

The Chivalric Biography of Boucicaut, Jean II Le Meingre.
Translated with notes and introduction by Craig Taylor and
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The chivalric biography of Jean II Le Meingre, better known as Boucicaut (1366–1421), completed in 1409–1410 survives in a single manuscript, Paris, BnF fr.11432. In this work, the anonymous author describes his subject as a flower of chivalry and the embodiment of true knighthood, and with good cause. Boucicaut fought in Valois service against Flemish and Navarese rebels and against the English in the Hundred Years War. When only twenty-six years of age Charles VI (1380–1422) appointed Boucicaut marshal of France. A devotee of the later crusades, Jean Le Meingre battled the pagan Lithuanians as well as Muslim forces and he was one of the commanders in the (albeit disastrous) Nicopolis campaign of 1396. Boucicaut's chivalric credentials were also established in various jousts and tournaments including the famous encounter at Saint-Inglevert in 1385 (a subject much discussed in Jean Froissart's »Chroniques«). A courteous knight, he established his own military fraternity, the Ordre de la Dame Blanche en l'Escu vert, whose members were dedicated to fight in the lists to protect the honour and property of women widowed or orphaned by the plague or as a result of the Nicopolis expedition.

Unlike most chivalric biographers such as Chandos Herald and Jean Cuvelier (authors, respectively of »La Vie du Prince Noir«, c. 1385 and »La Vie Vaillante de Bertrand du Guesclin«, c. 1387) the Boucicaut author wrote in prose and composed his work during his subject's lifetime. He claimed the marshal's comrades had commissioned him to write the biography. Also unusually, the final section of the biography turns away from a narrative of the subject's life in favour of a discussion of the moral lessons which can be drawn from his career and those qualities he espoused that a knight should seek to emulate

Boucicaut's life, however, was not without its controversies and it may be that the biography was designed, at least in part, to serve as a response to his critics in France and elsewhere. For example, the marshal was accused of avarice and of manipulating Charles VI for his own gain – financial and political. Several remarks in the biography that deal with the subject of Fortune and those others that emphasise the marshal's generosity may be read as counter-arguments to these allegations. More particularly, the middle sections of the work (Parts 2–3) deal chiefly with the marshal's career in Italy (1401–1409) and his actions as governor of Genoa in which capacity he played a role in the controversies of the Great Schism that divided the papacy. Boucicaut was not a popular ruler in Genoa and his policies also strained relations with a number of other city states. Given that the biography was written around the time this appointment concluded, but long before his career ended, the work may have sought to salvage a reputation that had become somewhat tarnished.



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Like many of his contemporaries, the Boucicaut author claimed that his intention was to inculcate noble qualities in his readers as well as commemorate »the deeds of the valiant« (p. 23) and, as this suggests, much of the biography offers a conventional image of later medieval chivalry. Boucicaut's childhood, for example, appears to have been »conventionally precocious« by the usual standards of chivalric biographies. He led his friends in warlike games and soon »pester[ed] everyone to be allowed to leave [the court] and bear arms« (p. 29). He swiftly began to excel in deeds of chivalry and trained hard to perfect his military skills. »[N]o hardship was too great«, we are told; »privations that would have seemed intolerable to others gave him great pleasure« (p. 30–31). Such comments are reminiscent of Geoffroi de Charny's remarks in his »Livre de chevalerie« (c. 1350) concerning the terrible physical burdens knightly endeavour imposed on its practitioners. Boucicaut was also motivated to deeds of arms by love and the wish to earn the admiration of ladies – another conventional trope in many chivalric compositions.

The work, however, is less conventional in its final section. By concluding with a discussion of those qualities the author considered most worthy of praise he combined elements of the chivalric biography with those instructional guides and commentaries for the secular elite which were very popular at this time. This, then, is a work which should be read alongside those such as Honoré Bouvet's »Arbre des batailles«, c. 1382–1387, and Christine de Pizan's »Livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie«, c. 1410, as well as those others mentioned above. It is noteworthy that this final part does not strongly emphasise deeds of arms or prowess (Richard Kaeuper described prowess as the »demigod« of chivalry) but virtues such as piety, charity, restraint, generosity, chastity, justice and eloquence. As a result the biography provides a subtly different approach to the chivalric ethic during a key period in its evolution: in France especially, chivalry and the chivalrous became subject to new and considerable pressures at this time on account of the travails of the Hundred Years War and the increasing intensity of the Armagnac-Burgundian feud.

The English translation offered here is based on the edition Denis Lalonde produced in 1985: »Le Livre des fais du bon messire Jehan Le Maingre, dit Bouciquaut, Mareschal de France et gouverneur de Jennes« (Geneva 1985). Originally composed in the standard prose characteristic of the later medieval French court, the language adopted in the biography is complex and somewhat »baroque« and the translation, for the most part, replicates this style, but it is clear, lively and deeply engaging, nonetheless. The reader is also provided with a great deal of supplementary information concerning the subject, author and the political context in which the work was composed through the Introduction (p. 1–19), in extensive footnotes, which also offer alternative readings and translations, and in a brief but useful glossary that is particularly helpful for naval terminology. This, then, is an important addition to the growing range of later medieval chivalric texts available to Anglophone students and scholars and which, because of its extensive supplementary material, will also provide an ideal teaching resource.



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