

We May Lose More Than We May Gain

Boldness and prudence among Froissart's warriors

Steven Muhlberger, Nipissing University

Delivered at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 2001

Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, one of the most influential accounts of the first half of the Hundred Years War, was in large part devoted to preserving tales of individual chivalric accomplishment -- as Froissart himself said in his preface, it was a record of "honourable enterprises, noble adventures, and deeds of arms," and with the intention "that brave men [might] be encouraged in their well-doing."¹ Stories that emphasize the boldness of individual warriors are among the most famous parts of this famous work, and they tend to affect modern readers' evaluation of the whole. The argument of this paper is that both Froissart and his contemporary readers, however much they loved colorful stories, and however much they were fascinated by individual achievement, did not lack an appreciation of the realities of war; and that among those realities was the fact that boldness, though necessary, was not sufficient for success. As much as Froissart and his readers prized the dramatic deed of arms, and the virtues of courage and prowess, they were also aware of the role of prudence. Indeed, Froissart's warriors were often torn between what might seem to be contradictory impulses, between boldness and prudence.

I must begin by admitting that Froissart is a tricky author to evaluate. He has often been criticized for inaccuracy.² Further, both his poetry and his *Chronicles* show him to be a very sophisticated writer, quite capable of playing for effect with the conventions of his genre. Laurence de Looze has recently identified Froissart as a chief practitioner of a type of courtly poetry he identifies

¹ Sir John Froissart, *Chronicles of England, France Spain and the Adjoining Ccountries*, trans. Thomas Johnes (London, 1849) 1. The translations of Froissart in this paper in most cases follow Johnes' closely.

² J.N.N. Palmer made the point that a narrow focus on "the errors and defects of Froissart's treatment of institutional history and of "l'histoire evenementielle" obscures his value for understanding the mentality of the era. See his "Introduction" to *Froissart: Historian*, ed. J.N.N. Palmer (Woodbridge, 1981), p. 5.

as "pseudo-autobiographical."³ How far can we trust a writer who is a convicted pseudo-autobiographer?

Yet in regard to the subject of this paper, Froissart is very useful. Froissart's history strongly appealed to those readers and listeners who were fascinated by the long saga of the wars of England and France. These readers included the very rich and very noble -- some of whom subsidized Froissart -- but clearly more modest men as well. Froissart showed war, as Contamine said, "as seen by the middling man-at-arms, by the ordinary combatant (whose condition was nevertheless noble)."⁴ His contemporary success derived from his ability to show knights, squires, and good men-at-arms, and those who might be sympathetic to them, a recognizable if perhaps flattering picture of themselves. In particular, Froissart must have been very good at making such warriors sound like themselves to themselves.⁵ Therefore, when Froissart showed warriors discussing the proper relationship between boldness and prudence, he was reflecting a real debate, a tension that real men-at-arms of his time had to deal with. If there had been no issue, there would have been no story -- and everyone agrees Froissart was a storyteller.

Let's begin with one incident that led to a debate on the subject of prudence among men at arms: a disaster that took place during the French king's campaign against Ghent in 1382.

The war against Ghent had a strong element of class conflict, and many Flemish nobles supported the king of France. One of these was the Haze of Flanders. Early in the campaign, the Haze assembled a group of knights and squires who crossed the river Lis at Pont-Amenin, attacked the town of Harle, and killed many of the inhabitants. Then, with the country roused, they rode back to Pont-Amenin, only to find the bridge held by a Flemish militia, who had booby-trapped the structure by breaking parts of it and covering the holes with straw. When the gentlemen charged the militia, the militia opened their ranks and let them ride through. The Haze of Flanders and the first thirty of his

³ Laurence de Looze, *Pseudo-autobiography in the fourteenth century*: Juan Ruiz, Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart and Geoffrey Chaucer, (Gainesville, 1997).

⁴ Philippe Contamine, "Froissart: Art militaire, pratique et conception de la guerre," in *Froissart: Historian*, ed. J.N.N. Palmer (Woodbridge, 1981), p. 137 (my translation).

⁵ Froissart's well-known account of his journey to visit Gaston de Foix in Béarn consists largely of conversations with his guide, Sir Espagn d'Lyon, with the notorious Bascot de Mauléon, and other men-at-arms active in the French and Spanish wars. See KdL, v. 11, pp. 22-84, 107-29; See the remarks of Andrew Taylor, "Chivalric Conversation and the Denial of Male Fear," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York and London: Garland, 1999), pp. 170-1, and Peter F. Ainsworth, *Jean Froissart and the Fabric of History: Truth, Myth, and Fiction in the Chroniques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 144-50.

companions got across, but then the bridge began to collapse, throwing horses and riders into the river and killing them. In the end about sixty died.

This mishap, says Froissart, was much commented upon: "He [the Haze of Flanders] was pitied by some, but by others not. Those who had been most accustomed to arms said, they had acted ill, to cross a river that was not fordable, attack a large town and enter an enemy's country, and return the way they had come, without having established guards on the bridge. It was not an enterprise planned by prudent men at arms [*sages gens d'armes*], who were desirous of success; but since they planned their enterprise with so much presumption, they had suffered from the consequence."⁶ If some men at arms sympathized with the Haze, the more experienced condemned him and his companions as self-willed, imprudent adventurers, not to be trusted with a real military operation. And it is clear that that Froissart agrees: he himself characterizes the Haze's actions as foolish, and, more significantly, he who tells the reader that it was the experienced warriors [*cit qui le plus estoient usé d'armes*] who spoke for prudence.

These sober judges make another appearance in Froissart's description of an incident in the Anglo-Scottish campaigns of 1378. The Scots, having suffered a setback at Berwick (see below), were determined to strike a blow against the English army. They thought a forced march would enable them to make a surprise night attack. But the weather turned against them: "There was none so stout but was overpowered by the storm, so that they could scarcely guide their horses."⁷ Before they were overwhelmed, "some knights and squires who had been long used to arms said, they were advancing foolishly, and that it was not proper to continue their course in such weather, and at so late an hour, as they ran a risk of losing more than they could gain. They therefore concealed themselves and their horses under oaks and other large trees until it was day. It was a long time before they could make any fire from their flints and wet wood: however, they did succeed, and several large fires were made."⁸

⁶ KdL, v. 10, p. 110: "Sy furent des aucuns plains, et des autres non, et disoient cit qui le plus estoient usé d'armes: Il on fait une folle emprise de passer un rivièrre sans gue et aler courir une grosse ville et entrer ou païs et retourner au pas par ou il avoient passet, et non gardet che pa jusques à leru retour; che ne'est pas emprise faide de sages gens d'armes qui voellent venir a bon chief de leur besongen, à faire enssy, et pour ce que outrequidiet il on t chavuchiet, leur en est-il, mal pris."

⁷ KdL 9, 38: "...à paines pooient-il tenir leurs chevaux..."

⁸ KdL 9, 38: "aucun sage chevalier et bien usé d'armes, qui la estoient, disoient que il chevauchioient folement et que ce n'estoit mies estas de chevauchier ensi par tel temps et à tel heure, et que plus y porroient perdre que gaignier. Si se quatirent et seconsèrent yaux et leurs chevaux desobs quesnes et grans arbres tant que li jours fust venus. Et li aucun, qui tout engelés estoient et tout hors mouilliet, faisoient grans feux pour iaux ressuyer et rescouffer; mès, ainçois qu'il peussent venir au feu, il eurent trop de paine."

The night attack was abandoned, but the Scots reconnoitered the country thoroughly in the morning, found at Melrose an English force of about their own size, and defeated it; then, when larger English forces came up, they once again changed their line of march and sought a safe haven. "They had wisely determined to retreat without making any halt; for, had they returned that evening to their former quarters, they would have run a risk of being conquered..."⁹ Again it is clearly prudence that was exercised by those "long used to arms," by the *sages chevaliers* who offered good counsel that restrained the Scots from impulsive, even thoughtless initiative. And there was a further payoff: Froissart remarks "This great success which they had obtained was a great novelty for Scotland."¹⁰

Was there no place for the bold impulse? Of course there was. It was simply a fact that boldness could only take one so far, and another that boldness all too often overreached itself. Consider Froissart's account of the taking and loss of Berwick by a daring band of Scots, an incident that took place just before the battle at Melrose just mentioned.

According to Froissart, King Charles V of France had incited the Scots to attack England, and four earls were preparing forces for that purpose, when Alexander Ramsay, "a valiant squire of Scotland ... set off with forty men from his company, determined to perform a gallant enterprise [*une haulte entreprise*]."¹¹ This foray, independently conceived, was no less than an attempt to seize the strategic castle and town of Berwick. Attacking at dawn, Ramsay and his company were entirely successful in taking the castle. "[They] thought they had done wonders, as in truth they had."¹² However, the English governor of the town, separately fortified, had moved equally fast. He had destroyed the drawbridge of the castle, trapping the Scots within. The fate of Berwick would be decided by which side brought effective help to its people there first.

The earl of Northumberland was quickly notified of the emergency and sent forces to besiege the castle. The Scots also assembled troops: "They ... determined to march thither, raise the siege, and reinforce the castle, for they considered what Alexander Ramsay had performed as a most gallant

⁹ KdL 9, 42: "De ceste cose faire et dou retraire sans séjourner furent-il bien conseillet; car, se ce soir il fussent revenu à leurs logeis de Hondebray, il eussent esté en aventure de estre tout rué jus sicomme je vous diray."

¹⁰ KdL 9, 44: "Si fu grant nouvelle parmi Eschoce de ceste besoingne et de le belle journée que leur gens avoient eue."

¹¹ KdL 9, 27: "Alixandres de Ramesay, uns moult vaillans escuiers d'Escose, et se avisa de emprendre et achiever à son pooir un haulte empris, et prist XL compaignons de sa route..."

¹² KdL 9, 29: "qui trop bien cuidoiient avoir exploitiet, (et ossi avoient-il...)"

achievement."¹³ Froissart reports the words of Sir Archibald Douglas, the Scots constable: "Alexander is my cousin, and it is his high birth that has caused him to undertake and execute so bold a feat as the taking of Berwick castle: it behoves us to do all in our power to assist him in this business, and if we can raise the siege it will be to us of great value: I am of opinion, therefore, that we march thither."¹⁴ Only boldness could have taken Ramsey so far, such boldness as originated from one's high birth.

When the Scots -- 500 lances -- got to Berwick, however, they found themselves facing full ten thousand enemies! (So Froissart tells us.) Prospects for a successful relief of Ramsay's company evaporated, and the Scots evaluation of the situation changed. According to Froissart, the same Archibald Douglas and other Scots knights said, "We cannot think it will be any way profitable for us to advance further to meet the English; for they are ten to one, and all tried men: we may lose more than we can gain [*si porrions plus perdre que gaignier*]: and a foolish enterprise is never good [*folle emprise ne fu onques bonne faite*]."¹⁵

Sir William Lindsay, "a valiant knight and uncle to Alexander Ramsay," protested. He said, "It will turn to your great shame, if he should be lost, and none of our family in future will thus boldly adventure themselves."¹⁶

Yet, "Those present answered, 'That they could not amend it, and that the many gallant men who were there could not be expected to risk their own destruction in the attempt to prevent a single squire from being made prisoner.'"¹⁷ The Scots left the captors of Berwick to their fate.

The two earliest English translators of this passage, Lord Berners and Thomas Johnes, both felt, without direct textual support, that the Scots not only refused to rescue Ramsay, but that they re-evaluated his deed retrospectively from a bold feat to a foolish enterprise. We may also ask whether Ramsay's assault was a rash act. Let's look at another incident before we try to answer the

¹³ KdL 9,32: "Si s'avisèrent l'un par l'autre que il venroient lever le siège et rafresquir le chastel, et tenoient ceste emprise que Alixandre Ramesay avoit faicte, à haulte et belle.

¹⁴ KdL 9, 32: "Alixandres est mon cousin, et lui vient de haute gentillesse d'avoir empris et achiévé si haute emprise que d'avoir pris de castel de Bervich. Si le devons tous à ce besoing conforter; et, se nous poons lever le siège, il nous tournera à grant vaillance. Et je voel que nous allons celle part."

¹⁵ KdL 9, 33: "Nous ne poons veoir que nostre prouffit soit à chevaucier maintenant plus avant sus les Engls, car il sont X contre I de nous, et toutes gens de fait. Si porrions plus perdre que gaignier, et folle emprise ne fu onques bonne faite."

¹⁶ KdL 9, 33-4: "Si vous tournera à grant blasme se il est perdu; et une autre fois chil de nostre costé ne s'aventurent point si volentiers."

¹⁷ KdL 9, 34: "Là respondoient li autre, et disoient que on ne le pooit amender, et que tant de bonnes gens qui là estoient, ne se pooient pas perdre, ne mettre à l'aventure de estre perdu pour le prise d'un escuier."

question. This is Froissart's account of another crossing of the river Lis by a French force, and a much more successful one.

The background was this: The French army was halted at the Lis because all the bridges had been destroyed and were being watched by Flemish forces. With the commanders uncertain what to do next, "several knights and squires silently withdrew, with the intent to hazard some gallant deeds of arms and attempt to cross the river, whatever it might cost them."¹⁸

Their plan was a simple one: "'We will procure two or three boats, which we will launch into the river Lis, at a sheltered place below Commines, and will fix posts on each side of the river where it is not wide, to fasten cords to. We shall by this means soon convey over a large body of men, and by marching on the rear of our enemies we may attack them, and, if victorious, we shall gain the reputation of valiant men at arms.'" ¹⁹

The lord of Saimpy and several others found the necessary "boats, cords, and fastenings," and began to cross the river in a place not guarded by the Flemings. Only when the boats were ready were the constable and marshals of France informed. Despite the fact that they had been kept in the dark, their reaction was to grasp the opportunity offered: when the marshal arrived at the crossing place, he saw "with pleasure...the arrangement of the boats. The lord of Saimpy, addressing him, said, 'My lord, is it agreeable to you that we should cross here?'

"'I am very well pleased with it,' replied the marshal; 'but you are running great risks [*mais vous vous mettez en grant aventure*]; for if our enemies... should know your intentions, they would do you great mischief.'

"'My lord," answered the lord of Saimpy, 'nothing venture nothing win [*qui ne s'aventure il n'a riens*]: in the name of God and St. George, we will cross over, and, before tomorrow evening, will fall suddenly on our enemies and attack them.'" ²⁰

¹⁸ KdL 10, 121: "soustilloient autre chevalier et escuier par biau fait d'armes et haute emprise à eux aventurer vaillaument et à passer celle rivière dou Lis pour conquerir la ville..."

¹⁹ "Se nous aviens II ou II bacquès, se les fesissiens lanchier en celle rivière dou Lis au desous de Commines à le couverte et eussions de une part de l'aighe et del'autre estaques et mis cordes as estaques selone ce que la rivière n'est pas trop large, nous seriens tantos une grant quantité de gens mis oultre, et puis par derièr nous venriosn asaillir nos ennemis. Nous conquerièmes sus eux le pas, et se ne fesissons passer fors que droites gens d'armes."

²⁰ KdL, 10, 123: "regarda volentiers le conventant et le chavance de ce bacquet. Adont dist li sires de Saint-Py: 'Sire, il vous plaist que nous passons?' -- 'Il me plaist bien, dist li mareschaux, mais vous vous mettez en grant aventure; car, se li anemit qui sont à Commines, avoient vo convenant, il vous porteroient trop grant damage.' --

This was precisely what happened. With the main force distracting the Flemings at Commines, a sizable contingent crossed the river, waited out the night in great discomfort in a marshy area, and attacked and defeated the Flemings the next day. It was a famous victory.

How does this differ from the raid launched by the Haze of Flanders or the capture of Berwick? In one important way, not at all: in all three cases, there is no hint that the adventurers consulted with anyone before taking the initiative. Perhaps a difference is that the Lord of Sainpy's initiative was discovered by the high command and re-integrated into the tactics of the army as a whole. This may have reduced the risk to those who had crossed the river, and made their move effective rather than disastrous.

However, I think that the best answer is the simplest: the Lord of Sainpy and his fellows won, and therefore their deed was a worthy and gallant one. There are, as we have seen, some traces in these passages of sympathy for a bold move that did not work, but many would see a failed enterprise as *ipso facto* a foolish one. And if the men "most accustomed to arms" could point out obvious errors in execution, or that the adventurers had been guilty of too much "presumption," then sympathy was likely to be even less forthcoming. Normal standards of prudence and a strong appreciation of the utility of organization, planning, and discipline (surely the opposite of "presumption") did exist, and were applied, at least by some, in their judgment of military deeds.²¹

My argument so far may seem to lead to one of two conclusions: first, that some men at arms were bold and foolish, and others were prudent and calculating; or, that prudence was judged inconsistently, entirely on the basis of whether a given action was successful or not. I think that there is some truth to each of these statements. However, I think it likely that in most cases, the same man at arms mixed prudence and boldness, even prudence and foolishness. There were alternative standards of behavior that could be applied by the same person at different times or even simultaneously. And neither was sufficient by itself.

To understand these men, we must remember that war is always a hazardous business. The word *aventure*, ("venture" or "adventure" in the older translations) means that something is put at risk -- and in war it is one's self that

'Sire, dist li sires de Sainpy, qui ne s'aventure il n'a riens. Ou nom Dieu et de saint Jorge, nous passerons et nous ferons, anchois que il soit demain jours, sur nos ennemis bon exploit.'

²¹ Kenneth McRobbie, "The Concept of Advancement in the Fourteenth Century in the *Chroniques* of Jean Froissart," *Canadian Journal of History* 6 (1971), p. 13.

is put at risk. Boldness and courage might lead to disaster where a little more coolness would have avoided it. But boldness was necessary, for without it none would go to war. Even the man-at-arms fighting solely out of duty would need it -- and few fought for duty alone. These knights and squires hoped to advance themselves in reputation, power, and wealth, and risk was the essence of the enterprise.

Thus what I propose is that Froissart's chivalric readers were hardly unaware of the need for prudence. They could not, however, afford to be too attached to either boldness or prudence, because the balance between them was always uncertain. Within each warrior must have been a voice saying with the Scots outside of Berwick (the same Scots who won at Melrose), "we may lose more than we can gain: and a foolish enterprise is never good;" and at the same time another, saying, with the Lord of Sainpy, "nothing venture nothing win." Froissart seems to have understood this inner debate very well.