



The Epic Hero and Excess: Achilles, Hector, Raoul de Cambrai and Ernaut de Douai.

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One of the most well-known scenes in the *Iliad* is the death of Hector in Book 22, in which Achilles, hoping to avenge the death of Patroclus, chases Hector around the walls of Troy. Achilles is at this time inflamed by an anger that is furious, disproportionate, inhuman. This anger is the *Mḗνις*, the first word of the *Iliad*:

Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
ούλομένην...

Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus (1.1; tr. Samuel Butler)

We can compare this anger with *furor*, the murderous madness which overtakes a warrior in combat, as well as with *hybris*, or excess, which is an essential component of the epic hero. Indeed, *furor* and *hybris* are highlighted by an identical scenario in the *Iliad* and in a late 12th century *chanson de geste*, *Raoul de Cambrai*, during the confrontation between Achilles and Hector on the one hand, and between Raoul de Cambrai and Ernaut de Douai on the other. The death of Hector, pursued at the foot of the Trojan ramparts, is surprisingly echoed

in *Raoul de Cambrai* when Raoul mercilessly chases his wounded enemy in order to finish him off. Both heroes respond with the same blind violence to the pleas of the vanquished. This furious madness, scorning moral values, imparts to the epic hero's excess its mythical component.

In Books 20 and 21 of the *Iliad*, Achilles comes to avenge the death of Patroclus and slaughter the Trojans, all of whom have taken refuge behind the walls of Troy, except Hector. Book 22 recounts the long confrontation (230 verses) between Achilles and Hector who, alone, awaits his enemy in front of the Scaean gates despite the pleas of Priam and Hecuba. In spite of his resolution, he is struck with terror at the sight of Achilles and flees, pursued by the Greek:

Ἔκτορα δ', ὡς ἐνόησεν, ἔλε τρόμος· οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτ' ἔτλη
αὐθι μένειν, ὀπίσω δὲ πύλας λίπε, βῆ δὲ φοβηθείς·
Πηλεΐδης δ' ἐπόρουσε ποσὶ κραιπνοῖσι πεποιθῶς (22.136-
138).

*Fear fell upon Hector as he beheld him, and he dared not stay
longer where he was but fled in dismay from before the gates,
while Achilles darted after him at his utmost speed.*

In their race, they go around the walls of Troy three times, under the gaze of the gods. Zeus weighs on his golden scale the destinies of the two heroes and sees that Hector must die. Tricked by Athena, who assumes the likeness of his brother Deiphobus, the Trojan decides at last to fight his enemy. He soon understands that he is doomed and decides to seek a glorious death by fighting valiantly. This fervour is cut short by the javelin of triumphant Achilles, who, mercilessly, rejects the dying man's entreaty to respect his body and return it to his people. Hector's only remaining recourse is to call upon Achilles the wrath of the gods: "I was sure that I should not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; look to it that I bring not heaven's anger upon you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the Scaean gates" (356-360). He dies soon after predicting for Achilles his imminent death at the hands of Paris.

The pursuit opposes the one running away (φεύγων) and the other pursuing (διώκων, 157). It is assimilated to a hunting scene through a series of comparisons:

ἤυτε κίρκος ὄρεσφιν ἐλαφρότατος πετεηνῶν,

ρήιδίως οἶμησε μετὰ τρήρωνα πέλειαν,
 ἢ δέ θ' ὕπαιθα φοβεῖται, ὁ δ' ἐγγύθεν ὄξυ λεληκῶς
 ταρφέ' ἐπαΐσσει, ἐλέειν τέ ἐ θυμὸς ἀνώγει·
 ὡς ἄρ' ὁ γ' ἐμμεμαῶς ἰθὺς πέτετο, τρέσε δ' Ἔκτωρ
 τεῖχος ὑπο Τρώων, λαιψηρὰ δὲ γούνατ' ἐνώμα (139-144).

As a mountain falcon, swiftest of all birds, swoops down upon some cowering dove- the dove flies before him but the falcon with a shrill scream follows close after, resolved to have her- even so did Achilles make straight for Hector with all his might, while Hector fled under the Trojan wall as fast as his limbs could take him .

ὡς δ' ὅτε νεβρὸν ὄρεσφι κύων ἐλάφοιο δίηται
 ὄρσας ἐξ εὐνῆς διὰ τ' ἄγκεα καὶ διὰ βήσσας·
 τὸν δ' εἴ πέρ τε λάθησι καταπτήξας ὑπὸ θάμνῳ,
 ἀλλὰ τ' ἀνιχνεύων θέει ἔμπεδον ὄφρα κεν εὖρηι·
 ὡς Ἔκτωρ οὐ λῆθε ποδῶκεα Πηλείωνα (189-193).

as a hound chasing a fawn which he has started from its covert on the mountains, and hunts through glade and thicket. The fawn may try to elude him by crouching under cover of a bush, but he will scent her out and follow her up until he gets her- even so there was no escape for Hector from the fleet son of Peleus.

ὡς δ' ἐν ὀνείρῳι οὐ δύναται φεύγοντα διώκειν·
 οὔτ' ἄρ' ὁ τὸν δύναται ὑποφεύγειν οὔθ' ὁ διώκειν·
 ὡς ὁ τὸν οὐ δύνατο μάρψαι ποσίν, οὐδ' ὅς ἀλύξει (199-201).

As a man in a dream who fails to lay hands upon another whom he is pursuing- the one cannot escape nor the other overtake- even so neither could Achilles come up with Hector, nor Hector break away from Achilles.

However, when Hector decides to sell his life dearly, one last comparison reverses the roles, turning Hector into the eagle swooping down on a lamb or hare (309-311). But this resistance is short-lived. Fatally hit, the Trojan implores his victor to return his body to his people, albeit in vain.

τὸν δ' ἄρ' ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν προσέφη πόδας ὠκύς Ἀχιλλεύς·
μή με κύον γούνων γουνάζεο μὴ δὲ τοκήων·
αἶ γάρ πως αὐτόν με μένος καὶ θυμὸς ἀνήη
ᾧμ' ἀποταμνόμενον κρέα ἔδμεναι, οἷα ἔοργας,
ὡς οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅς σῆς γε κύνας κεφαλῆς ἀπαλάλκοι,
οὐδ' εἴ κεν δεκάκις τε καὶ εἰκοσινήριτ' ἄποινα
στήσωσ' ἐνθάδ' ἄγοντες, ὑπόσχωνται δὲ καὶ ἄλλα (344-
350).

Achilles glared at him and answered, "Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents; would that I could be as sure of being able to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill you have done me, as I am that nothing shall save you from the dogs- it shall not be, though they bring ten or twenty-fold ransom and weigh it out for me on the spot, with promise of yet more hereafter."

The pursuit of Hector by Achilles and the pitiless fury of the Achaean are echoed in a key scene of the *chanson de geste*, *Raoul de Cambrai* (Kay and Kibler 1996): the frantic race of Ernaut de Douai, wounded, from Raoul who refuses to spare him. The story of Raoul de Cambrai is that of a rivalry between two lineages for possession of the Vermandois. Raoul was deprived of his fiefdom, the Cambrésis, by the weak and indecisive king Louis, who gives it to his favourite. When Raoul turns of age, he receives as compensation from the king the fiefdom of the first earl to die, that of Herbert de Vermandois, father of four sons, one of whom is the father of Bernier, his squire and friend. To conquer this fiefdom, Raoul stages a raid in Vermandois and, in his fury at having lost two men, burns down the village of Origny and the abbey along with all of the nuns, including the abbess Marsent, Bernier's mother. It is after this that Bernier joins the Vermandois forces. The two armies meet and from the crush of battle a single combat breaks away, positioned at the centre of the account of the battle, between Raoul and Ernaut de Douai, a long confrontation (nearly four hundred verses, from *laissez* 137 to 155) which ends only with the death of the hero himself. Ernaut de Douai is the ally of the Vermandois but also the personal enemy of Raoul since the death of his two young sons, for which he considers the hero accountable. The exchange of challenges between the two warriors is succeeded by jousting with lances and sword fighting. Raoul soon reveals his superiority: with a sword blow, he severs the left

arm of his adversary. Ernaut, mutilated, flees on horseback, chased by his bloodthirsty enemy. Then from *laisse* 142 on, the scene is no longer one of combat, but of hunting and going in for the kill, in which Ernaut, defenseless, recalls, as Hector did before Achilles, the stag hounded by the hunter. The parallelism of the *laisses* emphasises the stages of this eerie cavalcade, through the repetition of the verbs *hunt* and *flee* and the repetition of three motifs :

- the frantic flight of the vanquished,
- his appeal for pity,
- the fury of the hunter with regards to his prey.

E[rnaus] i monte qi molt fu esperdus,
fuiant s'en torne lez le bruellet ramu ;(...)
R[aus] l'enchausse qi de preis l'a seü.

Fuit s'en E[rnaus] et R[aus] l'enchaussa.(...)
« Merci, R[aus], por Dieu qi tot cria ! » («...)
Et Raous jure qe ja nel pensera
desq'a cele eure qe il ocis l'avra.

Fuit s'en E[rnaus] broichant a esperon ;
R[aus] l'enchausse qi cuer a de felon (2691-2693, 2694-2707,
2708-2709, repeated in 2758-2759, 2768, 2828 and 2832).

Frantic, Ernaut mounted his charger, fleeing in the direction of the dense woodland ... Raoul chased him, keeping close by.

Ernaut flees and Raoul chased him ... « Mercy, Raoul, in the name of God who created everything »... Raoul swore that he would never consider such a thing until he had killed him.)

Ernaut flees, spurring his horse ever faster, Raoul chased him, he who had a vilanous heart.

As soon as Ernaut admits defeat and begs for mercy, the battle should end. Indeed, the code of chivalry forces the victor to spare the vanquished who begs for mercy. As Guillaume d'Orange proclaims in *Le Couronnement de Louis* (Boutet 1996):

Deus ne fist ome qui tant m'ait corocié,
Se tant puet faire que il viegne a mon pié,
Ne li pardoinse de gré et volentiers (1735-1737).

*God never created a man, no matter how much he might have
angered me, should he come to me on foot, that I would not
gladfully forgive him.*

However, Raoul, who has already burned alive the nuns of the abbey of Origny, transgresses once more the moral laws.

This mad race is articulated by three successive encounters; three knights from the clan of Vermandois come, one after the other, to the aid of Ernaut: Rocoul, his nephew, Ybert de Ribémont and finally Bernier, based on a progression meant to amplify the tragedy of the scene. These encounters are also three possibilities for salvation which Raoul lets pass one after the other, persevering in his madness. Rocoul fights first against Raoul, who cuts off his foot, heaps cruel, sarcastic remarks on the two mutilated knights and continues to chase his victim. Ybert de Ribémont and his men capture him, but he is set free by his uncle Guerri le Sor and resumes with more zeal his pursuit of Ernaut. He takes one more step in his excess and sacrilege by dismissing once more an appeal to mercy in the name of God:

« Terre ne erbe ne te puet aténir,
ne Diex ne hom ne t'en puet garantir,
ne tout li saint qe Dieu doivent servir ! » (...)
Cele parole l'a forment empirié
q'a celui mot ot il Dieu renoié (2838-2840, 2843-2944).

*Neither earth nor grass can save you, nor God or man can
deliver you, nor all the saints who serve God! » ... These words
brought much harm upon him for, by saying them, he repudiated
God.*

The jongleur underlines the blasphemy, as does Ernaut himself, who regains confidence faced with the monstrosity of Raoul's words:

« Par Dieu, R[aus], trop te voi renoié,
de grant orguell, fel et outreqidíé !

Or ne te pris nes q'un chien erragié
 qant Dieu renoies et la soie amistié,
 car terre et erbe si m'avroit tost aidié,
 et Dieu de gloire, c'il en avoit pitié ! » (2847-2852).

« By God, Raoul, I see that in your great pride and vile arrogance, you have renounced your faith! Since you repudiate God and his love, I reckon you no more than a rabid dog, for the earth and grass will be quick to come to my aid and the God of glory, in his compassion ».

The third encounter can only be that between Bernier, the instrument of divine vengeance, former friend and squire of Raoul, who killed his mother in the fire of Origny. He appears suddenly after Ernaut's invocation, as if in response to this call for help. His last conversation with Raoul marks the opposition between moderation and immoderation. Bernier reminds Raoul of his previous generosity towards him and his own favours which were so poorly rewarded; he proposes peace, as in their previous encounter (2092-2106 and 2876-289). However, a new element is added: the invocation to God and the appeal to mercy for the defenceless enemy.

E R[oulos], sire, por Dieu le droiturier,
 pitié te pregne, laisse nos apaissier,
 et cel mort home ne te chaut d'enchaucier :
 qi le poing pert, n'a en lui q'aïrier (2898-2901).

Raoul, sire, by God who is the judge of us all, take pity and let us make peace. What use is there in chasing this moribund man ? Whoever loses his fist has lost all joy.

But Raoul's heart has become numb and nothing can move him. This is the hero's last refusal, the last rejection of a chance at salvation. The battle is quick, a simple formality: the dice had been cast long ago. Bernier's sword is driven into Raoul's skull. However, the poet does not wish Bernier to be solely responsible for the death of the hero. Ernaut is to be the one to finish off the wounded warrior, as pitiless as Raoul had been with regards to him.

Even after his death, Raoul continues to be an emblematic figure of excess. Guerri has the body of his nephew opened as well as that of the

giant Jean de Ponthieu who had previously been killed by the latter, in order to compare their hearts: the heart of the giant is no larger than that of a child's, while Raoul's heart is the size of a bull's. The hero incarnates the principal epic value, that of prowess, but his destiny demonstrates that in the absence of wisdom, which must act to counterbalance it, the warrior virtue only leads to excess, defeat, and death.

Medieval clerics were not aware of Homer's text, but read the latin adaptations of the *Iliad*. Some of these adaptations modify Hector's death scene and omit the chase scene, as is the case with the *Ephemeris belli Troiae* of Dictys (4th century), the *Historia de excidio Troiae* of Dares (5th or 6th century), and the *Ilias* of Joseph of Exeter (circa 1190). This is also the case with the *Roman de Troie* of Benoît de Sainte Maure around 1160. However, in the *Ilias latina* (1st century) attributed to Baebius Italicus (Scaffai 1982), we once again find Hector struck with terror fleeing Achilles:

Quem procul ut vidit tectum caelestibus armis (...),
pertimuit clausisque fugit sua moenia circum
infelix portis, sequitur Nereius heros:
in somnis veluti, cum pectora terruit ira,
hic cursu super insequitur, fugere ille videtur,
festinantque ambo, gressum labor ipse moratur (22.935-941).

*When, from afar, he saw him with his divine arms (...)
He fled, struck with terror, circling the walls, for it was his
misfortune that the gates should be closed. The hero,
descendant of Nereus, set off in pursuit. As in a dream in
which the heart is in a rage, the first of the two gives the chase
and closes in, the second seems to flee: they both go as fast as
they can, the effort alone slowing their pace.*

Thus, the similarity between the two scenarios is not fortuitous, no more than that of the two heroes, with regards to their murderous violence.

Μῆνις (mênis), is described as divine wrath, fateful, destructive. The term is used for anger which is not human, for the excess and immoderation of Achilles, whereas for mortals (Hector, for example), the

term used is *χόλος* (22.94). It is close in meaning to *furor*, the murderous state of insanity which takes over the warrior.

We also encounter for Raoul de Cambrai a vocabulary belonging to two registers: that of excess and that of madness. One lexical group comes from the area of excess and disorder. The term *desmesure* (excess, immoderation) appears for the first time in the portrait of Raoul, during his dubbing ceremony:

S'en lui n'eüst un poi de **desmesure**
 mieudres vasals ne tint onques droiture,
 mais de ce fu molt pesans l'aventure :
 hom **desreez** a molt grant paine dure (320-323).

*Had he not been somewhat given to **immoderation**, a better warrior for defending a fiefdom could not have been found. But this flaw brought much misery: an **unchecked** man finds it hard to stay alive for long .*

The poet's linking of *desmesure* with *desreé* is meaningful. The adjective *desreé* (unsettled, unchecked), used three different times, is synonymous with *desmesuré*, as is proved by their parallel use in the rhyming words, with regards to Raoul:

Li quens R(aous)^o fu molt **desmesurez**.
 « Fil a putain, ce dit li **desreez** ... (1093-1094)

The earl Raoul had **lost all sense of measure**.
 « Whore's son, says the **unsettled madman** ...

A second lexical group is linked to the register of madness and uncontrollable violence. Raoul is described as *erragiés* (insane) (1296) and accused of *folie* (madness) (1734).

One of the poems in Victor Hugo's *Légende des siècles, L'Aigle du casque* (*The Eagle on the helmet*) published in 1876 (Cellier 1967), is directly based on the battle between Raoul and Ernaut, which Hugo had discovered in extracts of the *chanson de geste* published by his first publisher, E. Le Glay. Hugo had considered another title for this poem: *L'Homme sans pitié* (*The Man without Pity*). An ancestral vendetta opposes two Scottish lineages. The two representatives of these families,

Tiphaine, « l'homme fauve » (« the wild man »), and Angus, the « tragique enfant » (« tragic child »), last in the line of the enemy's lineage, are forced to fight one another; the boy, barely a man, is unable to put up any resistance faced with the rugged warrior and flees, chased by his opponent.

Tremblant, piquant des deux, du côté qui descend,
Devant lui, n'importe où, dans la profondeur fauve,
Les bras au ciel, l'enfant épouvanté se sauve. (...)
L'un fuit, l'autre poursuit. Acharnement lugubre !
Rien, ni le roc debout, ni l'étang insalubre,
Ni le houx épineux, ni le torrent profond,
Rien n'arrête leur course : ils vont, ils vont, ils vont ! (...)
Grâce !, criait l'enfant, je ne veux pas mourir ! (252-254, 276-280, 308)

The terrified child flees, his hands in the air, trembling,
spurring his horse on, downhill, straight ahead, anywhere, into
the depths of the forest.
One flees, the other gives the chase. What lugubrious
relentlessness!
Nothing, neither standing rock nor squalid pond nor thorny
holly nor deep mountain stream, stops their chase: they go,
they go, they go ! (...)
Pity ! cries the child, I do not want to die !

Modeled after the medieval poem, the infernal race is interrupted as well by three encounters, three interventions designed to awaken pity in the heart of the pursuer: an old hermit, a group of nuns, and a mother carrying her child in her arms. Like Raoul, the hero is unmoved. Worse, he sacrilegiously rejects the hermit, the nuns, the mother, defies God and kills the child:

Pas de grâce ! Et sinistre, il cria, blasphémant :
Nul ne m'échappera, cieux terribles, quand même
Celui qui m'a bravé, celui que j'ai proscrit
Tiendrait de ses deux mains les pieds de Jésus-Christ !

I shall have no pity ! Sinistrously, he shouts the blasphemy:
No one shall escape me and my wrath, even if he that defied

me and whom I had banished, were holding the feet of Jesus
Christ in his two hands !

Spanning several centuries, we can make out in these three texts the essence of the warrior's violence: the uncontrollable force of the warrior, the *furor* which characterises, for Georges Dumézil (1961), the heroes of the second function, the warrior function. But in the *Iliad*, as in *Raoul de Cambrai*, this savage violence is confronted with human and moral values which are incarnated in Hector and Bernier.

In Hugo's poem, the man without pity is castigated by means of a supernatural intervention giving way to a barbarous and fantastic scene; the guilty party is punished by the emblem of his ferocity, the bronze eagle of his helmet:

Il lui creva les yeux, il lui broya les dents ;
Il lui pétrit le crâne en ses ongles ardents
Sous l'armet d'où le sang sortait comme d'un crible,
Le jeta mort à terre et s'envola terrible (395-398).

*It gouged out his eyes and crushed his teeth;
It clawed his skull with its sharp talons
Beneath the armet, from which blood flowed as if from a
screen,
And threw him down lifeless and flew away on its terrible path.*

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