

The Norman Conquest of the classical past: William of Poitiers, language and history

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William of Poitiers's *Gesta Guillelmi*, written shortly after the Norman Conquest of England, remains surprisingly neglected, especially by historians. He is generally regarded primarily as a classical stylist who employed classical references to decorate his panegyric of William of Normandy. Poitiers' use of classical allusion was, however, far from superficial. In arguing for William's legitimacy as king of England, Poitiers addresses a wider audience than is generally acknowledged, and appeals directly to the fears, expectations and values of his day. The article examines his three most sustained allusions to classical heroes of naval enterprises and conquest – Caesar, Aeneas and Theseus – as key components of the memory of the Norman Conquest, demonstrating that each allusion makes a specific moral and political point. Poitiers is a case study for medieval authorial ingenuity in applying classicism to the problems of the present.

Keywords: historiography; Norman Conquest; classical allusion; morality; politics; William of Normandy

William of Poitiers (d. c.1090), writing in Normandy shortly after the Norman Conquest of England, has continued to be regarded primarily as a classical stylist who employed classical references to decorate and enhance his unqualified panegyric of William of Normandy: the

Gesta Guillelmi (c.1071–7).¹ Although the *Gesta* is valued for its perspectives on Anglo-Norman warfare and lordship, Poitiers is regularly charged with intemperance in his classicising praise of William. The *Gesta* has been described as ‘nauseatingly sycophantic’,² lacking in honesty,³ written primarily to flatter both William and himself,⁴ and as a work characteristic of ‘pretentious authors working at a distance on a vague and confused story’.⁵ Because of this unreserved condemnation of Poitiers’ integrity and knowledge, his reputation as a historian has suffered – as has, by extension, the reputation and nature of classical scholarship in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe.

In the twelfth century, Orderic Vitalis praised Poitiers’ multiplicity of skills and experience.⁶ In an important but largely ignored study, Jeanette M. A. Beer has described in detail how Poitiers employed classical *auctores* to provide a sophisticated rhetorical model for the *Gesta*,⁷ and Dominique Barthélemy has proposed that Poitiers’ work provides some of the earliest evidence of nascent chivalrous thought in medieval Europe.⁸ Yet although the *Gesta* is one of the few contemporary sources for the Norman Conquest, it has remained

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this paper: *GG*: William of Poitiers, *The Gesta Guillelmi of Poitiers*, eds. R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

William of Poitiers is referred to hereafter ‘Poitiers’, to avoid confusion with William of Normandy, who is referred to as ‘William’.

² John Gillingham, ‘William the Bastard at War’, in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. Allen Brown*, eds. Christopher Harper-Bill and others (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 141–58 (141); cf. David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), 68.

³ George Garnett, *Conquered England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4; idem, ‘Coronation and Propaganda: Some Implications of the Norman Claims to the Throne of England in 1066’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 36 (1986): 91–116 (95).

⁴ R.H.C. Davis, ‘William of Poitiers and his History of William the Conqueror’, in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to R.W. Southern*, eds. R.H.C. Davis and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 71–100 (72).

⁵ Frank Barlow, ‘The *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*’, in *Studies in International History: Essays Presented to W. Norton Medlicott*, eds. K. Bourne and D.C. Watt (London: Longmans, 1967), 35–67 (44, 61–3).

⁶ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall. 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–1980), 2: 258–61 (iv.ii.217–18).

⁷ Jeanette M. A. Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1981), 13–22.

⁸ Dominique Barthélemy, ‘The Chivalric Transformation and the Origins of Tournament as Seen Through Norman Chroniclers’, *Haskins Society Journal* 20 (2009): 141–60 (145–9). But cf. the suggestion that ecclesiastical chroniclers permitted ‘moral purpose to be overshadowed by the brilliance of chivalric prowess’ (148).

surprisingly neglected, especially by historians.⁹ Historical scholarship abounds on twelfth-century Anglo-Norman historians who wrote about the Norman Conquest, including William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon and Orderic Vitalis, and on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, their main English source – but not on Poitiers.¹⁰ There is a lack of dialogue between literary and historical scholarship concerning the *Gesta*: this problem has both reinforced the vilification of Poitiers and perpetuated the tendency to regard him with scepticism simply because of his remarkable ability to turn a phrase.

Any accord which Poitiers finds or makes between the classical past and the Norman Conquest is usually attributed to conventional medieval classicism rather than authorial ingenuity. The notable exception is Beer's study on Poitiers' classical rhetorical style and claims to truth.¹¹ But the study is largely confined to the text itself: she does not consider Poitiers' intended audience, nor the import of his first-hand knowledge of the historical events.¹² On the other hand, historical critiques of Poitiers have tended to obscure the intimate connection between his conquest narrative and the moral content of the classical stories on which he draws. There is a wealth of scholarship on uses of the classical past in the Middle Ages,¹³ but in Poitiers' case this is often limited to identifying borrowings of specific quotations. Where, then, are the motives and the man behind the classicist?

⁹ On the dearth of studies about Poitiers' work, see David Bates, *The Normans and Empire: the Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford During Hilary Term 2010* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68.

¹⁰ e.g. recently, Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn, *William of Malmesbury and the Ethics of History* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012); Catherine A. M. Clarke, 'Writing Civil War in Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 31 (2009): 31–48; Amanda Jane Hingst, *The Written Word: Past and Place in the Work of Orderic Vitalis* (Notre Dame: University of Indiana Press, 2009); Nicholas Brooks, 'Why is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle About Kings?' *Anglo-Saxon England* 39 (2010): 43–70.

¹¹ Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 13–22.

¹² e.g. Beer finds the *Gesta* 'curiously scientific' in its information about siege, numbers of combatants, William's behaviour, and the element of chance (*Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 22); whereas Poitiers' military and clerical background, and his personal knowledge of William, go far in explaining his narrative choices: on the value of this historical context, see Pierre Bouet, 'Orderic Vital, lecteur critique de Guillaume de Poitiers', in *Mediaevalia Christiana XIe–XIIIe siècles: hommage à Raymonde Foreville de ses amis, ses collègues et ses anciens élèves*, ed. Coloman Etienne Viola (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1989), 25–50 (25).

¹³ See famously Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927); Beryl Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974); Ernst Breisach, ed., *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute

Poitiers does not merely use classical quotations and stories: he thinks about the past with them. Poitiers asserts, for instance, that William conquered England with more than 1,000 ships, thereby evoking and exceeding the 1,000 named in the *Aeneid*.¹⁴ Poitiers' eloquently worded estimate may also be relatively accurate: Poitiers' contemporary, Norman historian, William of Jumièges, probably exaggerated his claim of 3,000 ships.¹⁵ Poitiers, after all, spent time in William's retinue, and would be in a position to know.¹⁶ The *Gesta*'s rhetoric has frustrated many twentieth-century historians, but it is unhelpful to view the *Gesta* as a work of deceit. Rather, we may say that Poitiers had an accurate understanding of the expectations of his audience, for the *Gesta* displays both political acuity and an awareness of Christian morality.

My present aim is not to conduct a comprehensive literary study of his classicism, already surveyed by Beer, and many instances of which have been noted by Davis and Chibnall. Poitiers was precise in invoking the particular moral in a classical story relevant to his persuasive narrative about William's legitimacy, and in applying it at the right moment. It is this precision which now merits attention. Poitiers did not use classical allusion superficially, nor does his *Gesta* belong in the realm of empty flattery. Latin panegyric as a genre was never static or proscriptive; scholarly scorn of panegyric, and the misconception

Publications, Western Michigan University, 1985); Matthew Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the Writing of History, 400–1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ *GG*, 110–11 (ii.7). Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid*, in *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid: Books 1–6*, ed. H. Rushton Fairclough and G. P. Goold. 2 vols. Revised edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 1: 330–1 (ii, line 198).

¹⁵ William of Jumièges, *The Gesta Normannorum ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni*, ed. and trans. E. M. C. van Houts. 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992–5), 2: 164–5 (vii.14); on the unlikelihood of this estimate, see, *GG*, 111, nn. 4–5; Bernard S. Bachrach, 'The Norman Conquest, Countess Adela, and Abbot Baudri', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 35 (2013): 65–78 (73–5). William's Ship List, likely a near-contemporary source, suggests – like Poitiers – totals of or approaching 1000 ships: see Elisabeth M. C. van Houts, 'The Ship List of William the Conqueror', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 159–83, especially 166, 169–70, 174.

¹⁶ Cf. Gilduin Davy, *Le duc et la loi: héritages, images et expressions du pouvoir normatif dans le duché de Normandie, des origines à mort du Conquérant: fin du IXe siècle–1087* (Paris: De Boccard, 2004), 180, for claims about Poitiers's reliability as a contemporary source; Gillingham, 'William the Bastard at War', 142; but cf. Barlow, who refers to Poitiers exaggerating numbers and writing 'at a distance': '*Carmen de Hastingae proelio*', 44.

that it was sycophantic or reductive, are primarily twentieth-century ideas.¹⁷ Rather, individual panegyrists adapted the genre to suit the subject and the situation at hand.¹⁸ In asserting William's legitimacy, Poitiers employed the classical material he knew intimately to appeal directly to the moral and legal conundrums of his day. In doing so, he sought to compete on the same terms as classically-inspired writing in eleventh-century England, but with a different agenda.¹⁹ He re-envisioned classical stories through a medieval lens, using them to buttress his moral judgements of Harold Godwineson and William. His sophistication in this regard suggests that there remains a need to re-examine the vision of the classical past in the Anglo-Norman world. The *Gesta* firmly reinforces the idea that classicising history could be an endeavour more substantive than stylistic for medieval writers of history.

The audience of the *Gesta Guillelmi*

The *Gesta* was not an academic discussion of succession practices, theoretical or otherwise.²⁰ It addressed a problem more immediate and practical: the fears of William's subjects, allies and critics. William was newly king, and kings were responsible for their subjects' security, both physical and spiritual. The conquest persisted in recent memory:²¹ those who felt its effects, whether through trauma or opportunities, needed a guarantee that he would defend

¹⁷ Roger Rees, 'The Modern History of Latin Panegyric', in *Latin Panegyric*, ed. Roger Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–48 (15–16).

¹⁸ Susanna Morton Braund, 'Praise and Protreptic in Early Imperial Panegyric: Cicero, Seneca, Pliny', in *Latin Panegyric*, ed. Rees, 85–108 (87).

¹⁹ See especially Elizabeth M. Tyler, 'The *Vita Ædwardi*: the Politics of Poetry at Wilton Abbey', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 31 (2009): 135–56; Simon Keynes and Rosalind Love, 'Earl Godwine's Ship', *Anglo-Saxon England* 38 (2009): 185–223 (205–6, 212–13, 216–18, 223).

²⁰ Harold claimed that his accession in 1066 was Edward the Confessor's deathbed bequest; William justified his claim based on a bequest from Edward in 1051 and Harold's alleged perjury of an oath of fealty to William. The validity of these competing claims was a matter of contention on both sides of the Channel: see, most comprehensively, Stephen Baxter, 'Edward the Confessor and the Succession Question', in *Edward the Confessor: the Man and the Legend*, ed. Richard Mortimer (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 77–118; see also Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 20–1; Garnett, *Conquered England*, 5, 232.

²¹ See Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900–1200* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), especially 123–36.

their interests. Safety and salvation were in jeopardy, and these twin threats prompted Poitiers to create a moral argument for William's leadership.

Poitiers roots his narrative firmly in the distant past, one brought to terms with the moral demands of the present. He makes explicit and tacit moral connections between ancient heroes and contemporary leaders to justify William's claim, to defend his leadership and to commend him to posterity.²² It is therefore essential to place greater emphasis on Poitiers' conscious and substantive use of classical references than has been usual among historians.²³

Poitiers quotes and alludes to classical works and heroes throughout the *Gesta*,²⁴ but the stories and qualities of three heroes – Aeneas, Caesar and Theseus – constitute the most substantial and sustained part of Poitiers' narrative case for Harold's illegitimacy and William's legitimacy. For Poitiers, these heroes are more than categorical classical *exempla* for praising a ruler: they are directly and particularly relevant to the Norman Conquest of England. Poitiers finds significant parallels between the intention, destination and morality of these heroes' sea voyages and William's conquest.

The significance of Poitiers' rhetoric in its political and cultural context is best understood in view of his purpose in writing and his audience. The *Gesta* exists only in a transcript of an incomplete manuscript.²⁵ Yet against the lack of extant manuscripts must be placed the evidence that both William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis²⁶ – and others,

²² *GG*, 150–3 (ii.30).

²³ e.g. Barlow, '*Carmen de Hastings proelio*', 44; David Bates, '1066: Does the Date Still Matter?' *Historical Research* 78 (2005): 460–1; Bates, *William the Conqueror*, 34, 36, 49, 68; David C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror: the Norman Impact upon England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 204; Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England. I: c.500–c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1974), 101–2.

²⁴ Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 3–22; for a partial list, see *GG*, 189–90.

²⁵ André Duchesne edited the now-lost manuscript in 1619; Orderic Vitalis provides most of the information known about Poitiers: Davis and Chibnall, 'Introduction', in *GG*, xv.

²⁶ On Orderic's treatment of Poitiers as an historian, see Bouet, 'Orderic Vital, lecteur critique de Guillaume de Poitiers', 25–50.

including the author of the *Liber Eliensis*²⁷ – had first-hand familiarity with the *Gesta*,²⁸ indicating circulation and a readership on both sides of the Channel.

The *Gesta* was probably intended for a wide audience. It belonged to a larger project of Norman legitimation, akin to strategies of Norman historical writing after the conquest of Sicily used by Geoffroi Malaterra and William of Apulia. Each Norman apologist sought not only to advertise the strength of the Normans as a people, but also to compete for the primacy of his own leader's heroism.²⁹ The Normans were conquering, and their advocates were aware that Christendom as a whole continued to watch and to comment.

Poitiers' primary audience, which he would have reached through court circles, was the Norman elite on whom William depended. After imposing control in England, William shifted his strategic priorities to defending his expanded realm and sustaining his men's allegiance.³⁰ The 1070s – when Poitiers was writing – and early 1080s saw the outbreak of Norman power conflicts and defections. William's half-brother Odo of Bayeux, earl of Kent, was tried for defrauding the crown and the Church, and William faced a Norman rebellion organised by his son, Robert Curthose.³¹ Maintaining the support of Norman nobles after 1066 was essential, especially given the ambition and opportunism of men like Odo and Robert.

²⁷ E.O. Blake, ed., *Liber Eliensis*. Camden, third series, 92 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1962), 158–9, 185–95.

²⁸ Rodney Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*. Revised edn. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 69, 214; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, eds. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom. 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998–1999), 1: 416–63 (ii.228–iii.247); Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2: 258–61 (iv.ii.217–18).

²⁹ See Marie-Agnès Lucas-Avenel, 'Le récit de Geoffroi Malaterra ou la légitimation de Roger, grand comte de Sicile', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 34 (2012): 169–92; Bates, *Normans and Empire*, 67–9.

³⁰ M. Swanton, ed. and trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. Revised edn. (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 195–208 (D 1066–1072[1071]); cf. Bates, *Normans and Empire*, 64–92, and, for an earlier interpretation, Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, 204–7, 211–21. See also Marjorie Chibnall, *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 2.

³¹ Swanton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 213–15 (DE 1079–1083). For the suggestion that Odo commissioned the *Gesta Guillelmi*, see Davy, *Le duc et la loi*, 16; Leah Shopkow, *History and Community: Norman Historical Writing in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 44.

Poitiers aimed to preserve the favour of William's allies. He styled his narrative in a classical, heroic genre aimed at a well-educated court audience, including politically influential nobles and clerics familiar with the classical rhetoric Poitiers employs.³² Poitiers, once William's chaplain, had battlefield and court experience as a classically-educated knight and cleric. The *Gesta*'s panegyric style would be unlikely to persuade those already opposed to Norman power: many in England and Europe condemned William's violence, fearing the expansion of a Norman empire.³³ Yet William's allies and mercenaries included other peoples of Europe, among them the Flemish linked to him by marriage; it was politically shrewd to continue communicating William's impressiveness and legitimacy to these peoples.³⁴ Even in Normandy, where primogeniture was more customary than in England, William's conquest of a land to which he had no direct hereditary claim required some justification.³⁵ The *Gesta* was designed not just to convince, but to remind.

Nor should an English audience be discounted. The *Gesta* was known in both England and Normandy; the narrative reveals Poitiers' knowledge of English geography and engages with questions about the succession in 1066 similar to those raised in MS 'D' of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.³⁶ Poitiers' arguments suggest familiarity with English succession practices and an interest in targeting his case accordingly. He recognises the nobles' role in electing a king and, although he acknowledges the nobles' desire to elect a fellow countryman, he

³² On Poitiers writing for a 'courtly audience', see Roger D. Ray, 'Orderic Vitalis and William of Poitiers: a Monastic Reinterpretation of William the Conqueror', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 50 (1972): 1116–27 (1123–5); most recently, on chivalrous themes in the *Gesta Guillelmi*, see Barthélemy, 'Chivalric Transformation', 145–9.

³³ See Elisabeth van Houts, 'The Norman Conquest Through European Eyes', *English Historical Review* 110 (1995): 843–53; David Bates, 'William the Conqueror and His Wider Western World', *Haskins Society Journal* (2006): 73–87.

³⁴ On William's imperial pretensions, qualities and effectiveness, see Bates, *Normans and Empire*, 64–92.

³⁵ See, e.g., Ann Williams, 'Some Notes and Considerations on Problems Connected with the English Royal Succession, 860–1066', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 1 (1979): 144–67; Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2: xxxvii, 364; Marjorie Chibnall, 'Les droits d'héritage selon Orderic Vital', *Revue Historique de Droit Français et Étranger*, 4th series, 48 (1970): 347.

³⁶ Swanton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 195–200 (D 1066); Bates, 'William the Conqueror as Maker of Empire', 70–1.

appeals on two occasions to Edgar the Ætheling's youth as a strike against his eligibility for kingship – a reason which might have resonated more with an English audience than a Norman one,³⁷ as similar comments in the Norman *Carmen de Hastingae proelio* indicate.³⁸ Even Poitiers would probably not have expected recent victims of conquest to have accepted this kind of philosophical argument about kingship, especially as Edgar was still very much alive and continuing to press his claim in alliance with the Scottish king Malcolm.³⁹ But throughout the *Gesta*, Poitiers looks to the future. He eagerly anticipated that the tie between the two lands would grow stronger. He may have envisioned an audience not English and Norman, but Anglo-Norman, which he believed would develop under William's continued leadership.⁴⁰

Lastly, Poitiers wrote to communicate William's deeds to posterity. Poitiers' knowledge of the classics, including Virgil's *Aeneid*, Caesar's *De bello gallico* and Sallust's *Catilina*,⁴¹ demonstrated to him that writing could survive the ages, influencing, guiding and instructing them. Poitiers aims to teach William's deeds 'to the age to come',⁴² observes that William's victory against conspiracy '[deserves] to be remembered by future generations',⁴³ claims to 'think it worthwhile to hand down to posterity the exact truth' of William's just conquests of Maine and England, and presents William as one 'whose memory we wish to

³⁷ *GG*, 146–7 (ii.28), 162–3 (ii.35).

³⁸ Guy of Amiens, *The Carmen de Hastingae proelio of Guy, Bishop of Amiens*, ed. and trans. Frank Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38–9 (ll. 643–54), 44–5 (ll. 741–52).

³⁹ For years, post-Conquest commentators struggled to reconcile William's conquest with the claim of this more legitimate heir: Emily A. Winkler, '1074 in the Twelfth Century', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 36 (2014): 241–58; cf. Nicholas Hooper, 'Edgar the Ætheling: Anglo-Saxon Prince, Rebel, Crusader', *Anglo-Saxon England* 14 (1985): 197–214.

⁴⁰ For the argument that the Bayeux Tapestry was aimed at a cross-Channel audience, see: T.A. Heslop, 'Regarding the Spectators of the Bayeux Tapestry: Bishop Odo and His Circle', *Art History* 33 (2009): 222–49, especially 229–32.

⁴¹ Poitiers favours classical allusions over references to patristic texts. On this tendency and the influence of Sallust, see Janet Martin, 'Classicism and Style in Latin Literature', in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, eds. Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 537–68 (548–9); Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2: 258–9 (iv.ii.217); Davis and Chibnall, 'Introduction', in *GG*, xviii.

⁴² 'Guillelmus vero, gloriosissimus dux, cuius acta venturam aetatem divina opitulatione freti docebimus ...': *GG*, 6–7 (i.4).

⁴³ 'notificanda saeculis unius diei pugna': *GG*, 10–11 (i.8).

preserve in writing.⁴⁴ These comments, although grandiose, nevertheless convey a sincere address to posterity. Classical historians were aware that they could address a future audience through writing as they could not verbally; Thucydides, for example, wrote his contemporary history for a future readership, as a ‘possession for all time’ and for ‘all those who want to know’.⁴⁵ Poitiers emulated classical rhetoric to shape future readers’ perceptions about the Norman Conquest.⁴⁶ In Poitiers’s account of the present, the future was his vision; the past, his means.

Classical heroes and the *Gesta Guillelmi*

Poitiers’ preoccupation with heroes engaged in sea voyages and conquest – precedents he uses to support directly his arguments about the Norman Conquest – merits explanation in the wider context of his classical comparisons. Several scholars have made lists of Poitiers’ classical allusions, indiscriminately mixing comparisons of equivalence, competition and superiority.⁴⁷ The resulting impression is that these allusions are of a piece: Tabuteau claims, for instance, that in the *Gesta* ‘the Conqueror comes out better in comparison with every famous ancient figure.’⁴⁸ This is simply incorrect. Poitiers treats the heroes differently, depending on which classicising arguments will best support his conquest narrative at key moments. On different occasions, Poitiers asserts only William’s superiority, only his equivalence or both, and with varying degrees of emphasis. Merely listing Poitiers’ classical allusions, although a useful endeavour, obscures their narrative effect. Poitiers uses them

⁴⁴ ‘Quapropter nos operae pretium arbitramur quam verissime tradere ... quem scripto propagamus ... optamus’: *GG*, 58–9 (i. 36).

⁴⁵ Quoted in John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21.

⁴⁶ Cf. classicism used to similar effect in the Bayeux Tapestry and to widen the appeal of the Norman Conquest story: Heslop, ‘Regarding the Spectators of the Bayeux Tapestry.’

⁴⁷ Cf. *GG*, 189–90; Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 13–22; Emily Zack Tabuteau, ‘Review Article: *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, eds. and trans. R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall’, *Speculum* 75 (2000): 523–5.

⁴⁸ Tabuteau, ‘Review Article: *The Gesta Guillelmi*’, 523.

when pertinent, and when his account is in need of defence and support. Hence, he uses comparisons with seafaring conquerors most often, and to greatest effect. The degree of each comparison matters, as does its timing.

Crucially, Poitiers only compares William to classical heroes after Harold seizes the throne and William decides to contest the claim. Comparisons to classical heroes were unnecessary when William was a duke, a stage of his career which needed neither proof nor the foundation of tradition. His accession to the dukedom, a title he inherited from his father, was legal and consistent with the Norman practice of primogeniture. The Conquest of England, however, was a different matter: because it involved contest, Poitiers's promotion of William required classical ammunition.

Indeed, the very first comparison between William and any classical hero occurs on William's sea voyage to England, the beginning of the conquest venture. Poitiers compares William to two predecessors in sea ventures, Agamemnon and Xerxes, and asserts William's explicit superiority in this regard, not his equality. It is significant that these assertions occur in Poitiers' own voice – 'we protest' that William had more ships than Agamemnon; 'we proclaim' William linked Normandy and England, whereas Xerxes linked two towns with a boat bridge⁴⁹ – for he avoids such direct comparisons between Harold and any hero. Poitiers proclaims William's explicit superiority when comparing conquests by sea of any sort. Agamemnon barely succeeded in his endeavour and the Roman Empire took years to expand, whereas William conquered England in a day.⁵⁰ Where William needed unequivocal superiority was in the justification for crossing the Channel and conquering a foreign land – indeed, for the very idea of conquest. Poitiers returns repeatedly to analogies with seafaring

⁴⁹ 'protestamur'; 'propagamus': *GG*, 110–13 (ii.7).

⁵⁰ *GG*, 142–3 (ii.26).

heroes who conquer, because these stories and precedents do the most moral work for advancing his argument.

Aeneas, Caesar and Theseus are special because they permeate the narrative in this regard: the former two in the pervasiveness of allusions; the latter in moral depth. Poitiers uses the time-tested and honourable heroes Aeneas and Caesar frequently, but also selectively, so as to distinguish the Norman Conquest as a special, unblemished enterprise. Theseus' sea journey provides a useful moral example of the consequences of oath-breaking, and so proves particularly useful for Poitiers' aim to compare the integrity of William and Harold. The comparisons were potentially problematic, for the close parallels between the heroes' deeds and William's endeavours might suggest similar implications which Poitiers hoped to avoid. There could be no defeated Troy, lost Britain or broken promise in the story of William's life, because Poitiers sought to dispel any doubts about the king's legitimacy. The core of Poitiers' argument is not just his hailing William's strength, victories or achievements, but his justifying William's conquest through particular narrative emphasis on words and promises.

In describing William's military abilities, Poitiers does not need to argue that William is superior in all respects. Poitiers uses several individual mentions of heroes, each to make a single point about William's personal military strength – his defence of his men and his realm, his ability to fight and win against the odds, and his daring. In these cases, Poitiers asserts equivalence and superiority, but stresses the former. Although William is Xerxes' superior in sea crossings, they are equal in strength.⁵¹ Poitiers emphasises first that Marius and Pompey deserve their victories because of their excellent leadership. He then mentions their reserve in leading small raiding parties as compared to William, but these heroes are

⁵¹ *GG*, 112–13 (ii.7).

equals in the grand enterprises.⁵² William is Tydeus' 'equal and in no way inferior in standing':⁵³ their circumstances were different, as Tydeus faced only 50 men as opposed to thousands; the key point is their shared ability to defeat the odds. These references establish William's leadership abilities, but are not part of the more important moral goal of the narrative: to sustain an argument for William's legitimacy.

Poitiers declares William the equal of Achilles and Aeneas in daring: 'Against Harold, who was such a man as poems liken to Hector or Turnus, William would have dared to fight in single combat no less than Achilles against Hector, or Aeneas against Turnus.'⁵⁴ He claims that Statius and Virgil would rank William greater, which implies superiority, but Poitiers does not choose to make the point himself. Poitiers' implication of the superior truth claim of his prose, as compared to poetry, is noteworthy. He is responding directly to the poem *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*, composed shortly after the Battle of Hastings. Whereas the *Carmen* calls William a son of Hector, Poitiers carefully removes the connection between William and a defeated hero.⁵⁵ In Poitiers' efforts to establish William's military prowess, the comparison of bravery in single combat – unlike the argument for the Conquest's legitimacy – does not require William to be better than his predecessors: rather, like them, he must simply be the victor. Indeed, Poitiers also stays away from making a direct comparison between Harold and his predecessors as losers of single combat – Hector and Turnus – because he does not find Harold worthy of these heroes' impressive legacy. Hector and Turnus fought honourably, courageously entered into single combat, and avoided cowardice. In Poitiers' view, Harold shared none of these personal qualities: for this reason Poitiers avoids making an explicit comparison to Harold in his own authorial voice.

⁵² *GG*, 114–17 (ii.9).

⁵³ 'par, haud inferior loco': *GG*, 136–7 (ii.22).

⁵⁴ 'Cum Heraldus, tali qualem poemata dicunt Hectorem vel Turnum, non minus auderet Guillelmus congregi singulari certamine, quam Achilles cum Hectore, vel Aeneas cum Turno.' *GG*, 134–7 (ii.22).

⁵⁵ Guy of Amiens, *Carmen*, 36–7; for dating, see xv–xxx; see also: R.H.C. Davis and others, 'The *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*: a Discussion', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 2 (1980): 1–20 (6–10).

It is only in the matter of William's Christian faith to a single God that Poitiers asserts William's superiority to Achilles and Aeneas. Protesting his own humility, Poitiers claims his goal is to 'bring humbly to the notice of kings his piety in the worship of the true God, who alone is God from eternity to the end of the world and beyond'.⁵⁶ The implication is that, however honourable, pious and heroic these ancient exemplars were, they were necessarily inferior because their virtues were directed towards numerous, unpredictable and erratic gods. One of Poitiers' main moral defences for William is divine support: this is why, in this particular category of comparison, William must be superior.

In one key case, Poitiers asserts only equivalence: no sense of superiority is mentioned or even implied. This most striking instance of equivalence is also the most revealing about the ideal of Christian rulership Poitiers seeks to convey. On describing the news of William's kingship reaching Normandy, Poitiers makes a single comparison of equivalence between William and Augustus to make the point that William's peacekeeping is extremely valuable for Normandy: 'It was doubtful which was the greater, his country's love for him or his love for his country, just as it was once doubted of Caesar Augustus and the Roman people.'⁵⁷ William's matching Augustus – as opposed to surpassing him – shows that William has achieved something. William is a king, at home in his *patria*, exhibiting the ideal quality of rulership which he shares with Augustus: mutual love between ruler and people. Poitiers does not need to – nor can he – make William improve on this feat. William, as Augustus' likeness, is the answer to his subjects' fears for their own security.

Poitiers measures William against Caesar, Aeneas and Theseus according to the medieval criteria of ideal Christian kingship and judges him more worthy of rule: William is victorious where others are overcome, and vigilant in situations where others are negligent. A

⁵⁶ 'titulatura ipsius humillime regnantibus pietatem in cultu veri Dei, qui solus ab aeterno in finem seculorum et ultra Deus est': *GG*, 136–7 (ii.22).

⁵⁷ 'Profecto dubium erat illum patria, an patriam ille, plus diligeret, qualiter est olim dubitatum de Caesare Augusto et populo Romano.' *GG*, 154–5 (ii.32).

medieval ruler was expected to be an exemplary military leader and a servant of God and people, always anticipating and addressing crisis.⁵⁸ For Poitiers, the ruler who forgets or neglects, with or without intent, is unworthy of the title and a danger to the security of his realm.⁵⁹

William and Caesar: the problems of the past

Poitiers' comparison of William with Caesar is the most well-documented classical allusion in the *Gesta*, but the nature of the contrast between the two heroes bears further explanation. It is traditional to argue that medieval historians sought authority and legitimacy for their subject by turning to classical models,⁶⁰ and to observe that medieval writers of panegyric biography imitate the examples of Suetonius and Sallust in constructing medieval kings like ancient emperors and heroes. R. Allen Brown and Elisabeth van Houts have referred primarily to Poitiers' comparison of William with Caesar,⁶¹ but not to the contrast. Others have noted the contrast: T. A. Dorey has remarked that Poitiers casts William as a 'second and greater Caesar',⁶² and Roger D. Ray has noted that Poitiers is in this regard using the

⁵⁸ Janet Nelson, 'Kingship and Empire', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c.350–c.1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 211–251 (218); for the early development of this ideal, see John Procopé, 'Greek and Roman Political Theory', in *Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Burns, 21–36 (25–8).

⁵⁹ On the development of *negligentia* as a particularly problematic royal vice in ninth-century political thought, see, most comprehensively, Hans Hubert Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit* (Bonn: L. Röhrscheid, 1968).

⁶⁰ On the uses and re-uses of classical rhetoric in the Middle Ages, see Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶¹ R. Allen Brown, 'Guillaume le Conquérant et son temps', in idem, *Castles, Conquest and Charters* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 305–15 (315); Elisabeth M. C. van Houts, 'Latin Poetry and the Anglo-Norman Court 1066–1135: the *Carmen de Hastingae proelio*', *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989): 39–62 (41–2); Elisabeth van Houts, 'Historical Writing', in *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, eds. Christopher Harper-Bill and Elisabeth van Houts (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 103–21 (106), citing and summarising R.H.C. Davis, 'Poitiers and his History of William the Conqueror', in *Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, eds. Davis and Wallace-Hadrill, 71–100.

⁶² T.A. Dorey, 'William of Poitiers: *Gesta Guillelmi ducis*', in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge, 1967), 139–55 (153).

traditional medieval ‘outdoing topos’.⁶³ The problem with assessing Poitiers’ allusive choices purely in terms of comparison and contrast is that doing so highlights only the traditional elements of Poitiers’ classical allusions, without identifying Poitiers’ particular nuance and its reason. These assessments have been seen as evidence for the superficiality of the *Gesta*, a view which belies and obscures Poitiers’ deep engagement with the problems and moral contingencies of the past.

Ray’s and Dorey’s conclusions are convincing to an extent. In classical historiography, which medieval writers emulated, authors established their own authority by criticising predecessors and contemporaries,⁶⁴ which medieval writers emulated. Poitiers links William with Caesar to place him in a historical tradition of great men, but also argues for progress, showing William as the greater leader. Caesar, as William’s predecessor in crossing the Channel to conquer, provided an ideal comparison for Poitiers. Caesar was a renowned historical figure and one of the Nine Worthies, but he failed in the conquest of Britain.⁶⁵

Poitiers’ William is not only greater than Caesar, but in important ways different from him. A key distinction is between constancy and volatility, both in character and in the assurance of success.⁶⁶ The twelfth-century poet Chrétien de Troyes praises his patron, Philip of Flanders, by claiming that Philip was far superior to Alexander the Great. The ‘proof’ of this superiority, Chrétien confidently asserts, is in the constancy of Philip’s Christian character, most evident in the virtue of charity. Alexander, although impressive, was inconsistent; because of Alexander’s pride, his actions rendered him culpable as often as

⁶³ Ray, ‘Orderic Vitalis and William of Poitiers’, 1120–1, arguing for Poitiers’s use of the ‘outdoing’ topos as defined by Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially 162–5.

⁶⁴ Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 5, 218–19.

⁶⁵ Caesar’s missions lasted from 55–54 BC; the Claudian invasion of AD 43 began the Roman occupation of Britain that ended by AD 410.

⁶⁶ On the contrast Poitiers draws between William’s prudence and Caesar’s rashness, see Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 14.

honourable.⁶⁷ The nature of this critique is not arbitrary: pride was, in the view of Gregory the Great, the most serious vice which could afflict a medieval ruler.⁶⁸ Similarly, Poitiers conveys the differences in a way which suits his own vision for the nature of William's worthiness of rule. Two previously unremarked differences important to the Norman Conquest story are in the nature of the two conquerors' authority over Britain specifically, and – more subtly – in William's use of the spoken word.

Poitiers follows the medieval tradition of echoing and invoking the ancients by criticising Caesar whilst stating that he is doing otherwise. In a moment of significant understatement, he writes: 'We omit further mention of Julius Caesar, as it may perhaps be considered disparaging.'⁶⁹ Yet Poitiers has just narrated extensively Caesar's failures in Britain and his inadequacy compared to William:⁷⁰

Julius Caesar, who twice crossed over to this same Britain (for the older name of England is Britain) with a thousand ships, did not perform deeds as great as this the first time, nor did he dare to advance far from the coast or to stay long on the coast, although he fortified a camp in the Roman fashion. He crossed over at the end of summer and returned before the following equinox. His legions were overcome with great fear when his ships were partly broken up by the tides and waves of the sea ... What then did he accomplish that deserves the praise to be given to the man of whom we are writing?⁷¹

⁶⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: the Story of the Grail*, ed. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1–3 (ll. 11–60).

⁶⁸ Gregory illustrates this point with the careers of biblical kings Saul, David and Solomon in his *Regula Pastoralis*: for discussion and references, see Matthew Kempshall, 'No Bishop, No King: the Ministerial Ideology of Kingship and Asser's *Res gestae Ælfredi*', in *Belief and Culture in the Early Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, eds. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 106–28 (117–19).

⁶⁹ 'Mentionem super Iulio Caesare, quae forte notetur quasi derogans, omittamus.' *GG*, 174–5 (ii.40).

⁷⁰ *GG*, 168–75 (ii.39–40); see also Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 14, 17–18.

⁷¹ 'Iulius Caesar bis transvectus in ipsam Britanniam navibus mille (nam Angliae nomen antiquius est Britanniae) non aequè magna peregit prima vice, nec a littore longius progredi, nec in littore, tametsi patria consuetudine castra munierit, diutius morari ausus est. Transiit in extremo aestasis, rediit ante aequinoctium quod prope instabat. Perturbatae sunt legiones eius magno metu, cum naves partim fractae aestu maritimo aut fluctibus ... Quid igitur huius viri, quem scribimus, conferendum laudibus hac vice patravit?' *GG*, 168–71 (ii.39).

This passage highlights the men's fear, and implies that Caesar is not a strong enough leader to make adequate provision for them. William, on the other hand, is for Poitiers a vigilant leader more capable of navigating the difficulties of a sea invasion. Pursuing his criticism of Caesar, Poitiers writes:

The Britons often gave battle to Caesar; whereas William crushed the English so thoroughly in one day that afterwards they could not muster the courage to fight him again ... Caesar sent out his cavalry to lay waste the fields with fire and plunder ... William, on the other hand, made peace-offerings to the people, and so preserved with its inhabitants the land which he could have devastated utterly in a short time.⁷²

Although the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes a decidedly contrary assertion,⁷³ Poitiers' William is not destructive. For Poitiers, Caesar is not only an inferior military leader, but also unworthy of rule because of his destruction of land and property. The passage shows William as an efficient commander who protects his future subjects – quite the opposite of a man who ravaged the countryside after Hastings, flouting the traditions of nomination and election. Poitiers highlights Caesar's military achievements in bringing three continents under his dominion – Africa, Europe and Asia – thereby associating William with classical precedent: the model of an ancient ruler conquering lands.

But the authority of the 'second and greater Caesar' model was of limited value to Poitiers: in the invasion of Britain – the most similar enterprise of the two leaders – William had to be distinctly different. Poitiers does not list Caesar's ventures in Britain; were he to draw a sustained parallel between Caesar and William, he would have to address two facts.

⁷² 'Caesarem praelio saepius adorti sunt Britanni; Anglos adeo Guillelmus die uno protrivit, ut post secum dimicandi fiduciam nullatenus reciperent ... Caesar, ut agros vastaret igne ac praeda, equitatum suum effudit ...Guillelmus autem pacifica iubens incolis, terram quam citius euertere posset, incolas cum terra sibi conservavit.' *GG*, 170–1 (ii.40).

⁷³ For the account of William's violence in 1066 and his subsequent harrying of the north: Swanton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 195–208 (D 1066–1072[1071]).

First, Caesar's invasion failed. Second, subsequent Roman dominion in Britain ultimately ended. Caesar's deeds and legacy did not provide a model conducive to projecting William's line as eternal rulers of England. The difference is subtle but important. Poitiers needed to differentiate William from Caesar in order to support his claims that William's descendants will rule. A direct analogy with the Roman occupation – an era foreshadowed by Caesar's invasion – would inevitably result in implying an eventual end to Norman control of England.

For Poitiers, an oral claim carried great weight, and he re-uses Caesar's words to enhance William's constancy in this regard. He places Caesar's famed words of victory, as reported by Suetonius – 'Veni, vidi, vici' – in William's mouth when William promptly defeats Alençon.⁷⁴ Suetonius describes Caesar's victory thus: 'Amidst the pageantry of the Pontic triumph, a litter carried in front a banner with three words: "I came, I saw, I conquered", the sign indicating not (like the rest) the deeds of war, but the speed of their execution.'⁷⁵ His report conjures the pomp and circumstance of traditional Roman triumphal practices, suggesting that this catchy slogan, written on a banner, was used to advertise Caesar's victory at home. Hardly a slavish copyist, Poitiers renders this written claim of conquest as an oral one. He makes the leader proclaim the words on the battlefield: 'The town, most strongly protected by its site, fortifications, and armed defenders, fell into his hands with such swift success that he could boast in these words, "I came, I saw, I conquered."⁷⁶

This is important because Poitiers' case hinges on oaths: it depends upon William appearing as a man of his word – and Harold the contrary. This appropriation is no simple,

⁷⁴ *GG*, 28–9 (i.19); this and other direct parallels between William and Caesar are discussed in Dorey, 'William of Poitiers', 152–3.

⁷⁵ 'Pontico triumpho inter pompae fercula trium verborum praetulit titulum VENI·VIDI·VICI non acta belli significantem sicut ceteris, sed celeriter confecti notam.' Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, in *Lives of the Caesars*, ed. K. R. Bradley and John Carew Rolfe. 2 vols. Revised edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1: 82–5 (c. 37).

⁷⁶ 'Oppidum enim natura, opere atque armatura munitissimum adeo currente proventu in eius manum venit ut gloriari his verbis liceret: "Veni, vidi, vici."' *GG*, 28–9 (i.19).

inevitable, classical borrowing: rather, Poitiers changes the circumstances of the famed words to give them more immediacy, and to advance the close connection he wishes to establish between reality and William's words. Poitiers notes that Harold's perjured oath was proclaimed, and he cites the import of the verbal testimony of those who witnessed it:

And, as the most truthful and distinguished men who were there as witnesses have told, at the crucial point in the oath he clearly and of his own free will pronounced these words that as long as he lived he would be the vicar of Duke William in the court of his lord King Edward; that he would strive to the utmost with his counsel and his wealth to ensure that the English monarchy should be pledged to him after Edward's death ...⁷⁷

Subsequently, he reiterates that Harold took his oath 'with both voice and hand' to William.⁷⁸ Words spoken and enacted should, in Poitiers's view, carry the force of action and truth. In borrowing from Suetonius, Poitiers imbues William with the verbal authority which sustains his argument for William's legitimacy throughout the *Gesta*.

Poitiers uses Caesar as a model and precedent for William and his deeds only insofar as Caesar's example is a worthy one for his purposes. He makes the linked stories diverge to suggest that William will take a different, superior route to Caesar in Britain. William will retain England for his line far into the future, unlike his predecessor whose labours on the island ended in failure.

William and Aeneas: the revision of Trojan origins

Poitiers compares William with Aeneas, navigating carefully around Troy to avoid associating the Norman Conquest with the ravaging and defeat which befell this ancient city.

⁷⁷ 'Et sicut veracissimi multaque honestate praeclarissimi homines recitavere, qui tunc affuere testes, in serie summa sacramenti libens ipse haec distinxit: se in curia domini sui Edwardi regis quandiu superesset ducis Guillelmi vicarium fore; inisurum quanto consilio valeret aut opibus ut Anglica monarchia post Edwardi decessum in eius manu confirmaretur ...' *GG*, 70–1 (i.42).

⁷⁸ 'et lingua et manu': *GG*, 76–7 (i.46), quoted also below; see also 68–79 (i.41–6).

Medieval peoples throughout Europe claimed Trojan origins in order to provide a sense of collective solidarity, to imbue their lineage with authority and to assert a connection with the legacy of Rome.⁷⁹ Poitiers' approach to Aeneas and Troy is important because of the way he adopts and rejects elements of this pervasive tradition to set William apart.

Poitiers belonged to an aggressive Norman historiographical project, which historians have identified as one seeking to equal the long-established reputations of peoples in one geographic region like the Franks and Saxons. The Normans could not claim the same longevity of rule as could the Frankish kingdom: William's family history and that of most of his entourage could not be traced beyond several generations.⁸⁰ As descendants of Viking settlers in northern Europe established for less than two centuries, the Normans' historians sought to graft the Norman past onto one longer and loftier than that of their Viking ancestry,⁸¹ often by claiming affiliation with Troy. At the start of the eleventh century, Dudo claimed Trojan origins for the Normans to prove the Normans' nobility, portraying Rollo as 'a Christian Aeneas' because both heroes founded a new dynasty.⁸² Claiming Trojan origins and parallels with Aeneas enabled Norman historians like Dudo to place themselves alongside the other peoples of Europe.

Poitiers pushed the aggressive project of Norman historical writing further. Writing within a framework of classicising history and biography, he set himself a colossal task: not

⁷⁹ Lee Patterson observes that 'virtually every European nation claimed descent from a common origin at Troy', *Negotiating the Past: the Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 202–3; Susan Reynolds, 'Medieval *Origines gentium* and the Community of the Realm', *History* 68 (1983), 375–90 (375).

⁸⁰ Linda Georgianna, 'Periodization and Politics: the Case of the Missing Twelfth Century in English Literary History', *Modern Language Quarterly* 64 (2003): 153–68 (161).

⁸¹ Shopkow, *History and Community*, 14; R.H.C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) 49–58; on the origins of this trend in the late tenth century with the Norman dukes' commissioning of Dudo's history of Normandy, Emily Albu, *The Normans in their Histories: Propaganda, Myth and Subversion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001), 7; Eleanor Searle, *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840–1066* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 62–7; R.W. Southern, 'Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 1. The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 20 (1970): 173–96 (190).

⁸² Southern, 'Classical Tradition', 191–2. Dudo has Rollo descend from the Trojan Antenor: see Cassandra Potts, 'Atque unum ex diversis gentibus populum effecit: Historical Tradition and the Norman Identity', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 18 (1995): 139–52 (142).

just to equal established traditions, but to surpass them and to change them. His task was the more complicated because of William's tenuous connections to the land, lineage and monarchy of England. Poitiers was not alone in attempting to strengthen these connections after the Conquest. In the early twelfth century, William of Malmesbury records the legend of Herleva's dream wherein her womb connects Normandy and England.⁸³ Poitiers had an immediate, pressing goal to elide dispute over the English succession and to preserve for William the support of his subjects and of posterity. Claiming equality with the other peoples of Europe and their traditions would not be enough: he had to make William special.

The link between William and Aeneas mattered to Poitiers in the specific context of Norman historiography and the Norman Conquest. According to Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Trojan refugee Aeneas flees the fallen city, and founds the Latin people and the Julian clan on the Apennine Peninsula. Poitiers identifies William as a hero like Aeneas, but casts William as a man both arising from and founding a great dynasty. Emphasising descent from Troy would not further Poitiers' goal for two reasons. It was not a claim unique to the Normans among the peoples of Europe, and it would place a defeated people at the beginning of a story about an invincible ruler.

Poitiers alludes to Aeneas during William's sea journey to England in order to convey William's valour, worthy of ancient heroism. The allusion permits Poitiers to demonstrate William's confidence in the rightness of his enterprise, his attentiveness to his men's needs and his superiority to Aeneas in analogous situations. Poitiers recounts how, after William's ships set sail at night, the duke's ship pulls ahead, and the next morning they see none of the other ships:

⁸³ For a brief discussion of legends surrounding Herleva and the birth of William, see Bates, *William the Conqueror*, 39–40.

At once the anchor was dropped and, so that fear and grief might not trouble his companions, the mettlesome duke partook of an abundant meal, accompanied by spiced wine, as if he were in his hall at home, asserting with remarkable cheerfulness that all the others would arrive before long, guided by God to whose safe-keeping he had entrusted them. Virgil, the prince of poets, would not have thought it unfitting to insert in his praise of the Trojan Aeneas (who was the ancestor and glory of ancient Rome) an account of the confidence and purpose of this banquet.⁸⁴

The ships then arrive: the potential for crisis has been averted. The passage most likely refers to the banquets Aeneas hosts for his men; Dorey notes that Poitiers identifies William's presence of mind with that of Aeneas.⁸⁵ Davis and Chibnall concluded that, because none of Aeneas' banquets occurred at sea, Poitiers is trying to have his hero's banquet on the journey match or exceed Aeneas's example.⁸⁶ Poitiers portrays William as improving upon Aeneas' behaviour in quality and extent. His claim that Virgil would have praised William provides credence of a classical authority, and it permits Poitiers to imply neatly that he is as a worthy successor of Virgil, the poet of poets. Poitiers had a keen interest in the power of words both written and spoken; he knew his educated court audience could not be retained – nor the English persuaded – without the aid of a recognised authority who transcended both time and cross-Channel conflict.

Poitiers links William with Aeneas as founders of new dynasties.⁸⁷ To some extent these allusions represent the kind of rhetorical technique that R.W. Southern describes:

⁸⁴ 'Confestim anchora iacta, ne metus atque moeror comitem turbam confundaret, abundans prandium nec baccho pigmentato carens, animosissimus dux, acsi in coenaculo domestico, memorabili cum hilaritate accepit; cunctos actutum affore promittens, Deo, cuius eos tutelae credidit, adducente. Non indignum duceret Mantuanus poetarum princeps laudibus Æneae Troiani, qui priscae Romae ut parens gloria fuit, securitatem atque intentionem huius mensae inserere.' *GG*, 112–13 (ii.7).

⁸⁵ Dorey, 'William of Poitiers', 152; cf. *GG*, 112, n. 2. Aeneas hosts a feast for his men after his shipwreck on the Libyan coast: Virgil, *Aeneid*, i, ll. 186–222; he hosts another after receiving heavenly signs that the day had arrived to found their new city, *Aeneid*, vii, ll. 141–7.

⁸⁶ Davis and Chibnall, 'Introduction', in *GG*, xxxii.

⁸⁷ Dorey, 'William of Poitiers', 153.

‘everything in their picture had to tell the same story.’⁸⁸ The analysis needs to be taken a step further: Poitiers’ analogies are not superficial; rather, he is both attentive to the thematic significance of the comparisons he makes within the context of the Norman Conquest, and aware of these comparisons’ implications – an awareness sustained in his narrative.

Poitiers limits and qualifies the connection between William and Aeneas, using rhetoric to illustrate William’s particular propinquity to the divine. He compares William’s stormy transit of the Channel to Aeneas’ journey from Sicily.⁸⁹ William sails over calm seas, suggesting divine approval, whereas Aeneas is storm-tossed, borne by forces beyond his control.⁹⁰ Poitiers animates the sun to imply that it shines with divine support for William’s victory over England during the victory celebrations in Normandy:

It was a time of winter, and of the austere Lenten penances. Nevertheless everywhere celebrations were held as if it were a time of high festival. The sun seemed to shine with the clear brightness of summer, far more strongly than usual at this season.⁹¹

Sunlight was a traditional marker of legitimacy in medieval narratives of papal elections and royal inaugurations. William acts with God, neither at the whim of Fate nor of the gods who consider Aeneas’ prayers for favourable winds:⁹² William is master not only of his choices, but of his circumstances.

The location of William’s feast in the Channel is significant in the context of justifying the Norman Conquest. William does not simply ‘outdo’ Aeneas in lavish

⁸⁸ Southern, ‘Classical Tradition’, 185; cf. Davis and Chibnall, ‘Introduction’, in *GG*, xxxi–xxxii.

⁸⁹ Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32, n. 68.

⁹⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid* i, ll. 82–185.

⁹¹ ‘Dies erant hiberni, et qui poenitentiae quadragesimalis rigori vacant. Ceterum ubique agebantur tanquam summae festivi temporis feriae. Sol aestiva serenitate ludicus videbatur, gratia dierum solita longe maior.’ *GG*, 174–5 (ii.41). This image evokes the language of divine favour in the election miracles of Pope Gregory I in 590.

⁹² Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* v, especially ll. 65–6, 762–78.

generosity: Poitiers transforms the whole invasion into a celebration. This is especially noteworthy given the responses of historians in England, who reacted with horror or avoided direct mention of the event.⁹³ From the Norman perspective, the invasion was not tinged with dishonour: William was defending part of his rightful realm from a treacherous nobleman.⁹⁴ The celebratory atmosphere and William's generous attention to his men convey the Norman perception of William's just cause in making this sea journey. The allusion to Virgil appropriates the poet's approval, permitting Poitiers to portray William as a hero like Aeneas, but one with greater control of his situation and his destiny.

The single combat parallel provided a way for Poitiers to judge William's honour and Harold's cowardice against a recognised classical and contemporary standard, and to cast William as the superior victor to classical heroes. When faced initially with Harold's treachery, William proposes single combat to settle the matter:

In short, William was ready to accept a judgement determined by the laws of peoples.⁹⁵ He did not wish the English to die as enemies on account of his dispute; he wished to decide the case by risking his own head in single combat.⁹⁶

For this brave and good man preferred to renounce something that was just and agreeable rather than cause the death of many men, being confident that Harold's head would fall since his courage was less and his cause unjust.⁹⁷

⁹³ Swanton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 195–200 (D 1066); on the phenomenon of 'conspicuous avoidance' in William of Malmesbury's *Vita Wulfstani* and the anonymous *Vita Ædwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit*, see Monika Otter, '1066: the Moment of Transition in Two Narratives of the Norman Conquest', *Speculum* 74 (1999): 565–86, especially 567.

⁹⁴ Davis, 'William of Poitiers and His History of William the Conqueror', 74.

⁹⁵ Davis and Chibnall note that this phrase is meant to indicate English and Norman legal customs: *GG*, 123, n. 2.

⁹⁶ 'Denique iudicium, quod iura gentium definirent, accipere praesto fuit. Anglos inimicos mori ob litem suam noluit; singulari certamine proprio capite causam determinare uoluit.' *GG*, 122–3 (ii.12).

⁹⁷ 'Nam vir strenuus et bonus iustum aliquid ac laetum renuntiare, nec multos occumbere volebat; Heraldum caput, pro quo minor fortitudo, aequitas nulla staret, casurum confidens.' *GG*, 122–3 (ii.13).

Poitiers' reiterated observations about the proposed duel defend William's actions to his audience. In Normandy and in post-Conquest England, single combat would have been a familiar alternative to the ordeal or *judicium Dei*: the judicial duel was a recognised custom in Normandy, if not always enacted.⁹⁸ Even if a bluff or strategic ploy, the proposal of a duel was in itself a verbal claim to moral authority and God's favour – and we have already seen the importance which Poitiers accords to the spoken word. Furthermore, as a military man under William, Poitiers would have had personal experience with this kind of leadership in action.⁹⁹ Single combat and its rhetoric resonated with Poitiers's personal experience, and he sought to justify the Conquest within the framework of expectations and values he shared with his audience.

Poitiers invokes the single combat challenge later in the narrative with references to Achilles, Hector, Aeneas and Turnus to highlight the worthiness of William's action, even though Harold has refused.¹⁰⁰ By connecting William's honour with that of ancient heroes, Poitiers secures his message in a more ancient tradition than Norman custom. Poitiers conveys in William's victory both daring and moral superiority, ignoring the classical victors' anger and intemperance because these traits would not help his cause.

⁹⁸ See Matthew Strickland, 'Provoking or Avoiding Battle? Challenge, Duel and Single Combat in Warfare of the High Middle Ages', in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1998), 317–43, especially 328–35; Ralph J. Hexter, *Equivocal Oaths and Ordeals in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 8–9; *GG*, 122, n. 1. Davis and Chibnall (*GG*) also suggest that 'such an offer, if made, would have been unacceptable to an Englishman', but it would certainly not have been unfamiliar. For the argument that *GG* is 'the exposition of a legal case', cf. Garnett, *Conquered England*, 40; on military and legal parallels, see also Stephen D. White, 'Proposing the Ordeal and Avoiding It: Strategy and Power in Western French Litigation, 1050–1110', in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 89–123; F.M. Powicke, *The Loss of Normandy, 1189–1204: Studies in the History of the Angevin Empire*. 2nd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 242.

⁹⁹ Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2: 258–9 (iv.ii.217); Strickland, 'Provoking or Avoiding Battle?' 319–20.

¹⁰⁰ *GG*, 134–7 (ii.22), quoted above. At *GG*, 135, n. 11 the editors observe that Poitiers may have known of the duel between Achilles and Hector in the *Ilias Latina*. For the duels, see Homer, *Iliad*, ed. A. T. Murray and William F. Wyatt. 2 vols. Revised edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 2: 452–91 (xxii); Virgil, *Aeneid*, xii, ll. 707–952.

Dorey concludes that this passage is evidence of the ‘latent identification’ between Aeneas and William in the *Gesta*, a point which is convincing but incomplete. He observes that both William and Aeneas shared the virtue of *pietas*, sought to settle their respective disputes in single combat and followed a just cause against a treaty-breaker. Breaking his oath to William was Poitiers’ central criticism of Harold, as is particularly evident in Poitiers’ attitude towards Theseus.¹⁰¹ What needs to be added is that Poitiers identifies William with Aeneas only when useful in the context of the Norman Conquest. Dorey cites William’s challenge of single combat to Harold as evidence of the comparison between William and Aeneas,¹⁰² but does not mention the further parallel in the same sentence between William and Achilles – the hero of the Greeks and enemy of the Trojans.¹⁰³ At the key moment, William is on the winning side: unconditional victory proves his just cause.¹⁰⁴ William’s authority in England depended upon an association with the victor of single combat, be he Greek or Trojan, rather than with Aeneas specifically.

William and his dynasty emerge as superior to the victorious ancient heroes. Achilles was killed in battle, and Aeneas fled a defeated city – situations Poitiers does not acknowledge. An allusion to Agamemnon creates the desired contrast between William and the Trojan tradition, because both men were victors in conquest, but Agamemnon needed 10 years and significant aid to conquer Troy.¹⁰⁵ Either he was a weaker commander than William, as Poitiers suggests, or – more problematically – the Trojans were more than a

¹⁰¹ See below.

¹⁰² Dorey, ‘William of Poitiers’, 153.

¹⁰³ Poitiers might also be making a moral association between William and Achilles, if the comparison between Harold and Hector arises from a judgement that Hector wrongly defends the Trojans against Greece for the Trojan theft of a Greek woman. Poitiers characterises Agamemnon and the Greeks as avengers: ‘Ancient Greece tells us that Agamemnon of the house of Atreus went to avenge the violation of his brother’s bed ...’ (‘Memorat antiquae Graecia Atridem Agamemnona fraternos thalamos ultum ivisse ...’): *GG*, 110–11 (ii.7).

¹⁰⁴ *GG*, 122–3 (ii.13), quoted above.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Argiorum rex Agamemnon habens in auxilio multos duces atque reges, unicam urbem Priami dolo vix evertit obsidionis anno decimo ... Subegit autem urbes Anglorum cunctas dux Guillelmus copiis Normanniae uno die ab hora tertia in vesperum, non multo extrinsecus adiutorio.’ *GG*, 142–3 (ii.26); the reference is to Virgil, *Aeneid*, ii, ll 196–8, noted in, *GG*, 142, n. 2.

match for their adversaries. Poitiers anticipates this counterargument, which indicates that he is aware of the implications of his own analogies. Several sentences later, he resolves the potential conundrum by adding: ‘Even if the walls of Troy had defended [England’s] citadel, the strong arm and counsel of such a man would soon have destroyed it.’¹⁰⁶ William is stronger than the Greek heroes; the English, although a worthy opponent, proved no match for William’s forces.

Not even Aeneas’ worthy Trojan ancestry prevents Poitiers from concluding that Troy was, ultimately, a defeated city – one which William would have quickly conquered. Unlike Aeneas, William was not escaping a conquered kingdom to found a new one, but rather claiming a territory already his by right. By portraying William as founding a dynasty in England and defending part of the Normans’ undefeated realm, Poitiers evades the idea that William was acquiring a separate kingdom. For Poitiers, the Aeneas and William are ultimately engaged upon different enterprises. In choosing his allusions to Aeneas in order to create a consistent, coherent picture of William, Poitiers indirectly asserts Norman superiority to Rome and the competing realms of Europe.

Harold, William and Theseus: oaths and negligence

Poitiers’ implicit comparison of William with Theseus is both the most subtle and the most moral. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* includes the most comprehensive version of the Theseus story. The *Gesta*’s editors have claimed that Poitiers knew Plutarch’s work,¹⁰⁷ but no extant Latin manuscript which he might have encountered is known. Poitiers (the place) was a centre of classical learning,¹⁰⁸ but it is more likely that Poitiers (the man) would have known

¹⁰⁶ ‘Si tuerentur eas moenia Troiana, brevi talis viri manus et consilium excinderint Pergama.’ *GG*, 142–3 (ii.26).

¹⁰⁷ Davis and Chibnall, ‘Introduction’, in *GG*, xvii; Raymonde Foreville, ‘Introduction’, in William of Poitiers, *Histoire de Guillaume le Conquérant*, ed. and trans. Raymonde Foreville (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1952), xxxix.

¹⁰⁸ See Dorey, ‘William of Poitiers’, 140; Orderic Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2: 258–61 (iv.ii.217–18).

Plutarch's writing indirectly, as it was not widely available in Latin translation in the West until the mid-fifteenth century in Italy.¹⁰⁹ Plutarch's *Theseus* was nevertheless the *fons materialis* of the Theseus story which had currency in the medieval imagination.¹¹⁰

Classical versions of the Theseus story vary, many alluding not to Theseus' heroic qualities, but to his recurring traits of betrayal and deceit: his desertion of Ariadne on Naxos, his attempt to kidnap Helen and his attempt to capture Persephone from the Underworld.¹¹¹ A frequent and familiar theme was the story of Theseus' sea voyage from Athens to Crete to defeat the Minotaur. On his return Theseus forgets to announce his success with a white sail, as he had promised his father, Aegeus.¹¹² Aegeus, distraught on seeing the black sail on the horizon, leaps to his death.¹¹³ The Theseus story is particularly relevant in the *Gesta* because Poitiers characterises William above all as a vigilant king who never neglects his duty.¹¹⁴

The *Gesta* refers frequently to William's constant vigilance, and examples of how his deeds temper or even prevent adversity. Poitiers describes William as the guardian and

¹⁰⁹ See Marianne Pade, *The Reception of Plutarch's Lives in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2007), 1: 37 ff.; on Byzantine reception and transmission of Plutarch in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Timothy E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

¹¹⁰ For example, the *Aeneid* includes several references to Theseus; William of Malmesbury knew of Theseus' adventures on Crete, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 1: 288–9 (ii.170.3); Thomas of Britain and Poitiers knew of his fateful journeys, discussed below.

¹¹¹ e.g. on abandonment of Ariadne, see Catullus 64, in *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris*, ed. G. P. Goold. 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 98–127; Ovid, *Heroides 10: Ariadne to Theseus*, in *Heroides, Amores*, ed. Grant Showerman and G. P. Goold. New edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 120–33; on Helen, see Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters / Deipnosophistae*, ed. S. Douglas Olson. 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6: 230–3; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ed. Peter K. Marshall (Monachii: K. G. Saur, 2002), 76 (No. 79); on Theseus in the underworld, Hyginus, *Fabulae*, No. 79; Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi.

¹¹² In Catullus' version, which was probably not known to Poitiers, forgetfulness has a different function: Ariadne curses Theseus for deserting her (64.135); the curse makes him forget his promise to his father. In this variant, he is not morally culpable for his own negligence, and can go on to reign with impunity; unlike Poitiers' defence of a Christian ruler, Catullus makes no moral claim about the particular value of a ruler's constancy. Cf. above discussion of Chrétien; Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth*, 14.

¹¹³ See *Theseus*, in Plutarch, *Lives*, ed. Bernadotte Perrin. 11 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1: 34–5, 44–7 (xvii.4, xxii.1–3); Statius, *Thebaid*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey and Kathleen M. Coleman. 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2: 294–5 (xii, ll. 625–6).

¹¹⁴ This is a highly-lauded quality of medieval lords in other narrative sources as well. Harold is described as neglecting nothing, Swanton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 194–200 (CD 1066); William of Malmesbury censures William Rufus for discrediting himself by sacrificing *diligentia* for *neglegentia*, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 1: 560–1 (iv.316.1).

caretaker of the religious community in Normandy: ‘How admirable such diligence, how worthy of imitation and perpetuation in the ages to come!’¹¹⁵ When William is faced with inclement weather on the sea journey to invade England, Poitiers says that he ‘[met] adversity with good counsel’, increasing the daily allotment of supplies to put his men at ease.¹¹⁶ William anticipates need and forgets nothing.

Poitiers implicitly compares both William and Harold to Theseus, commending William for his vigilance, and condemning Harold for neglect unbecoming a medieval lord. He moralises history by employing the imagery of Theseus’s black and white sails and by associating the contemporary conquests and sea journeys with Theseus’ journeys to and from Crete. In describing Harold’s return to England, Poitiers pauses in his narrative to address Harold directly, criticising him for breaking his oath:

Just a few words, O Harold, will we address to you! With what intent dared you after this take William’s inheritance from him and make war on him, when you had with both voice and hand subjected yourself and your people to him by a sacrosanct oath? ... How impious the smooth sea which suffered you, most abominable of men, to be carried on your journey to the shore! How perverse was the calm harbour which received you, who were bringing the disastrous shipwreck of your native land!¹¹⁷

It is significant that Poitiers chooses the moment of Harold’s ignominious return to England to accuse him. Poitiers could have chosen the moment Harold broke the oath, when he seized the crown upon Edward the Confessor’s death. To criticise Harold later, on a sea journey, is a

¹¹⁵ ‘O recolendam, o imitandam, o in omne aeuum propagandam diligentiam!’ *GG*, 82–3 (i.51).

¹¹⁶ ‘Quin et consilio adversitatibus obuius, submersorum interitus quantum poterat occultavit, latentius tumultando, commeatum in dies augendo, inopiam lenivit.’ *GG*, 108–11 (ii.6).

¹¹⁷ ‘Paucis igitur te affabimur Heralde. Qua mente post haec Guillelmo haereditatem auferre, bellum inferre, ausus es, cui te gentemque tuam sacrosancto iureiurando subiecisti tua et lingua et manu? ... Impie clemens pontus qui vehementem te hominem teterrimum ad littus provehi passus est. Sinistre placida statio fuit quae recepit te naufragium miserrimum patriae afferentem.’ *GG*, 76–9 (i.46); see also 68–79 (i.41–6). The shipwreck image could refer to the Pauline nautical metaphors in 1 Tim. 1:19.

rhetorically elegant choice: it enables Poitiers to draw an analogy to Theseus's fateful sea journey.

Poitiers invokes the story of Theseus in direct address to Harold: 'How unfortunate were the following winds which filled your black sails on the way home!'¹¹⁸ Poitiers' allusion is not primarily to the black sail's intended use, but rather to the ignominy Theseus incurs by flying the black sail in violation of his promise to his father. For Poitiers, the hero's intention is irrelevant: what connects Theseus and Harold morally is the disastrous outcome of a broken promise. Theseus had his father's blood on his head, because Aegeus would not have killed himself had Theseus kept his promise. Statius' *Thebaid* – which Poitiers also knew¹¹⁹ – notes this moral implication explicitly, invoking the 'false sail' which precipitated Aegeus' death.¹²⁰ Theseus, like Harold, forgot his promise, neglected his duty, and sailed home imagining himself victorious – but under a black sail.

The choice of this moment and this analogy enables Poitiers to establish the contrast he creates later in his narrative. He portrays William using white sails, with which Theseus had promised to announce his victory, thereby drawing a tacit parallel to Theseus and showing William as the more worthy leader. After William conquers England, he prepares to return victorious to Normandy:

The ships were waiting, all ready for the crossing; it had seemed fit to equip them with white sails in the manner of the ancients, for they were to carry back a most glorious triumph and to announce the greatest joy that could have been desired.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ 'Infeliciter secundi flatus, qui nigerrimis velis tuis aspiraverunt redeuntibus.' *GG*, 76–9 (i.46). Meanings of 'nigerrimus' include black, dark and ill-fated, which resonate with the story Poitiers is telling.

¹¹⁹ See *GG*, 136–7 (ii.22); and the comments of Davis and Chibnall, *GG*, 189.

¹²⁰ 'unde vagi casurum in nomina ponti / Cresia deceptit falso ratis Aegea velo' [emphasis added], Statius, *Thebaid*, xii.625–6. This passage is not noted in the edition of *GG*.

¹²¹ 'Stabant naves ad transmittendum paratissimae, quas vere decuerat albis velis more veterum adornatas esse. Erant enim revecturae gloriosissimum triumphum, nunciaturae maxime optatum gaudium.' *GG*, 166–7 (ii.38). Davis and Chibnall, 166, n. 2, note that this and the reference in i.46 are likely to the Theseus legend.

For Poitiers, the white sail highlights William's foresight, respect and awareness of tradition, qualities which Theseus and Harold do not share: William succeeds where the others fail.

Poitiers was not the only medieval writer to find the Theseus story well-suited to illustrate the consequences of deception, whether by negligence or by design. In Thomas of Britain's *Tristan* of around 1170, a white sail is meant to indicate that Yseut has come to heal the hero's wounds, whereas a black sail would indicate her refusal to return. What transpires is that Tristan's jealous wife gives a vindictively false report that the ship carries black sails, causing Tristan to despair and die.¹²² This parallel example suggests that the association of black sails with deception and neglect of promises may have been more widespread in the medieval imagination – and not simply stylistically useful to Poitiers. The *Tristan* story further highlights the point that Poitiers's allusion is not to Theseus' intent, but rather to his actions and their effects – his failure to honour a promise and its tragic consequences. The allusion takes on contemporary moral relevance in Poitiers's assessment of Harold.

Theseus' negligence may not have prevented him from being a hero in a classical age, but negligence was a major flaw in an era of feudal obligations. Most significant for Poitiers' argument, negligence was not a valid excuse for a moral infraction.¹²³ Through the Theseus story, Poitiers found subtle rhetorical support for his condemnation of Harold and his approval of William's authority as a king.

Harold breaks his oath deliberately. Theseus breaks his oath unintentionally. Poitiers would have us believe that William would not break his oath.

Conclusion

¹²² Norris J. Lacy, ed., *Early French Tristan Poems*. 2 vols. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 2: ll. 2558–66, 3022–39.

¹²³ But cf. Peter Abelard, for whom intent was particularly important in evaluating morality: D.E. Luscombe, ed. and trans., *Peter Abelard's Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 12–13, 22–3. On the theme of accountability regardless of intent in the Middle Ages, see e.g. R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 32.

Because the Norman claim to the English throne was in contention, Norman advocates had to justify William's actions to posterity. Poitiers uses classical models of great leaders to give William a worthy lineage by example. Yet he also uses them to provide contrast to his rhetorical argument for William's ideal kingship – characterised by vigilance, fulfilment of his duties, and military prowess – and his promise for the future. Poitiers' narrative reveals both his knowledge of classical material regarding Caesar, Aeneas and Theseus and his re-interpretation of historic accounts of conquest and naval enterprise. Together, these enable him to evaluate the classical heroes in his contemporary worldview and to judge them accordingly. By Poitiers' verdict, William emerges as the ideal king who has earned the right to rule England without shame or dishonour.

Poitiers' *Gesta* is a crucial case study of both Norman Conquest narratives, and the nature and forms of medieval classicism. Poitiers was not alone as a classically minded commentator: the Bayeux Tapestry and the *Carmen de Hastingae proelio* wove classical allusion into the very substance of their Norman Conquest narratives.¹²⁴ Yet Poitiers differs from them substantially in using these allusions to sustain a moral argument for William's rule, which shows that Poitiers was in direct political dialogue with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the *Carmen* and detractors of the Conquest in greater Europe.¹²⁵ To invoke the classical past had implications beyond the purely literary or decorative. The ways in which Poitiers reviewed and revised it reveal that he found in it potent meanings and morals relevant to the political and intellectual milieu of his day.

Classicist and champion of Norman identity though he was, Poitiers did not take Trojan origins for granted, nor did he accept them without considering their consequences. He was worried about their implications, a mindset to which the presence, absence and

¹²⁴ See e.g. Heslop, 'Regarding the Spectators of the Bayeux Tapestry'; van Houts, 'Latin Poetry and the Anglo-Norman Court.'

¹²⁵ Cf. van Houts, 'Norman Conquest through European Eyes'; see above.

progression of his references to Troy in the *Gesta* attest. Despite the pan-European rhetorical competition for Trojan origins in medieval chronicles, Troy's defeat was an inconvenient truth in Poitiers' project of justifying and exalting its opposites: conquest and victory. What this suggests is that negative associations with Troy could be just as important to a medieval writer as was Troy's hold on the medieval imagination. Within a given medieval narrative, the relative value of different aspects of the classical past was subject to change based on the author's motivations. Susan Reynolds has suggested that medieval stories of common descent from Troy offer evidence for medieval writers' interest in the unity and solidarity of a people.¹²⁶ As Poitiers' classicism indicates, in an era of conquest – and of the joining of previously separate realms under one crown – both commentators and their audiences would have been keenly aware of factors that might stand in the way of unity.

In the *Gesta*, classical allusions have a specific and consequential function beyond that of decoration: Poitiers uses them to strengthen the narrative structure of contingency, and to convey the political import of language. For Poitiers, the course of his narrative was as important as – if not more important than – the fact of including references to classical authority. As a panegyrist, he makes 'outdoing' comparisons, but he also tightly constructs the flow of narrative time. His classical references, and the ways in which they repeat or change to present a coherent narrative, provide evidence for his awareness that what comes after depends upon what comes before. These allusions speak to the value which Poitiers and his intended audience would have placed on oaths. The *Gesta* reveals a preoccupation with the moral content of words, a content shown in a man's actions and their consequences for people, *patria* and the fate of the man himself who acts – or fails to act – as he should. In crafting his story thus, Poitiers sustains an intimate harmony between classical precedent and his arguments for William's legitimacy and Harold's perjury.

¹²⁶ See, e.g., Reynolds, 'Medieval *Origines gentium*', especially 381.

We should not forget the inspirational and aspirational qualities of classical learning beyond the realm of narrative. The compelling nature of classical stories meant they were at times seen as dangerous and distracting, or at least in need of justification, as the remarks of the well-read classical scholar William of Malmesbury suggest.¹²⁷ But these stories also had the potential to provide inspiration to rulers, writers, knights and clerics, whether in the form of making grander conquests, or seeking to capture in writing the moral spirit of a people and an age with the greatest possible precision and narrative depth.

The mounting evidence that Norman exploits worthy of classical heroes were happening in the present reinforced the belief not only that God was on the Normans' side, but also that to portray William as a classical hero for a Christian age was to render truth in writing. The fact and the scale of the Normans' military successes indicated to the Normans that they were justified in thinking of themselves as new, better and modern Caesars. Moreover, events seemed to confirm repeatedly that they, as Normans, were particularly entitled to do so. Within William's lifetime, the Normans had dramatically expanded their influence and hegemony within and beyond Europe. Poitiers certainly knew this, and associated Norman ventures with those of Rome. Poitiers claims that Rome would have rejoiced to have produced William. Immediately thereafter, he lists the imperial exploits of William's Norman knights in Apulia, Sicily, Constantinople and Babylon, and implies that the word *imperator* should be applied to William.¹²⁸

William and his retinue also knew of the Normans' comprehensive successes, and could well have thought of themselves in relation to classical heroes, adventures and conquests long before Poitiers set out William's deeds in writing. Men in William's court – Odo and Poitiers among them – were familiar with the classics and would have shared an

¹²⁷ In his *Polyhistor*, William of Malmesbury defended himself to his contemporaries for his interest in the classics: see Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 28–9, 52; on this recurring theme in the Middle Ages, see Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages*, 8–10, 18–20.

¹²⁸ *GG*, 156–7 (ii.32); see also Bates, *Normans and Empire*, 64–92.

ability to recognise or to draw parallels with their present era. Memorising texts and stories was a critical element of this education. Poitiers placed rhetorical emphasis on the spoken word: it is equally plausible that his emphasis is historical as well, if the Normans self-consciously performed in the manner of the ancients. Poitiers' *Gesta* probably represents with some truth the way in which William and his companions imagined themselves and their role in the making of history. As Campbell observed, Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* may reflect a sincere representation Charlemagne's own conscious classicism in content, as much as it reflects as much as Einhard's decision to frame his narrative with classical rhetoric in structure.¹²⁹ We cannot prove that William thought of Caesar's victory banner and proclaimed the famed words on the battlefield to his comrades. Yet it is the sort of thing he might well have done – and for which he, like Poitiers, would surely have had a receptive and comprehending audience.

The case of the *Gesta Guillelmi* confirms that the proliferation of the classics in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was more than rebirth or renaissance: it is evidence of a sustained evolution of literary techniques and moral values. Poitiers' Norman Conquest was a venture not only across the Channel, but also into the classical past. Poitiers forged an alliance between classical allusion and moralising history aimed at a wide audience. The case of his far-ranging yet targeted narrative is a testament to the need to maintain a heightened awareness in reading and interpreting classical allusions in the long twelfth century. We are finding, more and more, that calculated classicism in the Middle Ages provided not a flourish, but rather a foundation for moralising the past.

As for the *Gesta Guillelmi*, the only superficiality it possesses is that which later historians have imposed upon the text. The classical brilliance of the *Gesta* does not obscure

¹²⁹ James Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', in idem, *The Anglo-Saxon State* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 129–55 (149).

the stuff of the past, but rather illuminates the full range of morals, aims, lies, disputes and hopes keenly felt in the years following 1066 – and historians, as well as literary scholars, would do well to take note. Poitiers' Norman Conquest of the classical past succeeds in representing a past, a present and a reality which he and his contemporaries imagined to be true, and an Anglo-Norman future which they hoped would prove true.

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