

SHANE BOBRYCKI

Nigellus, Ausulus: self-promotion, self-suppression and Carolingian ideology in the poetry of Ermold

In the late 820s, Ermold ‘Nigellus’, an exile from the court of King Pippin of Aquitaine, composed a series of poems in a bid to return to favour from his place of exile in Strasbourg. Ermold directed two short poetic Epistles to Pippin and one long panegyric poem, the *Carmen in honorem Hludowici Caesaris*, to Pippin’s father, Emperor Louis the Pious (r. 814–840).¹ Ermold’s crime remains unknown. Like Ovid, whose *Tristia* and *Epistolae ex Ponto* influenced Ermold’s exilic poetry, the Carolingian panegyrist, though he fully confesses his culpability, pointedly neglects to say for what.² The *Carmen* is explicitly about Louis: the first book describes his youthful achievements as the sub-king of Aquitaine, especially against the Muslims of Barcelona; the second book describes his accession to his father’s empire and the visit of Pope Stephen to assist in his consecration; the third book describes his victory against the rebellious Bretons under their king Murman; and the fourth book describes the baptism of King Harald of the Danes, presented by Ermold as the Christianisation and peaceful subjugation of the entire *gens*.³ As a source for the early reign of Louis the Pious, the *Carmen* was once demeaned for inferior style and dubious accuracy, but has recently received more respectful scholarly treatment.⁴ Ermold’s praise may be fulsome, but it was measured by the yardstick of Carolingian norms and consequently serves as a source for historians examining those norms.⁵ As such, it has fuelled studies on the role of concepts like *pietas*,⁶ notions of royal authority and legitimacy,⁷ literary patronage,⁸ the practice of

¹ Ermold, *Carmen in honorem Hludowici Caesaris* (ed. Edmond Faral, *Ermold le Noir: Poème sur Louis le Pieux et Épîtres au Roi Pépin*, Les Classiques de l’Histoire de France au Moyen Age 14, Paris 1964). For a possible chronology for these poems, and previous orderings, see Peter Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 19 (1985) 239–289, at 253–271. For Louis the Pious, see *Charlemagne’s Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman/Roger Collins (Oxford 1990). Karl F. Werner has argued that Ermold was also the author of the *Waltharius* in *Hludovicus Augustus: Karl F. Werner, Gouverner l’empire chrétien – Idées et réalités*, in: *Charlemagne’s Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman/Roger Collins (Oxford 1990) 3–123, at 101–123, but the matter is unresolved.

² Ermold, *Carmen* I, 43; IV, 2640–2641.

³ For a more detailed inventory of each book, see Alfred Ebenbauer, *Carmen Historicum. Untersuchungen zur historischen Dichtung im Karolingischen Europa* 1 (Philologica Germanica 4, Wien 1978) 101–149.

⁴ See above all Philippe Depreux, *La pietas* comme principe de gouvernement d’après le *Poème sur Louis le Pieux* d’Ermold le Noir, in: *The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Joyce Hill/Mary Swan (Turnhout 1998) 201–224; id., *Poètes et historiens au temps de l’empereur Louis le Pieux*, in: *Le Moyen Âge* 99 (1993) 311–332; Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets 253–271; Isabella Ranieri, *La technica versificatoria nel Carmen in honorem Hludowici Caesaris di Ermoldo Nigello e la tradizione da Hilica Latina*, in: *Studi medievali*, ser. 3, 25, 1 (1984) 93–114. For older attitudes, see: Ermoldus Nigellus, *Carmina* (ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, MGH SS 2, Hannover 1829) 464–523, at 464–466; (ed. Ernst L. Dümmler, MGH *Poetae latini aevi Carolini* 2, Berlin 1884) 1–93, at 2; Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* 1 (München 1911) 552–557; Ebenbauer, *Carmen Historicum* 101–149.

⁵ Cf. Depreux, *La pietas* 204.

⁶ Depreux, *La pietas*.

⁷ Jean Batany, *Propagande carolingienne et mythe carolingien: Le programme de Louis le Pieux chez Ermold le Noir et dans le couronnement de Louis*, in: *La Chanson de Geste et le Mythe carolingien* 1, ed. Emmanuèle Baumgartner (Saint-Père-sous-Vézelay 1982) 313–340.

⁸ Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets, esp. 253–254; id., *The poetic hunt: from Saint Martin to Charlemagne’s heir*, in: *Charlemagne’s Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman/Roger Collins (Oxford 1990) 565–589; id., *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford 1987) 106–130.

hunting,⁹ and the role of women¹⁰ in the Ludovician period, as well as studies focussing on events and personalities.¹¹

But there is more still to be gained from Ermold than a picture of the elite set of norms according to which he formed his praise. Ermold's self-depiction in the *Carmen*, as a flawed petitioner with something yet to offer, also reveals how and for what reasons literary spokespeople (from whom we have learned so much about Carolingian ideology) accepted and asserted Carolingian norms. Ermold's attempt to balance humble self-promotion and praise of Louis involved, as I hope to show, a performed acceptance of Carolingian ideology which was, by assuming the static reality and truth of that very ideology, a part of its historical formulation. By examining Ermold's 'ego troubles', we can see Carolingian ideology as it existed for the individual: not as static mental Urtext, but as the dynamic conceptualisation of interested negotiations.

Before doing so, it may be helpful to dispel some assumptions about Ermold's status and background that have dogged the interpretation of his work up to this point. We know remarkably little about Ermold the person. From the dates of events described in his poetry, we can conclude that he wrote the *Carmen* at the end of the 820s (Faral's 826/828 seems reasonable).¹² He often alludes to his former position in the entourage of Pippin of Aquitaine, but does not go into details.¹³ He never specifies the exact reasons for his exile, as we have seen, though he admits generally *delicti gesta nefandi mei*.¹⁴ An Ermold or Hermold apparently acting as *cancellarius* in three of Pippin's Aquitanian charters of the mid 830s is the only possible evidence for Ermold outside of his poetry – evidence, if it is the same Ermold, that his poetic petitions were successful – but we should not put more weight on this slim fabric than it can hold.¹⁵ As for Ermold's status in life, Faral and many others have assumed that he was an ecclesiastic, but the evidence for this is even slimmer, as we shall see.¹⁶

For Faral, Ermold's learning and subject matter clearly indicated a clerical or monastic background.¹⁷ Echoing Dümmler and Manitius, Faral saw a famous autobiographical passage in book four as evidence of Ermold's religious status. Here, Ermold describes himself wielding arms ineptly during the 824 Breton campaign, prompting King Pippin's laughing response: "Put down your arms, brother; love letters instead!"¹⁸ I will argue against this reading below. Faral's suggestion that Ermold's consignment to a church (St. Mary's in Strasbourg) was "une forme de détention réservée aux ecclésiastiques" can be dismissed entirely, as Mayke de Jong's analysis of monastic imprisonment (with victims including Emperor Louis himself!) makes clear.¹⁹ But Faral's entire approach is flawed, for failing to take his author's self-representation seriously. Neither Ermold's self-descriptions nor his thematic choices are the passive function of his place in the world. The idea that anything straightforwardly autobiographical might slip out in such poetry, painstakingly constructed as a plea for amnesty to a powerful person, is an unwarranted devaluation of its author's good sense. Recent scholarship, all

⁹ Janet L. Nelson, *The Lord's anointed and the people's choice: Carolingian royal ritual*, in: ead., *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London 1996) 99–132, at 120–123.

¹⁰ Mayke de Jong, *Bride shows revisited: praise, slander and exegesis in the reign of the Empress Judith*, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia Smith (Cambridge 2004) 257–277.

¹¹ E.g., to elucidate the career of Empress Judith, in Elizabeth Ward, *Caesar's Wife: The Career of the Empress Judith, 819–829*, in: *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman/Roger Collins (Oxford 1990) 205–227.

¹² Faral, *Poème viii*.

¹³ E.g. Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2016–2019, and throughout both *Epistolae*.

¹⁴ Ermold, *Carmen I*, 43: "the wicked deeds of my crime".

¹⁵ *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France 6*, ed. Martin Bouquet (Paris 1748), *Diplomata numbers 16–18, 674–676: Isaac Clericus ad vicem hermoldi recognovit (16); Isaac Diaconus ad vicem Hermoldi recognovit & subscripsit (17); Isachar [Bouquet: recte Issac] Notarius ad vicem Ermoldi recognovit & signavit (18)*. Also printed in *Recueil des actes de Pépin Ier et de Pépin II, rois d'Aquitaine*, ed. Léon Levillain (Paris 1926) nos. 28–30.

¹⁶ Examples include Ludovico Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores ab anno aerae christianae 500 ad annum 1500*, 2 (Milano 1726); Ermoldus Nigellus, *Carmina*, ed. Pertz 464; ed. Dümmler 1; Manitius, *Geschichte 552–553*; Ebenbauer, *Carmen Historicum* 101 ('ein Geistlicher').

¹⁷ Faral, *Poème vi*.

¹⁸ Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2019: *Cede armis, frater; litteram amato magis!*

¹⁹ Mayke de Jong, *Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms*, in: *Topologies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke de Jong/Frans Theuvs (The Transformation of the Roman World 6, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2001) 291–328.

else aside, has rehabilitated Ermold's ingeniousness.²⁰ Ermold's 'admiration' of the church and its splendours, so telling for Faral, was neither exclusively 'clerical'²¹ nor exclusively 'his'. Ermold liked a good fight or hunt too.²² But the scenes and attitudes of the *Carmen* are there not because Ermold has this or that proclivity, stemming passively *de conditione*, but because he feels that Louis, his honorand, will favour what he describes. Or rather, he hopes to match his descriptions and link himself to what he understands to be Louis's ideal empire.

All this simply shows that the very project of classification is poorly conceived.²³ Apart from the desire to place every learned Carolingian author in a monastery, despite enough counter-examples to fill a recent book,²⁴ what does such categorization even tell us? Soldiers became monks,²⁵ and ecclesiastical and secular elites often shared interests in the early Middle Ages; both made and received grants, participated in cases of law, gave counsel to the king, worshipped God, participated in Empire. Not only were the lines between *oratores* and *bellatores* crossed; their permeability was central to Carolingian administration and ideology alike.²⁶ Of course, contemporaries asserted distinctions, often vigorously,²⁷ but then too, ideological vigour is often aimed at real laxity. It remains difficult to shake off a model dividing elites into grunting fighters and Latinate praying men, but it is high time that assumptions about medieval individuals no longer precede individual study.²⁸

Indeed, the question of Ermold's status, based on anachronistic assumptions about the nature of Carolingian literacy, underlines the need to examine more carefully the 'ego troubles' of early medieval authors. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to extract the historical condition of an author from an interested self-representation, but we can use interestedness to our advantage.²⁹ If the historical Ermold remains mysterious, Ermold in performance, as he presents himself in relation to the aims of his poetry, may still edify.

Fortunately, the (performed) aims of the *Carmen* in honorem Hludowici Caesaris are clear: first, to praise the deeds of Louis, and, second, to secure pardon and release from exile. Both aims are signposted openly, the first particularly in the preface and the opening lines of book one,³⁰ the second usually at the end of books,³¹ but most noticeably at the end of the work as a whole: *Deprecor ut nostri sit memor exilii ... Confer opem lapsio, allisum solare misellum, / Erige labentem, carcere solve reum.*³² Connecting both is the basic assumption of panegyric: the success of an act of praise leads to the success of the petition connected to it.³³ But what does

²⁰ Godman, Louis 'the Pious' and his poets 235–271; detailed examinations of Ermold's stylistic methods and models can be found in Isabella Ranieri, I modelli formali del *Carmen in honorem Hludowici Caesaris* di Ermoldo Nigello, in: *Acme* 36, 1 (1983) 161–214; ead., *La technica versificatoria*; and Mauro Donnini, *L'ars narrandi nel Carmen in honorem Hludowici di Ermoldo Nigello*, in: *Studi medievali*, ser. 3, 47 (2006) 111–176.

²¹ See Julia M.H. Smith, Religion and lay society, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History* 2, c. 700–c. 900, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1995) 654–678.

²² Fight: e.g. Ermold, *Carmen* I, 302–571; III, 1688–1723; III, 1796–1871; Hunt: IV, 2360–2415, Ep. I, 99–100.

²³ A point recently made by David Ganz, Einhardus *Peccator*, in: *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. Patrick Wormald/Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2007) 37–50, at 37; and by Stuart Airlie, The world, the text and the Carolingian: royal, aristocratic and masculine identities in Nithard's *Histories*, in: *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. Patrick Wormald/Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2007) 51–76, at 54–56.

²⁴ *Lay Intellectuals*, ed. Wormald/Nelson.

²⁵ Cf. Ermold, *Carmen* I, 224–301, the story of Datus, a layman who becomes a monk after living a life filled with *mundanum omne nefas* ('all worldly evil'), later founding the abbey of Conques with the help of a young Louis the Pious.

²⁶ See Karl F. Werner, *Missus – Marchio – Comes: entre l'administration centrale et l'administration locale de l'empire carolingien*, in: *Histoire comparée de l'administration (IV^e–XVIII^e siècles): actes du XIV Colloque historique franco-allemand (Tours 1980)* 191–239; Mayke de Jong, *Empire as ecclesia: Hrabanus Maurus and biblical historia for rulers*, in: *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzak Hen/Matthew Innes (Cambridge 2000) 191–226.

²⁷ See Airlie, *The world, the text and the Carolingian*.

²⁸ But see Thomas F.X. Noble's remarks in *Secular sanctity: Thomas F.X. Noble, Forging an ethos for the Carolingian nobility*, in: *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. Patrick Wormald/Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2007) 8–36, at 28–30.

²⁹ Cf. *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini: Introduction, Translation and Historical Commentary with the Latin Text of Roger A.B. Mynors*, ed. C.E.V. Nixon/Barbara S. Rodgers (Oxford 1994) 4: "their very tendentiousness ... is part of their value to us".

³⁰ Ermold, *Carmen* pr. 9–11; I, 38–39; I, 64.

³¹ In the form of an Ovidian parenthesis to the *libellus* as it ends. Ermold, *Carmen* I, 650–651; II, 1252–1253; III, 1880–1881.

³² Ermold, *Carmen* IV, 2643–2647: "I ask that he be mindful of our exile ... Bestow your influence to a fallen man, console the shipwrecked wretch, lift up the falling, free the accused from the prison."

³³ Cf. Helena Siemens, *Beiträge zum literarischen Bild Kaiser Ludwigs des Frommen in der Karolingerzeit* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1966) 6 n. 3; Philippe Depreux, *La pietas* 202 n. 7.

it mean for an act of praise to succeed, and by what indirect connection does Ermold link his petition to his praise?

The answer to these questions lies in the nature of the genre itself. In the Classical world and Late Antiquity, panegyric was considered part of the so-called epideictic genre.³⁴ Greek and Latin experts of rhetoric divided oratory into three types: deliberative (*deliberativum*), forensic (*iudicale*), and epideictic (*demonstrativum*).³⁵ This third genre was usually defined as that of *laudatio*, ‘praise’, and its opposite, *vituperatio*, ‘invective’, and therefore was concerned with demonstrating the virtues (or vices) of the subject in question.³⁶ Quintilian adds that while some call the genre *laudativum* ‘after its better part’, its Greek origins have a sense more of ‘display’ rather than ‘demonstration’.³⁷ This distinction between demonstration and display is important. It helps to explain how praise is also a recommendation of the praise giver. A piece of epideictic rhetoric is a performance. No less than the public speeches of Late Antiquity, Ermold’s panegyric poem plays (and is a playing of) a particular game, for which success, unlike that in deliberative and forensic rhetoric, does not rely on dialectical argument.³⁸ The virtues of Louis the Pious are taken for granted; it is whether their formulation is pleasing to Louis that matters in recommending the performer.

Ermold’s ‘case’ is not to prove the virtues of Louis the Pious, but to display them. But what about Ermold’s second aim, restoration to favour? It should be stressed that Ermold’s poem is not a straightforward plea for ‘Verzeihung’.³⁹ The fact that Ermold’s Ovidian echoes are suppressed until the ends of books does not mean that they reveal his truest intentions. A whole range of possibilities exist: Ermold is presenting himself as an adviser, a court poet, a propagandist, and not just trying to release himself from an exile, which, after all, he does not describe all that negatively.⁴⁰ Perhaps it is best to see his expected side of the negotiation in more general terms of ‘favour’.⁴¹ This said, we are still left with our previous question: how is Ermold’s praise successful, both in its quest to display the virtues of the emperor and to display the patronisability of its author? Quintilian, again, supplies an incisive answer: in composing epideictic oratory, the orator must know the *audientium mores*, “customs of the audience” and the *publice recepta persuasio*, “opinions generally prevailing”, so that, as he puts it, ‘the judgment will not be in doubt because it will have preceded the oration’.⁴² Epideictic rhetoric must model itself according to the perceived normative system of its audience precisely because it does not make a case in a dialectic way. This is especially true when the audience is also the receiver of praise. In lieu of dialectic, the successful panegyrist has two tasks. First, he must identify the *mores* and *persuasio* of

³⁴ For Late Antique panegyric see above all In Praise of Later Roman Emperors; Sabine MacCormack, Latin prose panegyrics, in: Empire and Aftermath: Silver Latin 2, ed. Thomas A. Dorey (London 1975) 143–205; ead., Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity (London 1981); a useful review of the commentary on panegyric can be found in Richard A. Flower, Polemic and Episcopal Authority in Fourth-Century Christianity (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge 2007); also see the essays in The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity, ed. Mary Whitby (Leiden 1998).

³⁵ See MacCormack, Panegyrics 2; Richard E. Volkmann, Die Rhetorik der Griechen und Römer (Leipzig 1885) 314–361, summarizes guidelines of the epideictic genre.

³⁶ Cf. Cicero, De oratore 2, lxxxiv, 341–lxxxvi, 350.

³⁷ Quintilian, Institutiones 3, 4, 12: *est appellatum a parte meliore laudativum: idem alii demonstrativum vocant. Vtrumque nomen ex Graeco creditur fluxisse; nam ἐγκωμιαστικὸν αὐτὸ ἐπιδεικτικὸν dicunt. Sed mihi ἐπιδεικτικὸν non tam demonstrationis vim habere quam ostentationis videtur et multum ab illo ἐγκωμιαστικῷ, differre; nam ut continet laudativum in se genus, ita non intra hoc solum consistit* (“it is it named ‘laudatory’ after its better part: Others call it ‘demonstrative’. Both names are believed to have proceeded from the Greek, for they say ‘encomiastic’ or ‘epideictic’. But ‘epideictic’ seems to me to have a force not so much of demonstration as of display, and to differ much from ‘encomiastic’: for, although this genre concerns itself with the ‘laudative’, it does not consist solely of this”). It must be noted that the state of knowledge of Quintilian in the Carolingian period remains in doubt. Cf. Texts and Transmissions: A Survey of the Latin Classics, ed. Leighton D. Reynolds (Oxford 1983) 332–334. I am not so much asserting the direct influence of these classical authors (or lack thereof) as employing their theoretical points.

³⁸ Quintilian, Institutiones 3, 7, 5, points out that some semblance of proof (*aliquam speciem probationis*) is often needed in a panegyric, but the proper function of praise is to amplify or ornament (*sed proprium laudis est res amplificare et ornare*, 3, 7, 6).

³⁹ Manitius, Geschichte 553.

⁴⁰ Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets 256.

⁴¹ For the uncertain nature of the remuneration expected by Carolingian poets see Mary Garrison, The English and the Irish at the court of Charlemagne, in: Charlemagne and His Heritage: 1200 Years of Civilization and Science in Europe 1, ed. Paul Butzer/Maximilian Kerner/Walter Oberschelp (Turnhout 1997) 97–123, esp. at 100, 112–113. See also Mary Garrison, The emergence of Carolingian latin literature and the court of Charlemagne (780–814), in: Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1994) 111–140, at 128.

⁴² Quintilian, Institutiones 3, 7, 23: *ita non dubium erit iudicium quod orationem praecesserit.*

his audience, and select virtues with which to ornament his object of praise. When virtues are defined and controlled by social elites, knowledge of those virtues implies public acceptance of elite norms, or, to be exact, the performance of that acceptance.⁴³ Second, the panegyrist must associate his subject with his virtues. According to the classical authorities this was done foremost by juxtaposition through *exempla*.⁴⁴ An *exemplum* could be taken *ex maioribus ad minora* or *ex minoribus ad maiora* (from greater to lesser or from lesser to greater), and the comparison could be positive or negative for the subject.⁴⁵ Juxtaposed *exempla*, as we shall see, are also a means of importuning by display, making obligations clear without saying as much.

A cursory glance at the couplets of the Carmen reveals that juxtaposition, signposted by humour, language, and structure, plays a major role in Ermold's panegyric descriptions. A typical example occurs in book two. Pope Stephen has come to Reims to greet Louis and assist in his consecration. Stephen compares his visit to the emperor with that of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (II, 892–925). The pope says that wisdom attracted him, like the Old Testament queen, to a rich and wise king. But Stephen adduces some positive differences between the Frankish emperor and the biblical king as well:

*Tu tamen es potior, tu rite potentior extas,
Ille umbram retinens, tu quia vera colis
Ille fuit sapiens nimium, sed cessit amori;
Tu sapiens caste vivis amore Dei
Israel ille fuit regnator solius arcis
Tu pius Europae regna potenter habes. (IV, ll. 918–923).*

“You, though, are better, you are stronger, and rightly,
He gripped at the shadow, you cultivate truth
He was wise beyond measure, but gave in to love;
Wise, you live by the chaste love of God.
He was the ruler of the stronghold of Israel only
Pious, you hold in power the kingdoms of Europe.”

In this passage we see the practical strength of Ermold's choice of metre, beyond its passive echoing of exilic precedents. The form is fertile ground for contrast, whether in the balanced opposition of the two hemieps which make up a pentameter (e.g. l. 919), or in the unbalanced, charged opposition of hexameter and pentameter: the attributes of the praiseworthy, but imperfect Solomon are qualified in the longer line of the couplet, while those of the greater, more pious Louis are succinctly delivered in the shorter (ll. 920/1, 922/23).

Alternatively, a single theme can pass through several books. The pious kisses and embraces (*amplexus pii*, II, 871) shared by emperor and pope when they meet at Reims (II, 868–881) are echoed a book later in the wicked kisses of one of Louis's enemies, Murman, king of the Bretons, and his wife (III, 1418–1439). The embrace theme circles back to pious propriety when Louis's wife Judith gives her husband a singular, obedient kiss in the final book (IV, 2354–2355).⁴⁶

The moral gloss in such juxtapositions is given by context. The hierarchically ordered, loving embraces of pope and emperor – multiple genuflection by Louis, humble recognition by the pope (ll. 872–875), kissing (*basiare*) on eyes, lips, breasts, and necks (ll. 876–877), and the two walking, hand in hand, to the church where their prayers go on to God (II, 878–881) – depict an ideal of Christian empire. The sinister (but also ridiculous) embraces of Murman and his wife occur in the context of Louis's attempt in book three to make peace with the ‘so-called king of the Bretons’,⁴⁷ through his ambassador Witchar. In this story, Witchar all but convinces Murman to submit to Louis without a fight (III, 1416–1418) when Murman's *perfida conjunx* suddenly changes her husband's mind with a series of kisses and caresses, humorously described in their excess: *Oscula prima genu libabat et oscula collo, / Oscula dat barbibus, basiat ora, manus / Itque redit giro, tangitque perita per artem, /*

⁴³ Cf. Christina U. Pössel, *Symbolic Communication and the Negotiation of Power at Carolingian Regnal Assemblies, 814–840* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University 2004) 237–239.

⁴⁴ Quintilian, *Institutiones* 5, 11, 1–21.

⁴⁵ Quintilian, *Institutiones* 5, 11, 9.

⁴⁶ For the comparison of these last two exchanges, see Ward, *Caesar's Wife* 218.

⁴⁷ Ermold, *Carmen* III, 1309.

*Officiumque cupit insidiosa dare.*⁴⁸ Murman fails to live up to his role as a husband (III, 1427), and gives in to his wife's suggestions.⁴⁹ When Witchar visits Murman the next morning, the Breton king, hung-over, bleats his defiance in alliterative gurgles: *Missilibus millena manent mihi plaustra paratis, / Cum quibus occurram concitus acer eis.*⁵⁰ Needless to say, it is not long before Murman pays the price, dying in battle, and Ermold takes the opportunity, in the voices of Murman's retreating soldiers, to underscore the cause of the king's unfortunate demise: *Murman noster obit Francisco cuspide tactus, / Credulus en nimium conjugis alloquii.*⁵¹ Not subtle, but an amusing way of presenting the opposite of the correct role of a wife in the giving of counsel.⁵²

By contrast, Judith's kisses in book four are the image of propriety: succinctly limited to a one couplet and one body part: *Discubuit [Louis] laetus, lateri Judith quoque pulchra / Jussa, sed et regis basiat ore genu.*⁵³ After describing a rousing hunt with the recently-converted king of the Danes, Ermold depicts the empress preparing, *prudenter*, a vernal couch and feast for her husband, *pater Caesar*, 'father Caesar' (IV, 2419–2423), a scene emphasizing the stability and piety of Louis's family. Elizabeth Ward has emphasised that this depiction is part of a 'showcase' of ideal queenship.⁵⁴ Judith's active role is not denied; she is a major character in the *Carmen*. She leads the Danish women to the baptismal font.⁵⁵ She is depicted as an image of powerful, resplendent beauty.⁵⁶ Ermold even ends his poem with an appeal to her for intervention with Louis.⁵⁷ But the presumed efficacy of that intervention would derive from her role as ideal queen, who has influence with her husband precisely through the proper, respectful, and subordinate channels (just as Ermold has described her).⁵⁸

What I hope is clear from both the Solomonic comparison and the embrace theme is that Ermold's comparison of actions and qualities is squarely based on Carolingian notions about religion, empire, kingship, and family. The rights and obligations pertaining to these notions were spelled out in the texts and rituals of Carolingian society – chronicles, assemblies, administrative documents, coins – which a learned and socially elite man such as Ermold would have known. This is not the place to go into a complete discussion of which 'ought-worlds' existed in Ermold's day, nor to delve into the debate over the reliability of ritual as evidence.⁵⁹ What I want to express is the affinity of Ermold's (performed) attitudes on several questions of duty and propriety with those of the other normativising sources of the Carolingian period⁶⁰ – among the examples we have just seen: the ideal of Christian empire and the legitimacy of kings, the role of masculinity and social equality in determining the propriety of public embraces, notions of ideal female roles, and ideal channels and methods of advice-giving to kings.

⁴⁸ Ermold, *Carmen III*, 1420–1423: "she plants her first kisses upon his knee, the next kisses on his neck, / she gives his beard kisses, kisses his mouth, his hands. / She comes and goes in circles, and skilfully touches him with her art, / for she longs for a way to give forth her deceits."

⁴⁹ Alfredo Encuentra Ortega shows how Ermold used Virgil's depiction of Aeneas selectively to strengthen the contrast between Murman and Louis; whereas Louis shared with Aeneas such qualities as filial piety, Murman is described with language recalling Aeneas's uncontrolled anger and reliance on women: Alfredo Encuentra Ortega, *Luis el Piadoso, un Eneas cristiano en el poema laudatorio de Ermoldo*, in: *Latomus: Revue d'études latines* 64, 2 (2005) 445–455, at 452.

⁵⁰ Ermold, *Carmen III*, 1494–1495: "I still have a thousand wagons, missiles at the ready, with which I shall run, roused and bitter, against them [the Franks]."

⁵¹ Ermold, *Carmen III*, 1746–1747: "Our Murman is dead, struck by a Frankish spear, trusting, behold, too much in his wife's words."

⁵² Ward, *Caesar's Wife* 218.

⁵³ Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2354–2355: "[Louis] reclined happily, and at his order beautiful Judith also [reclined] at his side, but she also kissed the king's knee with her lips."

⁵⁴ Ward, *Caesar's Wife* 216–220.

⁵⁵ Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2242–2243.

⁵⁶ Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2266–2275. Cf. de Jong, *Bride shows revisited*.

⁵⁷ Ermold, *Carmen IV*, 2643–2647.

⁵⁸ Ward, *Caesar's Wife* 218; De Jong, *Bride shows revisited*. For Carolingian expectations of queenly duties in general, see Janet L. Nelson, *Early medieval rites of queen-making and the shaping of medieval queenship*, in: *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Anne Duggan (Woodbridge 1997) 301–315, reprinted in: Janet L. Nelson, *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others* (Aldershot 1999) XV: 301–315, at 304–305.

⁵⁹ The phrase is Leyser's, in Karl J. Leyser, *The tenth-century condition*, in: id., *Medieval Germany and Its Neighbours, 900–1250* (London 1982) 4–5. For a summary of the ritual debate, see Christina Pössel, *The magic of early Medieval ritual*, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009) 111–125.

⁶⁰ The *De ordine palatii* of Hincmar of Reims/Adalhard of Corbie is a much-cited example of such a source.

For our purposes here, it suffices to show that Ermold's poetry is epideictically useful as a means of weaving historical fact with the fabric of Carolingian norms. As with juxtaposition and elegiac metre, so with poetry and propaganda: the form fits the function. Early medieval Latin poetry was intensely allusive to classical and Christian sources and allowed its authors to pile up meaning upon meaning in a manner useful to an ideology that hoped to do the same. Classical, religious, and Carolingian concepts of *pietas*, to take Depreux's example, were equally relevant to an emperor who aspired to be a Roman, a Christian, and a Carolingian at once;⁶¹ and they could converge in a single poetical performance. In book three, for instance, Witchar threatens Murman with an impressive description of just who Louis is: Caesar of the world, glory of the Franks, ornament of Christians, first in peace and faith, second to none in war, outstanding in learning and in the work of piety.⁶² The deployment of this full title shows what propagandistic potential poetry had for the mapping of contemporary interests onto the accomplishments of the past without diluting either. In poetry that was self-consciously part of Roman, Christian, and Frankish traditions of language, style, and content, sheets of meanings could be forged layer by layer into a solid whole, and different concepts could be pounded into one shining *intitulatio*: *Hludowicus Caesar in orbe, / gloria Francorum, christicumque decus, / pace fideque prior, nulli quoque Marte secundus, / dogmate praecipuus et pietatis ope*.⁶³ Would an aristocratic audience have caught all the references? Perhaps not, but as Rosamond McKitterick has suggested, what is most important in such scenes of polysemic import, as in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, is the *potential* for understanding on several levels.⁶⁴

As long as this potential exists, Ermold can be a useful propagandist. This is self-recommendation enough, but Ermold's case this is even more intertwined with the norms he propagandises. Considering Depreux's discussion of 'the work of piety' (*pietatis ope*) once more, we learn that *pietas* had strong functional, even ministerial, connotations in Carolingian kingship. I will only echo Depreux's argument, which is that *pietas* governed an incredibly wide field of kingly activities, particularly in the realm of counsel and mercy, counterpoint in a way to other kingly values of hierarchical authority and justice.⁶⁵ In the Carmen, for example, when Bero asks to be judged according to the old Frankish laws, he appeals (successfully) to Louis's *pietas*.⁶⁶ Likewise, it is *pietas* that prompts the king mercifully to give Murman a fair burial after his ignominious end.⁶⁷ As a concept, *pietas* involves a neat New Testament juxtaposition to Old Testament justice (Ermold's scene comparing Stephen's visit as a second meeting should be seen in this light). In the 830s, Agobard of Lyon would also beg Louis the Pious to heed his advice by appealing to his *pietas*: *Oro, domine mi, adsit benignissima pietas vestra ...*⁶⁸ The later importance of *pietas* is even clearer when we read, in 846, the opening text of a war council of Lothar and his son Louis: *quia diuina pietas nos et karissimum filium nostrum ad commune colloquium pervenire concessit*.⁶⁹ *Pietas*, with its wide semantic import in Roman, Christian, and Frankish territories (useful and desirable for the emperor), also governed the field of mercy to a fallen servant, as Ermold's examples of Louis's mercy to repentant offenders ought to make clear, and the equally important field of listening to the counsel of skilled *fideles*.⁷⁰ So if *pietas* is ennobling it is also binding.

As we shall see, the epideictic strategies that Ermold used to make the 'case' for his first aim (to praise Louis), i.e. juxtaposition and polysemy, are precisely the same ones he uses to implicate his second aim (to curry favour) with the success of the first. Ermold asserts the merciful role of Emperor Louis's *pietas*, and juxtaposes the mercy which Louis shows to repentant wrongdoers (like Bero) to the mercy he hopes to receive himself. He also maintains the power, legitimacy, and resonance of the term *pietas* in other spheres. As a result, Louis must have mercy on Ermold or fail to live up to his own standards, and relinquish power, legitimacy,

⁶¹ Depreux, *La pietas*.

⁶² Ermold, Carmen III, 1370–1373.

⁶³ Paraphrased above.

⁶⁴ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge 1989) 229.

⁶⁵ Depreux, *La pietas* 205.

⁶⁶ Ermold, Carmen III, 1816–1817: *Caesar, pietatis amore / Deprecor ...* ("Caesar, for love of piety, I entreat you ...").

⁶⁷ Ermold, Carmen III, 1738–1741.

⁶⁸ Agobardus Lugdunensis, *Epistola* 15, 5 (ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH EE 5, Berlin 1899) 150–239, at 225: "I ask, my lord, that your most benign piety be present ..."

⁶⁹ *Synodus habita Francia tempore domni Hlotharii imperatoris* (846) no. 12 (ed. Wilfried Hartmann, MGH Concilia 3, Hannover 1984) 135–139, at 135: "because divine piety permits us and our dearest son to come to public counsel."

⁷⁰ Depreux, *La pietas* 205.

and resonance alike. It is here that Ermold hedges his bets. By promoting an ideological claim in performance, Ermold is committing an act of service which that ideology itself claims must be reciprocated.

The thirty-five lines of dactylic hexameters which open the poem give a physical example of this phenomenon. Forming the acrostic (on either side) *ermoldvs cecinit hludoici caesaris arma*, “Ermold has sung the arms of Louis Caesar” (missing a line or two to form ‘v’ or ‘vv’), the preface is a literal commingling of Ermold’s case with his normative orientations. To compose this prefatory poem, Ermold borrows several phrases from Virgil, Ovid, Juvenius, Porphyrius, and others,⁷¹ but above all, as Isabella Ranieri’s exhaustive study makes clear, from the master of such materials, Aldhelm of Malmesbury, displaying a particular connoisseurship on his part.⁷² In a purposefully convoluted passage, Ermold displays his laudatory aims, his petition, and their interconnection. He begins coyly enough, directing a first, prefatory petition to God, addressing Him with the epithet ‘Editor’ and begging: *Confer rusticulo, quo possim Caesaris in hoc / Eximii exiguo modulariter poscito rite / Carmine gesta loqui*.⁷³ Using a time-honoured literary strategy, Ermold deflects his request by positing, and ostensibly addressing, an alternate readership, while referring to his honorand flatteringly in the third person (as with Witchar’s *intitulatio* directed at Murman and Ermold final request for Judith’s intervention). This is an old fiction to deflect the odiousness of flattery or the boldness of entreaty (or, in Ovid, reprimand) by pretending that the petitioned honorand has only stumbled across something not really directed at him: a game in which recognizing the fiction is part of the trick.⁷⁴ It is worth remembering that this strategy also widens the audience in such way as puts the heat on the entreated subject. If the petitioner has given a pleasing or convincing performance of the subject’s qualities according to *mores* which a wider audience adheres to (and in our case, which the subject is presumed to practice), this wider audience will judge as deficient the patron who fails to reciprocate.⁷⁵ The public in Ermold’s case includes not only the Carolingian elite over which Louis claims to rule (important enough), but God himself (indeed, the ostensible addressee is God), the source and judge of all correct *mores* as well as the source and justification for all kings’ power.

The die is cast from the first words of the preface. Ermold starts his poem by linking his case, the emperor’s success, quality, and legitimacy, and God’s judgement and support in an incredibly bold display of the mutual interdependence of the interests and obligations of all three characters:

... *Fave modo, Christe, precanti*
Carmina, me exilio pro quis nunc principis ab hoc
Auxilium miserando levet, qui celsus in aula
Erigit abiectos, parcit peccantibus, atque
Spargit in immensum clari vice lumina solis.
Alta regis Christi, princeps, qui maxime, sceptris,
Rex Hludowice pie, et pietatis munere Caesar
Insignis meriti, praeclarus dogmate Christi,
Suscipe gratanter, profert quae dona Nigellus,
Ausulus acta tamen qui tangere carmine vestra.
Regis ob aeterni, vestro qui pectore semper
Mansit amor, Caesar, famulum relevato cadentem,
Altitonans Christus vos quo sublimet in aethra (Pr. 23–35).

“... Now favour the one entreating, Christ,
 With his songs, so that for these the prince’s aid might raise me up
 from this exile by his mercy, he who, high in the hall,
 Raises up the downcast, pardons the sinners, and
 Spreads out light beyond limit, in the manner of the shining sun.
 Greatest prince, you who hold the lofty sceptres of Christ,
 Pious King Louis, and by the gift of piety, Caesar

⁷¹ Ermoldus Nigellus, *Carmina*, ed. Dümmler 4.

⁷² Ranieri, *Modelli formali* 162–163.

⁷³ Ermold, *Carmen* pr. 9–11: “Bestow upon a rustic petitioner the power to tell the deeds of excellent Caesar justly and musically.”

⁷⁴ See, for one of many examples, Ovid, *Tristia* 3, VIII.

⁷⁵ Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets 255, citing Walther Marg, *Zur Behandlung des Augustus in den ‘Tristien’ Ovids*, in: Ovid, ed. Michael von Albrecht/Ernst Zinn (Darmstadt 1968) 345–354.

Of distinguished excellence, outstanding in the learning of Christ
 Accept with joy, what gifts 'Nigellus' brings,
 Who has, however, dared (though modestly)⁷⁶ to touch your deeds in song.
 For [love] of the eternal king, which in your heart always
 Has remained, Caesar, relieve a falling servant,
 So that, [by that love], All-thundering Christ may raise you into the heavens."

Performance, the 'faking' of an overheard prayer, is one of the things that rescues this bold intertwining from turning into argument or accusation. If Ermold implies that the propriety of his case follows directly from the emperor's own claims of divine authority, he must do so only by implying, through juxtaposition both conceptual and literal. Ermold only directly asks Louis to 'accept' and 'relieve'; the reasons for doing so (that such are the duties of a king according to the king's own rules) and the possible consequences of refusal (the negative of the final, subjunctive result clause) are subdued beneath the respectful tone, the diminutives, the indirectness of juxtaposition, and the affected passive role. Still, from out of passivity, potentiality, and praise, Ermold makes a convincing epideictic 'argument' for his petition. Line 29 links Louis's Caesarean kingship directly to his piety;⁷⁷ piety, we will hear again and again in the poem, forgives. Line 30 suggests that *dogma*, 'learning', is a direct connection to excellence before Christ; Ermold suggests this in the midst of a display of Aldhelmian learning, in which he mirrors the language of the most difficult writers.

Moreover, in performative terms, Ermold's endeavour has already succeeded. *Assit principio Sancta Maria Meo!* begins the preface, "Assist my beginnings, Saint Mary!", 'beginnings' which are themselves directed as a petition to the greatest muse of all, *Editor, Regnator mundi fautorque redemptor et auctor, Christe*.⁷⁸ If Ermold's work is eloquent, convincing, pleasing, useful to his audience – if it performs satisfactorily, he has already connected its success to God's support. After all, Ermold does not ask Christ to support his entreaty for songs only (*Fave ... precanti / carmina*), but asks that for such songs (*pro quis*) the *auxilium principis* might raise him *ab hoc exilio*. Likewise, when Ermold appeals to Empress Judith at the end of the poem, as Elizabeth Ward points out, he does so soon after invoking the Virgin Mary in similar language.⁷⁹ What appears like stock piety, or, alternatively, stock borrowing of Aldhelm, is an act of no small boldness: like a litigant linking his military skills to God's judgment before a judicial duel, Ermold connects the success of his epideictic project to the same source of justification.

Yet the audacity of this epideictic q.e.d. is simultaneously suppressed by the subjunctive tone, the tortuous word-order (*me exilio pro quis nunc principis ab hoc / Auxilium miserando levet*), and the cautiously deflective, impersonal, language (*Fave precanti carmina* rather than *Fave carminibus, principis auxilium* rather than *princeps*). Ermold wants to soften threatening claims or self-representations, and, more importantly, any acts which would compromise the essential, though paradoxical, assumption of his normativising enterprise: that he is merely a passive teller of Louis's great deeds, which do not need to be argued into greatness. This need also accounts for Ermold's use of diminutive forms to describe himself and his efforts, not only in the preface, but throughout the poem. These perform the paradoxical task of asserting and simultaneously undermining his propagandistic usefulness.

In book one, for instance, Ermold will call himself *promptulus* (I, 38), an odd word contextualized only by *carmen eat ... promere gesta* later in the passage (I, 64): Ermold is "a little propagator" because his song "goes out to promote the deeds" of Louis. Activity is strenuously mitigated in such phrases. Panegyric is a balancing act in which the panegyrist displays his worth as a spokesman (and, since it so often seeks a material patronage, must inform us of his authorship), but under the flattering illusion that the honorand's praises are already universally known. Ermold must display his abilities to *promere* not just *gesta*, of course, but ideology – the special slant on 'deeds' that gives them a meaning useful to the patron – and he wishes to connect such abilities to his real, patronisable self. At the same time, one of Ermold's performed assumptions is that the norms behind his praise are necessarily the same as reality. Another is that Louis needs no propagation because he has already

⁷⁶ My attempt to encapsulate the diminutive aspect of this perfect verb (*ausus [est]*), a neologism placed contrapuntally against *nigellus*, but still suppressed by diminution.

⁷⁷ See also Ermold, *Carmen* II, 722.

⁷⁸ Ermold, *Carmen*, pr. 1: "Creator, ruler of the world, patron and redeemer and author, Christ."

⁷⁹ Ward, *Caesar's Wife* 216, note 56.

taken the place of the sun and spread his light across the world.⁸⁰ Consequently, Ermold must suppress both his normativising activity and his authorial self. How does he balance such activity and passivity? The performative aspect of epideictic plays a part, as we have seen, by assuming Carolingian norms and Ludovician perfection from the beginning. But Ermold's diminutives are well suited to the task as well: the word *nigellus* (diminutive form of *niger*, 'black'), by which he is known, is a good example.

Nigellus, unfortunately, has ossified into surname for Ermold, and in French and English scholarship this becomes, unhelpfully, 'the Black' or 'le Noir'. This byname is better explained in the context of Ermold's epideictic strategies. In his preface, Ermold asks Louis to receive gifts which (and I reorder the Latin for ease of reading) *profert Nigellus, qui tamen carmine acta vestra tangere ausulus [est]*.⁸¹ The potential simultaneity of asserting and undercutting personal agency is particularly well expressed in the untranslatable form *ausulus*. Ermold has craftily seized upon the verb's (*audere*, 'to dare') deponent form to combine a 'daring' verb (and thus daring action) with a diminutive noun (and thus suppressed self-representation). *Audere* can be good or bad, depending on what is being attempted, but Ermold has neutralised the word in a semantic stew of opposites. *Nigellus* is set against *ausulus [est]* by a deliciously ambiguous *tamen*, for the positive or negative slant on either diminutive can be set against its opposite in the other.

What exactly does Ermold mean by calling himself *Nigellus*? Faral's suggestion ("cette allusion au teint semble dénoncer l'homme du midi") is typically materialistic. If *nigellus* is an "allusion au teint", it could as easily be meant to evoke the image of a sunburnt swain, to match Ermold's 'creaking pipe', as that of a sunburnt Aquitanian.⁸² It is better to consider the idea of 'blackness' from a Carolingian perspective than to attempt to educe literal or semi-literal meanings. Perhaps Ermold refers to Song of Songs 1, 5: *nigra sum sed formosa*, "I am black but beautiful", suggesting that his errors are mitigated by his usefulness. In Ermold's poetry, darkness is often associated with *gentes* on the border – Murman tells Witchar that *scuta mihi fuscata tamen (sunt candida vobis)*,⁸³ and in his first Epistle to Pippin, Ermold describes a *gens atra nimis*, an "extremely dark people", that lives near his home of exile and do not worship God.⁸⁴ Both outsider peoples are presented as potentially useful contributors to the Christian empire, just as the Danes are presented to have become a glorious part of Louis's Christian empire, and just as Ermold, lifted from his dark *gesta nefanda*, might also be of glorifying use. Ermold may have been setting himself against the formidable foil of Alcuin, whose poetry often inspired his. Alcuin's nickname of 'Albinus' was well known to ninth-century writers. A mocking comparison to Alcuin is a comparison still, and another example of Ermold's balance of self-promotion with self-suppression.

The salient point is that *nigellus* is no simple surname, but a carefully considered, ambiguous, self-representation. The precise context of that representation may be lost to us, but its function is not. A diminutive byname such as *nigellus*, if we may apply that terminology to what is probably better termed a neologism, works opposite angles. On the one hand, it self-deprecates. Ermold is little and dark; he is harmless; Louis's deeds are already well known, and Ermold's attempt to describe them is not even fully 'daring', but merely *ausulus*. There is a strong note of passivity. On the other hand, even self-mocking representation can be assertive. Mary Garrison has shown how Alcuin uses bynames, even gently mocking ones, to assert his special familiarity with the powerful.⁸⁵ More straightforwardly, referring to oneself by a funny neologism makes one more memorable to one's audience. Thus, Ermold's self-representation escapes the dangers of audacity but also asserts an active, patronisable presence.

A similar balance of passivity and activity can be seen in the passage in book four of the *Carmen* describing Ermold's participation in the 824 Breton campaign led by King Pippin. In the passage, Ermold describes himself humorously, as the hapless wielder of arms that harm no one, prompting a jesting remark from Pippin:

*Huc egomet scutum humeris ensemque reuinctum
Gessi, sed nemo me feriente dolet.*

⁸⁰ Ermold, *Carmen* pr. 27.

⁸¹ Ermold, *Carmen* pr. 31–32: "'Nigellus' brings, who has, however, dared (though modestly) to touch upon your deeds in song."

⁸² Faral, *Poème v.* For 'creaking pipe', see Ermold, *Carmen* IV, 2628–2629.

⁸³ Ermold, *Carmen* III, 1496: "My shields are black (yours are white)."

⁸⁴ Ermold, *Epistola* I, 153–160.

⁸⁵ Mary Garrison, *The social world of Alcuin: Nicknames at York and at the Carolingian court*, in: *Alcuin of York: Scholar at the Carolingian Court*, ed L.A.J.R. Houwen/Alasdair A. MacDonald (*Germania Latina* 3, Groningen 1998) 59–79. See also Mary Garrison, *Alcuin's World through His Letters and Verse* (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge University 1996) 142–252.

Pippin hoc aspiciens risit, miratur et inquit:

“Cede armis, frater; litteram amato magis!” (IV, 2016–2019).

“There I myself bore a shield on my shoulders, a sword in my belt
I bore them, but nobody suffered from my blows.
Seeing this, Pippin laughed, wondered, and began:
‘Put down your arms, brother; love letters instead!’”

Too many commentators have failed to take seriously the humour of this passage.⁸⁶ For Faral, the exchange was little more than a static mine of biographical ore.⁸⁷ More recently, Kershaw has used the passage to underline the reasonable point that books alone do not make scholars, and arms alone do not make warriors, “something the poet Ermoldus Nigellus sheepishly admitted when recounting his own hapless participation in the Breton campaigns of the mid 820s.”⁸⁸ But when Kershaw goes on to say that Pippin’s “dismissal”, as he puts it, “reveals something of an implicit sense of the tensions between learning and the active life”,⁸⁹ he underestimates the passage. By downplaying humour, we overlook what humour implies: a distinct, even proud, asserted familiarity with Pippin.⁹⁰ This is no simple *Königsnähe* either: what is emphasized in this passage, and highlighted with humour and an *exemplum ex minoribus ad maiora*, is the usefulness of the man of learning to the king, and the king’s recognition of that usefulness, not friction between ‘learning and the active life’.

Pippin’s reaction supports this. It is not meant to be dismissive. Instead, Pippin is making a kingly judgment, observing outside reality, considering it, and making recommendations. *Pippin hoc aspiciens risit, miratur et inquit* implies a process, i.e., “Pippin, seeing this [first] laughs, [then] wonders over it, and [finally] says”. Ermold here builds upon the idea of an Alcuin’s or an Einhard’s closeness to a Carolingian king, who, with the old *David*’s good judgment and good humour, disposes, not dismisses, a given *fidelis* to the most fitting environment. In the second Epistle to Pippin, Ermold likewise describes the resurgence of learning in the world as the direct result of Charlemagne’s kingly munificence, in a succinct history of the dynasty intended to inspire Pippin with *exempla* for his own kingship:

*Rex bonus et sapiens, mitis, praeclarus, honestus,
Augustus, placidus, bellipotensque pius,
Ecclesiae custos, sapientia munere cuius
Surrexit, longo tempore posthabita (Ep. II, 160–163).*

“A king good and wise, mild, noble, distinguished,
An augustus, peaceable, strong in war and pious,
Guardian of the church, by whose gift⁹¹ wisdom
Arose, for a long time undervalued.”

The ability to recognize a man of learning implies for Pippin (his *nutritor*, in the language of Einhard)⁹² a connoisseurship of knowledge, and in a society where learning is necessarily connected to *fides*,⁹³ this is a powerful attribute in a leader, even (especially) in the midst of battle. We should not let the charm of the portrait lead us toward our own preferences for idiosyncrasy, modesty, pacifism, or categorization. Pippin here is a master of either sphere: an ideal king. His reaction is a judgment, made from a position of widely defined authority.

⁸⁶ On the uses of humour in the early Middle Ages see the essays in *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge 2002).

⁸⁷ Faral, Poème VI.

⁸⁸ Paul J.E. Kershaw, Eberhard of Friuli, a Carolingian lay intellectual, in: *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. Patrick Wormald/Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2007) 77–105, at 82.

⁸⁹ Kershaw, Eberhard 89.

⁹⁰ Godman, Louis ‘the Pious’ and his poets 258, suggests this, but explicitly denies a more complicated meaning.

⁹¹ But also ‘office’.

⁹² Ganz, Einhardus *Peccator* 46; id., The preface to Einhard’s ‘Vita Karoli’, in: *Einhard: Studien zu Leben und Werk*, ed. Hermann Schefers (Darmstadt 1997) 299–310, at 302.

⁹³ Cf. *De litteris colendis* (ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH LL Capitularia regum Francorum 1, 1, Hannover 1883) 78–79, and *Admonitio generalis* (ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH LL Capitularia regum Francorum 1, 1, Hannover 1883) 52–62.

Ermold's expectations for Louis the Pious, reading the humorous scene in the description of the 824 Breton campaign, would presumably be similar. Louis, *aspiciens*, would laugh first, then wonder about this exiled petitioner, and finally, act, in line with the norms which Ermold, *promptulus*, had proclaimed so earnestly. He would forgive his fallen servant and then, in light of Ermold's displayed literary talents, patronise that servant's abilities. The humour deflects the over-assertiveness of the expected negotiation (and, indeed, has distracted us). But as Ermold laughingly self-mitigates, he tightens the obligatory bonds which Carolingian ideology creates for its leaders towards authors. In the passage quoted from the second Epistle above, Ermold will go on to tell Pippin, *non aliunde, peto, in genitore exempla require: / quae gessit facito, quae facit ipse gere. / Haec tibi, rex, quondam verbis scriptisque solebam / Dicere*.⁹⁴ Both kings are linked by behavioural obligations, linked in turn to Ermold's own agency as an author.

In this context, even simple descriptions have obligatory force. Louis is *pietatis munere Caesar*, "Caesar by the gift of piety" (pr. 29), which then implies *pietas*'s merciful behaviour to the fallen and attentiveness to learned counsel. He is also *praeclarus dogmate Christi*, "outstanding by/in learning of Christ" (pr. 30), so not only should he be able to recognize learning when he sees it, his ability to do so is connected to the agency of God which upholds his kingship. Imperatives flow from description in such a normatively charged atmosphere. The wider audience, including – crucially – God himself (object of piety and learning alike), is watching and assessing. In a courtly context where such poetry was read aloud, the effect could likely be dramatic. Both generations of Carolingians are asked (if only by juxtaposition) to act accordingly, or deny the representation of their habits, perhaps in front of a real audience.

And Ermold has the king even more in his hands. In book one, as in the preface, Ermold begins by invoking his muse, God, *Principis opto loqui praeconia promptulus almi, / Conferat omnipotens, qui valet, arma mihi*.⁹⁵ (I, 38–39). Ermold has, in other words, taken Pippin's advice. He has dropped his sword and shield and picked up new *arma* instead, the *arma* of words and rhetoric, which will allow him to speak the praises of the pious prince, to *describere* the deeds of the warlike Caesar. As the acrostic phrases it even earlier: "Ermold has sung the *arma* of Louis Caesar". When Christ is *Regnator mundi fautorque redemptor et auctor, / Militibus dignis reseras qui regna polorum*, "Ruler of the world, patron, redeemer, and author, / who opens up the kingdoms of heaven to worthy soldiers" (pr. 2–3), this is also a reminder to the royal addressee (as well as to a wider audience including God) that the ultimate king, Christ, ruler of the world, a patron, a redeemer (of the fallen), as well as an *auctor* himself, gives the kingdoms of his empire⁹⁶ to worthy soldiers. We know what makes Ermold a worthy 'soldier' in his role as a learned *promptulus*. We also know what makes a king a worthy soldier, in his role, like the higher king, as a *fautor* and *redemptor*.

As useful as Ermold is as a source of Carolingian ideology, therefore, he is equally useful for what he reveals about the formation of ideology through the cumulative assertion of mutual obligations.⁹⁷ Ermold's poetry allows us to hypothesize about how members of Carolingian society not only came to believe in the normative claims of ruling elites, but why they actively participated in the formulation of such claims performatively, and how their performances altered the meaning of those claims in society. Much has been written about the role of texts in the creation, dissemination, and inculcation of elite identities during the early Middle Ages.⁹⁸ As Rosamond McKitterick writes, "Les textes historiques francs qui traitent d'une élite puissante sont là pour persuader les contemporains et la postérité, par l'écrit, de l'importance et du status de cette élite."⁹⁹ The

⁹⁴ Ermold, Epistolae II, 199–202: "Do not, I beg you, look for examples anywhere besides in your father: what he has enacted, do; what he has done, enact. These things, king, I have chanced to say to you previously in words and writings."

⁹⁵ Ermold, Carmen I, 38–39: "A little propagator, I wish to speak the praises of the pious prince. May the omnipotent give me the 'arms' strong enough to do this."

⁹⁶ *Regna polorum* would normally be a simple poetic plural, but a comparison to Louis's own empire of multiple *regna* seems quite likely.

⁹⁷ Cf. Pössel's discussion of 'public transcripts' in Symbolic Communication 237–239.

⁹⁸ See Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge 2004); ead., *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Notre Dame 2006); ead., *Histoire et mémoire de la crise d'une élite carolingienne: l'année 785 et les Annales Regni Francorum*, in: *Les Élités au Haut Moyen Âge: Crises et Renouvements*, ed. François Bougard/Laurent Feller/Régine Le Jan (Turnhout 2006) 267–282; Stuart Airlie, *Narratives of triumph and rituals of submission: Charlemagne's mastering of Bavaria*, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser. 9 (1999) 93–119; Matthias Becher, *Eid und Herrschaft: Untersuchungen zum Herrscherethos Karls des Grossen* (Thorbecke 1993).

⁹⁹ McKitterick, *Histoire et mémoire* 282.

panegyrist can help explain how such persuasive texts came into being and acquired meaning. The formation and dissemination of elite ideology was a cyclical process in which interested elites and interested authors played varying active and passive roles. These roles were rooted in contemporary relationships between parties (in our case, patronage and punishment) which were further buttressed and formulated by the texts (poems, narratives, charters, etc.) that those relationships fostered among the literate.

Ermold links hoped-for mercy and favour with representations of ideal leadership, modelled along the king's own ideological lines, to display the obligations inherent in his relationship with Louis according to those lines. The techniques he uses to emphasise and downplay his agency simultaneously in drawing such imperatives – epideictic display, topoi of modesty, paradoxical diminutives like *nigellus ausulus* – reveal the tensions inherent in framing negotiations according to elite ideology. Did Ermold 'buy into' the ideology according to whose norms he made his case? Maybe or maybe not; for our purposes it should hardly matter. Ermold's performance is not only more accessible than his personal beliefs; it is equally illuminating. Reading a modern cover letter or resume, we can learn about the values of an employer as perceived by a potential employee, though we fail to know whether the candidate in fact espouses those values she professes to possess. But by examining the candidate's performance only, we can still infer a great deal about the application process. What we have in Ermold is a similar source for the history of Carolingian ideology. The reality of elite power sent the literate petitioner to the textual arbiters of mental reality (chronicles, histories, letters, administrative documents and, especially for Ermold, poetry) to frame his/her own case on and against which he/she modelled his/her petition. Ideology was further disseminated in ritual, at assemblies, in the everyday performance of the empire in the transactions of daily and extraordinary life. But the petitioners who adopted ideological framework for their own purposes, even our *nigellus ausulus*, also, cumulatively, reshaped that ideology to their needs – regardless of their own personal beliefs. The activity of interested individuals in the formulation of ideology was essential. The success of the process added to and further formulated the perceived power of the elite, but also kept the doors open for propagandists like Ermold, encouraging further petition and formulation, building and strengthening a self-reproducing mentality for a political community whose primary aim was its own continuation,¹⁰⁰ but also leaving space for clever commentators to gain by the continuation of that elite.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge 2000) 263.

