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### **Rewriting History in the *Chanson de Hugues Capet***

When Dante reaches the fifth terrace of Purgatory he meets a soul who identifies himself with the following words:

Io fui radice de la mala pianta  
che la terra cristiana tutta aduggia,

Chiamato fui di là Ugo Ciappetta;  
di me son nati i Filippi e i Luigi  
per cui novellamente è Francia retta,  
Figliuol fu'io d'un beccaio di Parigi.<sup>1</sup>

This passage forms part of the impassioned anti-Capetian propaganda of Canto XX by taking up the legend of Hugh's bourgeois (specifically butcher) origins. The legend reappears in the *Chanson de Hugues Capet*, written some time after 1358, where Hugh is the nephew, not the son, of a butcher. But while Dante used the legend to highlight the base origins of the Capetians, the author of the *Chanson* celebrates Hugh's accession to the throne by merit: his valor and effectiveness, the poet argues, were enhanced by his bourgeois connections. Thus the legend concerning Hugh's family ties to a butcher plays an important role in defining the *Chanson's* politics.<sup>2</sup> In rewriting what was initially a negative

<sup>1</sup> "I was the root of the evil plant that overshadows all the Christian land....I was called Hugh Capet yonder; of me were born the Philips and the Louises, by whom of late France is ruled. I was the son of a butcher of Paris" (*Purgatorio* XX: 43-44 and 49-52). See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. Purgatorio*, trans. Charles Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 1:214-17. While Dante calls Hugh the son of a butcher, in the *Chanson* his maternal grandfather and uncle are butchers, but not his father. For the figure of Hugh Capet in Dante, see Pio Rajna, "'Ugo Ciapetta' nella 'Divina Commedia,'" *Studi Danteschi* 37 (1960): 5-20.

<sup>2</sup> *La Chanson de Hugues Capet*, Marquis de la Grange, ed. (Paris: Frank, 1864). References here to this unnumbered text are by page number. For

legend, the poet exploits and transforms both literary and historiographical traditions. This dual framework provides him with the means to recast the legend in a celebratory mode. An analysis of the techniques employed in this recasting will allow us to define not only the poet's politics but also his attitude toward the late epic tradition and the writing of history.

Since the *Chanson de Hugues Capet* is not a very well-known text, I will give a brief summary: Hugh's mother is the daughter of a rich butcher, while his father is a *chevalier* named Richier; he dies when Hugh is sixteen. A life that is described as *courtois* but also *dépensier* leads to Hugh's bankruptcy within seven years. Hugh turns to his uncle, the richest butcher of Paris, for help. The uncle offers to teach him his trade, but Hugh has other plans: he wishes to be maintained in his chivalric way of life. His uncle finally agrees to contribute 200 florins to this enterprise and is more than relieved to see Hugh leave. Hugh proceeds to the land of plenty, the Hainaut, where he fathers no fewer than ten illegitimate children. Meanwhile the queen of France and her daughter are in trouble. The Count of Champagne, Savary, after supposedly having poisoned king Louis (a conflation here of several Louis)<sup>3</sup> demands the hand of Louis's daughter Marie and, when refused, lays siege to Paris. Hugh offers his services to Louis's widow Blanchefleur. In a *sortie*, aided by a contingent of bourgeois, he kills Savary. In the middle of the countless subsequent complications Hugh takes a heroic vow on a roasted peacock: he will infiltrate the enemy camp and kill Hugo de Vauvenisse. Despite the queen's efforts to prevent the execution of what she considers a foolhardy plan, Hugh manages to leave Paris and returns

the date and an analysis of the events between 1356 and 1358 depicted in the *Chanson*, see Robert Bossuat, "La Chanson de *Hugues Capet*" *Romania* 71 (1950): 450-81.

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand Lot, *Études sur le règne de Hugues Capet*. Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études 137 (Paris: Emile Bouillon, 1903) 324-50, deals with the legends surrounding Hugh Capet. He shows that the King Louis whom Hugh succeeded was, in different versions of the legend, Louis II, Louis III, the victor over the pagan Gormond, Louis IV, also supposedly poisoned (and in conflict with Hugh the Great, Hugh Capet's father), Louis the Pious, and Louis V. See also Bossuat, "La Chanson de *Hugues Capet*" 462n.1.

successful. The queen muses that if only his lineage were more distinguished she could claim him for herself. As it is, she gives him the duchy of Orléans and promises him her daughter.

Paris is still under siege. Savory's son, Fédry, and the Duke of Burgundy, together with his brother, Asselin, have established camps before the city walls. A threat to the assailants arrives in the form of Blanchefleur's nephew, Drogon, king of Venice, and King Tarse, who help Hugh gain the victory and who are—many thousands of lines later and after an excursion to Venice—victors over the infidels with the help of six of Hugh's ten sons. As for Hugh, he wins the crown through his *hardement* and the *trenchant de l'espee*. The second part of the *Chanson* deals with the treacherous activities of Fédry and especially of Asselin, who use Hugh's absence from the court to break their feudal vows and lead an assault on the queen in Orléans. Hugh finally triumphs over this last challenge to his rule and, explicitly recalling the trial of Ganelon, has the traitors executed. After Hugh's nine-year reign, his son Robert goes on to rule for thirty-four. But Hugh was the one, the poet insists, who "tant ot de grant painnez ains qu'il ot le royon" (242). With this line, harking back to the *Aeneid*, the final prayer is introduced: may Jesus Christ absolve the writer and the readers of this story.

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The precise source of the legend of Hugh Capet's butcher origins is not known. Some historians, such as Ferdinand Lot, have suggested that the legend must have been born in a Parisian milieu and had, at least in part, the purpose of exalting the bourgeoisie and its role in Hugh's accession to the French throne in 987.<sup>4</sup> Robert Bossuat considers it more logical to seek the origin of this "invention désobligeante" in regions under the rule of the Hohenstaufen and hostile to the French monarchy.<sup>5</sup> As indicated above, the important innovation of the *Chanson* is to transform the potentially damaging legend into a celebration of a new social

<sup>4</sup> Lot, *Études sur le règne de Hugues Capet*, 343.

<sup>5</sup> "La Chanson de *Hugues Capet*," 454.

harmony which made possible the beginning of a new dynasty.<sup>6</sup> Thus the *Chanson* has to be seen as one piece in the vast mosaic formed by the myths surrounding Hugh Capet's taking over the realm from the Carolingians. Let us now situate the text with regard to these myths by concentrating on the two aspects outlined at the beginning of this article: the *Chanson's* political significance and its literary and historiographical context and antecedents.

The essential question in the political myths surrounding Hugh's rise to power was whether his accession to the throne was an act of usurpation or of legitimate succession by election. Medieval historiographers pondered this question over many centuries, and both pro-Capetian and anti-Capetian polemics could be found in many texts. One especially strong invective against Hugh Capet's dynasty is the eleventh-century *Historia francorum senonensis*, which claimed that in 987 "rebellavit contra Karolum Hugo dux Francorum" (Hugh, the duke of the Franks, rebelled against Charles).<sup>7</sup> Charles of Lorraine, the uncle of the recently deceased Louis V, is, in the *Historia*, considered to be the legitimate heir of Louis. It is true as Joachim Ehlers states that this chronicle must be seen in the context of the dispute over coronation rights between the archbishops of Sens and Rheims. But in more general terms, by its partisan view of tenth-century history, it shows how open and susceptible this specific period of French history was to falsification and polemic exploitation.

Indeed, the late tenth century is a period about which very little first hand information has come down to us. Or, as Laurent Theis remarked in his book on Hugh Capet, aside from the lone contemporary account by the chronicler Richer, we have mostly

<sup>6</sup> Albert Gier has shown that the *Chanson* is not a one-sided polemic for the bourgeoisie, but rather advocates social harmony by insisting that all parts of society have to work together to defeat a common enemy. See "Hugues Capet le poème de l'harmonie sociale," *Essor et fortune de la chanson de geste dans l'Europe et l'orient latin*. Actes du IXe Congrès de la Société Rencesvals, 2 vols. (Modena: Mucchi, 1984) 1: 69-75.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent analysis of the *Historia* is in Joachim Ehlers, "Die *Historia francorum senonensis* und der Aufstieg des Hauses Capet," *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978): 1-25. The quote is on p. 13.

"conjectures, supputations et affabulations," and he rightly remarks with regard to the later chroniclers that "ce qu'ils en ont dit est donc constitutif, à bien des égards, de l'événement lui-même."<sup>8</sup> The *Chanson* undoubtedly played a part in this later (re-)constitution of the event.

How Hugh's character was constructed and polemically exploited over the centuries can also be seen in a version of his accession which is totally different from—but no less ingenious than—the *Historia francorum senonensis*. It can be found in the *Reditus regni ad stirpem Karoli Magni*, where Hugh's taking over of the French crown is legitimized by a prophecy of Saint Valerian and thus cleansed of any suggestion of usurpation.<sup>9</sup>

A detailed analysis of the medieval vicissitudes of the Capetian founding myth, informed by multiple and contradictory currents, would exceed the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the *Chanson* features one version of the myth, drawing not only on political but also on distinctly literary traditions.

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The emphasis in previous studies of the *Chanson de Hugues Capet* has generally been on the political aspects, in particular on the bourgeois interests evident in this poem. In fact, it has sometimes been read as nothing more than a polemical document written at a critical point in the Hundred Years' War—when Jean le Bon was being held hostage by the English and Etienne Marcel was threatening the established order—for the benefit of the Parisian burghers, who are portrayed as staunch supporters of the monarchy, without whom the royal power would have succumbed to the machinations of the leaders of Champagne and Burgundy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *L'avènement de Hugues Capet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 12; 199.

<sup>9</sup> For an extremely interesting analysis of the *Reditus* see Gabrielle Spiegel, "The *Reditus regni ad stirpem Karoli magni*: A New Look," *French Historical Studies* 7 (1971): 145-74. For the Valerian prophecy, see p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> But see Gier, "*Hugues Capet* le poème de l'harmonie sociale," for a more balanced view.

However, if this ideological basis were the only attraction of the *Chanson*, it would be hard to explain its long-lived popularity, which even extended to Germany where several different translations circulated well into the sixteenth century.

A work's popularity is often linked to its genre and whether that genre is in vogue in a given period. What are the position and function of the *chanson de geste* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? According to François Suard, nineteen *chansons de geste* survive from the fourteenth and eight from the fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The ideological differentiation between romance and epic prevalent in the twelfth century becomes blurred in that later period.<sup>12</sup> Peter Dembowski has shown how later chivalric texts, whether epic or romance, try to "restore" lost worlds: "Post-1350 chivalric literature . . . expresses the aspirations of a class in search of a coherent ideology, which could hardly be found in the social and political realities of the epoch."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the late epic introduces heroes who are far from chivalric perfection. Thus Tristan de Nanteuil is a rather timorous sort who would rather be without "amye" or "seignorie" than to wage war, for there one could lose one's life.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See his "La tradition épique aux XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles," *Revue des sciences humaines* 183 (1981): 95-107 and "L'épopée," chap. 11 in *Grundriß der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters VIII/1* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1988), especially pp. 161-69.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of these ideologies see Karl D. Uitti, *Story, Myth and Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry, 1050-1200* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), chapters 2 (on the *Chanson de Roland*) and 3 (on Chrétien de Troyes).

<sup>13</sup> "Whom and What did Galien Restore?" *Olifant* 10 (1983-84): 83-98; 97. The generic difference between romance and epic has also become unimportant in that period. The *Galien*, as Dembowski points out, is "an idealized and romanticized *remaniement* of (a) *remaniement(s)* of both the Roland and the *Pèlerinage [de Charlemagne]* (in which the former represents the frame for the latter)" (89).

<sup>14</sup> See Suard, "L'épopée," 164.

These ideas are certainly valid for the time of the *Chanson's* composition. The idea of restoration, even re-construction, of past eras and ideologies undoubtedly informs the *Chanson*, but, as we will see, it is somewhat tempered by an ironic view of this reconstructed world and of its ambiguous hero.

The Hugh Capet of the *Chanson* is a *construct* whose identity and character derive from literary, historiographical, and political traditions. We have already touched upon Hugh Capet's contradictory and controversial images in the chronicle tradition. In the literary realm, the *Chanson* also drew on a variety of sources. One reason for the *Chanson's* popularity was undoubtedly its connection to the *Vœux du paon*. Written around 1310 by Jacques de Longuyon, the *Vœux* was designed as part of the *Alexander* cycle and was an immediate success. It spawned several continuations and popularized the ceremony of taking chivalric vows on roasted birds in such later texts as the *Vœux de l'épervier* and the *Vœux du héron*.<sup>15</sup> In the coalescence of political preoccupations and literary models, Hugh Capet's vow of the peacock as well as the intertextual presence of the *Vœux du paon* help to define the ideological underpinnings of the *Chanson*.

Like many epics the *Chanson* conflates two distinct periods: here the tenth century is transported into the fourteenth. The beleaguered country of 1358 surely would have found solace in the depiction of the glorious origins of the Capetian dynasty celebrated in an epic poem. The dynastic change from the Carolingians to the Capetians was, as we saw above, an extremely controversial topic in French historiography. The author of the *Chanson* skillfully chose

<sup>15</sup> It also introduced the concept of the Nine Worthies. For the continuations of the *Vœux du paon*, see my "The Poetics of Continuation in the Old French *Paon* Cycle," *Romance Philology* 39 (1986): 437-47; on the political implications of the *Vœux de l'épervier*, my "Historiography and *Matière antique*: The Emperor Henry VII as a New Alexander: The Fourteenth-Century *Vœux de l'épervier*" *Medievalia et humanistica* n.s. 14 (1986): 17-35 and of the *Vœux du héron*, B.J. Whiting, "The Vows of the Heron," *Speculum* 20 (1945): 261-78. On the Nine Worthies, see H. Schröder, *Der Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

the *Vœux du paon* as intertext, thus suggesting that Hugh was cut of the same cloth as Alexander the Great, and that Hugh's merit was so extraordinary that it could win him legitimate accession. Similarly, in the *Vœux de l'épervier*, written around 1313 after the death of the German emperor Henry VII, the vows had been used to assure Henry's participation in an imperial myth, exemplified by Alexander the Great. The staging of this ceremony had expressed Henry's nostalgic longing for a by-gone world of chivalric virtue and imperial ideals. In the texts following upon the *Vœux du paon*, the scene of the vows thus took on a certain textual independence: it could leave its specific context and become reusable as an iconic representation of heroes aspiring to a better and nobler world.

The circumstances surrounding the creation of the *Chanson* did not correspond in the least to the world depicted in it; conversely, the events of the *Chanson* had little to do with what we know of the "real" accession of Hugh Capet. By 1358, chivalry had been definitively defeated at Crécy in 1346 and at Poitiers in 1356, when Jean le Bon became a prisoner of the English. Among the tenth-century characters and events, the most notable absence is that of Charles de Lorraine who was considered by many a valid contender for the throne. The Hugh of the *Chanson*, straddling these two disparate worlds, dramatizes the ambiguous position of a poet who rewrites history. It seems to me that the utilization of the legend of Hugh's bourgeois origins skews the vision of a heroic past and is an ironic commentary on the late epics's (futile) attempt to recreate a world of chivalric and royal glory. But at the same time, the poet demonstrates—through the celebratory aspects of his text—the usefulness of literary constructs in this very rewriting.

As a hero, Hugh is at odds with several literary traditions at once. He serves as a model of *largesse*—but on money borrowed from his butcher uncle. He kills a *chevalier* in a combat replete with epic diction (page 9)—but the reason for the conflict is the pregnancy of the knight's daughter. The poet tells us in this context that Ovid says a man should have many *amies* (10). From a generic perspective, Hugh is "acting out" love poetry, following Ovid's precepts when he says "je serviray amours" (10). Unfortunately we are not in a lyric world here, but in a world where girls get pregnant, so that Hugh has to put his "epic" valor to the shameful service of defending himself against irate fathers. Ovidian (lyric) ideology thus clashes with a more realistic romance world. Hugh is forced to



live a travesty of *aventure*. But somewhat later, in an interesting twist, his butcher connections are turned into a chivalric asset, when in one of the early battles Hugh's exploits are described in the following terms:

C'est Huez ly bouchiers; il cuide estre o maissel,  
Car il lez [the enemies] fent ensi con bacon ou pourcel. (37)

The *Chanson* poet clearly likes to play with conventions and, from the poem's beginning, has Hugh embody different medieval literary traditions, which he subverts in various ways.

A most interesting feature of the *Chanson* is that in the course of the text the narrative developments that emphasize the *Chanson's* literary heritage collide with the historiographical tradition. Several scenes illustrate this collision.

In the *Chanson*, Savary is accused of having poisoned king Louis. The idea of poison has a two-fold lineage in the *Chanson*, a lineage that corresponds to the two traditions—the historiographical and the literary—that inform the text. Adémar de Chabannes, in his early eleventh-century chronicle, attributed the extinction of the Carolingian dynasty to two consecutive poisonings: both Lothaire and his son Louis are said to have been poisoned by their wives.<sup>16</sup> On the literary side, the *Vœux du paon* as part of the *Alexander* cycle intertextually evokes the death by poison of Alexander the Great as recounted in the *Mort Alixandre*. In fact, the tradition established in the *Mort*, following upon the *Vœux* in the *Alexander* sequence, became so strong that this text was used to buttress the poison theory in the death of emperor Henry VII by providing the structure and themes for the death scene in the *Vœux de l'épervier*.<sup>17</sup> Thus the idea of a change of dynasty through the use of poison is doubly present in the *Chanson*; both literary and historiographical

<sup>16</sup> On the poisoning theory see Lot, *Études sur le règne de Hugues Capet*, 324-35; Theis, *L'avènement de Hugues Capet* 203; Bossuat, "La légende de Hugues Capet au XVIe siècle," *Mélanges Chamard* (Paris: Nizet, 1951), 29-38; 35.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis, see my "Historiography and *Matière antique*," 29-31.

traditions contributed to the poem's initial narrative developments, which established the basic premise of the text: the empty throne waiting to be occupied by the most deserving successor.

Hugh's actual winning of the throne provides another example of the coalescence of political thought and literary model. To dispel any rumors of usurpation, the *Chanson* poet makes it clear that it was Louis's widow Blanchefleur who offered him the kingdom and her daughter.<sup>18</sup> In a discussion among some unnamed characters, the poet highlights the problematic nature of this generosity: one group sees it in a negative light, while the other is in favor. Naturally, the second group wins the argument (45). This fictional discussion reproduces the political arguments made over several centuries in connection with Hugh's accession. The "rigged" outcome of the debate predetermines the audience's reactions and preempts any possible objections. Another discussion, this time among the high nobility, concerns the Salic Law, which kept women from royal succession and was consequently one of the reasons for the Hundred Years' War. Thus Hugh is allowed to succeed to the throne because of his merit and his marriage to the late king's daughter, but henceforth, so a *parlement* decides,

Que, s'en Franche avoit roy qui ne laissast en vie  
Hoir malle aprez sa mort, la cose fu jugie,  
La fille n'y aroit une pomme pourie  
For ceulle le douaire où seroit adrechie,  
Ainchois prenderoit on en la quinte lignie  
Ung prinche de ce sanc de le roial partie (176)

This passage achieves two aims at once: it posits Hugh as a legitimate successor through his valor, albeit the last one for whom such an accession to the throne is possible; at the same time, France's position toward the Salic Law—and consequently its role

<sup>18</sup> The name Blanchefleur also evokes Chrétien's *Perceval*, of course. In that romance, Perceval came to the aid of the queen and thus merited her hand in a manner quite similar to that of Hugh in the *Chanson*. Here, however, the queen reluctantly gives up Hugh to her daughter.

in the Hundred Years' War—is legitimized through the law's supposed ancient (that is, tenth-century) origin.<sup>19</sup>

Hugh's right to the throne through his chivalric exploits still needs more support, and the poet adduces a whole series of heroic examples whom Hugh surpasses: Judas Maccabeus, an Old Testament hero and one of the Nine Worthies; Melidus, a character from the *Vœux du paon*; Marsile, Baligant, Fernagu, and others. But again, surpassing characters from a mostly literary tradition is not sufficient. History intrudes and Hugh understands that he needs *les grands du royaume* to legitimize his accession, as the queen says:

Pléuist à ce Seigneur qui se char ot clauwée  
Que ly baron de Franche, le nobile contrée  
Euwissent cette cose et faite et acordée. (168)

But there still is opposition, even after Hugh's coronation (174). Hugh's conflicts, in particular with the dukes of Champagne and Burgundy, clearly echo events of the mid-fourteenth century and illustrate particularly well the *Chanson's* interweaving of two decisive periods of French history. As the fourteenth-century dauphin, in the absence of his imprisoned father, is threatened by an alliance led by Charles de Navarre (who aspired to the duchy of Champagne) so Hugh, supposedly in the tenth century, has to combat a formidable enemy alliance. In fact, Bossuat has shown that the dramatic siege of Paris in the *Chanson* corresponds in countless details to the siege of 1358.<sup>20</sup>

The threat personified by the dukes of Champagne and Burgundy explains the creation of the character of Asselin, the brother of the duke of Burgundy in the *Chanson*, as another example of the coming together of the historiographical and literary traditions in this text. From the eleventh century on the name

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, by making the Salic Law the result of a decision by the high nobility, that group seems to have to take the blame for the problems resulting from the exclusion of women in the royal succession. For the attitude of the high nobility toward the Salic Law, see Lot, *Études sur le règne de Hugues Capet* 341.

<sup>20</sup> For details see Bossuat, "La Chanson de *Hugues Capet*."

Asselin, or Ascelin, had acquired the connotation of "traitor." a character could be an Ascelin, just as he could be a Judas or a Ganelon.<sup>21</sup> An Ascelin appears, for example, in the *Couronnement de Louis* as the son of the treacherous Richard of Normandy. The model for the different sinister characters called Ascelin was Adalbéron (Ascelin in the diminutive), bishop of Laon from 977 to about 1031, who in 991 betrayed the pretender to the throne, Charles de Lorraine, by capturing him and sending him to Hugh Capet, whose reign was anything but secure at that point in time.<sup>22</sup> According to Claude Carozzi, in subsequent historiography Adalbéron came to play the role of the scapegoat in Hugh's accession, thus whitewashing the first Capetian of all suspicions of usurpation. It is thus highly significant that a character named Asselin should appear in the *Chanson* as one of the chief opponents of Hugh. Not only does he evoke the cleansed figure of Hugh Capet, but Asselin also represents the conjunction of the fictional and the political that marks the whole poem. As the depiction of the real Adalbéron was shaped by such figures as Catilina and Ganelon,<sup>23</sup> the depiction of Hugh depends to a large extent on literary models. But, as I have indicated for his youthful exploits, he not only emulates literary heroes and conventions, he also parodies them on occasion. The rewriting of history as exemplified in the *Chanson* is bound up with parodie elements.

What is the view, then, that the *Chanson* offers us of its protagonist and of his world? Is he more butcher or more *chevalier*?

<sup>21</sup> For a brilliant analysis of the role of Ascelin in the mythmaking surrounding the accession of Hugh Capet, see Claude Carozzi, "Le dernier des Carolingiens: de l'histoire au mythe," *Moyen Age* 82 (1976): 453-76, esp. 454; also Ehlers, "Die *Historia francorum senonensis*" 15; and Lot, *Études sur le règne de Hugues Capet*, 345. The name Asselin appears no fewer than eighteen times in Moisan's *Répertoire des noms de personnes et de lieux cités dans les chansons de geste françaises et les œuvres étrangères dérivés* (Geneva: Droz, 1986). Among them is Asselin de Troies (that is, from a region close to that of the Asselin of the *Chanson*), a traitor linked to Thiébaud d'Aspremont in the thirteenth-century epic *Gaidon*.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see Carozzi 453-54.

<sup>23</sup> Carozzi 460.

Is he a legitimate ruler or a usurper? Hugh contains within himself the seemingly unreconcilable elements of chivalry and butchery.<sup>24</sup> In fact, even far into the *chanson de geste*, Hugh cannot shake off his butcher origins; he is still being challenged with words such as the following: "Par Dieu! bouchier... morir vos convendra" (209). The two sides of his character and lineage, then, remain in constant tension, though not in conflict. The *Chanson* in its positive rewriting of an existing (negative) legend rather proposes a dialogue that, while upholding class distinctions, suggests strategies for profiting from new ways of ordering society that include the bourgeois in the political power play.

In a similar "dialogue," the *Chanson* embraces two drastically different historical periods without trying to resolve the opposition. The most striking example of that tendency was, as we have seen, the *Chanson's* ambiguous treatment of the Salic Law: Hugh's accession is shown to be at the same time legitimate and illegitimate, depending on which time frame the audience chooses for the events.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> in the sixteenth century, Etienne Pasquier tried to explain away Hugh's butcher connection through a supposed "jeu de mots," a concretization, as it were, of the epic topos of bloodthirstiness. In defending Dante, whose suggestion of Hugh's butcher origins had offended François Ier, Pasquier proposed that "cet auteur [Dante] entendit sous ce nom de Boucher que Capet estoit fils d'un grans et vaillant guerrier. Car à vray dire en matière de guerre, quand on fait en une bataille un grand carnage, nous disons d'un autre mot boucherie et appelions aussi un grand meurdrier et carnassier, grand Boucher." Cited by Bossuat, "La légende de Hugues Capet au XVIe siècle," 36. As I have indicated above, the idea that warfare bears a resemblance to butchery already appears in the *Chanson* itself.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the later German tradition picked and chose among the literary and political possibilities offered by the *Chanson*. The first translator, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrück, belonged to the high nobility. In her reception of the *Chanson*, here called *Hug Schapler* (ca. 1437), the epic aspects prevailed: she stressed the collective heroic experience where narrator, protagonist, and audience form one community. (This is what Uitti sees as one of the prime characteristics of the epic. See *Story, Myth and Celebration*, ch. 2.) The second and third translations, dating from ca. 1500 and 1537 respectively, redefine the epic world model. The second translation highlights the historical aspects of the text (insisting on the historical distance and otherness of Hugh's world), while the third represents a popular *Volksbuch* wherein Hugh becomes just another

What we are left with, then, is profoundly ambiguous text. Its meaning results from the dialogue of the multiple and contradictory currents that inform it. By deploying elements that problematize heroism (characteristic of the late epic), the poet denies a wholly heroic vision of the past. At the same time, by denying his audience a resolution of the text's contradictory elements, he seems to insist on the impossibility of creating univocal meanings and consequently on the impossibility of writing—or rewriting—history.

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romance hero. In all three German translations, the political significance of the French text, its chronicling of the importance of personal merit and of the support of a bourgeois-monarchic alliance in the change of dynasty, has vanished. For a detailed analysis of the three German translations, see Jan-Dirk Müller, "Held und Gemeinschaftserfahrung: Aspekte der Gattungstransformation im frühen deutschen Prosaroman am Beispiel des 'Hug Schapler,'" *Daphnis* 9 (1980): 393-426.