

AUTUMNTIDE of the MIDDLE AGES

A study of forms of life and thought of
the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in
France and the Low Countries



Johan Huizinga

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TRANSLATED BY DIANE WEBB

EDITED BY GRAEME SMALL AND ANTON VAN DER LEM

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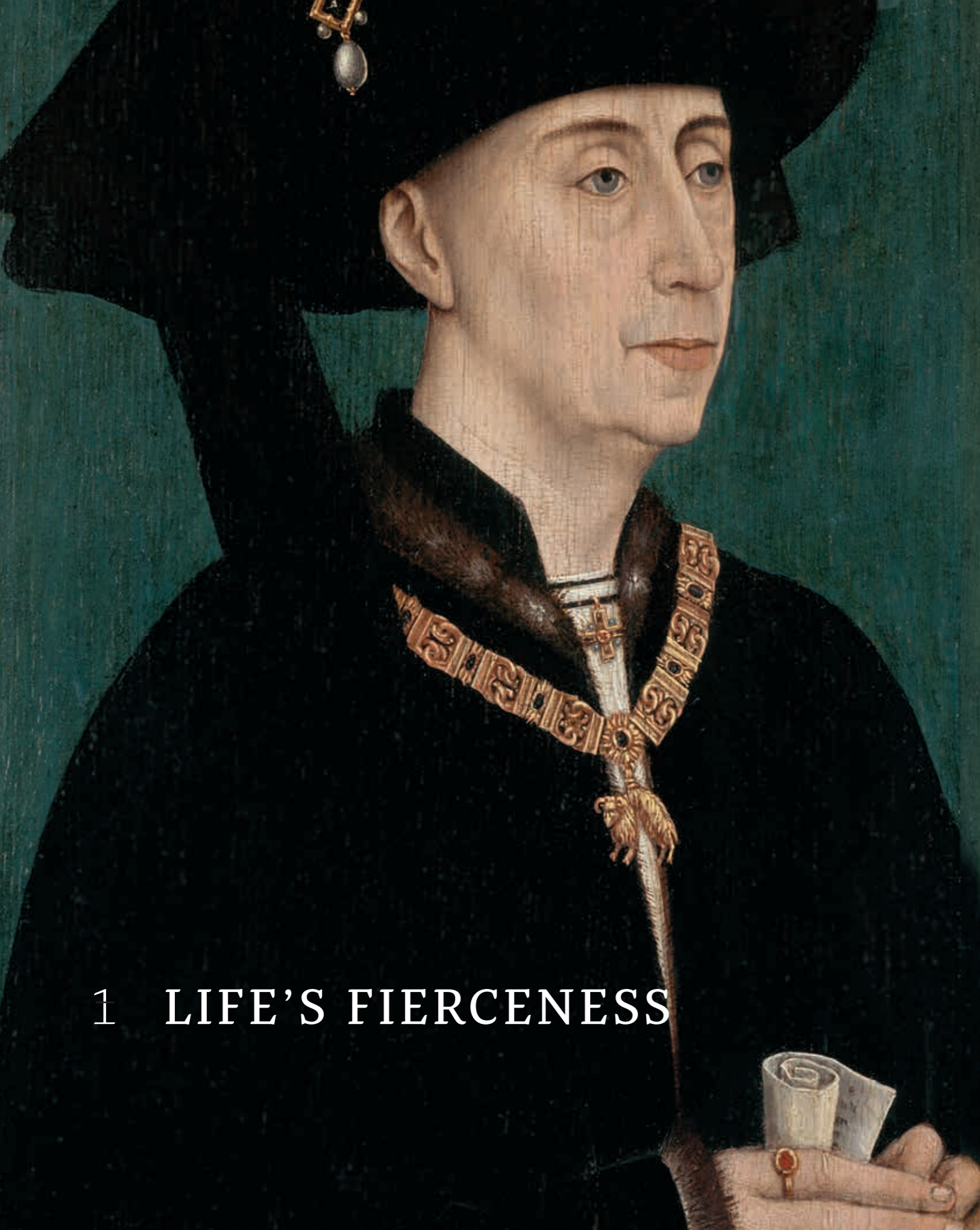
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1 LIFE'S FIERCENESS

WHEN THE WORLD was five centuries younger, all the affairs of life had much sharper outward forms than they do now. Between grief and gladness, between calamity and good fortune, the distance seemed greater than it does to us; everything one experienced had that high degree of immediacy and absoluteness that joy and sorrow still have in the minds of children. Every event, every action was surrounded by emphatic and explicit forms, was raised to the dignity of a strict, rigidly prescribed style of life. The big things – birth, marriage, death – were endowed by the sacraments with the splendour of the divine mystery. But lesser matters too – a journey, a task, a visit – were accompanied by a thousand benedictions, ceremonies, mottos, forms of conduct.

There was less relief from disasters and dearth than there is now; they were more terrifying and more anguishing. Sickness contrasted more sharply with health; the biting cold and fearful darkness of winter were evils that were much more real. Honour and riches were enjoyed more deeply and more avidly, for they stood out more starkly than they do now against the howling poverty and abasement. A fur tabard, a roaring fire, drink and banter and a soft bed still possessed that intense degree of pleasure that was perhaps propagated the longest and embodied most vividly by the English novella in its description of life's joys. And every aspect of life was conspicuously and horribly public. Lepers shook their rattles and walked in procession, beggars wailed in churches and displayed their deformities. Every rank, every order, every profession was recognizable by its dress. Great lords never went out without flaunting their coats of arms and liveries, inspiring awe and envy. Dispensing justice, hawking wares, weddings and funerals all proclaimed themselves loudly with processions, cries, lamentations and music. The lover wore the token of his lady, the members of a brotherhood its emblem, the followers of a lord his colours and blazons.

Town and countryside, too, were dominated in their outward appearance by such contrast and diversity. The city did not dwindle, as our cities do, into slapdash suburbs of decayed factories and silly little country houses, but lay enclosed within its walls, a self-contained picture, bristling with countless towers. [1.1] However tall and sturdy the stone houses of nobles or wealthy merchants, it was the churches – massive, towering structures – that continued to dominate the townscape. [1.2]

Just as the contrast between summer and winter was starker than in our time, so too the contrast between light and dark, silence and noise. The modern city hardly knows perfect darkness and perfect silence, the effect of a single light or a single, far-off cry.

The constant contrast, the multiplicity of forms with which everything thrust itself upon the mind meant that everyday life emanated a thrill, a passionate intimation, which manifests itself in that volatile mood of raw exuberance, intense cruelty and deep tenderness, in the midst of which medieval city life unfolds.

There was one sound that always rose above all the noise and commotion



1.1 View of the towers of Bruges. Background of the painting by the Master of the Legend of Saint Lucy, *Lamentation of Christ* (fragment of the *Lamentation with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria*).

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART



1.2 The premises of the Genoese and Florentine merchants in Bruges. From Antonius Sanderus, *Flandria Illustrata* (Cologne: Cornelius ab Egmond, 1641-1644).
GENT, UNIVERSITEITSBIBLIOTHEEK GENT

of life, and which – its bright chimes intermingling, yet always unmistakable – temporarily suspended everything in a sphere of order: the bells. In daily life the bells were like cautionary good spirits, whose well-known voice tolled sorrow, tolled joy, tolled rest, tolled unrest, then summoning, then warning. They were known by familiar names: Fat Jacqueline, the Great Bell Roland; one knew the difference between sounding and tolling. Despite the excess of bell-ringing, people were not insensitive to the sound. In 1455 in Valenciennes, when two burghers fought a notorious duel that kept the city and the entire Burgundian court in extraordinary suspense, the big bell sounded for the duration of the fight, ‘which was hideous to hear’, according to Chastelain.¹ Hanging in the belfry of the Church of Our Lady in Antwerp was the old alarm bell of 1316, called *Orida* (i.e. *horrida*, ‘the terrible’).² [1.3] Sounding the alarm bell was referred to as ‘sounding the panic’, ‘raising the panic’.³ Originally meaning ‘unrest’, the term ‘effroi’ – *exfredus* – came to mean the notification of that state by ringing the bells, then simply ‘alarm signal’ and finally ‘terror’. How terrifically intoxicating it must have been when all the churches and convents of Paris rang their bells from morning to evening and even the whole night, because a pope had been elected who would put an end to the schism, or because peace had been declared between Burgundy and Armagnac.⁴

The processions, too, must have been deeply moving. In anxious times, and these occurred often, there were sometimes processions day after day, for weeks on end. When the fatal feud between the houses of Orléans and Burgundy finally led to open civil war, and the king, Charles VI, takes up



1.3 The alarm bell ‘Orida’ from the tower of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk in Antwerp. The bell is 1.37 metres in diameter and bears the inscription: MAGISTER : JERADUS : DE LEODIO : ME : FECIT : ANNO DOMINI : MCCCXVI : O : RIDA : VOCOR. ‘Master Geert of Liège made me in the year of our Lord 1316. I am called the terrible’.

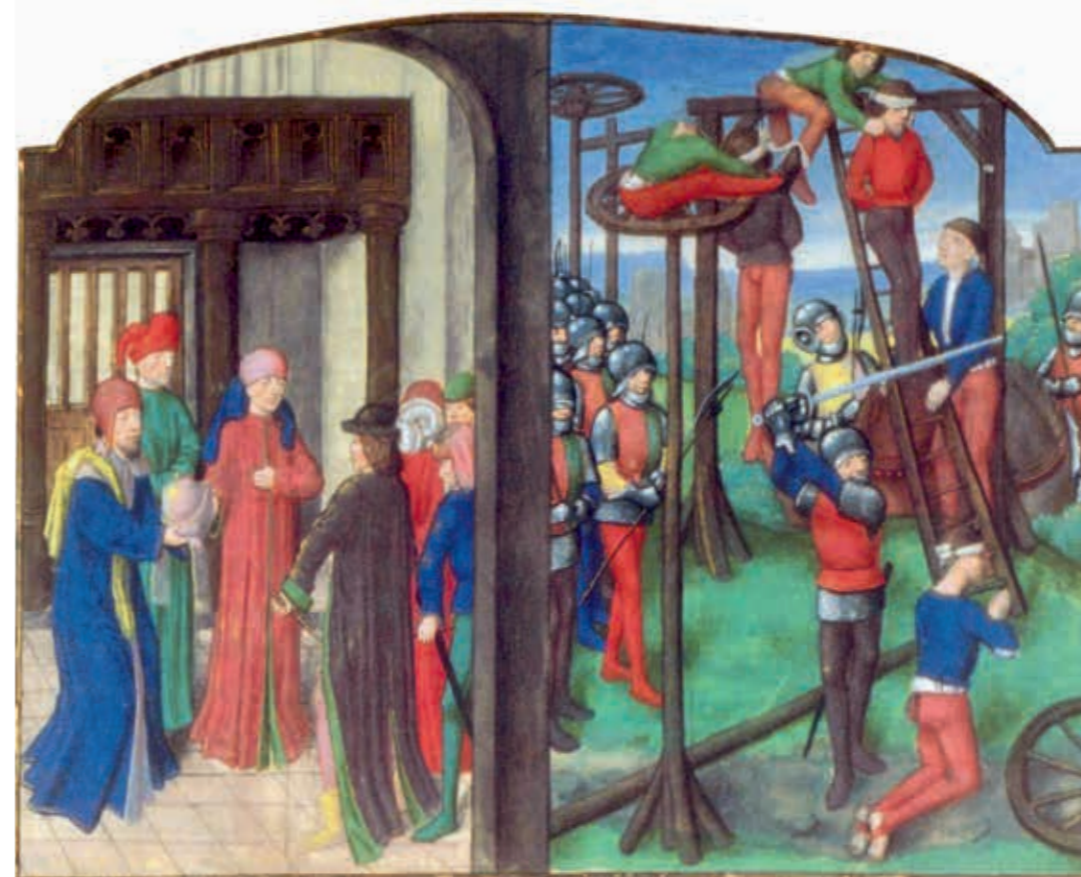
ANTWERP, MUSEUM VLEESHUIS



1.4 The oriflamme – made, according to legend, from the shroud of Saint Denis – was a sacred banner of red silk with gold stars. Here the French army carries the oriflamme against the Flemish foot soldiers in the Battle of Courtrai, 11 July 1302. The French were defeated and the battle was later named the Battle of the Golden Spurs after the French knights’ pillaged spurs. In 1973 the 11th of July was officially declared the public holiday of the Flemish Community in Belgium. Loyset Liédet, miniature on parchment in *Les anciennes chroniques de Flandres*. Bruges, c. 1470–1480. PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

the oriflamme in 1412 to go with John the Fearless to fight the Armagnacs, whose pact with England has made them traitors, daily processions are decreed in Paris as soon as the king finds himself in enemy territory. [1.4] They last from the end of May to sometime in July, always composed of different groups, orders or guilds, and always following a different route and parading different relics: ‘the most piteous processions ever seen in human memory’. Everyone walked barefoot and on an empty stomach, the lords of Parlement and poor townfolk alike; those who could, carried a candle or a torch; there were always many small children among them. From the villages around Paris, too, poor country folk walked long distances, barefoot. People joined them or watched ‘with intense weeping, with bitter tears, with great devotion’. And it rained hard nearly every day.⁵

Then there were the princely entries, prepared with all available ingenuity and skill. And the continuous, countless executions. [1.5] The cruel thrill and the rough compassion of the scaffold were an important element in the spiritual nourishment of the people. It was a spectacle with a moral. Atrocious punishments were devised for atrocious depredations: in Brussels, a young arsonist and murderer, bound with a chain that could turn around a stake, is placed inside a circle of burning faggots. With moving words, he holds himself up as an example to the people, ‘and he melted their hearts so much that everyone dissolved into tears of pity. And his end was praised



1.5 Nobles were beheaded with the sword; ordinary people were hanged. French miniature from the end of the 15th century from a manuscript of Flavius Josephus, *Antiquités judaïques*. PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

as the finest ever seen.’⁶ Lord Mansart du Bois, an Armagnac beheaded in Paris in 1411 during the Burgundian reign of terror, not only readily pardons the executioner, who customarily requests this, but also asks the executioner to kiss him. ‘There was a throng of people, almost all of whom wept hot tears.’⁷ Often the victims were great lords, and then the people enjoyed the satisfaction of witnessing the iron hand of the law and the stern warning of the vicissitudes of worldly grandeur more vividly than through any painted *exemplum* or *danse macabre*. The spectacle could not fail to make an impression; the authorities made sure of that: the gentlemen made their sad journey wearing the symbols of their grandeur. Jean de Montaigne, the king’s Grand Master of the Household (grand maître d’hôtel) and victim of the hate of John the Fearless, rides to the scaffold seated high on a cart, preceded by two trumpeters; he wears full ceremonial dress: a hood, a long-skirted tunic, breeches that are half-white, half-red, and gold spurs on his feet; it is with those gold spurs that his beheaded body hangs on the gallows. The wealthy canon Nicolas d’Orge-mont, a victim of the Armagnacs’ vengeance in 1416, is carried through Paris in a rubbish cart, wearing a large violet cloak and hood, to view the beheading of two companions, before being condemned to life imprisonment ‘on bread of sorrow and water of fear’. The head of Maître Oudart de Bussy, who had refused a seat in Parlement, was exhumed by special order

of Louis XI and put on display in a scarlet, fur-lined hood 'in accordance with the fashion of the councillors of Parlement' in the market square at Hesdin, together with an explanatory rhyme. The king himself writes about the affair with grisly mirth.⁸

Less common than the processions and the executions were the sermons of itinerant preachers, who came now and then to stir up the people with their words. We newspaper readers can barely imagine the powerful impact of the word on an unsated and unknowing mind. Friar Richard, a popular preacher who was privileged to be confessor to Joan of Arc, preached for ten consecutive days in Paris in 1429. He began at five in the morning and finished between ten and eleven – mostly at the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, beneath whose galleries the famous Dance of Death was painted – standing with his back to the open charnel houses, in which the skulls were piled up in full view above the surrounding arcade. When he announced, after his tenth sermon, that it would be the last, because he did not have permission to deliver more, 'the people, great and small, wept as piteously and as profoundly as if they were witnessing their next of kin being buried, and he did too'. When he finally leaves Paris, the people think he will still preach on Sunday at Saint-Denis; in great herds, six thousand strong according to the anonymous Bourgeois of Paris, they troop out of town on Saturday night to assure themselves of a good place, and spend the night in the open.⁹

The Franciscan Antoine Fradin, too, was forbidden to preach in Paris, because he railed furiously against the bad government of the day. But this was precisely what endeared him to the people. They guarded him day and night in the Convent of the Cordeliers; the women stood guard with their munitions of ash and stones at the ready. The proclamation forbidding this watch is laughed at: what does the king know about it! When at last Fradin, banished, must leave the city after all, the people escort him, 'loudly bewailing and lamenting his departure'.¹⁰

When the saintly Dominican Vincent Ferrer comes to preach, the people flock to meet him from every city, the magistrates, the clergy, even bishops and prelates, welcoming him with songs of praise. He travels with a huge flock of followers, who process, flagellating and singing, every evening after sunset. New flocks accompany him from every city. He scrupulously arranges for the care and accommodation of all these followers by appointing irreproachable men as quartermasters. Numerous priests of various orders travel with him, to assist him continually in taking confession and celebrating Mass. A couple of notaries are among the company, to document, on the spot, the disputes settled everywhere by the saintly preacher. The magistrates of the Spanish city of Orihuela declare in a letter to the bishop of Murcia that Ferrer has brought about 123 reconciliations in their city, including 67 cases of murder.¹¹ Wherever Vincent preaches, a wooden barrier must protect him and his retinue from the crush of the multitudes determined to kiss his hand or habit. All work comes to a standstill as long as he is preaching. Rarely did he fail to move his audience to tears, and



1.6 The chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet. Portrait from the *Recueil d'Arras*. ARRAS, MÉDIATHÈQUE

when he spoke of the judgement and the torments of hell or of the Lord's Passion, then both he and his listeners invariably burst into such copious tears that he was forced to remain silent for a long time, until the crying had died down. Wrongdoers came and threw themselves to the ground in front of all those present, and tearfully confessed their great sins.¹² In 1485, when the famous Olivier Maillard preached the Lenten sermons in Orléans, so many people climbed onto the roofs of the houses that the slater chalked up sixty-four days of repair work.¹³

It is the mood of the Anglo-American revivals and of the Salvation Army, but to an immeasurably higher degree and much more in public view. There is no need to think that the description of Ferrer's impact was due to any pious exaggeration on the part of his biographer; the sober, laconic Monstrelet describes in almost exactly the same terms the effect produced by the sermons given in 1428 in North France and Flanders by one Friar Thomas, posing as a Carmelite but later exposed as a fraud. [1.6] He, too,

was welcomed by the magistrates, while nobles held the reins of his mule; for his sake, too, many people, including men of high birth, whom Monstrelet mentions by name, forsook their homes and families to follow him everywhere. Distinguished burghers decorated the tall seat of honour they erected for him with the costliest tapestries one could buy.

In addition to the Passion theme and the Four Last Things, it was mainly their opposition to luxury and vanity that enabled these popular preachers to touch the people so deeply. According to Monstrelet, common folk were especially grateful and well-disposed to Friar Thomas for his condemnation of splendour and finery, and particularly for heaping blame on the nobility and the clergy. Whenever distinguished ladies with tall, pointed hairstyles ventured to join his audience, he habitually incited little boys to beleaguer them (with the promise of indulgences, Monstrelet maintains), crying 'Hennins! Hennins!', and as a result, the women no longer dared to wear *hennins*, and instead went about coifed like beguines. 'But, following the example of the snail' – in the words of the genial chronicler – 'which retracts its tentacles when one comes close to it, and extends them again when it hears nothing, so too did these ladies behave. For shortly after the said preacher had left the country, they began anew, and forgot his teaching, and little by little they resumed their old fashions, just as grand or even grander than had been their custom.'¹⁴

Both Friar Richard and Friar Thomas kindled the bonfires of the vanities, just as Florence would do sixty years later, at the behest of Savonarola, on a tremendous scale and with irreparable loss to art. In Paris and Artois in 1428 and 1429 the loss was confined to playing cards, tric-trac boards, dice, headdresses and jewellery, which men and women willingly sacrificed. Such burnings were a frequent part of the great excitement caused by preachers in both France and Italy in the fifteenth century.¹⁵ It was the ceremonial form in which the remorseful renunciation of vanities and diversions had been codified, the stylization of a violent emotion in a collective, solemn act, just as that era tended to create stylized forms in everything.

One must form an idea of all of this emotional vulnerability, this susceptibility to tears and spiritual transformation, this sensitiveness in order to understand the colour and fierceness life had then.

In those days public mourning still had all the appearance of a calamity. At the funeral of Charles VII, people are beside themselves with emotion when they see the procession: all the court officials are 'attired in anguished mourning, most pitiful to behold, and the deep sorrow and dismay they felt because of their master's death caused great crying and lamentation throughout the city'. Six of the king's pages rode horses caparisoned entirely in black velvet, 'and God knows how sorrowfully and pitifully they mourned for their lord and master!' The people, deeply moved, recounted that one of the page-boys had not had anything to eat or drink for four days, such was his sorrow.¹⁶

However, it is not only the emotion caused by intense mourning or a

powerful sermon or the mysteries of faith that can unleash a torrent of tears. Any profane ceremony can open the floodgates. An envoy sent by the king of France to pay a courtesy call on Philip the Good bursts into tears repeatedly during his address. There is loud weeping at the departure of the young John of Coimbra from the Burgundian court, just as there is at the welcoming of the dauphin, and at the meeting of the kings of England and France at Arras. Louis XI was seen shedding tears upon his entry into the city of Arras; during his stay as dauphin at the Burgundian court, he is repeatedly in sobs and tears, according to Chastelain.¹⁷ These accounts are prone to exaggeration, of course; they are comparable to a newspaper reporting that 'there was not a dry eye in the house'. In his account of the peace conference at Arras in 1435, Jean Germain maintains that those listening to the envoys' stirring addresses are so moved that they fall to the ground, speechless – sighing, sobbing and wailing.¹⁸ It was certainly not like this in actual fact, but the bishop of Chalon apparently thought that it ought to be: the exaggeration reveals the underlying truth. It is just like the floods of tears spilled by eighteenth-century sentimentalists. Weeping was uplifting and pure. Moreover, who has not felt, even nowadays, the strong emotion – to the point of trembling and tears – that a princely entry can provoke, even if the ruler to whom such tribute is paid is a matter of complete indifference to us. In those days such an immediate emotion was filled with a semi-religious worship of pomp and grandeur, and this poured forth in real tears.

Anyone who does not recognize the difference in sensitiveness between the fifteenth century and our time can become acquainted with it through



1.7 A noblewoman and her admirer play chess, in *La Belle Dame sans mercy*, c. 1470-1480
THE HAGUE, KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK

an example from a sphere other than tears, namely hot-headedness. We probably find it difficult to imagine a game more peaceful and calm than chess. [1.7] According to La Marche, it often happens that differences arise while playing chess, 'and that even the wisest loses his patience'.¹⁹ The sons of kings quarrelling over a game of chess was just as common a motif in the fifteenth century as it had been in the Charlemagne romances.

In everyday life there was always unlimited scope for burning passion and childlike fantasy. This is why modern scholarly histories of the Middle Ages – which prefer to draw upon official documents as much as possible, owing to the unreliability of the chronicles – sometimes make a dangerous mistake. The records show us little of the difference in the tone of life that separates us from those times. They make us forget the fierce pathos of medieval life. Of all the passions that colour it, the records generally mention only two: avarice and aggression. Who has not often been surprised at the almost unfathomable intensity and persistence with which avarice, contentiousness and vindictiveness emerge from contemporary legal records! Only in the context of the general passion that waxed incandescent in every part of life do those characteristics become plausible and explicable to us. That is why the chroniclers, however superficially they treat the facts and however much they digress, remain indispensable to forming a clear picture of that age.

In many respects life still had the colour of a fairy tale. If the court chroniclers – erudite men of standing, with close knowledge of their rulers – could not see or describe these illustrious persons other than in an archaic, hieratic guise, what must the magical splendour of kingship have been in the naïve popular imagination! Behold an example of that fairy-tale tone from the historical work of Chastelain. [1.8] The young Charles the Bold, still count of Charolais, arriving in Gorkum from Sluis, hears that his father, the duke, has withdrawn his allowance and all his benefices. Chastelain describes how the count now summons his entire household, right down to the scullery boys, and informs them of his misfortune in a moving speech, in which he testifies to his respect for his misguided father, his solicitude for the well-being of his household, and his love for them all. He urges those of means to await their fate with him; he releases those who are poor: they are free to go, but if they happen to hear that the count's fortunes have turned, 'then come back, and you will find your place open and will be welcome to me, and I shall reward the patience you have shown for my sake'. – 'Then one heard voices rising and an outburst of weeping and a general clamour of common consent: All of us, all of us, My Lord, will live and die with you.' Deeply moved, Charles accepts their allegiance: 'Well then, live and suffer, and I shall sooner suffer for you than let you want for anything.' Then the nobles come and offer him their possessions, 'one saying: I have a thousand, another: ten thousand, others still: I have this, I have that to spend for you and to await whatever will befall you.' And so everything went on as usual, and there was not one chicken less for the pot.²⁰



1.8 Rogier van der Weyden, *Charles the Bold*.
BERLIN, STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN

Naturally it was Chastelain whose brush painted the scene. We do not know the extent to which his story stylizes what really happened. But what it boils down to is this: he sees the ruler in the simple forms of the folk ballad; to his mind the affair is completely dominated by the most primitive impulses of mutual loyalty, expressed with epic restraint.

Even though the mechanism of state governance and the state economy had, in reality, already taken on complicated forms, state policy projects



1.9 Silver goblet with lid, with the coat of arms of John the Fearless engraved on the foot. Burgundy, c. 1405–1419. KARLSRUHE, BADISCHES LANDESMUSEUM

itself on the minds of common people in a few fixed, simple images. The realm of political ideas one inhabits are those of the folk song and the chivalric romance. The kings of one's time are reduced, as it were, to a limited number of types, each one more or less conforming to a motif from a song or an adventure: the noble, just ruler; the ruler misled by evil counsellors; the ruler who avenges the honour of his house; the ruler in adversity, supported by his faithful followers. The burghers of a late medieval state, heavily taxed and with no say over expenditure, live in constant distrust, wondering whether their pennies are being squandered or actually used for the good of the country. This mistrust of government transforms itself into a simplifying image: the king is surrounded by greedy, cunning advisers, or the luxury and excess of the royal household is to blame for the sorry state of the country. Thus political questions are reduced for the common people to folk-tale cases. Philip the Good knew which language the people understood. During his festivities in The Hague in 1456, he has thirty thousand silver marks' worth of costly vessels put on display in a room next to the knights' hall, in an effort to impress the Hollanders and Frisians, who might otherwise think he lacked the money to subdue the bishopric of Utrecht. [1.9] Everyone is welcome to have a look. In addition, two coffers have been brought from Lille that contain two hundred thousand gold-lion coins. One may try and lift them, but all efforts are in vain.²¹ Is it possible to think of a more instructive blend of public finance and fairground attraction?

Princely life and endeavour often contained a fantastical element reminiscent of the caliph in the Thousand and One Nights. In the midst of coolly calculated political enterprises, they sometimes act with reckless impetuosity, putting their life and work in danger for the sake of a personal whim. Edward III risks his own life and that of the Prince of Wales, as well as his country's cause, by attacking a fleet of Spanish merchantmen in retaliation for some acts of piracy.²² Philip the Good has set his mind to marry one of his archers to a rich brewer's daughter from Lille. When her father tries to thwart this plan and brings the case before the Parlement of Paris, the duke is so furious that he suddenly breaks off the important affairs of state that have been keeping him in Holland and undertakes – in the holy days before Easter, of all times – a dangerous journey by sea from Rotterdam to Sluis in order to get his way.²³ Another time, in a senseless rage after quarrelling with his son, he secretly rides out of Brussels like a runaway schoolboy and gets lost in the forest at night. When he is found, the tricky task of bringing him to his senses falls to the knight Philippe Pot. This clever courtier finds the right words: 'Good day, My Lord, good day, what is this? Are you playing King Arthur now or Sir Lancelot?'²⁴

How caliph-like is the behaviour of that same duke when, after being told by his physicians to shave his head, he orders all the nobles to do the same, and instructs Peter of Hagenbach to remove the hair from the head of any nobleman found unshaven.²⁵ Or when the young king of France,

Charles VI, seated with a friend on one horse, sets out in disguise to watch the entry of his own bride, Isabeau of Bavaria, and – in the jostling crowd – suffers blows from the officers charged with keeping order.²⁶ A fifteenth-century poet upbraids rulers who promote their jester or minstrel to the post of court counsellor and minister, as happened to Coquinet, the fool of Burgundy.²⁷

Statecraft is not yet completely circumscribed by bureaucracy and protocol: rulers can shirk convention at any time and seek their policy guidelines elsewhere. Thus fifteenth-century sovereigns repeatedly seek advice in affairs of state from visionary ascetics and exalted popular preachers. Denis the Carthusian and Vincent Ferrer acted as political advisers; the vociferous preacher Olivier Maillard, a French version of Johannes Brugman, was involved in the most secret negotiations of royal courts.²⁸ In this way an element of religious tension was maintained in high statecraft.

Around the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century, those gazing up at the lofty stage of princely endeavour and destiny must have been struck more than ever by the idea that nothing but brutal tragedies, full of the most poignant falls from majesty and glory, took place in that bloodily romantic sphere. In September 1399, the same month that the English Parliament met at Westminster to hear that Richard II, defeated and imprisoned by his cousin of Lancaster, had relinquished the crown, the German electors had already assembled at Mainz to depose their king, Wenceslas of Luxembourg, who was just as mentally unstable, just as incapable of governing, and just as fickle as his English brother-in-law – only his fall was less tragic. Wenceslas remained king of Bohemia for many years, whereas Richard's deposition was followed by his mysterious death in prison, which recalled the murder of his great-grandfather Edward II seventy years earlier. Was not the crown a doleful possession fraught with dangers? In the third great realm of Christendom, with Charles VI – a king gone mad – on the throne, the country was soon torn by fierce partisan conflict. In 1407 the jealousy of the Houses of Orléans and Burgundy erupted in an open feud: Louis of Orléans, the king's brother, was killed by assassins hired by his cousin John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy. [1.10] Twelve years later, the revenge: in 1419, John the Fearless is treacherously killed at a ceremonial meeting on the bridge of Montereau. [1.11] These two princely murders, with their endless aftermath of vengeance and strife, lent a leitmotif of grim hatred to an entire century of French history. Because the people see all the misfortune that has befallen France in the light of that great, dramatic motif, they cannot yet comprehend any causes other than those which are personal and passionate.

Added to all that, the Turks, who are advancing ever more threateningly, who defeated – only a few years before, at the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396 – the magnificent French army of knights, which had rashly marched out under that same John of Burgundy, then still count of Nevers. And Christendom torn by the Great Schism, which had already lasted a quarter of a century: two men who called themselves pope, each backed with passionate

1.10 Portrait of John the Fearless, possibly after the Guelders-born painter Jan Maelwael. CHANTILLY, MUSÉE CONDÉ

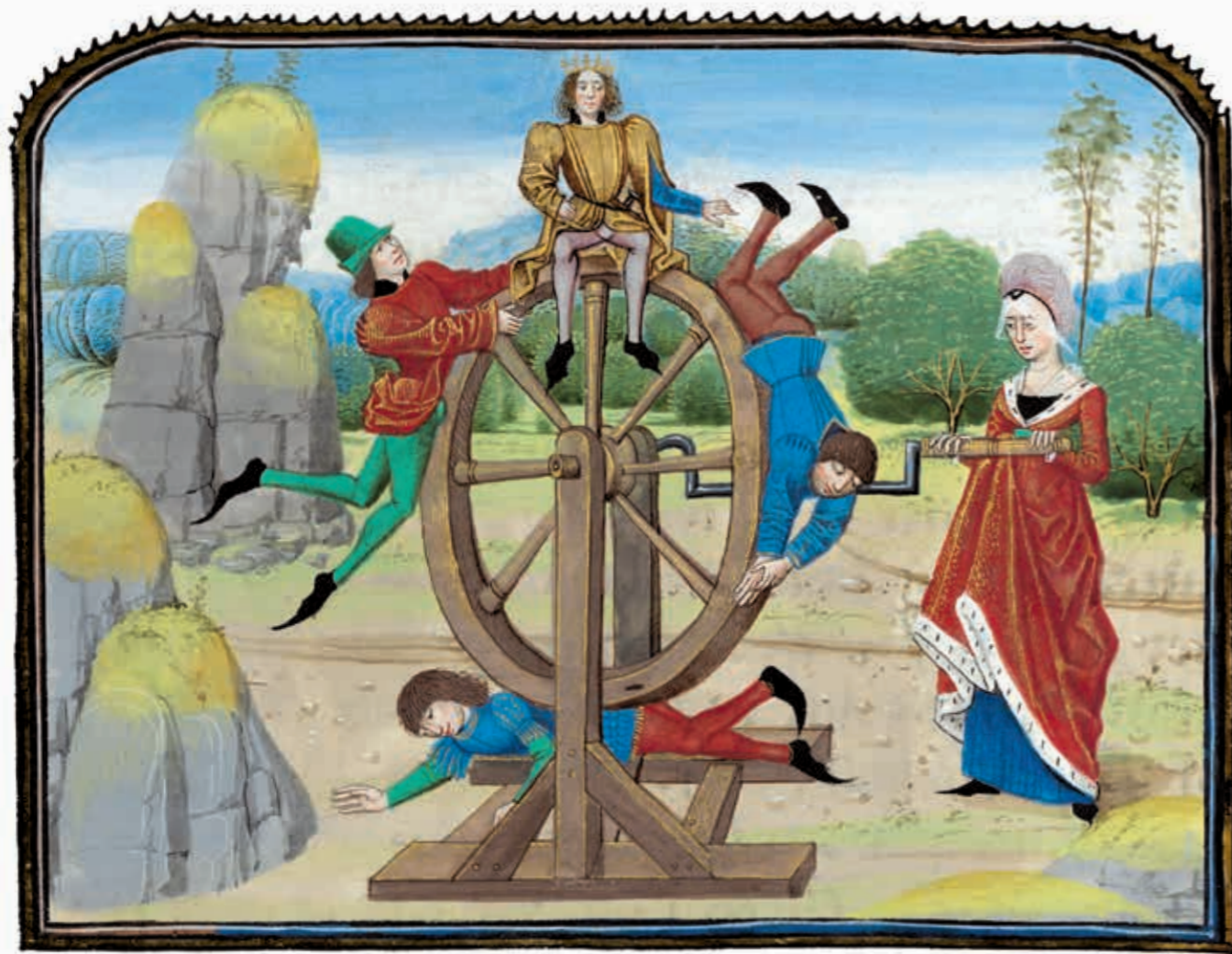


conviction by a number of Western countries. Soon, in 1409, when the Council of Pisa fails ignominiously in its attempt to restore unity in the Church, there will be three contestants for papal power. 'Le Pape de la Lune' was the name generally given in France to Peter of Luna, the obstinate Aragonese who held his ground at Avignon as Benedict XIII; wouldn't simple folk have thought his name had a half-delirious ring to it: the Pope of the Moon?

1.11 John the Fearless murdered on the bridge of Montreaux. Miniature from the chronicles of Monstrelet, Southern Netherlandish, end of the 15th century. LEIDEN, UNIVERSITEITSBIBLIOTHEEK LEIDEN

In those centuries many dethroned kings – mostly with little means but big plans – roamed from court to court accompanied by the splendour of the wondrous East from which they came: Armenia, Cyprus, soon Constantinople itself, each one a figure from the picture everyone had of





1.12 The Wheel of Fortune in the manuscript of Christine de Pizan, *Épître d'Othéa à Hector*. BRUSSELS, KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK VAN BELGIË

the Wheel of Fortune, from which kings come tumbling with sceptres and thrones. [1.12] René of Anjou was not among them, although he, too, was a king without a throne. He lived very well in the rich lands he possessed in Anjou and Provence. Yet no one embodied the vicissitudes of royal fortune better than this hapless prince of the House of France, who had always missed the best chances, who had sought the crowns of Hungary, Sicily and Jerusalem, and had encountered nothing but defeat, narrow escapes and prolonged imprisonment. This poet-king without a throne, who delighted in pastoral poetry and miniature painting, must have possessed a frivolity that was deep-rooted indeed, or else fate would have cured him of it. He witnessed the deaths of nearly all his children, and the daughter who was spared met a fate that surpassed his own in black bleakness. Margaret of Anjou, full of spirit, ambition and passion, had married, at the age of sixteen, the king of England, Henry VI, a fool. The English court was a hell of hatred. Nowhere had distrust of the king's relatives, accusations against powerful servants of the crown, secret and judicial murders com-

mitted in the interests of security or partisanship insinuated themselves so deeply into political mores as in England. Margaret had inhabited that sphere of persecution and fear for many years before the great family dispute between Lancaster, the house of her consort, and York, that of their numerous and impetuous cousins, entered the stage of bloody and open violence. Then Margaret lost her crown and her property. The vicissitudes of the Wars of the Roses had led her through the most dreadful dangers and harshest deprivation. Finally safe in her refuge at the Burgundian court, she personally told the moving story of her woes and wanderings to Chastelain, the court chronicler, relating how she had been forced to throw herself and her young son on the mercy of a brigand; how at Mass she had once had to request a penny for the offering from a Scottish archer, 'who, rather unwillingly and with regret, took a Scottish groat from his purse and lent it to her'. The good chronicler, moved by so much misery, dedicated to her, by way of consolation, a *Temple de Boccace* (Temple of Boccaccio),²⁹ 'a little treatise on the subject of Fortune, proceeding from its inconstant and deceptive nature'. [1.13] He thought, following the customary formula, that there was no better way to buoy up the king's longsuffering daughter than to present her with a grim gallery of princely misadventure. Neither of them could have known that for her the worst was still to come: the Lancastrians' ultimate defeat in 1471 at Tewkesbury, where her only son fell in battle or was killed afterwards; her husband's secret murder; and her own imprisonment in the Tower for five years, only to be sold in the end by Edward IV to Louis XI, to whom she was forced to hand over the inheritance from her father, King René, in gratitude for her freedom.

When real-life royal children experienced such fates, how could the Bourgeois of Paris do other than give credence to the stories of lost crowns and exile with which vagabonds sometimes sought attention and mercy? In 1427 a troupe of gypsies appeared in Paris posing as penitents, 'a duke and a count and ten men, all on horseback'. The rest, one hundred twenty strong, had to remain outside the city. They were from Egypt, and as penance for their apostasy, the pope had ordered them to roam for seven years without sleeping in a bed. They had once numbered twelve hundred, but their king and queen and all the others had died along the way. As some measure of solace, the pope had ordered every bishop and abbot to give them ten Tours pounds. The Parisians came in droves to gape at the



1.13 Margaret of Anjou and Henry VI of England seated opposite Giovanni Boccaccio, who comforts them about their lot in life by relating the sad lives of famous people of the past. Miniature from *Le Temple de Boccace* by George Chastelain, written with the same intention for Margaret during her exile at the Burgundian court. BRUSSELS, KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK VAN BELGIË