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**Henry the Young King,
1155-1183**

Written by Matthew Strickland

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A Forgotten King?

You would have been king of the noble and emperor of the brave, lord, if you had lived longer, for you had gained the name Young King; you were indeed the guide and father of youth. And hauberks and swords, and beautiful buckram, helmets and gonfalons, pourpoint and lappets and joy and love have nobody to maintain them or bring them back. They will follow you; like all mighty, honourable deeds, they will disappear with you.

– Bertran de Born, *Mon chan fenis ab dol et ab maltraire*¹

IN EARLY JUNE 1183, Henry III, king of England, lay dying in the little town of Martel in the Quercy.² Gathered around him in the humble house of a blacksmith were some of the greatest nobles of France, his recent allies in a bitter and still ongoing war against his own brother and father which had devastated much of Aquitaine by fire and sword. Finally, on 11 June, after days of being racked by acute fever brought on by dysentery, the Young King – *li res jovens, li giemble reis, l res joves* or *rex junior*, as he was better known to his contemporaries – breathed his last, aged only twenty-eight.³ Of all the Plantagenet kings, the young Henry remains the least known. His effigy is not at the abbey of Fontevraud among the famous tomb sculptures of Henry II, Eleanor and Richard the Lionheart for he died before Fontevraud became established as the principal Angevin mausoleum.⁴ Instead, he was buried in Rouen cathedral with his ducal ancestors. There, however, his tomb fared less well, and little remains of his original monument.⁵ The stylized images of young Henry on the few surviving examples of his great seal are badly worn, and as he struck no independent coinage, no silver pennies or deniers carry his depiction. He and his wife Margaret may be represented by the finely sculptured heads of a young king and queen in the early thirteenth-century portal of the church of Candes-Saint-Martin, close to Fontevraud, but there are few

if any contemporary images extant of a man once famed for his striking good looks, charm and knightly prowess.⁶

Yet his life, though short, had been a remarkable one. The eldest surviving son of Henry II, he was chief heir to the Angevin empire, one of the greatest agglomerations of territories seen since the days of Charlemagne.⁷ In 1170 he had been anointed king, the first heir to be crowned in the lifetime of his father in England since 796. For thirteen years, England was to have two kings. Yet within three years of his coronation the young Henry was at the head of a powerful coalition of rebel nobles and external enemies leagued against his father, precipitating a bitter two-year war which marked the gravest crisis of Henry II's reign. Reconciled with his father after his failed rebellion, the Young King had by the late 1170s become an international celebrity, fêted for his feats of arms in the tournament circuit of northern France and renowned as an open-handed patron of knights. After a decade of uneasy peace, however, and still with no territories to call his own, he had answered the call of the nobles of Aquitaine, chafing under the iron-fisted rule of his younger brother Richard, to be their duke. His campaign had come close to wresting the duchy from Richard when young Henry was seized by his fatal illness. Healing miracles were reported at his tomb and he was hailed by some as a saint – the only Angevin ruler ever to have been so regarded.

Handsome, athletic and with a winning character, young Henry was seen by many as the embodiment of chivalry and as possessing the virtues of an ideal prince. One of his chaplains, Gervase of Tilbury, described him thus:

He was tall in stature, and distinguished in appearance; his face expressed merriment and mature judgment in due measure; fair among the children of men, he was courteous and cheerful. Gracious to all, he was loved by all; amiable to all, he was incapable of making an enemy. He was matchless in warfare, and as he surpassed all others in the grace of his person, so he outstripped them all in valour, cordiality, and the outstanding graciousness of his manner, in his generosity and in his true integrity. In short, in this man, God assembled every kind of goodness and virtue, and the gifts which fortune usually bestows on single individuals of special distinction, she exerted herself to give all together and in richer measure to this man, so as to make him worthy of all commendation.⁸

Gervase, writing as he was for young Henry's nephew Emperor Otto IV, was doubtless guilty of flattering hyperbole. To those closer to Henry II, the younger Henry appeared more as a reckless and divisive ingrate who had stirred up unmerited and illicit war against a doting father. Nevertheless, the

Young King's untimely death had been marked by an outpouring of grief. The Limousin castellan and troubadour Bertran de Born, who had been an ally in the young Henry's war in Aquitaine in 1183, spoke for many of the nobility and especially for the younger, often landless knights, known collectively as the *juvenes* or 'youth', when he hailed him as 'the head and father of Youth (*de juvenen*)', 'the best king who ever bore a shield, the most audacious, the best tourneyer', whose equal was unknown before or since Roland.⁹ Another *planh* or lament noted that at his death Merit and Youth (*Pretz e Jovens*) had been left grieving, for death had robbed the world of 'the best knight that ever was in all the world (*il melhor chavalier as tout al mon*)', 'the most valiant of the worthy (*lo plus valens dels pros*)', beside whom 'the most generous were mean'.¹⁰ So too the author of the *History of William Marshal*, the long Anglo-Norman poem celebrating the life of the knight who had begun his remarkable career as young Henry's tutor in arms, complained that the Young King's death had 'changed chivalry into inactivity and idleness. Generosity (*largesce*) became an orphan, and the world was deprived of light by what Fortune had destroyed.'¹¹

Nor were such sentiments restricted to the lords and knights who had been particular beneficiaries of the Young King's patronage. Ecclesiastical chroniclers throughout the Angevin territories mourned his passing and praised his qualities.¹² Robert of Torigni, the abbot of the great Norman abbey of Mont Saint-Michel, noted that the death of 'the young king, our dearest lord', was 'the occasion to us of deepest grief', not only because he was Henry II's son, but also 'because he was of the most handsome countenance, of the most pleasing manners, and the most free handed in his liberality of all the individuals with whom we have been acquainted'.¹³ In Anjou, a monk of the great abbey of Saint-Aubin in Angers could write that young Henry's death 'was lamented by nearly all the world', while to a chronicler at Waverley abbey he was 'King Henry the Third, the illustrious man of wonderful qualities'.¹⁴ In the 1220s, young Henry was regarded as a role model for a new generation of rulers, held up to his two royal nephews, Otto IV of Germany and King John's son Henry, as the mirror of knighthood and chivalry.

Yet, perhaps ironically, it was in the wake of the coronation of the latter on 28 October 1216 that the title of Henry III began no longer to be applied to his uncle the Young King, but to the new Henry. By the time Matthew Paris painted his famous depictions of the series of English kings from 1066 onwards in his *Historia Anglorum*, c.1250–55, he could portray the Young King, labelled as 'Henricus Iunior', crowned and clean shaven, but in bust only and in a small arch between the seated figures of Henry II and Richard I. Here his raised hand points up to Richard, as his successor, labelled as 'rex sextus' following the Norman Conquest, while Henry II is labelled 'rex quintus'.¹⁵ The Bermondsey

annals, a compilation of earlier materials brought together around 1433, recorded the belief that 'this King Henry is not numbered in the numbering of kings because he was injuriously crowned by Roger, archbishop of York, while the blessed Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury was in exile for the cause of justice'.¹⁶ This is unlikely to have been contemporary reasoning behind the transference of regnal title, which may have been a gradual process and more probably reflected the growing assumption that the Young King should be passed over in regnal numbering because he had predeceased his father and not reigned alone.¹⁷

As he lost the title of Henry III, so too in time voices of approbation began to fade. Young Henry's great reputation as the epitome of chivalry would come to be eclipsed by the fame of his younger brother Richard, the towering figure of the Third Crusade, who was becoming the stuff of legend even before his death in 1199. The process was gradual: in the later thirteenth century an anonymous interpolator of the Old French crusade history known as *La Chronique d'Ernoult* could hail young Henry as 'the greatest hearted prince born of a king that ever was since the time of Judas Maccabeus', and noted that he was called 'the Lion'.¹⁸ Yet equally by the 1260s, the anonymous French poet known as the Minstrel of Rheims could present a remarkably garbled account of the Young King's career and even mistakenly call him 'Curtmantle' – 'Short cloak' – the epithet given by contemporaries to his father Henry II.¹⁹ An independent tradition, seemingly drawn from the semi-fictitious Provençal biographies (*vidas*) and commentaries (*razos*) attached to the poetry of Bertran de Born, saw young Henry appearing in the *Novellino*, a late thirteenth-century collection of Italian tales, in which he was celebrated as a prince of such generosity that he beggared himself, turning a blind eye to thefts from him by the needy: one *Novelle* even tells the story of how, hard pressed by his creditors, the Young King mortgaged his soul to the Devil, but was redeemed by his father, who paid off his debts.²⁰ Yet in such tales he has been transformed into an anonymous archetype known only as 'lo giovane re d'Inghilterra', while Bertran de Born gains increasing prominence as a malevolent Svengali, whose scheming tutelage sets the prince and his father at odds.²¹ It is thus that Dante knew him simply as the *re giovane*, when soon after 1300 the poet placed Bertran de Born in his *Inferno* among the sowers of discord, his head for ever severed from his body for maliciously stirring up war between father and son and parting those who should have been closely knit.²²

It was not literary echoes, however, that most powerfully shaped posterity's perception of the young Henry, but rather a more hostile and enduring tradition. Of the very few extant narrative sources to be written in later twelfth-century Aquitaine, the most significant is the chronicle of Geoffrey of Vigeois,

monk of the abbey of St Martial's, Limoges, then abbot of Vigeois (1170–84), who had witnessed the Young King strip his abbey of St Martial of its treasures to pay his mercenaries and bring a devastating war into Geoffrey's beloved Limousin.²³ Still more significantly, his leading role in the war of 1173–74 against his father, followed by the circumstances of his death while in rebellion, once again led to a damning verdict on him by contemporary writers in the orbit of the Angevin court, and it is their profoundly negative legacy that has influenced the assessment of the Young King by the great majority of historians ever since. In recording the Young King's untimely death, chroniclers such as Roger of Howden, Walter Map and Gerald of Wales reflected a sensitivity to Henry II's deep grief at the death of his son, as well as the sorrow felt by the court at the loss of so promising a young man, whose popularity they well understood. Nevertheless, with the expectation that the young Henry would succeed to his father removed – and with it the need for circumspection in any condemnation of the heir – they and subsequent writers were free to be fiercely critical of a son who had risen not once but twice against his own father. To these *curiales*, young Henry was not only a deeply ungrateful son, but a rebel and parricide, a second Absalom, who had abused his father's love and trust until he was finally struck down by the avenging hand of God.²⁴ Walter Map, a royal clerk and one of the great *literati* of the Angevin court, had accompanied Henry II on his expedition to suppress the rebellion in Aquitaine in 1183. In happier days, he had been involved in young Henry's education and clearly held the prince in affection, describing him as 'a man full of grace and favour. Rich, noble, loveable, eloquent, handsome, gallant, every way attractive, a little lower than the angels'.²⁵ Yet in a powerful passage written in the royal camp as Henry II's army continued the siege of Limoges and only weeks after young Henry's death at Martel, Map wrote bitterly: 'Truly he left nothing unprobed, no stone unturned; he befouled the whole world with his treasons, a prodigy of unfaith and prodigal of ill, a limpid spring of wickedness, the attractive tinder of villainy, a lovely place of sin . . . the originator of the heresy of traitors . . . a false son to his father . . . the peaceful king'.²⁶ To Ralph of Diss, the learned dean of St Paul's, young Henry's death offered a salutary moral lesson, 'leaving for the approval of the wise the opinion that sons who rise up against fathers to whom they owe everything that they are and everything from which they live, and by whose goods they expect to be enriched, are worthy only of being disinherited'.²⁷

The Young King's premature death, moreover, meant that it was his brother Richard – his bitter enemy in the war of 1183 – who inherited Henry II's great empire.²⁸ As a result, chroniclers might shape or reshape their depictions of young Henry to suit the times. Gerald of Wales, who joined the Angevin court

in 1184, had included a lengthy paean for young Henry in his *Topographica Hibernica*, written between 1186 and 1188 when Henry II still reigned and with his patronage very much in mind. In this, he extolled young Henry as ‘an honour of all honour, the beauty and ornament of the city and of the world, the splendour, glory, light and highest honour in war, a Julius Caesar in genius, in valour a Hector, an Achilles in strength, an Augustus in conduct, a Paris in beauty’. His only fault was that ‘of ingratitude, and the affliction which he brought to the best of fathers’.²⁹ Yet in his *Expugnatio Hibernica*, written during the late 1180s and dedicated soon after Henry II’s death on 6 July 1189 to Richard ‘noble count of Poitou, duke of Normandy and ruler of England in the near future’, Gerald included a polished literary comparison of Richard with the Young King.³⁰ With a clear view to pleasing the new king, Gerald noted that Richard

was second to his illustrious brother in age only, and not in virtue. For although they sprang from the same stock, they were of different manners and pursuits, yet each deserved glorious praise and eternal memory. Both were of noble stature, somewhat more than of middle height, and of beauty worthy of an empire. In activity and greatness of mind they were nearly equal, but very unlike in their ways of showing their virtues. Henry was praised for his lenity and liberality, Richard was remarkable for his severity of manner and firmness of purpose. The former was commendable for the sweetness, the latter for the gravity of his manner. For the former, an easy-going nature demanded praise, for the latter, constancy. The former was remarkable for his mercy, the latter for his justice. The former was the refuge of the wretched and of evil doers, the latter was their punishment. The former was the shield of the bad, the latter their destroyer. Again, the one was addicted to martial games, the other to serious pursuits. The one was attached to foreigners, the other more to his own subjects. The one was beloved by all, the other only by the good. The one coveted the world by the greatness of his mind, the other, not without success, sought the authority that was his by right. But why should I specify each of their various qualities? Neither the present age nor any period of antiquity calls to mind two so great and yet so different men as the sons of one ruler.³¹

This superficially even-handed contrast, however, was a thinly veiled critique of the Young King for taking up the cause of the nobles of Aquitaine against Richard in 1183, for these are ‘the wretched’, ‘the evil doers’, ‘the bad’ and the ‘foreigners’, while Richard’s harsh rule, which had caused the rebellion, is exonerated by Gerald, both here and in an ensuing encomium, as firm and just

government. The Young Henry may have been generous, likeable and easy-going, but these, Gerald implies, were not the qualities demanded by real rulers; in contrast to Richard's zealous engagement in the serious business of governing Aquitaine, the Young King's sporting activities reflected his essential frivolity.

Unlike Rigord of St Denis, who could style himself 'cronographus regis Francorum', Roger of Howden appears not to have been an 'official' historiographer of the Angevin court, but as a royal clerk, justice and diplomat with access to royal archives he was often well informed and his *Gesta regis Henrici*, begun in 1170 and thereafter largely written up year by year until 1192, constitutes the single most important chronicle for the career of the Young King.³² Yet Roger had soon been alienated by young Henry's leading role in the rebellion of 1173–74, then further outraged in 1176 at the young Henry's harsh treatment of his vice-chancellor, Adam of Churchdown, a member of the clerical circle of Archbishop Roger of York with which Howden had close connections.³³ His animus towards the Young King reached its climax in his reportage of young Henry's last war in Aquitaine in 1183 and of his last days and death. When in the mid 1190s Roger reworked the *Gesta* into his larger but substantially revised *Chronica*, he used the opportunity to adapt his picture of the Young King. The *Gesta's* contemporary account had noted the involvement of both Queen Eleanor and Richard, as count of Poitou, in the rebellion of 1173–74, yet in the *Chronica* mention of both was dropped, and blame instead heaped solely upon young Henry:

For this one of the king's sons was lost to all reason and feeling. He abandoned an innocent man, persecuted his father, usurped power, attacked the realm; he alone was to blame, setting a whole army against his father. 'One madman makes many others'. For he thirsted for the blood of his father, for the death of his progenitor.³⁴

Similarly, in the *Gesta* Howden had reported the acts of oppression Richard was alleged to have committed against the barons of Aquitaine, but these were removed from the *Chronica*, where it was noted instead that the rebels allied to the Young King 'inflicted much harm on Count Richard'.³⁵ Howden's revision of his account of the Young King's death was more complex, but as revealing. In the *Gesta*, he had briefly described the Young King's death from fever at Martel, reported Henry II's intense grief, then put a speech into the Old King's mouth addressed to his army besieging Limoges in which Henry stresses how God has saved him from near-destruction by being avenged on the sins of his son. Accordingly, though the king laments the death of one so handsome and

talented, 'it is preferable to be glad of his death, rather than to grieve', and better instead that his men should turn their efforts to defeating the Young King's allies, who were bent on destroying his father.³⁶ In the *Chronica* Howden gives a much fuller account, apparently drawn from eyewitnesses, of the Young King's death and his seemly acts of penitence.³⁷ King Henry's speech is omitted, and instead Roger adds his own condemnation:

O how dreadful a thing it is for sons to persecute a father! For it is not opposing sword nor enemy hand that takes up the father's injury, but fever that retaliates, and flux of the bowels, with excoriation of the intestines, avenges. With the son laid prostrate, all return to the father. All are overjoyed, all rejoice: the father alone bewails his son. Why, glorious father, do you bewail him? He was no son of yours who could commit such violence against your fatherly affection. This defence of you has brought security for fathers and checked the audacity of parricides. Wanting to introduce parricide into this world, it was his deserts to perish by a severe retribution, for just as He avenges the tribulations of the righteous, so the Judge of all minds sometimes punishes the persecutions of the wicked.³⁸

When Howden penned this, Henry II had been dead for some years. While the sentiments expressed may very well reflect Roger's own, his reworking of the narratives concerning the Young King strongly implies that he expected Richard, or at least those close to the king, to see his work, at a time when issues of propaganda and the projection of the royal image were very much to the fore.³⁹ Howden, moreover, came to regard the Young King's death as punishment both for his own misdeeds and for the failings of his father, not least Henry II's failure to counter the growing threat of heresy by not permitting the burning of heretics within his lands.⁴⁰ Roger records how a certain Walter, servant of Eustace, abbot of Flaye, told Henry II of a vision in which a heavenly voice had commanded the king, 'In the name of Christ, annihilate and destroy', and threatening the death of his sons if he did not obey. Henry II, however, did not understand the vision, took no action, and as a result first young Henry, then Geoffrey, died.⁴¹

Nor was Howden alone in depicting the Young King's fate as part of a larger narrative of providential retribution on Henry II. Thomas Becket's clerk and hagiographer Herbert of Bosham recounted how the tearful archbishop had told Herbert of his prophetic dream, in which he had foretold the death of young Henry (who as a child had been Becket's ward) as the result of God's anger at Henry II's persecution of the Church and of Thomas himself.⁴² It was, however, Gerald of Wales who set the Young King within a still darker and

more distorting picture of Henry II and his family in his *De principis instructione*, a work begun in the 1190s but not completed until 1218, by which time Gerald was seeking the favour of the Capetians. By then deeply embittered by his failure to gain the ecclesiastical preferment he believed he deserved, Gerald sought to portray the Angevins as a uniquely dysfunctional family. As he has Count Geoffrey of Brittany say, 'It is our own basic nature, planted in us as if by hereditary right from both our close and our distant ancestors, that none of us should love the other, but that always brother should fight against brother, and son against father'.⁴³ Henry II himself is depicted as a king who moved from excessive love for his children to deep hatred of them, for 'this had been the perverse nature of King Henry, that, with all his power, he excited and perpetuated quarrels between his sons, hoping from their discord to gain peace and quietness for himself'.⁴⁴ This inbred hostility was, argued Gerald, the result of a corrupted lineage; not only was Henry II's marriage to Eleanor 'adulterous', but Henry's own father Geoffrey le Bel had, he alleged, had sexual relations with her, while Eleanor's own infidelities to both Louis VII and Henry II were notorious. The dynasty was thus a blighted and doomed one. The Young King's rebellions, moreover, were part of a morality tale on a grand scale.⁴⁵ Henry II, rising to the heights of power and fortune through divine favour but then turning from God through sin, tyranny and persecution of the Church, compelled God to chastise him, especially by the rebellion of the Young King. For a time Henry's penance and humility over Becket's death regained divine favour, allowing him to defeat his enemies, but he again lapsed into evil ways, and, despite ignoring repeated warnings, was destroyed by the successive rebellions of his children. Gerald could thus regard young Henry as a *flagellum Dei*, a tool of divine vengeance against Henry II, but at the same time condemn his 'monstrous ingratitude' in rebelling against his father.⁴⁶ Gerald readily acknowledged the Young King's qualities and martial reputation, but now such virtues served only as a poignant *vanitas*, highlighting the fragility and emptiness of worldly fame and heightening the tragedy of his untimely end.

The depiction of the Young King by Gerald of Wales, Howden and other chroniclers has had a profound and long-lasting influence. Historians of Henry II, Eleanor, Richard the Lionheart, Thomas Becket and William Marshal have all touched on the Young King where his life intersected with those of their principals, yet their gaze has usually been brief and their verdicts almost always harsh. They echo the chroniclers' condemnation of young Henry's acts of rebellion against his father, seen both as morally reprehensible and as demonstrating a want of responsibility and political acumen.⁴⁷ The tone was set early. Bishop Stubbs deprecated young Henry's filial disobedience, but struggled to explain

the apparent paradox of his evident popularity: 'that wicked son in whom, although we see little else than unreasonable and perfidious disobedience, his contemporaries saw so much that was attractive and charming, that his popularity was one of the wonders of his age'.⁴⁸ Such a view was endorsed by Kate Norgate in her influential history of the Angevins: 'From the day of his crowning to the day of his death, not one deed is recorded of him save deeds of the meanest ingratitude, selfishness, cowardliness and treachery'.⁴⁹ For Norgate, young Henry lacked the true qualities of either the Angevin or the Norman, and appeared the antithesis of her hero Richard the Lionheart. Even his acknowledged virtues could not compare with those of Richard: 'Richard's generosity and graciousness were of a higher type than young Henry's; they were displayed only when they were deserved', while the Young King's 'careless, easy, shallow disposition' contrasted with the latter's 'energetic temperament'.⁵⁰ Like Stubbs, she found his contemporary popularity bewildering, while 'the attraction exercised by him over a man so far his superior as William Marshal, is well-nigh incomprehensible'.⁵¹ Her condemnation was repeated almost verbatim by Olin Moore, author of the first dedicated study in English of the Young King, who dismissed expressions of praise upon his death as mere self-serving flattery of courtiers or attempts by Henry II's critics to cast him in a more negative light in comparison with his son's alleged qualities.⁵²

More recent historians, while not displaying the moral outrage of Stubbs and Norgate at the young Henry's filial impiety, have remained critical. It was perhaps inevitable that for Lewis Warren, the pre-eminent biographer of Henry II, the Young King fell far short of his great father, whose reign he did so much to trouble. Warren recognized young Henry's personal charm and winning character, yet still dismissed him as 'shallow, vain, careless, empty headed, incompetent, improvident and irresponsible'.⁵³ In a typically vivid character sketch, he encapsulates what has remained the prevailing verdict:

The Young Henry was the only member of the family who was popular in his own day. It is also true that he was also the only one who gave no evidence of political sagacity, military skill, or even ordinary intelligence, but such, after all, are not looked for in a fairytale prince, and the young Henry had all the trappings of a hero of romance or aubade. He was tall, handsome, gay, and splendidly improvident. He had the sort of charm that makes even gross irresponsibility seem nothing more than the mischievousness of a lively boy.⁵⁴

Even David Crouch, the historian who has best captured young Henry's glamorous stardom and importance in the tournament circuit of northern France,