



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.105361](https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.105361)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Rio, A. (2015). Waltharius at Fontenoy? Epic heroism and Carolingian political thought. *Viator*, 46(2), 41-64. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.105361>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Waltharius at Fontenoy? Epic heroism and Carolingian political thought

Alice Rio\*

The Carolingian-era Latin epic poem *Waltharius* has been given a lot of attention over the decades, though its aims and context of composition remain generally mysterious.<sup>1</sup> It has typically been discussed more by literary scholars than by historians, and, among historians, more from the perspective of religion or gender than from that of political thought. The aim of this article is to suggest that the poem fits into a much more precise political context than has been recognised up to now, in the hope that the poem and the political context I am proposing for it will prove mutually illuminating.

Suggesting a precise political context, or indeed any sort of precise context, for a poem which has proved so resistant to dating is obviously a risky enterprise. *Waltharius* could have been written at any time between the late eighth and the tenth century. Although consensus is shifting towards dating it to the ninth century,<sup>2</sup> no argument based on internal evidence allows any date to be confirmed with any degree of certainty; and since the poem was not quoted in any other Carolingian sources, there is no way of gauging what its reception would have been before the earliest extant manuscript, in the tenth century. What I propose to do here instead is to try to historicise the poem as a whole, and to ask what context and audience, within this wide range of possible dates, would have been the most attuned to the sort of mood and concerns it conveys. The intention is to offer a new overall analysis of what the poem has to say from a literary point of view, based on its treatment of characters and the judgements it offers on their behaviour; and then to identify what wider historical, cultural and political setting it may have been speaking to. I suggest that the poem's gallows humour is not incompatible with a deeper reflection on the relationship between kings and their elite men, and that this political critique fits most comfortably in the context of the civil wars of the mid-ninth century. When placed next to other texts produced during this difficult period, the poem still emerges as deeply original, but also as less free-standing and *sui generis*. The poem does not have anything as crude as a single, univalent coded message, and its subtlety means that it could have been read in many different ways even at the time of its composition; but the broad matter it dealt with was one shared by many other texts from this time, regardless of precise political allegiance.

Although I use contemporary texts, above all Nithard, to point to such common interests and common emotional reactions, I do not base my argument on a claim of intertextuality proper, since it would be impossible to show that the poem had been directly influenced by them. The similarities between them, though, suggest

---

\* Alice Rio, Department of History, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, [alice.rio@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:alice.rio@kcl.ac.uk). I give very warm thanks to Alice Taylor, Jinty Nelson and John Gillingham for commenting on drafts. I am also grateful to *Viator's* two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> *Waltharius*, ed. Karl Strecker, MGH *Poetae Latini Medii Aevi* VI, 1: *Nachträge zu den Poetae Aevi Carolini* (Weimar 1951), 1-85; ed. and tr. Dennis M. Kratz, *Waltharius and Ruodlieb* (New York 1984) 1-71; for another English translation, Brian Murdoch, *Walthari* (Glasgow 1989). References to the Latin text in what follows are drawn from Kratz; English translations from the poem are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Stone, "Waltharius and Carolingian morality", *Early Medieval Europe* 21 (2013) 50-70, at 54-6. For more on the dating issue, see n. 17 below.

that they and the poet were reacting to the same events and problems, and were part of a common “emotional community”, to use Barbara Rosenwein’s useful phrase.<sup>3</sup> This article, then, constitutes something of a thought experiment, and is inevitably highly speculative (even if it is no more so than most arguments relating to this poem); but it is a kind of speculation which I hope has the virtue of making better sense of the poem as a complex literary creation.

#### THE STORY

The scene is fifth-century Europe. Attila and his Huns cross the Danube, threatening to attack three different kingdoms: Francia, Burgundy, and Aquitaine (the Roman empire is not mentioned at all). The first king to hear about Attila’s imminent arrival is the Frankish king Gibicho: terrified, he prefers to pay a huge tribute and surrender hostages rather than try to put up a fight. The king’s own son, Gunther, is still too young to be apart from his mother, so the young warrior Hagen is picked instead to go to Attila’s court. The Burgundian king Hereric is next: he, implicitly unlike Gibicho, is strong (*validus*), but, at the Huns’ approach, loses his nerve at the thought that the Franks, a *gens fortis* to whom the Burgundians could not hope to compare themselves (l. 58), had decided not to oppose Attila’s forces. He caves in as well, and sends countless treasures along with his only daughter, Hildigund, to Attila’s court. Attila then moves on to Aquitaine: the king Alphere worries that both the Franks and the Burgundians have already struck up a deal with the Huns, and agrees again to hand over treasure, as well as his only son, the young Walter, who happens to be betrothed to Hildigund, as a hostage. It is worth noting at the outset that all of this is presented as flowing from the Frankish king’s initial act of cowardice. Moreover, pointedly attributing this failure (and subsequent ones) to bad Frankish behaviour was evidently an active choice on the part of the poet, since in other known versions of the story Gunther and Hagen are Burgundians.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, Attila, the Huns, Hagen, Hildigund, Walter, and the treasure all go back to Pannonia, Attila’s homeland in South-Eastern Central Europe. A few years later, our hostages are all doing splendidly at Attila’s court. Hildigund has become the queen’s second-in-command; Hagen and Walter are both extraordinary fighters, “superior to all the Huns” (l. 105) and captains in Attila’s army. At this point, Gibicho, the feckless Frankish king, dies, and is succeeded by his son Gunther. Gunther decides to break his treaty with the Huns and refuses to pay further tribute. Hearing this, Hagen decides to make a run for it and escapes back to Francia. Walter stays and becomes even more indispensable. Attila’s queen, Ospirin, urges Attila to get Walter to settle down for good by giving him a wife and some land. Attila makes the offer, but Walter refuses; his excuse is that he fears that having a wife and children might hamper his military performance, and stop him from winning as many battles as he might. Attila thinks this is fair enough. Walter continues to excel in battle, and, on his return from one particularly successful display of prowess, he finds Hildigund alone in the royal chamber. She pours him a drink, and they tiptoe around each other: Walter brings up their betrothal, which Hildigund initially rejects as a cruel joke, presumably because of the arguments against marriage he had earlier put

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Rubén Florio, “Incoherencias del Waltharius: reyes, héroes y antihéroes. La leyenda y la historia”, *Viator* 43 (2012) 147–179, at 171.

to Attila.<sup>5</sup> The pair then learn to trust one another: Walter loves Hildigund; Hildigund loves Walter. Walter unveils an escape plan, which involves Hildigund stealing Attila's armour and two large coffers' worth of arm-rings. For his own part, Walter plans to throw a feast for Attila and the Huns, with the aim of incapacitating them with drink. This is what happens: the Huns all get extremely drunk and eventually fall asleep. Walter and Hildigund flee, having loaded the treasure onto a horse.

The Huns wake up around midday feeling much the worse for wear. Attila wakes up with a terrible hangover and looks for Walter in search of sympathy. He can't find him; Ospirin then can't find Hildigund and works out what has happened. Attila spends the whole day and night in misery. The next day, he assembles his military leaders and offers countless treasures to anyone who can capture Walter. The Huns, however, have seen Walter in action and think the better of it.

Meanwhile, Walter and Hildigund are on the run, wrongly supposing the Huns to be in pursuit. Walter catches birds and fish and refrains from sex with Hildigund. Forty days into their escape, they cross the Rhine at Worms, where the new Frankish king Gunther is residing. They pay the ferryman with a fish Walter had caught earlier. The ferryman sells it to Gunther's cook, who serves it to him for dinner. Gunther comments on the distinctly foreign air of the fish (Walter must have been carrying it for some time) and asks the cook how he has come by it. The cook gets the ferryman, who, now that Gunther mentions it, does remember being given this fish by a gigantic armoured warrior accompanied by a pretty girl and a horse carrying two large coffers on its back, the contents of which clinked like gold and gemstones whenever the horse reared. Hagen is there, and recognises Walter from the description. He rejoices at the thought of seeing his friend again, but Gunther only thinks of the gold: this, he says, is an opportunity to recover the treasure his father had given the Huns in tribute. Hagen is appalled and tries to dissuade him, but Gunther calls for his armour and sets off in pursuit of Walter with twelve warriors and the reluctant Hagen, who warns that no good can come of this.

Walter and Hildigund, meanwhile, are still only worried about the Huns. They reach the Vosges and find an easily defensible gorge. Walter sleeps while Hildigund stands watch. When she sees Gunther and his troop approaching, she assumes the Huns are coming, wakes up Walter and asks him to kill her to avoid rape. Walter takes a closer look and finds that these are Franks, not Huns. He boasts that no Frank will ever be able to return home unharmed to tell his wife that he had managed to take any of his treasure; he then immediately falls to the ground asking God to forgive him for having said this. He recognises Hagen and declares him the only man among them he is concerned about. Hagen sees that Walter is standing in a well-defended place and urges Gunther to negotiate for some of the gold instead of attacking him. Gunther sends Gamalo of Metz, who rides over and asks Walter to state his name and his business. Walter tells him. Gamalo demands that Walter hand over the horse, the coffers and Hildigund in exchange for his life. Walter refuses, but he does offer one hundred arm-rings for safe passage. Gamalo reports back, and Hagen urges Gunther

---

<sup>5</sup> For a different reading of this passage, see David Townsend, "Ironic intertextuality and the reader's resistance to heroic masculinity in the *Waltharius*", *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York 1997) 67-86. On this scene, see also Janet L. Nelson, "England and the Continent in the ninth century: IV, Bodies and minds", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* ser. 6, vol. 15 (2005) 1-27, at 15-6; for further comment see n. 12 below.

to accept this offer, citing an unsettling dream he has recently had in which he and Gunther fought a bear and lost various body parts. Gunther decides to refuse the offer, throwing in a few choice words accusing Hagen and Hagen's father of congenital cowardice. He sends Gamalo back; Walter offers two hundred arm-rings, which Gamalo takes as his cue to attack. Walter kills him, and goes on, in fact, to kill every single one of Gunther's men, whose deaths are recorded in graphic detail, as Gunther looks on and Hagen sulks nearby. The sixth man, Batavid, is Hagen's nephew and only a boy. When all his men are dead, Gunther flees to Hagen to try to persuade him to fight, appealing to his sense of honour and the need to defend the reputation of the Franks. Hagen eventually agrees to fight, but advises waiting until Walter leaves his natural stronghold so they can ambush him.

Walter decides to wait out the night. He reattaches his victims' heads to the appropriate trunks, says a prayer for them and goes to sleep, taking turns with Hildigund to keep watch. The next morning, he strips the bodies of their armour, takes the surviving horses, and they leave. Once they are in the open, Gunther and Hagen fall upon them. The fight lasts for hours, and all suffer for it: Walter cuts off Gunther's leg (ll. 1363-4); Hagen hacks off Walter's hand (l. 1382); Walter then, in two blows, takes out Hagen's right eye and slices off his lips, taking six teeth along with them. The fight then breaks off, and the fighters are all so exhausted it's all they can do just to sit there. Hildigund patches them up with bandages and pours them some wine. They drink, and Walter and Hagen start ribbing each other about their respective wounds – Hagen says Walter will need to get a stuffed glove to hide his missing hand, and also that he will now have to gird his sword on the wrong side and embrace his wife with his left hand. Walter replies that Hagen will no longer be able to eat meat, and will have to look at people sideways when he's talking to them. They then renew their pledge of friendship, load the king onto a horse, and go their separate ways. Walter goes back to Aquitaine, marries Hildigund, and after his father's death rules the Aquitainians happily for thirty years.

#### AUDIENCE AND VALUES

It is worth stressing (since this may not have come across in the preceding summary) that *Waltharius* is an extraordinarily good poem. It has undeniable value as a work of art, and is still now, after centuries and in a very different cultural context, enormously enjoyable. What modern commentators have found harder to tell is exactly in what way it was meant to be enjoyed at the time it was written. Many have pointed to a certain ambiguity in the poet's treatment of his characters, and to a possible conflict between his own values and theirs. One area of particular scholarly concentration has been on Christian versus pagan values. Earlier scholarship tended to see *Waltharius* as only superficially Christian, and the whole atmosphere as Germanic; this is partly down to the great number of variants and iterations of this story found across many different areas of Europe, suggesting a wide-ranging and vital oral diffusion.<sup>6</sup> This view was challenged in the 1970s and 1980s, in particular by Peter Dronke and Dennis Kratz.<sup>7</sup> This strand of scholarship saw the poem less as a

---

<sup>6</sup> For a very helpful guide to these, see Peter Dronke, "Waltharius-Gaiferos", in Peter Dronke, *Latin and Vernacular Poets of the Middle Ages* (Aldershot 1996), reprinted from Ursula Dronke and Peter Dronke, *Barbara et antiquissima carmina* (Barcelona 1977) 29-79.

<sup>7</sup> Dronke, "Waltharius-Gaiferos" (n. 6 above); Dennis M. Kratz, *Mocking Epic: Waltharius, Alexandreis, and the Problem of Christian Heroism* (Madrid 1980); Dennis M. Kratz, "Quid

ripping Germanic yarn and more as a virtuoso performance in the mobilisation of Latin epic themes, in particular Virgil, to serve a Christian purpose.<sup>8</sup> This re-evaluation has gone hand in hand with a renewed appreciation for the poet's skill. He frequently includes learned Virgilian in-jokes, for instance in making Attila look ridiculous by describing his grief at Walter's departure in terms closely echoing the description of Dido's sorrow in *Aeneid* book IV.<sup>9</sup> Kratz in particular developed the idea that irony is pervasive throughout the text, and that Walter features less as a hero than an anti-hero.<sup>10</sup> Everyone in the poem, including Walter, is guilty of sins – sins highlighted in particular through the borrowing of themes and terms drawn from the 'vices' camp in Prudentius's *Psychomachia* (an early fifth-century Christian epic on the battle between virtues and vices). Kratz, who imagines both author and audience to have been monks, assumes them to have been unsympathetic to the sort of behaviour displayed in the poem; the whole work functions, then, as an undermining of the figure of the epic hero in light of Christian standards.<sup>11</sup> A more recent variant of this idea, put forward by David Townsend, sees the whole poem as one big joke aimed at burly warrior males, and reads the text as a satire on the lay hegemonic masculinity of the times, once again for the benefit of monks. This aims the argument more in the direction of conflict over gender than conflict between Christian and pagan values, but amounts to the same sense that the story of Walter, presumably

---

Waltharius Ruodliebque cum Christo?", *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harald Scholler (Tübingen 1977) 126-49.

<sup>8</sup> On the elusiveness of any distinctive sense of "Germanic" culture in the Carolingian period, see Matthew Innes, "Teutons or Trojans? The Carolingians and the Germanic past", *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge 2000) 227-49; more broadly, Walter Goffart, "Conspicuously absent: martial heroism in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours and its likes", *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. K. Mitchell and I. Wood (Leiden 2002) 365-393.

<sup>9</sup> Kratz, *Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 30-1; Luigi Alfonsi, "Considerazioni sul vergilianesimo del 'Waltharius'", *Studi filologici letterari e storici in memoria di Guido Favati* vol. 1 (Padua 1977) 3-14. On classical precedents: Otto Zwierlein, "Das Waltharius-Epos und seine lateinischen Vorbilder", *Antike und Abendland* 16 (1970) 153-84. For further recent work emphasising the poet's skill: Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Fighting words: wordplay and swordplay in the 'Waltharius'", *Germanic Texts and Latin models* (2001) 29-51; Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Of arms and the (Ger)man: literary and material culture in the *Waltharius*", *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer Davis and Michael McCormick (Aldershot 2008) 193-208; Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Blood, sweat, and tears in the *Waltharius*", *Insignis sophiae arcator: Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Michael Herren*, ed. Gernot R. Wieland, Carin Ruff and Ross G. Arthur (Turnhout 2006) 149-64; on considerations of genre, François Hoff, "Le *Waltharius*: l'épopée ambiguë", *Lalies* 26 (2006) 151-69.

<sup>10</sup> Kratz, *Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 31: "an epic without a hero and a comic work of serious intent"; see also Ursula Ernst, "Walther – ein christlicher Held?", *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986) 79-83; Franz Brunhölzl, "Waltharius und kein Ende?", *Festschrift für Paul Klopsch*, ed. Udo Kindermann, Wolfgang Maaz and Fritz Wagner (Göppingen 1988) 46-55.

<sup>11</sup> See also Brian Murdoch, *The Germanic Hero: Politics and Pragmatism in Early Medieval Poetry* (London 1996) 90-103. On heroism in *Waltharius*: Gabriela Monti, "Waltharius: 'duo magnanimi heroes'", *Anales de estudios clásicos y medievales* (2004) 351-60; Gabriela Monti, "La guerra en el 'Waltharius' (vv. 644-1061)", *Mirabilia* 8 (2008) 68-85; Henk Vynckier, "Arms-talks in the Middle Ages: Hrotsvith von Gandersheim, 'Waltharius', and the heroic *via*", *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, rara avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Ann Arbor 1987) 183-200. On comic violence: Manuel Braun, "Mitlachen oder verlachen? Zum Verhältnis von Komik und Gewalt in der Heldenepik", *Gewalt im Mittelalter: Realitäten – Imaginationen*, ed. Manuel Braun and Cornelia Herberichs (Munich 2005) 381-410, at 393-7; Francine Mora, "Des parodies de Sedulius Scottus au rire de Waltharius: burlesque et dérision dans l'épopée medio-latine carolingienne", *Burlesque et dérision dans les épopées de l'Occident medieval*, ed. B. Guidot (Besançon 1995) 239-53.

already popular in oral form, was being turned into a critique of warrior culture.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, then, the poem, far from reflecting Germanic culture, was borrowing some of its well-loved characters only to use them against it, both as a spirited send-off and a warning on the vanity and emptiness of its values.

Taken to its extreme, this argument relies on the notion of a genuine cultural divorce between a putatively monastic author and audience and the lay subject matter. This, as several commentators have pointed out, is rather a lot to take for granted.<sup>13</sup> Although most monks were oblates, and so spent their most formative years in a monastic setting, they still retained many connections with the lay world, which makes the idea of a complete cultural rift unlikely.<sup>14</sup> When they read about elite warrior laymen, they were not only reading about an Other; they were also reading about their fathers, uncles, brothers, and nephews (not to mention lay abbots). A monastic audience may have read the poem with horror, but if they did, the effect may have been less one of critical distancing and hostility than of excited day-dreaming: the poem could equally well have offered them the *frisson* of fantasising, for a few hours, over what life might have been like if their parents had not dedicated them to the monastic life – perhaps combined with relief, by the end of the poem, that they had not had to deal with all of the violence and difficulties attached to such a life in reality. The monk chronicler of Novalosa who, in the eleventh century, turned Walter into a monk-saint in his old age added many frankly comedic details to his story, but nowhere does this translate into an impression that he was hostile to his hero.<sup>15</sup> Either way, even if monks were certainly part of the intended audience for the poem, this does not mean that they were the only one: a court audience seems equally plausible, and this would not be the first text written in this period to function successfully in both settings.

Whatever the particular reading of the text, the tendency in existing scholarship has been to consider it in the perspective of religion, gender, or morality.<sup>16</sup> This is partly because the poem is so hard to date with any degree of

---

<sup>12</sup> Townsend, “Ironic intertextuality” (n. 5 above). For Townsend, the privileged point of view in the poem is Hildigund’s. Much of his argument rests on her reference to ‘irony’ in her first depicted meeting with Walter, in which she expresses disbelief that Walter was being serious, but comparable scenes in other texts (for instance Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii*, c. 7: ed. Georg Waitz, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 55 (Hanover 1884) 28) suggest that her response could have been a standard way of inviting or allowing someone to speak their mind and express a further commitment, as opposed to challenging them. On gender in *Waltharius*, see also Gabriela Monti, “La representación de la masculinidad en el *Waltharius*”, *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 51:1 (2009) 177-84. On Hildigund, see Maria Lührs, “Hiltgunt”, *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986) 84-7.

<sup>13</sup> On the possibility of a lay audience, see Dronke, “Waltharius-Gaiferos” (n. 6 above) 69; Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge 1989) 227-9; Stone, “Waltharius” (n. 2 above) 56. On a court milieu, Nelson, “Bodies and minds” (n. 5 above) 17-8.

<sup>14</sup> On oblates, see Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Dronke, “Waltharius-Gaiferos” (n. 6 above) 48-9; Patrick J. Geary, “Epic tradition and monastic ideology: the *Waltharius* and the *Chronicon Novaliciense*”, *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 8, ed. Edgar L. Newman (Las Cruces, New Mexico 1981) 46.

<sup>16</sup> With some exceptions: Joachim Peeters, “Guntharius: die Fehler eines Königs”, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 34 (1991) 33-48, reads the text more in the context of contemporary political thought on kingship. Rubén Florio, “Waltharius, figuras heroicas, restauración literaria, alusiones políticas”, *Maia* 58 (2006) 207-29, argues for a political dimension, but links the criticism of

precision, so that modern commentators have had to rely for context essentially on *longue durée* phenomena – those whose relevance spanned a century at least, and whose validity therefore depends less on a precise dating.<sup>17</sup> But although these aspects are obviously crucial in order to gain an understanding of the cultural context the poet was operating in, it is important to remember that cultural commentary is not necessarily what the poem is *about*. The “ironic” reading of the poem has been recently criticised by Rachel Stone, who has argued convincingly that the actions of the characters in *Waltharius* sit squarely within acceptable contemporary standards of lay morality.<sup>18</sup> Dismissing the ironic reading, however, and interpreting *Waltharius* as an unproblematic and unproblematised reflection of contemporary values, reduces it once again to a ripping yarn. Is this really all it was? Is the ambivalent attitude so frequently attributed to the poem truly only in the eye of the modern beholder?

#### HEROIC FAILURE, ROYAL FAILURE

A great deal of the case for the poet’s ambivalence about his heroes has rested on the ending – a deliberate petering out, with reconciliation brought about only through sheer exhaustion. The poem ends not with a bang, but with a whimper, with all three main characters horribly wounded and disfigured, in ways reminiscent of both biblical and contemporary punishments.<sup>19</sup> They are not, however, the very worst punishments imaginable; the tension is relieved to a large extent by the heroes joking about how they will cope with their various disabilities, which, as Stone has pointed out, has the function of showing that life can still go on for them.<sup>20</sup> It remains clear, however, that the characters are all punished, to varying degrees, for having made a wrong call at one point or another in the poem. These wrong calls were not wrong from an exclusively Christian standpoint, but also, and perhaps primarily, from the point of view of honour and loyalty. As I hope to show, the characters in *Waltharius* are ultimately punished not for their adherence to a heroic code of conduct that would somehow stand in contradiction with a separate, Christian one, but for their inability to conform fully to this heroic standard. In particular, Walter and Hagen’s failure to match the highest standards of honourable behaviour, despite their best intentions, is presented as the direct result of a failure in royal leadership, as are all their consequent misfortunes. This lends the poem the quality of a political commentary,

---

Gunther to Carolingian criticism of the Merovingian dynasty in the time of Charlemagne. Both reach substantially different conclusions from the ones proposed here.

<sup>17</sup> Dronke, “Waltharius-Gaiferos” (n. 6 above) 66-79, argues for an early Carolingian date; for a more recent account of all the main hypotheses regarding date and authorship, see Ferruccio Bertini, “Problemi di attribuzione e di datazione del *Waltharius*”, *Filologia Mediolatina* 6-7 (2000) 63-77, and Ziolkowski, “Of Arms and the (Ger)man” (n. 9 above) 193-4. For specific arguments see Alf Önnarfors, *Die Verfasserschaft des Walthariusepos aus sprachlicher Sicht* (Opladen 1979); Rudolf Schieffer, “Zu neuen Thesen über den ‘Waltharius’”, *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 36:1 (1980) 193-201; Dieter Schaller, “Ist der *Waltharius* frühkarolingisch?”, *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 18 (1983) 63-83; Bernd Schütte, “Länder und Völker im *Waltharius*”, *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986) 70-4.

<sup>18</sup> Stone, “Waltharius” (n. 2 above).

<sup>19</sup> Kratz, *Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 48–58; Carola L. Gottzmann, “Schuld und Strafe im ‘Waltharius’”, *Als das wissend die meister wol: Beiträge zur Darstellung und Vermittlung von Wissen in Fachliteratur und Dichtung des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit. Festschrift für Walter Blank zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Martin Ehrenfeuchter and Thomas Ehlen (Frankfurt 2000) 29-50.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, “Waltharius” (n. 2 above) 67-70. I find Stone’s interpretation of this passage convincing, but would not follow her as far as to deny any punitive dimension to the mutilations undergone by Walter and Hagen. (Stone does accept the punitive reading as far as Gunther is concerned.)

and, as I will argue, one that is probably best understood when read in the specific context of the aftermath of the civil wars of 840-843.

Walter himself occasionally behaves in ways that are not strictly honourable. This does not in itself make him an anti-hero, since he very often has little choice in the matter. The prime example here is his killing of Hagen's nephew Batavrid: Walter, in contrast to his behaviour towards his other opponents, tries to persuade him to walk away (ll. 878-85), and the killing is largely self-defence, but he is still bitterly reproached by Hagen on account of it. Although his behaviour is explained, this is not the same as letting him off the hook: he has still killed the kin of a sworn friend.

To some extent a similar point can be made about his deserting of Attila. The Huns are never presented as Others in the poem. Although line 3 insists at the outset on the diversity of religions within Europe, Attila and his Huns are never described explicitly as pagans, and Attila's court functions in remarkably similar ways to a Frankish one. The relationship between king and followers there is a familiar one: for one thing in the close and emotional relationship envisaged between lord and follower, and also in the ways in which Ospirin and Attila try to secure Walter's loyalty, through offers of land and an advantageous marriage (ll. 138-9), all things that a ninth-century *fidelis* could hope for. There is a striking absence of any attempt to construct Attila as an alien to whom standard norms of fidelity might not apply, and this implies that there is some dishonour in Walter's robbing and abandoning him.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Walter chooses to leave after Attila makes the offer of marriage to a Hunnic princess, which would have forced Walter to set aside his previous betrothal to Hildigund. Although Walter manages to buy time, Attila's offer could not be put off indefinitely. Betrothal was a serious business in the Carolingian period, and capitularies increasingly insisted that it should be as firm a commitment as marriage; if he had stayed, Walter would eventually have risked jeopardising his honour from that direction instead. Once again, the dilemma there is a real one, but does not necessarily suffice to excuse Walter's actions.

On a more minor but nevertheless significant note, Walter also does not stop to announce himself to Hagen or Gunther on his way through Worms, but tries to slip by undetected. His lack of trust turns out to be justified, but it does all the same amount to a refusal to engage in normal patterns of hospitality and gift-giving.<sup>22</sup> Once again, none of this adds up to turning Walter into an anti-hero. Although Kratz points to the similarity between descriptions of Walter in action and Virgil's treatment of Turnus, this does not necessarily reflect badly on Walter. Turnus was not a bad choice as a point of reference for a positive heroic figure: the *Aeneid* describes him as brave and honourable; he only becomes Aeneas's foe because he is manipulated into it by Juno and Alecto; and Virgil insists on his fierceness more than on Aeneas's.<sup>23</sup> Crucially, in *Aeneid* book XII Turnus also agrees to a single combat to avoid needless

---

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Stone, "In search of the Carolingian 'dear lord'", *Frankland: The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Dame Jinty Nelson*, ed. Paul Fouracre and David Ganz (Manchester 2008) 152-66, at 162.

<sup>22</sup> Walter himself acknowledges this at line 1247, where he (rather disingenuously) reproaches Hagen with not having offered him hospitality in spite of his own unwillingness to seek it; he also claims he was going to offer gifts to Hagen, though his earlier behaviour suggests otherwise.

<sup>23</sup> Kratz, *Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 24-6 and 53; for Alecto and Turnus, *Aeneid* book VII, lines 415-66.

deaths, in an implicit contrast with Gunther's own behaviour.

Gunther, as all modern commentators have recognised, is the character who gets *everything* horribly wrong.<sup>24</sup> If he corresponds to any character from the *Aeneid*, it is the most unambiguously negative one: Mezentius, a king himself, expelled by his Italian people for his cruelty and arbitrariness.<sup>25</sup> Gunther is terrible at being a king; but he does try. Most of his actions are directly or indirectly linked to his desire to make up for his father's failings and restore the reputation of the Franks, but all of his efforts are fundamentally misguided, and he ends up achieving the opposite of what he meant. Even his decision to stop paying tribute to Attila (ll. 116-20) does not cancel out his father's initial cowardice, but seems irresponsible: it shows a total lack of concern over what might happen to Hagen, the hostage his father had handed over.<sup>26</sup> His decision left Hagen in a terribly difficult situation, and gave him little choice other than flight from Attila's court. In this event, it is clear that Hagen is the only one of the two mindful of the fact that Gunther is his lord and that mutual duties are involved.

Gunther's second bad call, which lies at the root of the whole second half of the poem, is again motivated by the desire to make up for his father's failings and recover the treasure he had handed over as tribute. In the event, however, he does not restore the reputation of the Franks so much as endanger it still further by seeing his best men defeated by a single unknown warrior (ll. 1085-8). This obsession with making up for the past, as opposed to acting honourably in the present, is what leads him to engage in egregious "bad king" behaviour. Perhaps most obviously and most damningly, he does badly by a traveller going through his land: if Timothy Reuter was right that ensuring the security of travel across the kingdom was the acid test of good kingship, Gunther fails this test spectacularly.<sup>27</sup> He also fails to take advice several times from his follower Hagen, whom he humiliates in front of his other men in the worst possible way, by insulting his family honour:

I see you take after your father Hagathie.  
He too carried a timorous heart under a chill breast,  
And with many words shrank from fighting.<sup>28</sup>

The accusation is all the more unfair as it had of course been Gunther's own father who had shown cowardice by handing over the treasure to the Huns in the first

---

<sup>24</sup> Peeters, "Guntharius" (n. 16 above); Bernd Scherello, "Die Darstellung Gunthers im *Waltharius*", *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986) 88-90.

<sup>25</sup> Kratz suggests that Walter is being likened to Mezentius in some passages (*Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 47), but Gunther seems a much more obvious parallel for the character.

<sup>26</sup> For lack of concern over the fate of hostages as a bad thing, compare the beginning of the (admittedly much later) *Song of Roland*, tr. John DuVal (Indianapolis 2012) lines 40-6, where the Muslim king and his counsellors decide to hand over their sons with the intention of renegeing on the agreement, in the full knowledge the hostages will be killed once the treachery is made manifest. For a classical example, see the Volscians' abandonment of their hostages in Livy, *Ab urbe condita* II, 22 (with thanks to *Viator's* anonymous reviewer no. 2 for the reference). On hostages, see Adam Kosto, *Hostages in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Reuter, "The insecurity of travel in the early and high Middle Ages: criminals, victims and their medieval and modern observers", in Timothy Reuter, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2006) 38-71.

<sup>28</sup> Lines 629-31: "*Ut video, genitorem imitaris Hagathien ipse. / Hic quoque perpavidam gelido sub pectore mentem / gesserat et multis fastidit proelia verbis.*"

place. Gunther also fails to heed the pleas of all his remaining men when they beg him not to ask them to fight Walter (ll. 941-57); all of them later die as a direct result of his refusal:

What of me, if I leave the Vosges thus, thus disgraced?  
Let each man adopt my resolve. See! I am prepared  
To die before I enter Worms with all that has happened.<sup>29</sup>

Selfishness and cowardice are the dominant themes here: Gunther gives no thought to those men already dead, and has in mind no one but himself (*Quid mihi?*). He sets himself up as a model for his men, but this aggressive posturing does not match his actions when he later runs away from the fight, after the last of his men has been dispatched by Walter:

Seeing this, the unhappy king sighs, and, making every effort  
To flee, climbs on the back of his horse decked out with trappings,  
And flew very fast to the sorrowful Hagen,  
And tried to sway him with every kind of prayer  
To come with him and renew the fight.<sup>30</sup>

Hagen then reminds him bitingly of his earlier accusation of cowardice against himself:

My line of shameful ancestors prevents me from warring,  
And a chill blood robs me of any heart for arms.  
For my father melted when he saw weapons,  
And, timid, with many words declined to fight.  
When you hurled these words, king, among your followers,  
Our help obviously seemed unworthy to you.<sup>31</sup>

Hagen nevertheless eventually agrees to help, and outlines his plan for an ambush, adding with heavy irony: “Then you can fight, king, if you have the heart for war.”<sup>32</sup> Gunther, then, lets down all his followers by causing them to die for the sake of his own honour, and loses all respect from the last one standing. He is maimed correspondingly more gravely than Walter and Hagen at the end of the story. The main reason why he is merely maimed and not killed is probably that the latter option would have turned Walter into a king-slayer, which would have taken him one unforgivable step too far.

In the case of Walter and Hagen, most of the wrong calls are more or less inevitable, above all when Walter kills Hagen’s nephew and Hagen fights Walter in

---

<sup>29</sup> Lines 946-9: *Quid mihi, si Vosago sic sic inglorius ibo? / Mentem quisque meam sibi vindicet. En ego partus / ante mori sum, WORMATIAM quam talibus actis / ingrediar.*

<sup>30</sup> Lines 1062-6: *His rex infelix visis suspirat et omni / aufugiens studio falerati terga caballi / scandit et ad maestum citius Haganona volavit / omnimodisque illum precibus flexisse satagit, / ut secum pergens pugnam repararet.*

<sup>31</sup> Lines 1067-72: *“Me genus infandum prohibet bellare parentum, / et gelidus sanguis mentem mihi ademit in armis. / Tabescebat enim genitor, dum tela videret, / et timidus multis renuebat proelia verbis. / Haec dum iactasses, rex, inter te comitantes, / extitit indignum nostri tibi quippe iuvamen.”*

<sup>32</sup> Line 1123: *Tum pugnare potes, belli si, rex, tibi mens est.*

spite of their sworn friendship.<sup>33</sup> In these places the poem takes on a properly tragic dimension, even if the ending is not tragic. Much of the existing scholarship has concentrated on trying to puzzle out whether Walter and Hagen should be interpreted as “good” or “bad” characters, but the key point is that they do not have to be either: they are simply people, faced with irresolvable dilemmas. All of these dilemmas are ultimately derived from a single source, namely Gunther’s failings as a king and a lord.

The fact that Gunther’s behaviour has made everyone deeply confused about what they ought to be doing is brought out most clearly in the case of Hagen, out of all characters the one who comes closest to being irreproachable; his only failing lies in his decision to fight his friend. Hagen gives very contradictory statements of his motivations for the fateful decision to fight Walter. When deliberating with himself after Gunther has tried to convince him, Hagen makes the decision for his own sake, opting to fight to preserve his own reputation:

Moved by the humble urgency of the suppliant,  
He reddened at his lord’s countenance, reflected upon his own reputation  
For courage, which perhaps might be cheapened as a result,  
If he should spare himself in any way in these matters.<sup>34</sup>

The passage inverts the expected sense of hierarchy between the two: Gunther, although technically the superior party, is the one who is *rogitans* and *subnixus*, and Hagen is embarrassed to see him humiliating himself in this way. Hagen eventually gives him a positive but heavily ironic response, and makes a cutting contrast between his own grief over the loss of life and Gunther’s selfish concern to avoid shame for himself (something which had nevertheless been at the forefront of Hagen’s own mind only a moment before, during his internal monologue):

But since I see that you are suffering more from shame  
Than from grief at the carnage, and that you do not want to leave,  
I share your pain; and my own sorrow yields to the honour  
Of the king...<sup>35</sup>

Hagen’s *compator* seems double-edged, in that he is suffering at the same time as the king but not for the same reasons – once again highlighting the difference between them rather than any commonality of purpose. Hagen makes it clear that he is obeying Gunther only out of a follower’s sense of duty to his king, rather than because he approves of him. This does not, however, lessen his stated commitment, and he stresses that even his sense of familial duty to his nephew would not have been

---

<sup>33</sup> On friendship in *Waltharius*, see Benedikt K. Vollmann, “Freundschaft und Herrschaft: zur *amicitia*-Idee im ‘Waltharius’, in der ‘Ecbasis capitivi’ und im ‘Ruodlieb’”, *Mentis amore ligati: Lateinische Freundschaftsdichtung und Dichterfreundschaft in Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Festgabe für Reinhard Düring zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Boris Körkel, Tino Licht and Jolanta Wiendloch (Heidelberg 2001) 509-20, at 510-2.

<sup>34</sup> Lines 1093-6: *Cuius subnixae rogitantis acumine motus / erubuit domini vultum, replicabat honorem / virtutis propriae, qui fors vilesceret inde, si quocumque modo in rebus sibi parceret istis.*

<sup>35</sup> Lines 1107-10: *Sed quia conspicio te plus doluisse pudore / quam caedis damno nec sic discedere velle, / compator propriusque dolor succumbit honori / regis.*

enough to make him fight otherwise:<sup>36</sup>

I tell you, lord: not on account of my dear nephew  
Would I want to break the sworn rule of faith.  
But see! Into certain danger, for you, king, I will go.<sup>37</sup>

By the time he is talking to Walter, by contrast, Hagen ascribes his desire to fight to an insuperable drive to avenge the same nephew:

The rest I might have borne, if this one sorrow had been absent.  
For you plucked a uniquely dear, golden, lovely, precious,  
Tender flower by the curve of your sword.  
This is the deed by which you voided an earlier loving pact,  
And for this I want no treasure for reconciliation.  
I want to learn through arms whether courage belongs to you alone,  
And I seek redress from your hands for the killing of my nephew.<sup>38</sup>

All of these motivations would have been eminently justifiable from a ninth-century perspective, but the point is that Hagen tells himself and everyone else different stories. Gunther's actions had created a conflict between several different bonds of loyalty, all of which should, if all had been well with the world, have been mutually reinforcing, but now no longer were: namely, lordship, kinship, and friendship. The poem does not constitute an argument against heroism, but a mournful and sad musing on its impossibility under the command of any king whose demands conflicted with the fulfilment of the duties legitimately owed to others.

#### GUNTHER AND LOTHAR

Competing and contradictory loyalties of precisely this kind would have been a sadly familiar fact of life to a ninth-century Frankish audience, no matter whether this audience was lay, clerical or monastic. The poem connects especially closely with concerns and complaints expressed by the Frankish elite during and after the troubled years of the civil war of 840-843, during which the heirs of Louis the Pious vied against each other, and in the process made sometimes very heavy and unreasonable demands on their followers.<sup>39</sup> It was not for nothing that Dhuoda, writing from 841 to 843, included in her manual of conduct for her son a hierarchical list of different ties of loyalty, in order of priority: however much she hoped that all these different forms of authority might become combined in a seamless drive towards perfection, she well

---

<sup>36</sup> Sabine Gäbe, "Gefolgschaft und Blutrache im *Waltharius*", *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 21 (1986) 91-4.

<sup>37</sup> Lines 1112-4: *Nam propter carum (fateor tibi, domne) nepotem / promissam fidei normam corrumpere nollem. / Ecce in non dubium pro te, rex, ibo periculum.*

<sup>38</sup> Lines 1272-8: *Cetera fors tulerim, si vel dolor unus abesset. / Unice enim carum rutilum blandum pretiosum / carpsisti florem mucronis falce tenellum. / Haec res est, pactum qua irritasti prior alium, / iccircoque gazam cupio pro foedere nullam. / Sitne tibi soli virtus, volo discere in armis, / deque tuis manibus caedem perquiro nepotis.*

<sup>39</sup> These demands are most vividly represented in Nithard's *Histories*, which describe the hardships and sacrifices Charles the Bald's men had to undergo – sacrifices which, in the case of Nithard, went famously unrewarded: Janet L. Nelson, "Public *Histories* and private history in the work of Nithard", *Speculum* 60:2 (1985) 251-93, at 269-81. Nithard, *Histories*, ed. Ernst Müller, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 44 (Hanover 1907); for a more recent edition (without chapter numbers): Nithard, *Histoire des fils de Louis le Pieux* (Paris 2012).

knew how high the chance was that they would be pitted against each other instead.<sup>40</sup> Dhuoda belonged to a generation which saw the flowering of Carolingian political thought – a flowering which came not, as one might have expected, under the reign of Charlemagne, but under that of his successors, when the mood had turned more sour. The strand of Carolingian political thought that would have the widest impact on later centuries was not developed when everything was going well, but, instead, at the point when every conceivable tie of loyalty was being tested, and all could be lost in their clash. The poem, read in light of this, corresponds very closely to the concerns of that haunted generation. I will argue that the poem's approach to the problem of kings and their demands, to Gunther, and to the final battle is less generic than it might initially seem, and shares a number of features with the portrayal of Lothar in the aftermath of Fontenoy, the most traumatic battle of the civil war. There is no question that *Waltharius* is a highly original poem; but when placed in the context of works in other genres produced within living memory of the civil war, by a generation that was still reeling from its aftermath, it also begins to seem less unique, and more part of a conversation.

Ambivalence regarding fighting and warfare is not only a feature of *Waltharius*; it was pervasive in writings of this time. While individual martial qualities could be prized in an uncomplicated way, *needless* bloody battles were seen as profoundly problematic (this is also, incidentally, a recurrent theme of the second half of the *Aeneid*, which may be why it proved such a fruitful reference point for the *Waltharius* poet). The paradigmatic bloody battle for this period was Fontenoy, fought on 25 June 841 between three sons and one grandson of Louis the Pious (Lothar and Pippin II of Aquitaine on one side, Charles the Bald and Louis the German on the other). Fontenoy, however, was also in many ways highly atypical.<sup>41</sup> The main reason why it is the Carolingian battle discussed at greatest length in the widest range of contemporary sources is that it was so unusually traumatic.<sup>42</sup> The strangest thing about it, in a way, is that it happened at all. Usually, as seen countless times in Nithard, when the armies of Carolingian brothers met, the outcome tended to be decided more often through embassies and strategic positioning: the opposing armies sized each other up, and the weaker side ceded ground.<sup>43</sup> Fontenoy happened

---

<sup>40</sup> Dhuoda, *Liber Manualis*, book III, ed. Pierre Riché, *Manuel pour mon fils*, Sources chrétiennes 225 (Paris 1975); for English translations, Marcelle Thiébaux, *Dhuoda, Handbook for her Warrior Son: Liber manualis* (Cambridge, 1998); Carol Neel, *Handbook for William: A Carolingian Woman's Counsel for the Son* (Lincoln, NE, 1991). Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1984) 36-54; Janet L. Nelson, "Dhuoda", *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. Janet L. Nelson and Patrick Wormald (Cambridge 2007) 106-20; Régine Le Jan, "The multiple identities of Dhuoda", *Ego Trouble: Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Corradini, Matthew Gillis, Rosamond McKitterick and Irene van Renswoude (Vienna 2010) 211-9; Thomas F.X. Noble, "Secular sanctity: forging an ethos for the Carolingian nobility", *Lay Intellectuals*, 8-36, at 15-6; Meg Leja, 'The making of men, not masters: right order and lay masculinity according to Dhuoda and Nithard', *Comitatus* 39 (2008) 1-40.

<sup>41</sup> As recognised by John Gillingham, "Fontenoy and after: pursuing enemies to death in France between the ninth and the eleventh centuries", *Frankland* (n. 21 above) 242-65, at 245-6.

<sup>42</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "Violence in the Carolingian world and the ritualization of ninth-century warfare", *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge 1998) 90-107, at 98-101; Janet L. Nelson, "The search for peace in a time of war: the Carolingian *Brüderkrieg*, 840-843", *Träger und Instrumentarien des Friedens im Hohen und Späten Mittelalter*, ed. J. Fried, *Vorträge und Forschungen* 43 (Sigmarigen 1996) 87-114.

<sup>43</sup> On the rarity of big decisive pitched battles in Carolingian (internal) warfare, see Eric J. Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire: Kingship and Conflict under Louis the German, 817-876* (Ithaca, NY 2006), 95-6.

because on that occasion both sides thought they had a shot. But its level of violence was clearly very unexpected, as testified by the two eyewitness accounts of Nithard's *Histories* and Engelbert's poem lamenting the battle and its violation of kin solidarity ("War screams aloud as here and there dire fighting breaks out, / A brother readies death for his brother, an uncle for his nephew").<sup>44</sup> This does not mean, of course, that anybody thought that war was wrong in and of itself, but some battles certainly could be, and Fontenoy had been one of them. The main surviving contemporary sources blamed Lothar for this battle, and laid the needless loss of life squarely at his door – a thing all the easier to do given that he had been the loser. Nithard, in his account of the days immediately preceding Fontenoy, stresses that it only took place because Lothar was being so unreasonable and refused all attempts at conciliation.

Kings, then, needed to give good reasons before endangering the lives of their faithful men. This is something that both Lothar at Fontenoy and Gunther in *Waltharius* notably failed to do. The character of Gunther, indeed, offers many close parallels with Lothar as painted after Fontenoy by contemporary hostile sources issuing from a variety of different quarters, all stressing his excessive, unreasonable intransigence, his greed, his lack of willingness to compromise, and his incompetence as a king and as a military leader: not only in Nithard, but also in the *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, which similarly stress his greed and cruelty, and, this time from an East rather than West Frankish perspective, the *Annals of Fulda*.<sup>45</sup> All of these traits correspond exactly to the defects of Gunther. It is, of course, impossible to prove that the poet had read Nithard (though the two certainly shared a fondness for Virgil), nor indeed that he had read any of these other texts; but the parallels between Gunther and the demonised, post-Fontenoy figure of Lothar remain striking – not least because of the rather distinctive quality of the criticism attached to Lothar, branding him with his own "form of Carolingian bad kingship".<sup>46</sup>

Greed was stressed above all as Lothar's chief defect as a leader. Lothar was presented by both Nithard and the *Annals of Saint-Bertin* as constantly unhappy with his fair share and always wanting more, leading to ever more injustice and bloodshed.<sup>47</sup> Although greed was certainly among the sins deplored by Carolingian moralists in general, it was not a particularly common go-to allegation in criticizing kings; in this Lothar constitutes a fairly special case.<sup>48</sup> Ninth-century mirrors for princes, when discussing greed, tended to see it instead as a vice typical above all of

---

<sup>44</sup> Ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH *Poetae Aevi Karolini* vol. 2 (Berlin 1884), 138-9; here cited in Paul Dutton's excellent English translation (Paul Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Toronto 1993) 363-5). The poem goes on to contrast the battle with the emotional world of family and friends: "Fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, friends all weep for them".

<sup>45</sup> Nithard, *Histories* II, 10 (n. 39 above); stressing Lothar's greed especially, as well as his incompetence: IV, 1. *Annals of Saint-Bertin, s.a. 840-841*: ed. Georg Waitz, MGH *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 5 (Hanover 1883); tr. Janet L. Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin* (Manchester 1991). *Annals of Fulda, s.a. 841*: ed. Friedrich Kurze, MGH *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 7 (Hanover 1891); tr. Timothy Reuter, *The Annals of Fulda* (Manchester 1992). On Lothar's attempts to control his own image during these years, see Elina Screen, "The importance of the emperor: Lothar I and the Frankish civil war, 840-843", *Early Medieval Europe* 12:1 (2003) 25-51.

<sup>46</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "Bad kingship in the earlier Middle Ages", *Haskins Society Journal: Studies in Medieval History* 8 for 1996 (1999) 1-26, at 22.

<sup>47</sup> Nithard, *Histories* II, 1; III, 3; IV, 1 (n. 39 above); *Annals of St Bertin s.a. 840* (n. 45 above), stressing Lothar's *cupiditas adque crudelitas*.

<sup>48</sup> On avarice in lay mirrors, see Stone, "Waltharius" (n. 2 above) 62.

bad advisors and leading men, rather than of kings themselves.<sup>49</sup> Even the plunder of churches and appropriation of ecclesiastical lands, which produced many complaints against kings from the time of Louis the Pious onwards, was understood as ultimately caused by the rapacity of followers. The standard expectation seemed to be more that kings were likely to make poor decisions in a bid to satisfy the greed of their leading men, and thus be diverted from the aims of peace and justice. The treatment of Lothar (and of Gunther) constitutes an unusual reversal of normal accusations by showing followers forced into a doomed enterprise as the result of the greed of their king, and of his own greed alone.

The legitimacy of any fighting was clearly determined largely by the nature of the adversary. Charlemagne, as contemporary writers never tired of reminding later Carolingian kings, had fought pagan enemies abroad, not civil wars; civil wars were a betrayal of his legacy – an idea put in verse most forcefully by Florus of Lyons, once again in connection with the events of the early 840s.<sup>50</sup> The crushing of the Avars in the 790s had been Charlemagne’s (and the Carolingians’) last large-scale aggressive military campaign against external enemies, and had brought with it unimaginable amounts of gold, prompting Einhard to comment that it was as if the Franks had justly appropriated all the treasure that the Avars had ever unjustly appropriated from other peoples.<sup>51</sup> Given that the conflict in *Waltharius* is fought entirely over Avar gold (the poem uses ‘Hun’ and ‘Avar’ interchangeably), it is hard to resist the notion that this was intended to remind readers of present kings’ struggle over their disputed inheritance; a struggle in which, as in *Waltharius*, many lost a great deal, and which was brought to a similarly indecisive resolution. Like Charlemagne’s bellicose heirs, Walter, Hildigund and Gunther all had equal claims on the Huns’ treasure, since their parents had all contributed to it.<sup>52</sup> Gunther’s wrongful attempt to appropriate all of the treasure could well have served as a criticism of Lothar, whom contemporary sources accused of trying to do the same with the whole empire. The comparison between Charlemagne’s external wars and the destructive civil wars of his grandsons would have been all the more cutting as Lothar’s attempts to appropriate Charlemagne’s symbolic legacy formed a key aspect of his struggle to impose his legitimacy during the civil war.<sup>53</sup> The line immediately following the listing of lost body parts strewn on the ground after the battle takes on a particularly poignant meaning if read in this light: “Thus, thus have they shared the arm-rings of the Avars!”<sup>54</sup>

Reading this line as an implicit comparison between Charlemagne and Lothar would have the virtue of offering an explanation for the sheer strangeness of starting

---

<sup>49</sup> Royal greed does feature in Sedulius Scottus’s *De rectoribus Christianis*, in the title to c. 8; but even in this case, no examples are given for what it might consist in. R.W. Dyson ed., Sedulius Scottus, *De Rectoribus Christianis (On Christian Rulers)* (Woodbridge 2010) 92.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London 1985) 50-1, with text and translation at 264-73.

<sup>51</sup> Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 13, ed. Georg Waitz, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 25 (Hanover 1911) 16; Stone, “*Waltharius*” (n. 2 above) 60; Timothy Reuter, “The end of Carolingian military expansion”, *Charlemagne’s Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814-840)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford 1990) 391-405, reprinted in Reuter, *Medieval Politics* (n. 27 above) 251-67, at 251.

<sup>52</sup> Dronke noted Walter’s, Hildigund’s and Gunther’s equal claims: Dronke, “*Waltharius-Gaiferos*” (n. 6 above) 62.

<sup>53</sup> Screen, “Importance of the emperor” (n. 45 above).

<sup>54</sup> Line 1404: *Sic sic armillas partiti sunt Avarenses!*

the epic with the Hunnic threat, then ditching the Huns entirely after 418 lines (just under a third the length of the poem), and switching to Frankish enemies. This is a puzzling narrative choice, which does not feature in most of the other versions of the story.<sup>55</sup> The switch from external to internal warfare, on the other hand, makes sense if the aim was to reproach present kings for their betrayal of Charlemagne's legacy. Even though the action takes place long before the time of Charlemagne, the description of Europe in the opening of the poem (ll. 1-3) as divided between various peoples and religions could still be pointing to him as an implicit point of contrast: he had been, after all, famously described as "Father of Europe" (*Europae pater*) in the early ninth-century *Poem of Charlemagne and Pope Leo*, which in some ways offers the closest Carolingian literary parallel to *Waltharius*.<sup>56</sup>

The repeated references to Gunther's cowardice also fit in with criticism of Lothar more than with that directed at other Carolingian kings. Cowardice was not a common criticism, partly because direct engagement in battle was no longer a common feature of praise for kings either. Peace was what was praised as the highest achievement of a ruler in most of the political literature of this time.<sup>57</sup> This is the case even in epic poetry, out of all genres the one most likely to feature personal success in battle. The surviving fragments of the *Poem of Charlemagne and Pope Leo* did not praise Charlemagne specifically as a fighter. Ermold the Black's poem in praise of Louis the Pious, although it did its best to portray Louis as a successful military leader, did not feel the need to place him at the vanguard of any battle or siege in order to do so.<sup>58</sup> There are signs, however, of a heightened level of interest in Lothar's behaviour on this count. Nithard, in particular, presents him as eager to lead his followers into war, while remaining prudent in relation to himself: after the death of his father, Lothar demands oaths from everyone with threats, but comes only *pedetemptim* ("cautiously") from Italy, in order to see how things turned out.<sup>59</sup> This willingness to commit the lives of his men without taking too many risks himself finds a strong echo in the figure of Gunther. Nithard pointedly ends his second book with a sentence stating that the unmitigated disaster at Fontenoy was Lothar's first battle, implying incompetence, and the *Annals of Saint-Bertin* also describe his flight after the defeat as "shameful".<sup>60</sup> This may explain the curious claims for Lothar's

---

<sup>55</sup> Dronke, "Waltharius-Gaiferos" (n. 6 above) 30. The Anglo-Saxon *Waldere* poem only survives in fragments; it seems to have shared the two-enemy structure with the Latin version, though it need not have included a full treatment of the Hunnic part of the story (41).

<sup>56</sup> *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa*, ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH *Poetae Latini Aevi Karolini* I (Berlin 1881) 366-84. Dronke, "Waltharius-Gaiferos" (n. 6 above) 75-9; on the "father of Europe" moniker, see Janet L. Nelson, "Charlemagne and Europe", Raleigh lecture, delivered at the British Academy, 12 November 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Nelson, "Search for peace" (n. 42 above); Paul Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power and the Early Medieval Political Imagination* (Oxford 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Alain Dubreucq, "Poésie d'éloge et image de l'empereur à l'époque carolingienne: l'exemple d'Ermold le Noir", *Hortus Artium Mediaevalium* 8 (2002) 193-204, at 196. Philippe Depreux, "La pietas comme principe de gouvernement d'après le Poème sur Louis le Pieux d'Ermold le Noir", *The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Joyce Hill and Mary Swan (Turnhout 1998) 201-24.

<sup>59</sup> Nithard, *Histories* II, 1 (n. 39 above); an echo of this may be found in the *Annals of Fulda*, s.a. 840 (n. 45 above).

<sup>60</sup> Nithard, *Histories* II, 10 (n. 39 above): *Qua finem primi certaminis dedit Lodharius terminetur liber secundus*. Nithard does state that Lothar and Louis the German had fought "hard" (*strenue*), but this does not necessarily reflect on Lothar personally. *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 841 (n. 45 above): *turpiter victus aufugit*.

individual prowess in sources sympathetic to him, such as Engelbert's poem and Agnellus of Ravenna's account of the battle; both state that Lothar himself fought bravely, but was let down by the flight of everyone else on his side.<sup>61</sup> The atypical nature of this praise in comparison with that offered for earlier kings suggests that they perhaps protest too much, and that criticism of Lothar's military abilities was in the air: Engelbert and Agnellus may indeed offer an insight into Lothar's own counter-propaganda.

The unanimity in interpretation with which Nithard and other contemporary sources treat Lothar constitutes evidence of a concerted propaganda effort on the part of Louis the German and Charles the Bald. This is very clear in the treatment of Lothar's flight, which is described in strikingly similar terms in both Nithard and the Annals of Saint-Bertin. The Annals end their account of Fontenoy by showing Lothar "turning his back" to flee: *Hlotharius terga vertens*. Nithard uses the exact same words: Lothar *terga vertit*. The phrase is relatively common in classical literature, but there is every chance that both Prudentius in the Annals and Nithard in his *Histories* had in mind a more pointed reference to the Vulgate, where, in Psalm 77:9, the children of Ephraim *terga verterunt in die belli* ("turned back on the day of battle").<sup>62</sup> The phrase implicitly associated Lothar with the rest of what is said of the tribe of Ephraim in the psalm: "They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law". The reference is particularly meaningful given the efforts made by Louis the German and Charles the Bald to present the battle as a judgment of God in their favour.<sup>63</sup> The presence of this same biblical borrowing in two sources written so close to the event, without further evidence of a direct textual connection, suggests that both were voicing a wider-ranging post-battle spin, to which the *Waltharius* poet may well have been exposed, whether in written or in oral form. (The word *terga* in fact does occur in the poem in the line describing Gunther's flight, though since the back involved is his horse's rather his own, perhaps this point should not be stretched too far.<sup>64</sup>)

There is some distinctiveness, then, in the inventory of Lothar's flaws during those years, which makes the match with Gunther all the more telling. Some of these traits, admittedly, also became ascribed to other Carolingian kings of the same generation in later years, though nowhere near as consistently nor in so neat a package. Even then, there is some evidence that, in so doing, these later sources were conjuring the spectre of Lothar as the paradigmatic figure kings ought to avoid resembling. This is especially the case in the treatment of Andernach (876), the other major military disaster in a civil war of the ninth century. Criticism of Charles the Bald in connection with this event seems intended to evoke both Lothar and Fontenoy. Andernach, for example, is the only other instance apart from Fontenoy of the use of the phrase *terga vertere* in the Annals of Saint-Bertin, which suggests that Hincmar (who by then had taken over writing the Annals) was consciously echoing

---

<sup>61</sup> Engelbert (n. 44 above); Andreas Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, c. 174: ed. Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH *Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum s. VI-IX* (Hanover 1878) 265-391; for an English translation, Deborah M. Deliyannis, *Agnellus of Ravenna: The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna* (Washington, DC 2004).

<sup>62</sup> KJV Psalms 78:9. Other uses of this expression in the Vulgate are equally damning: e.g. 1 Maccabees 11:55, about Demetrius; or Genesis 14:10, about the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Nithard, *Histories* III, 1 (n. 39 above).

<sup>64</sup> Line 1063; see above, n. 30.

what Prudentius had written about Lothar in 841.<sup>65</sup> Andernach, presumably not coincidentally, was also treated explicitly as a judgment of God, which made the Psalms reference especially relevant. Charles the Bald was also presented as overbearing in ways reminiscent of Lothar (the parallel may have been further motivated by Hincmar's view that the imperial title had gone to Charles's head, again recalling Lothar). The Annals of Saint-Bertin were not the only source to make the parallel between Charles the Bald and Lothar, and between Andernach and Fontenoy: in the Annals of Fulda, Charles the Bald is nowhere accused of being "greedy" (which, as we have seen, was a relatively unusual accusation to make against a king) except at Andernach, where he is described as such no less than three times. The memory of Lothar, then, seems to have prompted new ways of narrating the failures of kings of that generation. These did not last long past that generation (greed thereafter seems to have again disappeared from the normal register of criticism leveled at kings whose right to rule was not in dispute), though it may have been part of how they came to be remembered. Regino of Prüm, writing much later, reserved the accusation of greed for that particular generation, and did not level it at any later kings.<sup>66</sup> Although, in this sense, the criticism of Gunther in *Waltharius* could have been inspired by any of Louis the Pious's sons, some aspects of the poem fit Lothar (and Fontenoy) better than any other context. Lothar's reputation for obstinacy and his unwillingness to compromise for the sake of peace is a particularly good match for the long passage portraying Gunther as a particularly difficult customer in negotiations over the gold, showing him refusing even a substantial part of the treasure in order to get all of it (ll. 611-43).<sup>67</sup>

Identifying Gunther with Lothar also helps to make sense of another surprising aspect of the poem, that is, the location of the fighting. Why the Vosges? This seems a strange place to choose for an epic about a man trying to travel from Pannonia to Aquitaine; the Vosges are not exactly on the most direct route between the two. Things fall into place a bit more, however, if one notes that all of the locations connected with Gunther and his followers were situated in Lothar's kingdom at the time of the civil war: Metz (Gamalo, ll. 582 and 644), Worms (Gunther himself; Hadaward, l. 831; Gerwit, l. 940), Strasbourg (Trogus, l. 1009), Speyer (Tanastus, l. 1010). This was a contested border zone, which was eventually split between Lothar and Louis the German after Verdun; Lothar, however, retained the Vosges region.<sup>68</sup> The odd one out in the list of followers is Ekiwid, who was from Saxony (l. 756), but Saxon nobles had been divided in their support between Lothar and Louis the German during the civil war, so that a Saxon follower would not have been out of place for a figure representing Lothar.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Annals of Saint-Bertin, *s.a.* 876 (n. 45 above).

<sup>66</sup> Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, *s.a.* 866, ed. Friedrich Kurze, MGH *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 50 (Hanover 1890); for an English translation: Simon MacLean, *History and Politics in Late Carolingian and Ottonian Europe: The Chronicle of Regino of Prüm and Adalbert of Magdeburg* (Manchester 2009) 151: "the hearts of kings are greedy and never satisfied" (quoting Justin, in relation to Louis the German's attack on Charles the Bald in 858); on Andernach, *s.a.* 876, accusing Charles of overbearing pride and greed, once again in terms reminiscent of criticism of Lothar.

<sup>67</sup> Nithard, *Histories* IV, 3 (n. 39 above).

<sup>68</sup> Hans Hummer, *Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe: Alsace and the Frankish Realm, 600-1000* (Cambridge 2005) 169.

<sup>69</sup> Nithard, *Histories* IV, 2 (n. 39 above), in connection with the Saxon Stellinga revolt; he used the episode to draw a strong and explicit contrast between Lothar and Charlemagne. On the revolt, see Eric

## POST-MORTEM

I have argued that the poet's treatment of Gunther can be read as a conscious evocation of Lothar at Fontenoy. What would have been the point of this evocation, and how did it connect with the concerns and interests of his audience?

Above all, it means that the poet's treatment of the final battle can be seen as pushing one particular interpretation of Fontenoy, as a disaster for everyone involved (not only the losers), responsibility for which ultimately fell on the king himself rather than on his supporters. This interpretation in fact seems to have been widespread, and in this Fontenoy is again exceptional. After Andernach, Charles the Bald's followers were presented as a cause for the disaster as much as himself, and their deaths as a just punishment for their looting and violence. Fontenoy, by contrast, constitutes one of the rare occasions where the followers of a king were blamed for the disaster much less than the king himself, and also where the overwhelming tendency in all sources was to express sorrow at their deaths rather than smugness. If Fontenoy had been a judgment of God, it seems to have been increasingly interpreted as one which no king had really won: what was remembered above all was the loss of innocent lives and the transgression of every code of conduct.<sup>70</sup> *Waltharius* ascribes the same sense of innocence to Gunther's men: in his prayer, Walter thus hopes to see the dead Franks in Paradise, stressing a basic sense of solidarity with them (l. 1167).

The deeply conflicted attitude of the Frankish elite after the battle, and the feeling, even for the victors, that there was perhaps more in it to regret than there was to celebrate, is reflected in the fact that the victors still felt the need to hold a council on the following Sunday, in an evident attempt to stage-manage the reception of their actions (as well as, perhaps, to obtain some sort of closure). This ambivalent attitude is evident in Nithard, who, although he claims to have fought hard during it, gives only the barest description of the battle itself, and focuses instead on its penitential aftermath.<sup>71</sup> The sort of sensibility generated by these events gives some poignancy to Walter's strange behaviour just before the battle with Gunther's men, when, after having bragged that no Frank would take his treasure and live to go and tell his wife about it, he falls to the ground begging for forgiveness (ll. 564-5): perhaps what he needed to apologise for was less his arrogance than the flippancy with which he had treated the prospective massacre of his enemies. In a more satirical vein, it could also be read as a dig at some of the contradictions between the practical realities of warrior life and the contemporary insistence on penance – though it is difficult to be sure whether the intention was critical or not, and whether this scene was meant to denounce the little hypocrisies of life in the world of Carolingian warfare or, on the contrary, to sympathise once more with warriors torn between competing demands. There is no need to choose between them, since the poem is open to either reading,

---

J. Goldberg, "Popular revolt, dynastic politics, and aristocratic factionalism in the early middle ages: the Saxon Stellinga reconsidered", *Speculum* 70:3 (1995) 467-501.

<sup>70</sup> The theme of kin turned against itself appears in Engelbert, but also, later (and from a West Frankish rather than a pro-Lothar perspective), in Audradus Modicus's second Revelation: ed. L. Traube, *O Roma nobilis: Philologische Untersuchungen aus dem Mittelalter* (Munich 1891) 83; for an English translation: P. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, 2nd edn. (Toronto 2004) 351-2. For another take on the battle as a disaster for all sides, see the Annals of Xanten *s.a.* 841: ed. Bernhard von Simson, *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 12 (Hanover 1909).

<sup>71</sup> Nithard, *Histories* II, 10-III, 1 (n. 39 above); on his treatment of Fontenoy, see Nelson, "Public Histories" (n. 39 above) 262-4 and 273-4.

and either could have been relevant to different contemporary audiences. A similar sense of competing demands is also evident in the scene where Walter reattaches heads to corpses and prays for his victims (ll. 1157-67).<sup>72</sup> Like the funeral rites after Fontenoy for Nithard, its key function within the text is to keep any inappropriate sense of triumphalism at arm's length – as well as, perhaps, suggesting that all this was too little too late. As with Lothar at Fontenoy, however, the shame did not lie with the victors, but with the loser, identified as the prime mover behind the conflict.

All this would have resonated with military elites throughout the Frankish kingdoms. A case might be made, however, for placing the origin of the poem in Aquitaine (Walter's homeland) – linked to the Vosges region *via* the alliance between Lothar and Pippin II during the years of the civil war.<sup>73</sup> This suggestion has been made before.<sup>74</sup> It is, of course, impossible to know for sure whether the poem originated there or not; but it would fit into place particularly well within the political context of that region. Louis the Pious, before dying, had disinherited his grandson Pippin II and awarded his kingdom to Charles the Bald. Pippin II did not renounce his claim, and aligned himself with Lothar. This created a crisis of leadership in Aquitaine, and Aquitainian nobles fought on both sides, Charles's and Pippin's, at Fontenoy. Engelbert, who had fought on Lothar's side, may have been writing from an Aquitainian perspective;<sup>75</sup> if he was, his reference to intra-familial struggle and the sorrow of family and friends would take on a more pointed meaning, and refer to political splits not just within the royal family, but within aristocratic families – even more profoundly divided in their loyalties in that region than in any other at the time. Nor did this situation change immediately after Fontenoy: although Lothar quickly dropped any official support for Pippin, the latter remained at large in Aquitaine, and Charles took over the area only with great difficulty and after a decade of struggle.

Contradictory loyalties such as those described in *Waltharius* would have been especially relevant to any aristocratic audience during these years, but it must have been a particularly “live” concern to the Aquitainian nobility. Being led into error and forced into making bad choices by an intransigent and self-serving king must have found particular resonance in this context, and gives richer meaning to the character of Hagen. The poem uses the figure of Gunther to put all the blame onto Lothar, as did so many other contemporary sources. Part of the point of the poem may have been to try to distance the Aquitainian nobility from Lothar retrospectively, during the

---

<sup>72</sup> Kratz, *Mocking Epic* (n. 7 above) 44-5.

<sup>73</sup> For the Aquitainian angle on Fontenoy and its aftermath, see Janet L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (Harlow 1992) esp. 101-4, 118, 121, 144.

<sup>74</sup> Dronke, following Ramón Menéndez-Pidal (*Romancero Hispánico* vol. 1 (Madrid, 1953) 286-300), considered the story on the whole likely to be Visigothic / Aquitainian in origin, not only because Walter is himself an Aquitainian, but also because the Walter tradition as a whole, in different forms, seems to have been especially vital in Septimania and Spain: Dronke, “Waltharius-Gaiferos” (n. 6 above) 34-5 and 79. For another argument placing *Waltharius* in Aquitaine, see Karl F. Werner, “L'Aquitaine à l'honneur: la patrie et l'époque de l'auteur du poème épique *Waltharius*”, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France* (1989) 294-5, for a brief summary; developed in Karl F. Werner, “*Hludovicus Augustus*: gouverner l'empire chrétien – idées et réalités”, *Charlemagne's Heir* (n. 51 above) 3-123, at 101-23. Werner's further suggestion that the poet was Ermold the Black is more speculative.

<sup>75</sup> Godman, *Poetry* (n. 50 above) 50; though the total absence of reference to Pippin in the poem may make the Aquitainian connection marginally less likely. Dhuoda also wrote in this region: the problems of Aquitaine / Septimania in those years clearly made for fruitful ground for explorations of duty and lordship.

years of conflict with Charles the Bald following the Verdun partition of 843. Some of the Aquitainian courtly audience may have been concerned to explain to Charles why they might have fought on Pippin's side; or perhaps it was those who had fought on Charles's side, but now found it difficult to hold on to their property in view of Pippin's enduring control over the region, who felt that they had some explaining to do. Presumably some of the explaining that needed to be done was also to themselves. It is difficult to tell where the poet's loyalties lie, and perhaps partisanship was less the point than shared problems and experiences regardless of political alignment: every reader and listener could decide for themselves, in their heart of hearts, which king's return and thirty-year reign of peace it was that they were looking forward to – Pippin's, or Charles's. All, either way, would have been faced by similar anxieties over loyalty, and impossible moral and political choices: between ties of friendship, family, and fidelity to a king – all of which must have been sorely tested for all members of the Aquitainian elite during these years, and indeed for a long time afterwards (Aquitaine remained a region of divided loyalties well into the 860s). The point of the poem lay in the difficulty of making a choice, and also in the suspicion that it might sometimes be impossible to make a correct choice. All sides, one way or the other, had something to regret, and something to atone for. Either way, the eventual reconciliation of Walter and Hagen, maimed and bloodied, but alive, while the king was turned into an irrelevant, speechless figure, would have constituted a welcome message of hope, forecasting the possibility of reunion.

#### *WALTHARIUS* AND PESSIMISM ABOUT KINGSHIP

The overwhelming mood of *Waltharius* has little to do with a victory high; throughout, from the deaths of Gunther's men to the horrible wounds inflicted on Walter and Hagen, it stresses the costs more than the joys of success. In this it is very different in tone from earlier ninth-century epics. It is also very different from later ones: *Waltharius* is much closer in mood to Engelbert's dark and mournful poem than it is to later ninth- or tenth-century war poetry (not much of which admittedly survives). It has none of the facile triumphalism surrounding the figure of Odo in Abbo of Saint-Germain's poem on the Viking siege of Paris,<sup>76</sup> or the tenth-century panegyric to Berengar:<sup>77</sup> in both of these poems the difference between right and wrong expresses only the difference between two opposing sides, and criticism of one ruler essentially functions as a way to lay the ground for the triumph of the "right" side (triumphalism required a lot more work in the case of Berengar, as the poet tried to write victory into a period of unmitigated disasters, but if anything this means that the point is stressed even more).

*Waltharius* is different above all because of the remarkable absence in the poem of *any* figure that could be said to embody a positive vision of kingship: not the kings at the beginning of the poem, who cave in before the Huns; not Attila; and especially not Gunther.<sup>78</sup> The criticism levelled at Gunther is not a way of suggesting

<sup>76</sup> Abbo of Saint-Germain, *De bello Parisiaco libri III*, ed. Georg Pertz, MGH *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 1 (Hanover 1871); Nirmal Dass, *Viking Attacks on Paris: The "Bella Parisiaca Urbis" of Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés* (Paris 2007).

<sup>77</sup> *Gesta Berengarii imperatoris*, ed. Paul Winterfeld, MGH *Poetae aevi Carolini* IV, 1 (Berlin 1899) 354-401. For a recent discussion: Laurent Feller, "L'exercice du pouvoir par Bérenger Ier, roi d'Italie (888-915) et empereur (915-924)", *Médiévales* 58 (2010) 129-49, at 145-7.

<sup>78</sup> Florio, "Incoherencias" (n. 4 above) 150, notes the overwhelmingly negative treatment of all kings in the poem, though he understands the intended message as a more general Christian one regarding the fragility of earthly power.

Walter as an ideal king instead of him: although Walter does end up becoming king in the end, the poem spends no time on this, nor on developing an alternative vision for kingship. That Walter does not represent a “good king” in waiting is further suggested by the lack of connection between the qualities ascribed to him and the qualities normally associated with Carolingian kings in praise poems,<sup>79</sup> or indeed in mirrors for princes composed during the ninth century. Walter retains throughout the identity of a lone warrior, not a leader. The solution offered in the poem does not involve replacing a bad king with a good one: the poem also takes no interest in the future of Gunther, who, one can only suppose, remains king of Franks after the end of the story. Who should be king, then, seems to be of very little interest to the poet; the solution he offers instead lies in ignoring bad kings, and putting all of one’s efforts into acting honourably in relation to horizontal ties. It is striking in this respect that although the concept of fidelity, *fides*, turns up several times in the course of the poem, it is referenced almost exclusively to denote the duties of friendship, not lordship.<sup>80</sup> The language of fidelity is only used towards a king in Walter’s speech to Attila, where it is called on with the obvious intention to deceive (ll. 149 and 158-9). The poem as a whole privileges horizontal ties as the most crucial form of loyalty.

This level of pessimism, and stinging disappointment with Frankish kingship, gives *Waltharius* a markedly different tone from political writings produced either earlier in the ninth century or in the tenth, whether in poetry or prose. Competition between kings was of course if anything more rife after 888; but this criticism was essentially aimed at discrediting one candidate in order to push forward a better, alternative one. It does not amount to the same sort of disillusionment with *all* available candidates. While the question of who should be king was much more controversial in the tenth than it had been in the ninth century (when no single king’s right to rule was generally contested, but rather the extent of the territory they should rule), the tenth century displays much less pessimism about kings in general,<sup>81</sup> and in those regions where direct royal intervention was considerably lessened (Aquitaine being a case in point for the tenth century), it is equally hard to see how kings could have generated the scale of resentment discernible in *Waltharius*.

Deep engagement with the idea of kingship, together with an equally deep pessimism about it, was, by contrast, a distinctive feature of a current of political literature of the 840s to 870s, when politically active followers sometimes declared themselves let down by kings in general, and sometimes their own kings in particular, while still acknowledging that they would, and probably should, remain kings regardless. This combination of intense negativity without arguing for a change in leadership is characteristic, for instance, of Nithard’s and Hincmar’s respective grievances against Charles the Bald. Paschasius Radbertus was equally sour about contemporary rulers in the early 850s.<sup>82</sup> In none of these cases were hopes for the

---

<sup>79</sup> See Florio, “Incoherencias” (n. 4 above) 155 on the difference between the qualities ascribed to Walter and the qualities praised in the *Poem of Charlemagne and Pope Leo* and Ermold’s poem on Louis.

<sup>80</sup> Lines 1090, 1240, 1267, 1411 and 1439 between Walter and Hagen; line 1443 also describes their friendship as a *pactum*; line 550 for Hildegund’s *fides* towards Walter.

<sup>81</sup> Janet Nelson has noted the “profound confidence in Christian rulership” characteristic of the tenth century: Janet L. Nelson, “Rulers and government”, *New Cambridge Medieval History* vol. III, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge 1999), 95-129, at 96.

<sup>82</sup> Paschasius Radbertus, *Epitaphium Arsenii* II, 15, 4-6, ed. Ernst Dümmler, *Philosophische und historische Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 2 (1900) 1-98; for an

future placed on the arrival of a different king. This made the disappointment with kingship expressed during these few decades both much more radical and more fatalistic than at any other time during the early middle ages. *Waltharius* shares both this radicalism and this fatalism. Its treatment of Gunther, and of the various unfortunates pulled into his morally compromising orbit, makes most sense in this era. If the preface by “Gerald” was composed later than the poem, during the course of the tenth century, its description of the poem as a literary game, and an entertaining way to while away the hours, could indicate that a tenth-century audience, while still capable of appreciating the literary genius of the poem, was no longer so attuned to its subversive political message.

I have argued that *Waltharius* can be read as political poetry, in a way that a lot of ninth-century courtly poetry was political poetry. It would be a mistake to read hostility towards warriors into this text, when what it is offering is much more likely to be a highly sympathetic representation of the tensions and contradictions in Carolingian elite lay life in the decade or so after Fontenoy. The poem neither derides lay warriors nor gives them unproblematic support: instead, it is a poignant rendering of the problems at the heart of their condition. If it has playful, parodic elements, it may be better to think of it as loving, admiring parody, in the manner of *Don Quijote*: despite some irony in its treatment of certain characters, its mood is fundamentally one of nostalgia, and of wistfulness that the present time no longer had much room for this particular brand of heroism. The *Waltharius* poet turned an old, existing oral tradition into an epic that spoke to present emotions and dilemmas, and to a very contemporary political situation. Great artist that he was, he also wrote much more than a mere *roman à clef*: even if his poem did reflect pointedly current concerns, it also addressed more broadly the very real difficulties of being a member of the lay elite, and represented them on an epic scale. Like many of the works produced by the generation of writers who lived with the memory of Fontenoy, it was responding to highly contemporary political problems; but again like them, the richness of its answers to these problems, and the complexity of its portrayal of human relationships, ensured its continued success and relevance for centuries after its composition.

---

English translation: Allen Cabaniss, *Charlemagne's Cousins: Contemporary Lives of Adalard and Wala* (Syracuse, NY 1967).