<<De quy juqu'a mille ans bien parlé en sera>> La réception de la Chanson de Bertrand de Guesclin entre 1380 et 1618
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Summary
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The reception of the Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin between 1380 and 1618

Bertrand du Guesclin is a well-known name for many Frenchmen. This fourteenth-century Breton knight of modest descent succeeded where the great, noble armies of France failed: he provided the first series of French victories since the beginning of the Hundred Years War and he reconquered the territory that the French king had been forced to give up to his English colleague after the battle of Poitiers. Therefore, throughout the centuries, Du Guesclin has been remembered in history books, novels, theatre plays and comic books; his name decorates street signs and school buildings, and has been carved in stone in numerous statues. His remembrance is dominated by a few colourful anecdotes: he is the ugly boy who treats his mother with contempt, the cunning gang leader who disguises himself in order to intrude a castle, the insolent soldier who persuades the infamous Companies to follow him on an expedition to Spain and, of course, he is the arrogant knight who fixes his own ransom at an excessive sum in the full confidence that the French people will pay for his freedom. Du Guesclin is the savior of France, loved for his bravura and admired for his spectacular career within a strict class society.

His memory rapidly grew to legendary proportions. As with every legend, there is an element of truth in this story. Du Guesclin had indeed had a notable career: from a simple Breton knight, he had moved up to become the connétable (highest commander of the army) of France. Obviously, he owed this social ascent to his military qualities. However, the legend is silent about the lost battles Du Guesclin had also fought; it is also silent about the fact that his position was largely due to the specific circumstances of his time and about the fact that his loyalty to the French king, for which he was so often praised, seems to have been forced on him more often than not. Besides, Du Guesclin was not the only successful military of his time. This, then, raises the question why it was Du Guesclin, and not another man, who grew to become a national hero.

The answer to that question may lie in the study of the Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin. This late fourteenth-century chanson de geste (epic poem) paints a very positive picture of the life of Du Guesclin and has played a decisive role in the way in which he is remembered up until the present day. In this study, therefore, the primary reception of the Chanson is examined – from 1380 until 1618 – in order to map out and explain the creation, transmission and dissemination of this text.

The Chanson is a special text in many respects. It is the most complete source about the life of Du Guesclin in existence and is therefore often used by historians. In the late Middle Ages, it was already widely disseminated, as witnessed by the nine extant manuscripts. In addition to these, two prose versions were composed within twenty years after the original poem. These prose versions have been preserved in nineteen manuscripts and seven printed editions. Ever since the fourteenth century, the work has been accessible in one or several versions trough text editions, permitting a continuous dissemination. Even more remarkable, however, is that the Chanson was composed right after the death of the person whose life it recounts. Du Guesclin died in 1380; Cuvelier composed the Chanson in the period 1380-1385. The implications of this are discussed in chapter 1. First of all, the Chanson, while a work of fiction, is fairly trustworthy because its author has been able to consult eyewitnesses of the events he recounted. Secondly, the author had to stick

1 In translation: “Of which will be spoken for a thousand years”.
to reality, because his primary audience knew what had really happened and certain persons in the audience had even been involved in the events. This involvement of the audience in the tale provides a direct link between the creation of the work and its reception. Thirdly, the proximity in time of the subject to the text must have played a role in its popularity. The poem was able to fulfill different functions, that were in accordance with the receiver and the precise circumstances in which the text got to him or her. Three functions may be distinguished for the Chanson. The first was to celebrate Bertrand du Guesclin. The second was to serve as a type of chronicle, which recalled the events of an era and serves as a memorial text. The third was to convey a political message, which made the text very relevant regarding contemporary political developments; the political upheavals of the period 1380-1385 are visible in between the lines. In the different manuscripts, different aspects of the legend are accentuated by text varieties, readers' notes, choices in illustration and page lay-out. This variety in accentuation was important to those who created them – sometimes up to a century after the original composition of the Chanson. Variety and flexibility are therefore key principles in understanding the reception of this text.

This diversity can also be found in the terminology with which the text has been designated throughout the centuries. According to modern definitions, it is a so-called 'late' chanson de geste, a genre which is falsely thought to have been outdated even then, in the fourteenth century. However, the Chanson could also be seen as a chronicle since it tells the recent history of a community. At the same time, its textual structure is rather that of a biography. Since the perception of a text’s genre has a strong influence on the way in which it is read – and even on the choice whether a text is read at all – it is important to study the generical designation that was used in the different manuscripts of the Chanson. The same doubt that is found in the modern definitions is visible in the manuscripts. My own designation of the text as a chanson de geste is defendable when its functionality is taken into account: the epical theme is highly suitable for the glorification of an individual, the chanson de geste was still a popular genre at the end of the fourteenth century, the genre’s historicity was acknowledged, and it was a kind of text that was suitable for oral transmission and could therefore be disseminated widely and quickly.

Indeed, dissemination was an important goal for the author and patron of the Chanson. This is implied by the political function of the text, which is the subject of chapter 2. The chapter touches on various political discussions from the period 1370-1385, such as the question of loyalty to the king, the birth of a national awareness, the financing of the army, the degree of sovereignty of the king and the so-called loi salique, which stated that women could wear nor pass on the crown of France. These are first and foremost topics that revolve around the rights and duties of a subject to their king and vice versa, classic themes in the chansons de geste. It is striking that the discussion of these questions in the Chanson shows much resemblance to the political ideas of king Charles V (†1380), which are visible in his reforms and political treatises. The Chanson can therefore be seen as a form of propaganda, which consciously established a connection between the successful and popular Du Guesclin and the political ideology of the king to bring the latter to a broader audience. The author knew exactly what he was doing, as is apparent from the well-considered construction of the Chanson that guides the focus of the reader/listener to those passages that are politically the most significant.

On the basis of the analysis of the political discourse of the Chanson, it is possible to say something about the identity of the author. His name was already known, since he presents himself as ‘Cuvelier’ at the beginning of his poem. He was probably connected to the royal court of France, because that would explain how he was informed about the details of the most recent political
insights and ideas. By writing the *Chanson*, he managed to pull these out of the confined intellectual environment of the court and present them to a large audience in a playful way. Yet, who would benefit from such an enterprise?

In chapter 3, the search for the patron of the *Chanson* begins. Logically, this person should satisfy a number of criteria: he or she will have had a certain admiration for Du Guesclin, must have agreed with the political message as it appears in the text, will probably have a positive role in the *Chanson* and must have had a social position that was of a sufficient standard to be able to disseminate the work directly among the highest nobility of France. In addition, the patron is likely to have had direct access to the young king Charles VI, to whom the first manuscript was probably presented. Several persons could be eligible to be the patron, but none of them satisfies our criteria as fully as Louis II of Bourbon. This duke was the uncle and counselor of Charles VI, and he had often worked with Du Guesclin. Additionally, he had a strong political interest in the message that the *Chanson* conveys. Moreover, his patronage explains a number of choices made in the composition of the text that have been difficult to interpret until now. For example, if Louis of Bourbon is seen as the patron of the poem, it becomes easier to understand why so much attention has been paid to the Spanish adventures of Du Guesclin: once we realize that this expedition was started to depose the king who was responsible for the murder of the sister of Bourbon, this suggestion becomes the most plausible.

The analysis of the political discourse of the *Chanson* and the identification of the patron provide some clarity with regard to the intentions with which the text was made. The study now turns to the question whether or not these intentions were followed: who constituted the audience of the text and what did these people do with it? By examining the manuscript traditions of Cuvelier’s work (both of the *Chanson* and of the prose versions), it becomes clear that the reception has been very diverse. Chapter 4 discusses the textual variance shown in the manuscript traditions, but it also shows the diversity in the construction of the books by examining page lay-out, chapter arrangement and illustration programs. Every manuscript accentuates particular features that often are in keeping with the various possible, earlier mentioned, functions for the *Chanson*, namely the glorification of Du Guesclin, the conservation of the memory of a golden age for France and the transmission of a (potentially adapted or updated) political message.

The social environments in which Cuvelier’s work circulated show less variety. A substantial amount of manuscripts can be connected to the royal court. Furthermore, there is a striking amount of manuscripts that belonged to Burgundian nobility, as well as to the smaller nobility of Brittany and Normandy. In this, there is not much difference between the manuscripts of the *Chanson* and those of the prose versions as both patrons of the latter, Mary of Brittany and Jehannet d’Estouteville, were closely connected to the royal court. It is hard to be certain about why they chose to rephrase the *Chanson* in prose, but it seems at least that Mary especially wanted to cast her own political purposes in a form that was proper to the higher registers of historical writings, while Jehannet wanted to provide a wider dissemination for the message of the *Chanson* – indeed, with the translation from verses to prose it became possible to reach a new audience. A few decennia later, this effect was attained again when the prose texts were printed: the shortened first prose version was even translated into Spanish and sold on the Iberian Peninsula. In those years, an increasing commercialization of the material took place: it turned into a chivalric romance, cut loose from its historical origins and political context. In short, Cuvelier’s work, in all its forms, was renewed by, and available for a diverse audience for a period of at least a century and a half.
The success of the *Chanson* should, however, not be explained by looking at the manuscript traditions only. The audience of Cuvelier’s text came across Du Guesclin’s memory in other ways as well and this undoubtedly had an influence on the way the text was received. This is why Chapter 5 maps out the ‘cult’ around Du Guesclin in the late Middle Ages. This cult had been initiated by Charles V, who had decided to bury the *connétable* by his side in the royal basilisk of Saint-Denis; an exceptional political statement that had a follow-up by his son Charles VI, who celebrated an extensive memorial service for Du Guesclin in 1389. This was the beginning of a real rage: in the late fourteenth-century and early fifteenth-century archives of many important noblemen, pieces of art carrying the image of the Breton knight may be found. While Louis of Orléans could probably beat them all, others too possessed tapestries, silverworks or statues. Moreover, the four burial sites of Du Guesclin kept his memory alive, in addition to the oral tradition, which has left some traces. The memory of Du Guesclin probably did not belong exclusively to the nobility, because many expressions of praise were visible in the public space, to be noticed by a wider range of people. In addition to this cult, a clear interaction can be seen between the *Chanson* and other texts (and the manuscripts of these texts). For example, the theme of Eustache Deschamps’ poems on Du Guesclin matches perfectly with Cuvelier’s text, while Christine de Pizan knew his work but turned away from it. The *Chanson* itself or a prose version can regularly be identified as a source for chronicles, while some miniatures in manuscripts with chronicles also seem to have adopted the discourse of the epic poem. Furthermore, the *Chanson* cast its shadow forward because, at the end of the fifteenth century, Cuvelier’s work was still used as a source by the Breton historian Pierre le Baud. He was the first, however, to be overtly critical about the text and used Du Guesclin mainly to illustrate a political question proper to his time. A few decades later, the Breton knight was depoliticized: in the work of Bertrand d’Argentré, he is mainly praised with the same exaggeration as in the *Chanson*. Yet this time, the poem has to share its place as a main source with other, mainly local, informants.

The geographical and social dissemination of the cult around Du Guesclin showed much resemblance to the dissemination of Cuvelier’s work. As regards their period of popularity, they also agree. The popularity and significance of the text seems to have supported the cult and *vice versa*. It is no surprise, then, that the functions of the *Chanson* can be recognized in the way in which several cult-objects and texts have acted: as a glorification of Du Guesclin, as a remembrance of a period of French history, and especially as a political statement.

The long-lasting popularity and fame of the *Chanson* was undoubtedly due to this flexible functionality. By examining this from different angles – literary, historical, art-historical, codicological – a three-dimensional image has been created of the reception of Cuvelier’s text. Even though there are still some blind spots, this image is fairly clear: within a short period of time the *Chanson* was able to develop into the dominant discourse on Du Guesclin, in interaction with the cult around the recently deceased *connétable*. Its success is largely due to its flexibility, its imaginative power and its initial, well-orchestrated dissemination. The image of the insolent soldier who consecrated his life to the French king settled directly or indirectly in the late medieval collective memory and still leaves its traces today. We may conclude, therefore, that the influence of a text, even a so-called ‘late’ *chanson de geste*, should not be underestimated.