

Theories of Kingship in the Song of Lewes

Avery Lambert, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Barnard College

Mentored by Professor Neslihan Senocak, Department of History, Columbia University

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Introduction and Background

- ◆ The Second Barons' War began in 1263, as disaffected magnates, led by Simon Montfort, rebelled against Henry III for his poor handling of finances, his favoritism toward foreign courtiers, and his refusal to follow native counsel.
- ◆ In May 1264, at the Battle of Lewes, Montfort and his allies defeated royalist forces and took Henry prisoner.
- ◆ The Song of Lewes, composed by an unknown pro-baronial author, gives a firsthand account of this victory and offers a justification for the rebellion.

Scholarship of the Second Barons' War generally focuses on English political history to the exclusion of the medieval European political, theological, and philosophical context.

The Song provides grounds for a study of constitutionalist motives of well-educated baronial supporters, but it has been little studied alongside well-documented political tracts of medieval England and Europe, with which it shares many similarities.

Objectives and Questions

- ◆ How does the Song of Lewes define a good king?
- ◆ How does it use this definition to justify rebellion?
- ◆ How do the ideas expressed in the Song compare to other medieval political texts?
- ◆ How does the author of the Song of Lewes engage with contemporary theological and philosophical debates on the nature of kingship?

By asking these questions, I hoped to better place the Song in its larger medieval political context and examine how existing ideas on politics and government may have influenced the Second Barons' War.

Methods and Sources

I chose to investigate the Song of Lewes' influences and origins through a close reading and comparison with relevant historical texts.

- ◆ *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury
 - ◆ Written around 1159
 - ◆ John of Salisbury was an English theologian and, later, cleric
 - ◆ Follows model of a classical political treatise aimed at kings
- ◆ *On the Laws and Customs of England*, Henry Bracton
 - ◆ Likely collected in 1220s and 1230s
 - ◆ Attributed to Henry Bracton, a justice under Henry III
 - ◆ Primarily surveys application of common law in king's courts
- ◆ Magna Carta
 - ◆ Adopted 1215 by king and his barons
 - ◆ Charter aimed at restraining John, Henry's predecessor
- ◆ Letters of Adam Marsh
 - ◆ Written between 1241 and 1259
 - ◆ Marsh was a direct confidant of and adviser to Simon Montfort prior to the Second Barons' War
- ◆ *On Kingship*, Thomas Aquinas
 - ◆ Composed between 1260-1265
 - ◆ Political treatise written to king of Cyprus

Selected References

- Aquinas, Thomas. *On Kingship*. Translated and edited by Gerald Phelan. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949.
- Bracton, Henry. *On the Laws and Customs of England*. Edited by the Ames Foundation. Harvard Law School, 2019.
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- John of Salisbury. *Policraticus: of the frivolities of courtiers and the footprints of philosophers*. Translated and edited by Cary J. Nederman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Magna Carta. Translated by G.R.C. Davis. London: British Museum, 1963.
- Marsh, Adam. *The Letters of Adam Marsh*. Vol. 2, translated and edited by C. Hugh Lawrence. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- The Song of Lewes*. Translated and edited by Charles Kingsford. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.

Discussion

What Makes a King a Tyrant?

- ◆ **Failure to keep oaths**
 - ◆ This stems primarily from Henry's failure to adhere to the Provisions of Oxford, the reformist proposals which he swore to uphold in 1258.
 - ◆ Breaking one's oath was considered a sin at the time - this is evident in Adam Marsh's letters to Montfort, where he condemns Montfort for forcing a priest to break his oath and also urges Montfort to "keep lawful covenants."
- ◆ **Lack of counsel**
 - ◆ The Song argues that Henry was bound and failed to seek counsel from native lords of England. This counsel was seen as necessary for "the enlarging of kingly virtue" and the continuance of good governance.
 - ◆ Salisbury and Aquinas, among others, viewed the relationship between king and counselors as necessary for the "common good of the multitude." Counselors both restrained the king and protected him from missteps.
- ◆ **Reliance on foreigners**
 - ◆ English magnates took issue with Henry's favoritism towards his Lusignan half-siblings, to whom he offered much patronage and elevation in the years preceding rebellion.
 - ◆ The song justifies reformers' anti-French stance by arguing that foreign lords are unfamiliar with a nation's laws and customs and cannot truly seek the good of the commonality. This stance is echoed by Salisbury.
- ◆ **Misadministration of justice**
 - ◆ The Song takes issue with Henry's administration of justice, suggesting he does not respect claims to property and that his ministers accept bribes for writs. It also argues that only the unjust are able to be conquered.
 - ◆ Several of these specific offenses can be traced to the Magna Carta. The need for a king to respect justice is also central to the writings of Bracton and fundamental to English legal thought.
- ◆ **Non-adherence to law**
 - ◆ The Song describes law as a "light, without which we infer that the guide goes astray." The king is subject to the law, as it "strengthens his changing self" and allows for the stability of the realm.
 - ◆ As Salisbury, Bracton, and others write, "law makes the king." While the king may better the law, he is nevertheless subject to it, and it cannot be changed or removed by his will alone.

Responses to Tyranny

- ◆ **Inaction**
 - ◆ Aquinas argues that because action against a tyrant may fail, making the tyrant worse than before, or may result in a more extreme tyrant taking power, a mild tyrant ought to be tolerated.
 - ◆ Marsh suggests to Montfort that tyrants will face divine judgement, and he ought to keep course and adhere to "the commands of their Savior."
- ◆ **Restraint and removal**
 - ◆ For obvious reasons, this is the primary argument of the Song.
 - ◆ Montfort and his forces act as the hand of God against Henry, drawing from the two swords theory.
- ◆ **Tyrannicide**
 - ◆ Salisbury argues for tyrannicide, but this is not presented as an option in the Song, perhaps due to this stance's extreme nature or the Song's focus on defense of the crown rights rather than on the person of the king.

Conclusions

The Song of Lewes clearly stands in conversation with other major political and theological treatises of its time. While its author's identity and his education remain unknown, it seems reasonable to infer that he and other well-educated English elites during the Second Barons War were familiar with the major theological and political debates happening among academics and highly-educated elites in England and France.

The tendency by some English-speaking historians to frame the Second Barons' War as a revolution towards constitutional democracy obscures the fact that **baronial supporters actually relied heavily on accepted models of kingship to explain their rejection of Henry.** To this end, the Second Barons' War ought not to be studied in isolation from medieval European political history.

This study also suggests that **the Song of Lewes and the events of the Second Barons' War may have influenced political theorists both in and outside of England** in the following decades. Aquinas's writings seem to align with the Song of Lewes on some fronts, particularly in Aquinas's emphasis on a king's need for counsel in order to achieve the good of the multitude. His somewhat weaker stance against tyrants may likewise have been a response to the turmoil of English politics in his time. While no evidence can confirm or deny this potential influence, it remains a possibility for future research.

Much work remains to be done. A new critical edition and translation of the Song may make the text more accessible to scholars of various disciplines and illuminate new avenues for research. The question of the Song's authorship, too, remains unanswered. Additionally, comparison of the Song of Lewes to other texts of the Second Barons' War would allow for a richer understanding of the place of political theory both in the Song and among English contemporaries generally within this period.

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