Boucicaut Fils and the Great Hiatus: Insights from the Career of Jean II Le Meingre, Called Boucicaut

David S. Hoornstra

In the English-speaking world, it has for too long been fashionable to repeat the historical cliché of the vainglorious French knight with more pride than brains, charging into a hail of deadly English arrows in armor more costly than effective against them. Using the less-well-known actions and interests of a man born to be marshal of France, this essay will show that the French knightly ethos contained as much hard work as vainglory—and a worldview that spread far beyond the English Channel. It will also clear up the confusion caused by the fact that there were not two but three Boucicauts who fought for the crown of France during the Hundred Years War. But its primary aim is to shed light on how a French knight lived, fought, and affected politics in that wider world. In the second volume of this series, Kelly DeVries called for a wider view from students of the Hundred Years' War.¹ This article will provide a modest contribution from Boucicaut's adventures beyond the Anglo-French theater.

Born in 1366, Jean II le Meingre was the younger of two famous soldiers, father and son, both named Jean le Meingre, both of whom became marshal of France, each characterized in his time by the nickname “Boucicaut.”² Each fought the English during his portion of the War, but their lives overlapped by only two years. The third Boucicaut was Geoffroy, Jean II’s brother, born a year later and referred to by Froissart as Boucicaut the Younger. Sometimes called “Le Petit Boucicaut,” he signed himself as “Boucicaut’s brother” (Boucicaut son frère) in the charter issued for Jean II’s votive order, acknowledging his brother’s greater renown. Geoffroy’s career parallels that of his brother at a lesser level. He rose to become

¹ Kelly DeVries, “The Hundred Years Wars: Not One But Many,” in The Hundred Years War (Part II: Different Vistas, ed. L.J. Andrew Villalon and Donald J. Kagay (Leiden, 2008), 3-32.
² That “Boucicaut” is a nickname is made clear by the use of the phrase “dit Boucicaut” (“called Boucicaut”) or simply “Boucicaut” by the sources nearest the man himself, e.g. his biographer. Others, usually writing at a distance of time or geography, use phases that misleadingly suggest surnames or lands held: “the Sire de Boucicaut,” “the Mareschal de Boucicaut” and “Jean le Meingre de Boucicaut.”
governor of the Dauphiné in 1399. In his study of the _nom-de-guerre_ “Boucicaut,” Denis Lalande says its roots suggest “baskets” or “panniers,” used for the transport of loot won in a military endeavor. According to Lalande, it implies “wealth before honor.”³ Both Jean II and his brother, Geoffroy used the nickname for all that it was worth.

What most scholars know of Boucicaut _fils_—renowned jouster, marshal of France, and a general at Agincourt—would seem to support the cliché. Barbara Tuchman called him “the epitome of chivalry,”⁴ in terms that suggest more pride than sense. Froissart wrote him large as a young tournament hero. A page on campaign at twelve, knighted at sixteen, a “crusader” at eighteen, a Holy Land pilgrim at twenty-two, and marshal of France at twenty-six, Jean II married well above his station and was not only embraced by kings, emperors, and popes, but also praised by the leading female writer of the age, Christine de Pizan.⁵ He founded a votive order of chivalry, organized and fought in the most famous jousts of the fourteenth century,⁶ and organized and participated on the French side at the most famous battle of the next. As a French hero he fell short only by not dying like Charny, holding the Oriflamme and guarding his king’s person. His exit from the stage was anticlimactic—as a prisoner after Agincourt.

But there is far more to Boucicaut _fils_ than what has heretofore been published in English works. Boucicaut _père_ may have left his children a nickname with an anti-chivalric “loot-baskets” connotation, but he did not leave them much loot. What he did leave them—the memory of his service to the kingdom—put them in position at court to win their fortunes if they had what it took. Both sons did well, but Jean II is the one we remember. As the elder brother, as well as his father’s namesake, he was first to benefit from being brought up with the heir to the throne—the future Charles VI (r.1380-1422)—and he took enough advantage of this connection to win vastly more renown than his father had achieved. On the other hand, Boucicaut _fils_ paid a price for the glory he came to enjoy.

At Nicopolis in 1396, the wheel of fortune turned under our hero with a jerk. Not only did close and famous friends die in the battle and the after-

---
⁴ Barbara Tuchman, _A Distant Mirror, the calamitous 14th century_ (New York, 1978), 556.
⁶ Richard Barber and Juliet Barker, _Tournaments_ (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1989), 43.