

William Marshal
A Relic of Chivalry

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William Marshal, hailed at his death as the “greatest knight in the world” by the Knights Templar and the Archbishop of Canterbury, certainly lived up to those claims (Kaeuper). Living in the turbulent, almost mythological, era of the Angevin Empire, Marshal himself lived a life worthy of the legends of the time. His utter dedication to his vows of chivalry delivered him from the hopeless obscurity of a landless younger son to the household of the Young King Henry, to the Crusades in the East, to become Earl of Pembroke under King John, and eventually to the position of Regent for the young Henry III. William attended kings, he knighted kings, he fought for kings, he ruled for kings: he was ultimately the maker of kings. At the height of his life, he was not only the greatest knight in the Angevin Empire, but among the greatest knights of all Christendom. All of this prestige was due to his unwavering devotion to three pillars of chivalry, named by Georges Duby to be loyalty, valor, and generosity. The greatest of these in William's life was, by far, his steadfast loyalty and it served to carry him from the dying days of true militaristic chivalry into the days in which such chivalry was but a nostalgic relic of the past.

Before William's birth, his father, John, was appointed the title of Lord Marshal, one of the Great Officers of State, by King Stephen who had assumed the throne after the death of Henry I. Despite this, John was still only a lesser noble. When William was born sometime around 1147, he was a younger son, and as such had little hope of inheriting any land from his father. Just before his birth, Matilda – daughter of Henry I – invaded England and challenged Stephen's claim to the throne. Around the time of William's birth John switched his loyalty from Stephen to Matilda. In 1152, during the ensuing civil war, King Stephen besieged Newbury castle and took William hostage. In an attempt to force John to surrender, he threatened to hang the child, but John replied that he did not care – he had “the hammers and anvils to make more and better sons” (Crouch, *William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry*). William – painfully unaware of

his situation as he begged to play with the javelin of one of the guards escorting him to the gallows – was not hanged. Rather, King Stephen carried him away and William (telling the story in his later years) said that the king would often keep him with him in his tent and entertain the boy with games. William eventually reunited with his family at the death of King Stephen in 1154. As a younger son, unable to inherit any of his father's estate, the path of chivalry was the only available path. This decided, William departed for Normandy to train as a knight-errant with his cousin, William of Tancarville. In 1167, Tancarville knighted William during an engagement at Neufchâtel-en-Bray. Upon returning to Tancarville, William and the other newly knighted were informed that they were now fully grown men and would no longer be fed and housed there, they were to “take to the land...’turning about the world” (Duby). William moved on to tournaments, participating in at least two before returning to England in 1167 to serve in the house of his mother's family – Patrick, Earl of Salisbury. Henry II sent the earl to Poitou in 1168 to aid Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine; William accompanied him as part of his retinue. While there, Poitevin soldiers ambushed the group, murdered Earl Patrick, and wounded and captured William. Eventually Queen Eleanor ransomed him and gave him a position in her household. He remained there until 1170, when Henry II appointed William as head of the Young King Henry's household and tutor in chivalry. Only four years later, rumors of an adulterous relationship with Henry's wife forced William to flee. William returned to the tournament circuit, in which he stood undefeated for twelve years. In 1179, William rejoined the Young King Henry's household and continued to fight in the tournaments. The Young King Henry, knighted by William, took a Crusader's vow, but before leaving, became ill and died in 1183, requesting that William take his cross to Jerusalem. King Henry II permitted William to leave on the journey. For the next three years, William remained in Syria fighting with the Knights Templar. William returned to England in

1186 and was immediately accepted into Henry II's retinue and, in 1187, granted the modest fief of Cartmel in Lancashire. In 1189 though, Henry II died and Richard I, his son, assumed the throne. It was just after this event that Richard gave Isabel de Clare to William as his wife; with this marriage, William gained possession of her lands and estates as well. In early 1190, Richard set out on the Third Crusade to Syria and remained there for four years; during that time, William remained in Normandy. Richard returned in 1194 (with some conflict between himself and his usurping brother John) and for the next five years, William served him in wars against France. In 1199, during one of these conflicts, Richard was fatally wounded. Upon hearing this, William hurried to the Archbishop of Canterbury and advised that not only should the choice for the new king be made immediately, but that it should not be Henry II's grandson, Arthur, but John, Richard's brother. Because of this service, the newly crowned King John fully granted William the title of Earl of Pembroke and the official title of Royal Marshal (vacated when William's brother died in 1194) both of which Richard had delayed in granting him. John though, proved to be a suspicious and duplicitous man. Due to misunderstandings rooted in confusing double loyalties, William and John were set at odds and John demanded William's first and second sons as hostages and took ownership of all of William's English lands. William dutifully acquiesced to all of these demands. He eventually demanded that the king try him by combat for his supposed crimes. Neither John nor any of his men would accept the challenge and thus William was (partially) acquitted. John's ridiculous demands and abuse of power eventually led to the decision of the barons of England to revolt and write Magna Carta in 1215. William himself carried it to the king and urged him to sign it though he was not of the dissenter's camp. John's death in 1216 saw William appointed as Regent for the nine-year-old heir to the throne, Henry. In 1219, William recognized his failing health and fulfilled his vow to join the Knights Templar alongside whom he had fought in Syria.

Having lived for at least seventy years – well beyond the norm for a man of the sword – William died, and with him, the quixotic notions of chivalry that had been slowly abandoned by nearly all but himself. Just after his death, William's sons commissioned his biography in order to preserve his legacy. The work, *Le Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, was written in Anglo-Norman verse and largely based on the account of William's ward and squire John d'Erley.

Of the three principles of chivalry, the most difficult for William to uphold was generosity. This was not because the man was miserly or covetous; rather it was due to the very idea of chivalric generosity itself. The idea is inherently paradoxical. To be a knight, one required money to purchase all of the trappings befitting a knight, namely, the horse, the armor, and the weaponry. During the height of chivalry, it was expected for a knight to use his craft to support himself only in what he absolutely needed (armor and weaponry upkeep, horses, etc) and put the rest to use feasting with companions, giving it freely to one's lord, or as gifts. Marshal learned this lesson just after his knighting in an engagement in Neufchâtel-en-Bray. During the battle, William rode at the front of the force and proved his worth as a knight for the first time. Later that night though, when feasting and celebrating the day's victory, a baron requested that Marshal give him "a gift, for friendship's sake." Marshal, confused, protested that he "did not seek to gain possession, but to deliver the town." The surrounding company laughed and while they could not condemn his brave actions, William did learn that a knight could not exist on his bravery alone (Duby). Marshal learned the lesson well and put it to good use in his tournament years. Marshal was not fond of jousting, believing the sport too safe. Rather, his forte was the *melee* in which knights and their footmen divided into two teams and charged each other. Following the charge, the lines would soon dissolve into individual battles with knights or groups of knights attempting to subdue and take other knights captive. The goal of the day was to capture men, and

take horses, trappings and weapons as prizes for themselves. Knights could be ransomed at the end of the day for money or goods. It was expected for the bachelors (like William in the height of his tournament career) to doggedly pursue knights and hold onto their captives (who were worth far more than the horses or weaponry). The bachelors were often landless and it was the generosity of the greater, landed lords that let the younger men take the lion's share of the spoils. William, (at this point married and in possession of lands) was once reproached by Richard I for not only pursuing a particular knight during the *melee* but, upon taking a rest after capturing the man, sitting on his body to keep him from escaping. Duby makes this out to have been more out of pride for his tournament record though, rather than desire for the spoils. To support this claim is William's tournament record when allied with Roger of Gaugi. In a single year, the pair captured one hundred and three knights, and an untold number of horses and weapons. All of their spoils, gathered for "their mutual entertainment," they gave to their lord, Henry; they fought for the sole "pleasure of winning" and "kept nothing ... except glory" (Duby). While this practice of *largesse* was a paradoxical and often superfluous pillar of chivalry, William lived up to the paradox, taking what would bring him the greatest glory but keeping only that which was necessary for his livelihood.

The chivalric ideal of the pursuit of valor rivaled loyalty in importance to Marshal and indeed, he rarely did anything that could tarnish his reputation as the most honorable of knights; often approaching situations in a manner best suited to bring the most glory even if at severe risk of his life. When William Tancarville evicted the company of knights from his estate, his last gesture of aid was to take them to their first tournament. William was not in possession of a charger though and as he was no longer a part of the Tancarville household, he had not received a mount. Tancarville did – in quite a tongue-in-cheek manner – offer William a fine horse yet "refractory to the reins,

ill-trained, and too restive for anyone to dream of using in any sporting encounter." In response, William leapt into the saddle and "mastered it in the course of a rodeo" and later that day took four and a half hostages (sharing one hostage with a companion) proving his accomplished horsemanship – a defining quality of a successful knight (Duby). The years spent in the household of the Young King Henry touring the tournament track was the greatest affirmation of his valor. The reputation he built as an undefeated master of arms certainly helped enhance his honor. Once, though, during a tournament, William captured one Simon de Neauphle. He led his captive proudly back to his own camp and instructed a squire to take charge of his hostage. It was then that he found his prisoner missing. The Young King Henry revealed that while being led through the town, Simon had taken hold of a low gutter and escaped, much to the hilarity of everyone riding behind Marshal (Painter). Even such an amusing failure as this could not damage Marshal's reputation. One point in Marshal's career that the *Histoire* is oddly silent on is his involvement with the Knights Templar. The Templars were a collection of the most highly regarded and accomplished knights and for them to accept Marshal – an outsider – among their ranks was an extremely high honor. The *Histoire* holds that in his two years in Syria William accomplished such deeds that would take most men seven (Crouch, *William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry*). There was a stigma amongst the Templars though, against boasting and Georges Duby attributes the silence of the *Histoire* to this. David Crouch, on the other hand, holds that the pilgrimage was of deep significance to Marshal and out of a respect for the experience, he did not share it with others. Marshal remained an active combatant well into his sixties; he had long since proven his ability, but his dedication to the chivalric code compelled him to pursue valor and honor until his death.

The third, and easily the most important principle of chivalry to William was loyalty. William never once broke a vow of fealty; he stretched a great many, in order to

refrain from breaking a different bond, but never once did he behave traitorously to a lord or friend. On only one bond did Marshal ever falter – his familial duty to his father and older brother. Throughout the *Histoire*, there is little evidence that Marshal ever felt any obligation to the men, but neither is there any evidence of their obligation to him. Georges Duby points this out many times in his book; ultimately though, his apathy is largely ignored and the *Histoire* glosses over this fault with only a few vague, passive remarks. William's official career as a knight began when he entered the household of Patrick Salisbury, his maternal uncle. While in his service, Salisbury and his retinue were sent to Normandy to aid Henry II's Queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. At one point, while escorting the queen, Poitevin soldiers attacked the company. A guard escorted Eleanor away and William and Salisbury remained to fight the attacking Poitevins. Salisbury was stabbed from behind – a manner of attack not considered an act of battle, but a heinous crime of murder. William, half-armored and in a rage, charged the assailants, hacking away in righteous vengeance. His horse was cut from under him and he soon found himself surrounded, backed into a hedge, still valiantly fighting the Poitevins. In another disgracefully ignoble maneuver, one attacker struck William from behind, wounding him. William was captured and held for ransom; it was eventually this story of such intense loyalty to his uncle and charge – Queen Eleanor – that prompted Eleanor of Aquitaine herself to ransom William. With his ransom, William entered the service of the house of Anjou to which he remained unfalteringly loyal for the remainder of his life. When placed in the position of head of the military household of the Young King Henry, William dedicated himself fully to the tutelage of his charge in the ways of chivalry. He served Henry faithfully, even when he childishly rebelled against his father, demanding the power his title should have permitted him. Even when Marshal himself became Henry's "lord" in knighthood (by knightng the young king) Marshal considered it another bond to tie him closer to Henry. Easily

William's greatest display of his unwavering loyalty was during the reign of King John. The loss of Normandy during John's reign supposedly prompted John to urge William to pledge loyalty to Philip Augustus of France in exchange for allowing him to keep his lands. Upon Marshal's return to England though, John set upon him for his "traitorous" act, denying ever having advised Marshal such. Marshal complied with all of John's demands for hostages, including his first-born son, and nearly half of his English properties. Marshal then left for Ireland to escape the King's ire. Unfortunately it was drawn to him again, when in 1209, William de Briouze sought asylum with Marshal in Ireland trying to avoid handing over his family as hostages to John. When confronted by the justiciar of harboring Briouze and his family William replied saying that he knew nothing of the quarrel between the two and as Briouze was his guest, he could not hand him over. Instead, Marshal delivered the family safely to Walter de Lacy. In 1210, John publicly confronted William about the affair. William responded in much the same manner declaring the act an act of mercy for a friend in need. John was not pleased, but did not have the support of his barons and could only demand that Marshal turn over a good portion of his remaining lands in England. Through all of this, and even the rebellion of the barony and subsequent writing of Magna Carta, Marshal remained steadfastly loyal to John. Eventually his lands and position in court were restored and Marshal was forgiven fully (Painter). His intense display of loyalty during this period of upheaval and duplicity (on John's part) directly influenced the dying King John and the majority of the barony to offer the Regency to Marshal until the Young King Henry III came of age. By this time loyalties became very fluid, moving and changing in favor of the highest gain. Amidst these swiftly changing tides, Marshal's granite loyalties stood, severe and outdated; it was his quixotic notion of loyalty that made Marshal a relic in his own age, but he bore it with such pride and dedication that it truly drove his career from obscurity to Regency and defined his very life.

William Marshal kept the company of kings almost from his birth. Little did he know then, playing games in the arms of King Stephen, that he – who should have been destined to obscurity – would rise, swiftly and elegantly, to the height of chivalry and nobility, becoming not only the greatest knight in the world, but one of the most powerful and influential men in the Angevin Empire. Marshal was a spiritual man, honorable, generous, intelligent, matchless in battle, and above all unfailingly loyal. Accounts of his life may have been inflated to heighten his already mythic qualities but this just stands to prove just how influential he was to the idea of chivalry. His life enshrined the qualities of chivalry even in his own time as the old codes and framework began to fail. In him the ideals were preserved, from which the later romantic, chivalric ideal would be drawn.

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