

## TWO CHRONICLERS OF LOUIS IX

by Donald W. Tappan

By studying the approaches of two authors to the same historical event, we can learn something of their respective manners of comprehending the world and representing reality in literary form. The anonymous author of the *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* and Saint Louis's biographer, Joinville, were contemporaries, natives of Champagne, and skillful writers of prose. Although the *menestrel* begins his work with fanciful anecdotes involving historical persons of the twelfth century, he turns to the present in Paragraph 336: *Ci vous lairons esteir des morz, et parlerons des vis.*<sup>1</sup> From this point on the *Récits* become less fictional and more accurately historical in their depiction of factual events—many of the same events treated by Joinville in the *Histoire de Saint Louis*. A detailed analysis of a few passages of the *Récits* and a comparison with Joinville's treatment of the same material will help us understand the point of view and the literary art of the *menestrel de Reims*. The two authors' accounts of the events between Louis's illness and his taking of the cross in 1244 and the crusaders' departure in 1248 will serve our purpose. In Joinville's text they occupy Chapters XXIV-XXVI and in the *Récits*, Paragraphs 367-371.

The biographer's account begins with a reference to the will of God:

Après ces choses desus dites avint, ainsi comme Diex vout, que une grans maladie prist le roy à Paris, dont il fu à tel meschief, si comme on le disoit, que l'une des dames qui le gardoit li vouloit traire le drap sur le visaige, et disoit que il estoit mors. Et une autre dame, qui estoit à l'autre part dou lit, ne li souffri mie; ainçois disoit que il avoit encore l'ame ou cors.

Et comme il oyt le descort de ces dous dames, Nostre Sires ouvra en li et li envia santei tantost; car il estoit esmuyz et ne pouoit parler. Et si tost qu'il fu en estat pour parler, il requist que on li donnast la croiz, et si fist-on. Lors la royne sa mere oy dire que la parole li estoit revenue, et elle en fist si grant joie comme elle pot plus. Et quant elle sot que il fu croisiez, ainsi comme il meismes le contoït, elle mena aussi grant duel comme se elle le veist mort (Joinville, XXIV<sup>2</sup>).

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Louis's sudden recovery and immediate decision to take the cross are depicted as miraculous events; it was God's will that the king fall ill, and God brings about the recovery of his voice when He hears the two women disagree about the king's condition. Joinville here does not seize the opportunity, as he so often does, for elaborate pious interpretation. He seems to accept the fact of divine intervention in the affairs of men; he reports it as such without dwelling upon its prophetic significance, without mention of the momentous historical events, Saint Louis's two crusades, which were determined at this precise moment by the miracle of recovery. Rather, the story is told in the form of a capsule drama. The episode in the king's sick-room has all the potential elements for a vivid dramatic tableau: the two women in attendance upon the unconscious king, one attempting to cover his face with the sheet, the other refusing to let her do so; the miracle and the king's first words as he calls for the cross; the queen mother's arrival, her joy at the return of his health and her sorrow at his determination to leave her to undertake a new and perilous Holy War. Joinville appears here as a reporter rather than a literary artist. He has not witnessed the scene himself; indeed, he is a little embarrassed by the fact and interrupts his account to assure the reader that it did take place: "It is said," *si comme on le disoit*. A constant preoccupation with certainty, with authenticity, is characteristic of Joinville's narrative.

He continues his account of the origins of the crusade by listing a number of great lords who joined the king in taking the cross. The list ends thus:

. . . li cuens de Salebruche, mes sires Gobers d'Apremont ses freres, en cui compaignie, je Jehans, sires de Joinville, passames la mer en une nef que nous louames, pour ce que nous estiens cousin; et passames de là atout vint chevaliers, dont il estoit li disiesme et je moy disiesme (Joinville, XXIV).

The syntax of the passage is awkward. The events mentioned are irrelevant and out of their natural order, for the agreement with the Sire d'Apremont and the actual departure and crossing of the sea took place some years later. Joinville returns immediately in the next chapter to the settlement of his personal affairs before leaving his estates in Champagne. The passage just cited is little more than a somewhat inept transition from affairs of national interest to the subject the historian knows best: himself.

Let us look now at how the *ménestrel de Reims* treats the same historical material. The miraculous aspect of the king's recovery is missing from the *ménestrel's* account:

Puis avint un tans après qu'une mout granz maladie li prist, et fu malades comme près de mourir, et en celle eure se croisa pour aleir outre meir; et repassa, et atourna sa voie, et fist preeschier des croiz. Et mout se croisierent de hanz hommes . . . et tant d'autres granz seigneurs que France en demoura toute wide, et encore i pert (*Récits*, 367).

The grave illness, decision to undertake a crusade, recovery, preparation

of the expedition and preaching of the crusade are all told in one sentence with almost no elaboration. The sentence is little more than a series of verbs. For the *ménestrel* it was in the hour of his illness, rather than when he had regained his health, that the king decided upon a crusade. Joinville implied that the decision was an act of piety, of gratitude to God for the sudden cure; the *ménestrel* makes no such implication. And in both authors the concept of crusade as Holy War against infidel hordes who present a clear and present danger to all Christendom is curiously absent. For the *ménestrel*, especially, *se croisa pour aleir outre meir* means little more than "decided to wage a war overseas." The verb *se croiser* seems to have lost its religious connotation.

The greater part of the paragraph consists of a list of the princes who joined the king. Joinville's account contains a similar list, but with more extensive information about the princes' relative importance in the feudal hierarchy or their relationship to the royal house. What is striking about the *ménestrel*'s version is his concern for the welfare of France, expressed in the final sentence. We have seen that he is unmoved by the idea of Holy War; he realizes on the contrary that the realm can ill afford to lose its best men. The practical results of such a depletion in the knightly ranks are still evident a generation later: *et encore i pert*.

The practical turn of mind of the author of the *Récits* is even more apparent in the next passage:

Mais une chose fist li rois dont il ne vint nus biens; car il s'acorda au respit de trois ans que li chevalier quisent au legat pour avoir respit des detes qu'il devoient aus bourgeois, sauf ce que li legaz ne pourprenoît pas leur foiz. Et sour ce il s'en alerent outre meir; et ainsi ne fist mie Godefrois de Bouillon, qui vendi sa duchée à touz jourz, et ala outre meir proprement au sien, et n'enporta rien de l'autrui. Si esploita, et l'Escriture dit que Dieus ne se veut mie servir de rapine ne de toute (*Récits*, 368).

The *mais* which begins the paragraph indicates general approval on the author's part of all of the actions of his king with the single exception of the financial arrangements he made before departing. Of these *il ne vint nus biens*, says the *ménestrel*. What he disapproves of so strongly is a three-year moratorium on debts owed by knights to the bourgeois. With a rather modern-sounding nostalgia for "the good old days when there was fiscal responsibility," the *ménestrel* compares Saint Louis's policy with that of Godefroy de Bouillon, who "paid his own way" on the First Crusade by selling his duchy outright. Our author calls upon the authority of Holy Writ to support him in disapproving of what he considers unfair treatment of the bourgeoisie. The shrewd method by which Louis IX financed his first crusade, and which the *ménestrel* so deplores, is not mentioned by other historians of the period. Its presence in the *Récits*, we feel, clearly indicates our author's close identification with the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Easter week of 1248, Joinville tells us in Chapter XXV, was a time of great feasting in his domain. His son, Jean, was born on the eve of the holiday, and each of the lords he had summoned to Joinville offered a banquet on successive evenings. On Friday he announced his decision to join the crusaders and offered to make amends to his vassals for any grievances they might have against him. There is no attempt in the scene to describe the festivities in any detail nor to create any dramatic effect. Only Joinville himself speaks; he is silent about the barons' reaction, if any. The chapter ends with further details of his arrangement with his cousin to share a vessel.

In the next chapter Joinville returns briefly to the king, but only because he was personally involved in the ceremony he mentions:

Li roys manda tous ses barons à Paris, et lour fist faire sairement que foy et loiautei porteroient à ses enfants, se aucune chose avenoit de li en la voie. Il le me demanda; maiz je ne voz faire point de sairement, car je n'estoie pas ses hom (Joinville, XXVI).

Joinville did not become a vassal of Louis IX until later, during the crusade itself. He is therefore not under any obligation to swear fealty to the king's heirs. Nor does he seem to feel any concern about the future of the realm of France in the event of the king's death in the Holy Land. He reveals himself in these first-person passages as an independent feudal lord who was not expected to have any "national" allegiance. Although he is about to accompany the king on a perilous campaign abroad, he is still a member of that class of barons who were capable of rebellion against the royal authority and whom the *ménestrel de Reims*, a member of the bourgeoisie, so distrusted.

There is much more pomp and ceremony in the *ménestrel's* description of the king's leave-taking from Paris than in that of Joinville:

Quant li rois ot atournei sa voie, si prist s'escharpe et son bourdon à Nostre Dame à Paris; et li chanta messe li evesques. Et se mut de Nostre Dame entre lui et la roïne et ses freres et leur fammes, deschauz et nuz piez; et toutes les congregations et li pueples de Paris les convoierent jusqu'à Saint Denis, en larmes et en pleurs. Et là prist à eus congïé li rois, et les renvoia à Paris, et ploura asseiz au departir d'eus (*Récits*, 369).

In contrast to the proud Joinville's refusal to take the oath before the king, this scene is painted with touches of tender feeling. The *ménestrel* sees the procession to Saint Denis from the point of view of the crowd along the route. It is an occasion for general emotion, the departure of a monarch by this time beloved of his subjects. The royal family passes by as a generalized spectacle; except for the king and queen, the *ménestrel* does not mention individuals—they are simply *lui et la roïne et ses freres et leur fammes*. The observer is struck by the unaccustomed humility of these high personages: *deschauz et nuz piez*. The mob accompanies the king to

Saint Denis amidst a general display of popular sorrow: *en larmes et en pleurs*. Louis IX himself cannot hold back his tears as he takes leave of his people: *et ploura asseiz au departir d'eus*.

Joinville never sees things from the point of view of the "nation." The class of barons to which he belonged retained its independent, rebellious spirit well into the seventeenth century. The *Récits* provide us, in certain passages like the one in question, with evidence that an incipient national feeling existed as early as the thirteenth century.

The two paragraphs which follow in the *Récits* constitute one of those imaginative dramatic scenes in which the narrative art of the *ménéstrel* reaches its apogee:

Mais la roïne sa mere demoura avec lui, et le convoia trois journées maugrei le roi. Et lors li dist: "Bele très douce mere, par celle foi que vous me devez, retourneiz desormais. Je vous lais mes trois enfanz à gardeir, Loueys et Phelipe et Ysabel; et vous lais à gouverneir le roiaume de France, et je sai bien qu'il seront bien gardei et li roiaumes bien gouverneiz." Adonc li respondi la roïne en plourant:

"Biaus très douz fiuz, comment sera ce que mes cuers porra souffrir la departie de moi et de vous? Certes il sera plus durs que pierre s'il ne part en deus moitez; car vous m'avez estei li mieudres fiuz qui onques fust à mere." A ce mot chéi pasmée; et li rois la redreça et baisa, et prist congié à li en plourant; et li frere le roi et leur fammes prisent congié à la roïne tout en plourant. Et la roïne se repasma, et fu grant piece en paumaison; et quant elle fu repairie, si dist: "Biaus tenres fiuz, je ne vous verrai jamais; li cuers le me dit." Et elle dist voir; que elle fu morte avant que il revenist (*Récits*, 370-371).

Doubtless this touching scene between Louis IX and Blanche de Castille is entirely a product of our author's imagination. After the public scene which we have just witnessed, he brings us indoors for a glimpse of the royal family's private sorrow, which he depicts in dramatic form. Although the *ménéstrel* gives us no details of décor, he provides the other elements of theater: dialogue and action. Indeed, the psychology of his principal characters is revealed *through* these dramatic means. Only once does he indicate emotion other than by means of dialogue or action; in the opening phrase, which establishes the situation, he implies the queen mother's great attachment to her son by telling us that she would not let him out of her sight for three days even though he was anxious to be away.

Louis, in his speech to his mother, appeals to her sense of duty (*par celle foi que vous me devez*), and hints at the consolation she will find in the continuing presence of her three grandchildren. He speaks of the great faith he has in her ability to govern the realm. In both its periodic structure and its subject matter the speech resembles a cornelian argument. Blanche's reply is, on the other hand, racinian; she can feel nothing but overwhelming maternal love and collapses after expressing it passionately. The king raises her and kisses her; he too is overcome with emotion, and

weeps. After a tearful farewell from the other members of the party of royal crusaders, Blanche expresses a final presentiment: *Biaus tenres fiuz, je ne vous verrai jamais; li cuers le me dit*. And the *ménestrel* closes his scene by telling his readers that the queen mother's prophecy came to pass, for she died before her son's return.

The prose of the *ménestrel de Reims* is uneven. His transitions are weak or nonexistent. And yet, when he develops a scene either in dramatic or visual form, his skill as an artist is unequalled among his contemporaries. Joinville's prose, too, is loosely strung together; there is no unifying principle. He is guided either by a vivid personal memory or by his assignment as a propagandist, and the two motivations produce strikingly different results. For all the verve and color of some of Joinville's reminiscences, his prose is seldom as controlled as that of the *ménestrel* in his best passages. Joinville is a splendid *mémorialiste*; our anonymous *jongleur* is a superior literary artist.

#### NOTES

1. *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims au treizième siècle*, ed. Natalis de Wailly (Paris, 1876). Arabic numerals will refer to paragraph numbers in this edition.
2. Jean de Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis*, ed. Natalis de Wailly (Paris, 1874). Roman numbers will refer to chapters in this edition.