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Robert Morrissey. *Charlemagne and France: A Thousand Years of Mythology.* Trans. Catherine Tihanyi. The Laura Shannon Series in French Medieval Studies. Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. xxii + 391 pp., 24 plates (in theory), notes, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-268-02277-1.

Translation of *L'Empereur à la barbe fleurie: Charlemagne dans la mythologie et l'histoire de France.* Bibliothèque des histoires. Paris: N.R.F./Gallimard, 1997. 437 pp., 24 plates, index. € 29.73 (pb). ISBN 2-07-073127-8.

Review by Jotham Parsons, Duquesne University.

This very ambitious study, first published in French in 1997 and now translated into English, traces Charlemagne's place in the French imagination from his death to the end of the nineteenth century. Combining the perspectives of literary history, art history, the history of political ideology, and the history of historical scholarship in the now well-established genre of *lieux de mémoire*, Morrissey has traced the surprisingly complex and ambiguous career of one of Europe's great heroes.[1] While it has useful things to say about the entire millennium it covers, this book will probably be of greatest interest to students of the "long eighteenth century." In that period, Charlemagne was an important figure of controversy, and through him Morrissey uncovers some important currents in the contested ideological terrain between monarchism and republicanism.

Morrissey divides his account roughly into four periods, with a post-Napoleonic epilogue. The first covers the generation or so after Charlemagne's death, when Einhard, Notker, and a few others crystallized the "historical" Charlemagne as he continues to be known to this day. The second, covering the rest of the Middle Ages and the Italian Wars of the sixteenth century, is the epoch of the *chanson de geste* and its descendants, from the *Chanson de Roland* to *Orlando furioso*. The third, the Renaissance, saw a revival and reexamination of the historical Charlemagne, based not only on surviving narratives but also on the capitularies and other direct documentation of his reign. Finally, beginning in the seventeenth century, the history and myth of Charlemagne served alternately and conjointly as a means of articulating the French people, increasingly conceived as a nation with a general will, and their monarch, who might be either the enemy or the creator of that general will.

According to Morrissey, Napoleon in some sense appropriated the figure of Charlemagne that this discourse had created and became for a moment a reincarnation of the first emperor, founding a new French nation with a monarchical structure and a vocation for military expansion. However, the growing national antagonism between Charlemagne's dual homelands of France and Germany after 1800, and the long-term decline of the monarchic ideal in France after 1815, gradually drained Charlemagne of his political relevance, returning him again to the historians and the romancers. Ever since de Gaulle and Adenauer ended the Franco-German rivalry and began the geographic and political reconstruction of Charlemagne's empire, the Old Europe has invoked his name only fitfully. Perhaps, as

Morrissey suggests, this shows that Europeans have finally outgrown the impulse to identify with even the most sublime of barbarian warlords.

From the beginning, according to Morrissey, the dialectic of the individual and the collectivity governed Charlemagne's story. Were his decisions and achievements those of the emperor, or of the Franks? Which is the better symbol of his reign: the palace at Aachen, created according to his designs and where, according to Notker, he literally oversaw the entire elite of his realm, or the assembly of the *champ de mars*, where the Frankish nation in arms deliberated with, it seems, minimal supervision? Morrissey traces this tension through the entire Middle Ages and Renaissance. In the *chansons de geste*, not surprisingly, an aristocratic ethos prevailed, and Charlemagne's kingship, though indispensable, was continually tempered and restricted by feudal consultation and, at times, revolt. As the French monarchy gained in power, its propagandists (particularly in the tradition of the Chronicle of St. Denis) put forward a picture of Charlemagne as a much more absolute ruler, almost single-handedly forging an empire and repressing evil.

Charlemagne even played a significant role in the aspirations to universal monarchy that arose in France in the period of the Italian wars. As it turned out, though, France lacked both the cultural and military resources to sustain these aspirations for long, and from the mid-sixteenth century on Charlemagne took on a decidedly subordinate place in official royal ideology. At least in part, this was a reaction to the rise of a new school of historical study, centered in the legal profession and deeply hostile to any extension of the kings' personal authority. Charlemagne's vital, if negative place in their project is seen most famously in François Hotman's glorification of the assembly of the *champ de mars* in the *Francogallia*, and perhaps most influentially in Étienne Pasquier's denigration of the Carolingians *en bloc* in his *Recherches de la France*. For Pasquier, Charlemagne was hardly an originator at all: neither the University of Paris, nor the institution of the Twelve Peers, nor even the bad idea of an excessively cozy relationship with the papacy were his creations. From this point on, if nothing else, the historical and the legendary Charlemagne became distinct cultural entities.

During the first half of the seventeenth century, however, Charlemagne fell into relative obscurity. Pasquier's erudite institutionalism had lost its vigor, and the absolutizing monarchy promoted by Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV showed much more support for its universal pretensions in classical antiquity than in the early Middle Ages. Only when the Sun King's culture machine had run out of other material did it turn to the great emperor, who wound up the victim of two epic poems even more inept and self-important than Chapelain's infamous *La Pucelle*. [2] Only the development of an opposition ideology towards the end of Louis XIV's reign saved Charlemagne from this predicament. As Morrissey shows, he played a vital role in the *thèse nobiliaire*, according to which France should have inherited from the Franks a mixed constitution with a predominant aristocratic element. Charlemagne's reign could quite plausibly be read as an exemplar of this constitution, and one as fertile in *gloire* as anything Louis XIV had produced.

Morrissey's most important finding, though, is that even after the noble party lost its power struggle during the Regency, its vision of Charlemagne continued to develop and remained influential. The institutional home of Carolingian studies for most of the eighteenth century was the *Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, a body whose political importance is only now being recognized by scholars.[3] Besides taking up rigorous medieval studies where Pasquier and Mabillon had left them off, the academicians and their associates made Charlemagne the creator and incarnation of French national identity, seeking to popularize both the history and the legend of the Carolingian age. Increasingly, as Rousseau's theories gained ground, Charlemagne was also presented as the creator of the French general will, which was then ventriloquized by the assemblies of the *champ de mars*. This idea appealed to absolutist modernizers like the Physiocrats, but above all it appealed to those in search of an alternative to the chaotic and destructive expressions of competing general wills that rocked France after 1789.

In this sense, as in others, Charlemagne was the original model for Napoleon, just as Bonapartism inherited the French tradition of enlightened absolutism. Ironically, however, Napoleon's very success allowed him to replace his illustrious predecessor in the French political imagination. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Charlemagne continued to play a role in Romantic accounts of French national identity, but less and less so as republicanism consolidated power. Already before the Great War, Charlemagne had suffered the worst fate available to historical figures: he had fallen into the domain of the professional historian. Morrissey holds out little hope that he will escape from this limbo in the foreseeable future.

This book's two greatest strengths both relate directly to its very broad scope. First, in its temporal dimension, it shows how much continuity there was in French political language from the Middle Ages into the nineteenth century. Morrissey argues implicitly but strongly that none of the great ruptures of French political history from Phillip Augustus to Napoleon were as total as has often been believed. At the same time, this book will be an indispensable reference for scholars attempting to understand any literary or historical reference to Charlemagne in any source from that long period. In its wide range of sources, it demonstrates even more conclusively how intimately literature, scholarship and politics have always been related in France. It is no accident that this translation is blurbed by Marc Fumaroli, the most prominent scholar and pundit of that relationship.

At the same time, this very scope creates problems. To begin with, it is often difficult to discern Morrissey's narrative thread, and his argument gets swamped in a thousand years of necessarily less than homogeneous history. On the other hand, in such a project every scholar will feel that one subject or another should have been treated in greater depth. For my taste, Morrissey's discussion of Renaissance historicism is somewhat underweight, though he is absolutely correct in his contention that the subordination of the individual to institutions was the central project of this school. His discussions of art and iconography are rather episodic and disconnected, though again he achieves some significant insights. His political reading of the so-called "Retable du Parlement," for example, is precisely confirmed by an unedited oration of Achille du Harlay obviously not known to him.^[4] On the other hand, I suspect that it is not merely a specialist's quibble which makes me think Morrissey should have placed greater stress on Charlemagne's relation to the church.

From Clovis on down, the French monarchy was very deliberately defined in large part by its role as a defender and exemplar of Roman Catholicism in variable degrees of cooperation and tension with the papacy. Charlemagne marked a vitally important stage in this development, as a military champion of popes and of Christendom, restorer of churches, liturgy and sacred learning, ecclesiastical legislator and, of course, Roman emperor. He lent his own distinct element to the sacrality of the French monarchy, as an (admittedly marginal) saint and, according to the *chansons de geste*, a Biblical patriarch in his age who presumably enjoyed direct contact with the divine.^[5] He was thus inevitably invoked in every crisis in church-state relations at least from the Concordat of Bologna to the Napoleonic Concordat. In effect, he was a figure not just for the conflicting demands of the leader and the collectivity in France, but also for the equally conflicting pretensions of the nation and the Church as to how that collectivity should be defined.

Catherine Tihanyi's translation is perfectly serviceable, but, whether because of haste or carelessness, it sometimes becomes a bit stilted and is occasionally subject to more serious lapses. Thus, Étienne Pasquier attributed the legend of the Twelve Peers to "our romances"—"nos Romans" (French ed., p. 184)—not "our Romans" (p. 128). More importantly, as "directeur de la librairie" (French ed., p. 305), Malesherbes was head of the royal censorship apparatus, not "director of the library" (p. 217). While Notre Dame has produced a very handsome volume, with a dust jacket that is a work of art in itself, two elements of its production impair its usefulness. First, the footnotes of the French text have become endnotes, an inconvenience to which American scholars are unhappily becoming accustomed. Much more gravely, at least in the copy I have examined, half of the plates are missing; it appears that the

sheet containing them was only printed on one side, so that every other opening is blank. Those who have access to the French edition will therefore find it preferable to the translation.

NOTES

[1] There is an obvious debt, acknowledged by the author, to Pierre Nora's editorial project, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

[2] Louis le Laboureur, *Charlemagne: Poème heroïque* (Paris: L. Billaine, 1664) and Nicolas Courtin, *Charlemagne, ou le Rétablissement de l'Empire romain, poème héroïque* (Paris: T. Jolly, 1666). The study of seventeenth-century French epic clearly requires more intestinal fortitude than almost any other branch of literary history.

[3] In particular, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Pocock, like Morrissey, shows that members of the *Académie des inscriptions* were pioneers not only in medieval history but in using that history to shape contemporary political ideology.

[4] The oration, a *mercuriale* delivered on 23 November 1584, is preserved in Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. français 4397, fols. 19-21. I discuss it in a forthcoming monograph on sixteenth-century Gallicanism. The "Retable du Parlement," a large painting that dominated the main council chamber of the Parlement of Paris and features St. Louis and St. Charlemagne on its two edges, is now in the first room of French paintings at the Louvre.

[5] Remember that the *Chanson de Roland* closes with God sending an angel to console and instruct the overwhelmed Charlemagne. The standard work on the sacred aspect of the French monarchy is, of course, Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges: Etude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale, particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Strasbourg: Librairie Istra, 1924); no mention of this book appears in Morrissey's index.

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