, Gobry uses it in conjunction with additional theatrical language, such as "actors" (111, 204, 211, 219) who play roles in "scenes" (142, 227) and "dramatic situations" (149) that take place within "theaters" (165, 204, 207). Moreover, the dramas these actors perform vary considerably, ranging from a "tragedy" (111, 186, 214) to a "comedy" (226) to a "tragi-comedy" with its "denouement" (210); at one point we learn that a sequence of events was nothing less than a scene from the "Ballet des Walkyries" (143). Such powerful metaphors inevitably lead Gobry to view those persons close to Louis but who ultimately rebelled against him during the 830s as "hypocrites" (180, 204, 235), confidence men who engaged in such frequent "duplicity" (214, 231, 235, 238, 240) that their treacherous behavior was not just strategically "premeditated" (210, 233), but outright "Machiavellian" (205, 241). No attempt is made to understand the motives of the rebels (apart from vague allusions to "psychologie"), for their motives are less important than—or are seen simply as a self-evident part of—their traditional roles as Louis's shrewd, opportunistic antagonists (200, 206, 211).

As Sergeant's venerable portrait of Louis quoted above demonstrates, the emplotment of Louis's reign in dramatic terms is hardly a stylistic innovation by Gobry. In fact, the "tragedy" of Louis the Pious is a tale that was created by Carolingian authors themselves, a story so well crafted that it has continued to enthrall and be retold by readers for more than a millennium, right up to Gobry's present biography.⁸ More specifically, Janet L. Nelson has suggested that the particular events of Louis's desertion by his men and subsequent public penance in 833 have been seized upon by generations of scholars as the critical "tragic" turning point in Louis's reign.⁹ This telling phenomenon noted by Nel-

1994) 67–80.

⁸On this point, see the important study by P. E. Dutton, "Awareness of Historical Decline in the Carolingian Empire, 800–887" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto 1981) 64.

⁹J. L. Nelson, "The Last Years of Louis the Pious" in P. Godman, R. Collins, eds., *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840)* (Oxford 1990) 148. Cf. her earlier observations about the tendency to write Carolingian history as a "magnificent tragedy" in J. L. Nelson, "Rewriting the History of the Franks,"

son is a fact that can be well documented: the events of the year 833 are nearly always characterized by historians as a tragedy, a comedy, or, as Gobry prefers, a “revolting” (211), “catastrophic” (207) “tragi-comedy” (210).¹⁰ Consequently, nearly all the many histories of Louis and his reign fall victim to that “incurable sclerosis” warned against long ago by Marc Bloch, for they succumb to “the same prejudices, false inhibitions, and myopias which had plagued the vision” of past generations.¹¹ This is not to say that such sclerotic, dramatic histories should therefore be considered worthless, for as Hayden White—himself a trained medievalist—has argued, the shifting modes of their emplotment can tell us much about the historical consciousness of their authors, reaching all the way back to their original Carolingian creators.¹² What they don’t provide is precisely what they purport to be: an objective, unproblematic narrative history of Louis and his reign.¹³ As even a contemporary Carolingian editor, Walafrid Strabo, knew, Thegan, the first biographer of Louis the Pious, was most surely not, in Gobry’s words, “habituuellement sobre et objectif” (71).¹⁴

Now, there can be little doubt that the continual retelling of the dramatic events of 833 is due to—and serves as an abiding testament of—the remarkable rhetorical and literary skills possessed by Carolingian authors. They knew how to tell a gripping story. Yet, I suspect that this is only part of the reason for their story’s perdurability; for their captivating narrative has also long been an extremely *useful* one, employed as early as the eighteenth century to account for the decline of the entire Carolingian Empire. Indeed, Louis’s “character flaws,” coupled with the “Machiavellian opportunism” of his wife, sons, and courtiers, are continually understood to have resulted in the “tragedy of 833,” a

History: The Journal of the Historical Association 72 (1987) 69–72.

¹⁰C. M. Booker, “Writing a Wrong: The Divestiture of Louis the Pious (833) and the Decline of the Carolingians” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles 2002) 1–338. An important—but largely overlooked—exception to this rule is C. Barthélemy, “La déposition de Louis le Débonnaire” in idem, *Erreurs et mensonges historiques*, 4th series (Paris 1873) 110–148.

¹¹M. Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. P. Putnam (New York 1953) 62–63.

¹²N. F. Partner, “Hayden White: The Form and the Content,” *History and Theory* 37 (1998) 162–172; N. F. Partner, “Hayden White (and the Content and the Form and Everyone Else) at the AHA,” *History and Theory* 36 (1997) 102–110.

¹³Cf. R. E. Sullivan, “The Carolingian Age: Reflections on Its Place in the History of the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 64 (1989) 267–306.

¹⁴See Walafrid’s editorial prologue to Thegan’s biography of Louis, partially trans. in E. S. Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century* (Ann Arbor 1962) 149.

drama that serves as an ideal case from which one can isolate and discern the general, essentialized social factors and causes considered detrimental to the progress of civilization, be it Carolingian or otherwise. Judging by the particular pejorative terms historians have recently used to characterize Louis and his reign, however, this process of diagnosing the “timeless” ills of civilization afflicting Carolingian Europe in truth continues to be nothing but a form of presentist projection: the rebels have been called a “troika” that compelled Louis to undertake penance in 833, a ritual that was nothing but a “tragic, Stalinesque show-trial,” while Louis has been described as a monarch who executed a “putsch” and implemented a regime that “had it worked out ... would have been a police-state.”¹⁵ Similarly, in Gobry’s estimation, the events of 833 were the unpardonable (254) result of Louis’s “essential”—read “transhistorically human”—fault (“faute primordiale,” 253): of placing the love for his wife before the love for his “nation” (254). By acquiescing to the will of Judith, Louis gained an inheritance for their son, Charles (the Bald), but only at the cost of one hundred thousand lives and the dislocation of the empire (247). The moment Louis conceded, the Carolingian Empire was lost (254). And if the title of the book is any indication—*Histoire des Rois de France: Louis I^{er}, Premier successeur de Charlemagne*—the empire that was lost was apparently an early form of the French nation, ruled by a French king. In other words, for Gobry, the drama of Louis the Pious’s reign was specifically a French *national* drama, despite the fact that the Carolingians—like the Merovingians before them—ruled in an era, as Patrick Geary has reminded us, “before France and Germany.”¹⁶ Modern concerns over French national identity may now inform the didactic script, but the drama itself remains “essentially” the same.

¹⁵B.-S. Albert, “Raban Maur, l’unité de l’empire et ses relations avec les Carolingiens,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 86 (1991) 19 (troika); E. Magnou-Nortier, “La tentative de subversion de l’État sous Louis le Pieux et l’oeuvre des falsificateurs (2^e partie),” *Le Moyen Age* 105 (1999) 640 (tragic, Stalinesque show-trial); J. L. Nelson, “Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?” in eadem, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London 1996) 239–242 (putsch); and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford 1983) 299 (police-state).

¹⁶P. J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford 1988). On this tendency to arrogate a national past from the early Middle Ages, see the related comments by R. Bartlett, ed., *Medieval Panorama* (London 2001) 20; M. E. Hoenicke Moore, “Euro-Medievalism: Modern Europe and the Medieval Past,” *Collegium* 24 (2002) 67–79; and P. J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton 2002).

In conclusion, Gobry's book is not a critical study of Louis and his career (see instead the recent biography by E. Boshof, *Ludwig der Fromme* [Darmstadt 1996]), nor is it the first French biography of this monarch, as the back cover of the book claims (see J.-M.-F. Frantin, *Louis-Le-Pieux et son siècle*, 2 vols. [Paris 1839]; and A. Himly, *Wala et Louis le Débonnaire* [Paris 1849]). Rather, it is an entertaining, popular history that rehashes the Carolingian literary portraits of Louis with a wistfulness reminiscent of the several nineteenth-century plays that were themselves based on those same inveterate portraits.¹⁷ Heedless of the modern "reconsiderations," "reassessments," "re-reconsiderations," and "new perspectives" of Louis the Pious and his reign, Gobry's book rehearses the same age-old drama in earnest.¹⁸ It's time we bring the show to a close.

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¹⁷For the literary portraits, see H. Siemes, "Beiträge zum literarischen Bild Kaiser Ludwigs des Frommen in der Karolingerzeit" (Ph.D. inaug. diss., Universität Freiburg 1966); and H. Kuhn, "Das literarische Porträt Ludwigs des Frommen" (Ph.D. inaug. diss., Universität Basel 1930). For the plays, see E. von Wildenbruch, *Die Karolinger: Trauerspiel in vier Akten* (1881; Berlin 1898); K. Robe, *Ludwig der Fromme: Historisches Schauspiel* (Berlin 1862); M. X. V. Drap-Arnaud, *Louis I, (Le Débonnaire), ou Le fanatisme au IX^e siècle, tragédie en cinq actes* (Paris 1822); and L. A. F. de Marchangy, *La Gaul poétique ou L'histoire de France considérée dans rapports avec la poésie, l'éloquence et les beaux-arts* (Paris 1815) 2.1–50.

¹⁸F. L. Ganshof, "Louis the Pious Reconsidered" in idem, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, trans. J. Sondheimer (1957; London 1971) 261–272; G. W. Marx, "Louis I (the Pious, or 'Le Débonnaire'): A Personal Reassessment of the Man through the Events in His Reign" (Ph.D. diss., New York University 1971); T. F. X. Noble, "Louis the Pious and His Piety Re-Reconsidered," *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 58 (1980) 297–316; P. Godman, R. Collins, eds., *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840)* (Oxford 1990); and P. Depreux, "Louis le Pious reconsidéré? À propos des travaux récents consacrés à l'héritier de Charlemagne et à son règne," *Francia* 21, 1 (1994) 181–212.