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Mousket on Courtmantle

Conventional wisdom has it that Henry II's nickname Courtmantle originated as a fashion accessory which the king had personally imported into Britain from his native Anjou. One of the closest contemporary authorities for this etymological hypothesis is one of king Henry's own courtiers, Gerald de Barri (Giraldus Cambrensis) who, towards 1215, offered the following explanation: ¹

Puer quidam accurrens pallio suo modico, ac tenui de filo contexto, quali solent aestivo tempore juvenes uti, vix genua velante, corporis quoad potuit nuda contextit. Tunc completum fuit agnomen ejusdem, sicut de agnominibus saepe videri solet, quod ei nondum regi, sed duci tantum, juvenilibus annis datum fuerat. Quoniam enimvero curta primum pallia de Andegavia in Angliam, (quae longis et demissis ad terram palliis ab avi sui Henrici primi tempore uti consueverat,) iste portavit, Henricus ob hoc Cum curto mantello vulgo vocatus erat.

Any boy running around would cover up his bare body, as best he knew how, with a small thin woven cloak of thread, the sort of garment that all young men are in the habit of wearing in summer. It barely covers the knees. This is how Henry came about his nickname, because, as often happens with such names, it goes all the way back to his youth. He was first given it at a time when he was merely a duke and had not yet become king. He actually brought this short cloak over from Anjou to England, and he wore it here at a time when the local custom, ever since his grandfather Henry I's day, had been to wear long cloaks that trailed right down to the ground. This explains why, from this time on, Henry was popularly known as Courtmantle.

Certain commentators interpret the epithet as a metonymy for an essentially practical and unpretentious monarch who spent much of his time on horseback, either fighting or hunting, and who dressed accordingly. As Lewis Warren puts it, Henry was "impatient of pomp, careless of his appearance, and disdain[ing] the trappings of monarchy."² Peter of Blois, another of the king's courtiers who knew Henry first-hand, describes him as restless in the extreme, rarely sitting still, neglectful of his appearance, often with dirty hands and clothes.³ Hardly a fashion icon, then.

Unlike Henry I's sobriquet Beauclerc, a retrospective (and almost certainly fallacious) invention of later centuries, Henry II's was widely used by his contemporaries, including such authoritative Latin historiographers as Ralph of Diceto, Roger of Howden and Gervase of Canterbury. An amusing alternative explanation of the genesis of Henry's nickname, less insular and decidedly more circumstantial, is offered by the Francophone vernacular historian Philippe Mousket, whose *Chronique rimée* was written around 1250 at Tournai in present-day Belgium.⁴

Its exhausting narrative, of over 30,000 verses, is verbose and rambling, and, characteristically of its time, more or less valueless as history. Being the work of a secular poet, however, it is rich in anecdotes and 'tales of yore', not unlike its contemporary *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims*. Its principal interest lies in the gentle sense of humour that pervades its narrative. This bears a striking resemblance to a passage in Geoffrey Gaimar's 12th-century Anglo-Norman *Estoire des Engleis* — the description of an incident at the court of William II Rufus, set somewhere in the 1090s. In it we are shown Rufus, universally regarded as an irreligious thug by contemporary (and indeed modern) historians, in a quite unexpected light. We witness him in good humour and using considerable savoir-faire to turn a dubbing ceremony, over which he is presiding, into a humorous piece of court entertainment.⁵

Maint gentil hom i adubat:
od sul Giffard le Peitevin,
ki de Barbastre ert, son cosin,
adubat il trente vallez.
Trenché avei[en]t lur tupez,
trestuz ourent les tops trenchez
car lur seignur fu corucez

pur sul un mais k'il demorat
 ke li reis armes ne lur donat;
 lui e sa gent fist estuper,
 les tups trenchez a curt aler;
 ço furent les primers vallez
 ki firent trencher lur tupez.
 Li reis s'en rist si s'en gabat:
 a curteisie le lur turnat,
 e quant li reis en bien le tint,
 de ses vallez desi k'a vint
 se tuperent tut ensement.
 Ore fu en curt l'estaucement:
 plus de treis cent s'en estaucerent,
 unc puis en curt cel ne leisserent.

Many a noble he dubbed knight on this occasion. Together with Walter Giffard the Poitevin, of Barbastro fame and a kinsman of his, he knighted no less than thirty young squires. They had all had the hair on the top of their heads cropped, and each of them was cropped on top, their lord having lost patience with the king for keeping them waiting all of a month before knighting them. Giffard had his own hair cropped as well as that of his men, and he had them present themselves at court with their hair cropped on top. These were the first squires ever to have their tops cropped. The king laughed and made a great joke of it. He not only took it extremely well, but even made them a splendidly courteous gesture: as many as twenty of the king's own squires top-cropped their hair in exactly the same way. Whereupon head-shearing swept through the entire court: more than three hundred men had their heads shorn, and continued to wear their hair short at court ever afterwards.

In Philippe Mousket's variation on this theme, we find, in addition to a humorous, lively and well constructed narrative, a subtext that plays, sympathetically and with a light touch, on Anglo-French (Insular-Continental) interrelationships. Absent from it, in particular, is the sort of parodic mockery that characterises, for example, Philippe de Remy's *Jehan et Blonde* from around the same time.⁶ Far from denigrating, as one might have expected from a 13th-century Continental poem, the English as a whole (they are, at most, gently mocked in a couple of lines), the text gives an altogether flattering portrait of their king. Henry II, whom history (or at least the unreliable Gerald de Barri) records as a relentlessly belligerent man of violence and anger,⁷ emerges, in the final analysis, as the jovial, fun-loving instigator of his own linguistic legacy.⁸

Li rois Henris au Cort Mantel,
 Ses peres, ferma maint chastel
 Pour lui et pour sa grant proëce
 Et pour sa tres grande largece.
 Or vous dirai par quel raisson 18880
 Il eut au Cort Mantel a non.
 Cil rois Henris estoit a Londres
 Pour ses anemis a confondre,
 Dont moult avoit par Engleterre,
 Ki li grevoient de sa terre. 18885
 De sa guerre a chief bien venoit
 Et a Londres si soujournoit.
 Comme sages et bien apris,
 Trestous les chevaliers de pris

Eut mandés par deça la mer, K'il pooit avoir, pour douner. Hues i fu de Hamlaincourt, Qui moult estoit bien de sa court, Et d'autres assés i avoit, Dont cascuns de grant pris estoit.	18890 18895
Uns chevaliers de grant renon, Je ne sai comment il ot non, Iert a ostel chés l'Englois, Qui savoit assés de genglois. Chevaliers iert et la manoit, Et li rois Henris sejournoit A Waimostier, et pour joïr, Estoit venus la messe oïr A Londres al moustier Saint Pol, Com cil ki n'ama onques fol.	18900 18905
Et sicom la messe ot oïe, A poi de gent de sa mesnie, Vestus d'uns dras bendés d'orfrois, Amenés fu ses palefrois. Montés est, si s'en vait moult tos A Waimostier, prés les galos, Et li bachelers l'oï dire Que li rois en aloit, ses sire, Et il voloit a lui parler. Si se vot après lui haster.	18910 18915
De grant haste plains et sopris, Le palefroi son oste a pris, Ki venus iert ja del mostier Et dit li ot, car grant mestier Avoit cil de parler au roi. Et il est montés a desroi Com cil ki sot moult de barate. Et prist un mantel d'escarlate Tot neuf et lonc a lor costume, C'onques n'i ot adesé plume.	18920 18925
S'uns grans om a pié l'afublast, Jusques al talon li hierçast. Teus dras si lons ot en la terre Tout par coustume d'Engleterre. Ausi com li poissons ki noe, Li bachelers parmi la boe S'en vait a esporon broçant, Et li mantels li vait hierçant Jusques au piet del palefroi, Ki petis iert li cor andoi.	18930 18935
Este vous l'englois chevalier Aprés sour un ronci troter ! Et quant en la boe hiercier voit Le neuf mantel ki siens estoit, Si li a dit : «Ostés, biaux ostes,	18940

Cis mantels n'est mie encor vostres,
 Bailliés le ça, vous le crotés,
 Ce m'est vis que vous redoutés
 Qui mon mantiel si cunchirés.»
 Par trois fois fu ensi huchiés 18945
 Li chevaliers, s'en ot grant honte
 Et il n'en a fait autre conte.
 Le mantel de son col desserre,
 Si le lait chëoir a la terre
 En la boe, auques par sa feste; 18950
 Et li Englois desus s'areste.
 Mais il s'en alerent parmi,
 Ki ne furent pas si ami,
 Quar li mantels fu depeciés
 Et deschirés et cunsirés. 18955
 La vespre le sot li rois
 Qu'atirés fu teus cil conrois;
 Grant feste et grant risee en fist.
 Son camberlenc manda, et dist
 Que il li fesist taillier bues, 18960
 Dras d'escarlante, corbs et nuefs,
 Jusques al genoul, a son oes,
 Et d'autres pour doner alués
 Soisante paire; et cil i court.
 Al tierç jor furent en la court 18965
 Cil drap vestut et departi,
 Sicom li rois l'ot äati.
 S'ot en la sale grant triboul,
 Pour çou que jusques al genoul
 Lor ataignoit mantels et cote. 18970
 Et li Englois, comme gent sote,
 S'esmervelloient de ces dras,
 Mais François en fisent lor gas,
 Et Poitevin et li Normant,
 Hainnuier et cil de Braibant, 18975
 Et d'autres terres li plusours
 Qui soujornoient a cel jour
 Avoec le roi et sa mesnie,
 Et li rois et sa barounie,
 Pour le mantel ki fu volés, 18980
 En la grant boe et defoulés,
 Dont li Englois fu tant irais ,
 Et pour les cours dras k'il ot fais,
 Et par sa feste et par revel,
 Li rois Henris au Cort Mantel 18985
 Ot il a non puis en sa vie,
 Que d'autres dras n'ot il envie.

Henry II Courtmantle, father of the Young King, had a large number of castles built to the benefit of his son in recognition of his military prowess and his outstanding

generosity. At this point in my poem, I shall tell you the reason why this Henry came to have the name Courtmantle. King Henry was in London from where he was seeking to defeat those of his barons who had rebelled against him. There was a large number of them throughout the whole of England, and they were inflicting considerable damage on the royal estates. Henry's war, however, was proving to be very successful, and this was why he chose to stay in London. (18887)

As an experienced and enlightened monarch, he had summoned, from over the Channel, all those of his most renowned knights who were available in order for them to witness his distribution of gifts and payment of his men's wages. Among those rewarded was Hugh de Hamelin-court, a highly regarded member of the royal court.⁹ Present also was a large number of other barons, each of whom was distinguished in his own right. (18895)

One particular knight of some repute, but whose name I do not recall, took lodgings with an Englishman, also a knight, who enjoyed a wide reputation as a loudmouth and gossip. It was here, in this windbag's house, that our French knight was lodging. As for king Henry, he was staying at Westminster where he was relaxing at leisure. Being nonetheless a serious sort of person, he went to St Paul's church to attend mass. (18906)

When the service was over, Henry, accompanied by a small retinue from his own household, made his public appearance, dressed in a surcoat decorated with gold-embroidered trimmings. His saddle-horse was brought out, and Henry mounted and rode back to Westminster more or less at a gallop. Our French knight, on hearing that his lord the king was leaving St Paul's, and being most anxious to speak with him, wanted to rush after him. Caught unawares, he was in such a desperate hurry that he jumped on the horse belonging to the knight he was staying with. The Englishman had already left the church, and had informed the French knight accordingly. Our knight needed so urgently to talk with the king that he simply leaped on the horse without a second thought, and with no idea of the trouble he was landing himself in. (18922)

He also made off with someone's bright new cloak of fine undecorated wool, a long mantle, as was the custom at the time. It was the sort that, if a tall man were to put it on and stand still, it would reach right down to his feet. Cloaks of this length were very common throughout the whole of England. Like a fish taking to water, our knight set off, spurring on his horse through all the mud, with the cloak hanging right down to the horse's hooves and dragging along the ground. Both the horse and its rider were somewhat on the short side. What a sight it was to see the English knight go chasing after him on his shabby packhorse ! (18937)

When he saw his own brand-new cloak being dragged through the mud, he shouted: "Oh no! Stop, my dear guest! This cloak isn't even yours, and you are already ruining it. Hand it over! I think you should be ashamed of yourself, covering it in shit this way." This he shouted out three times, much to the shame of the French knight, who nonetheless kept silent. He unfastened the cloak at the neck and, somewhat ceremoniously, let it fall into the mud on the ground. The English knight stepped forward and looked down at the cloak. Seeing it trampled underfoot, ripped to pieces and torn to shreds, he simply walked off. Each went their separate ways, their friendship now in tatters. (18953)

When it came to the ears of king Henry that evening that the cloak had ended up being completely mangled, he found it extremely amusing and had a good laugh. He called for his chamberlain and gave orders for a cloak clasp to be prepared and a fine woollen mantle tailored, a brand-new and shapely one, cut to knee length, for his personal use. He ordered sixty other similar ones to be made and liberally distributed. The chamberlain immediately set to work, and within three days these cloaks were ready to try on and, in accordance with the king's instructions, to be shared out among the members of the royal court . (18967)

This caused huge consternation at court because both mantle and surcoat came down only as far as the knee. The English, in their typically foolish way, were delighted at this and full of admiration, whereas it was regarded as something altogether ludicrous not only by the French, but also the Normans, the Poitevins, the Hainauters and Brabanters, and all those who were guests in the king's household at the time. (18978)

It was, then, on account of a mantle that had been first stolen and then trampled underfoot in all that mud that the new fashion was greeted with such enthusiasm by the English. It was thanks to the short mantles which the king had had made as an item of after-dinner entertainment that he was known as Henry Courtmantle for the rest of his living days. He was unwilling ever again to wear any other sort of cloak. (18987)

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via <http://www.anglo-norman-texts.net>

ENDNOTES

¹ *Giraldus Cambrensis: De instructione principum*, ed. J.S. Brewer (London, 1846), III: 157 (my translation; cf. Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales: De principis instructione ...* (OUP, 2018), p. 157.)

² W.L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley CA, 1973), p. 78-79.

³ *Petri Blesensis, Opera Omnia*, ed. J.A. Giles (London, 1847), I: 192-97 (letter 66); cf. I: 48-51 (letter 14).

⁴ Frédéric de Reiffenburg, ed., *Chronique rimée de Philippe Mouskés* (Bruxelles, 1836-38), II: 251-55 (v. 18880-18987) ; cf. *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises ...*, ed. Geneviève Hasenohr and Michel Zink (Paris, 1992), p. 1146-47. The narrative covers 12th-century Anglo-Norman history on p. 192-286. See Arlima for more bibliography, to which add Victoria Flood, 'Relatum ueridica: wonderful history from Gervase of Tilbury to Philippe Mousket' in her *Fantastic Histories ...* (Manchester University Press, 2026), p. 96-144.

⁵ *Geffrei Gaimar: Estoire des Engleis ...* ed. Ian Short (OUP, 2009), v. 6082-6102, p. 329-31.

⁶ *Jehan et Blonde ...*, ed. Sylvie Lecuyer (Paris, 1984). Cf. Peter Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French literature ...*(Cambridge, 1956), p.170-89.

⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales 1146-1223* (Oxford, 1982), p. 58-93; Warren, *Henry II*, p. 207-11; *Henry II: New Interpretations*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 311-19. See also John Gillingham, *Richard Coeur de Lion ...* (London, 1994), p. 105-18. Wace adds his pennyworth by accusing Henry of not keeping his word (*Rou*, v. 11425-26).

⁸ I reproduce the Medieval French text from de Reiffenberg's edition, though in the interests of accessibility, I have standardised certain of the text's dialectal graphies. My accompanying translation deliberately avoids the literal in an effort to reflect some of the poetic qualities of the original.

⁹ Hugh d'Aubigny, 5th earl of Arundel, Pincera Regis (d. 1243).