

# The Tribulations of William

Sources: Shahar, S.h (1990). *Childhood in the Middle Ages*.  
London, UK: Routledge.

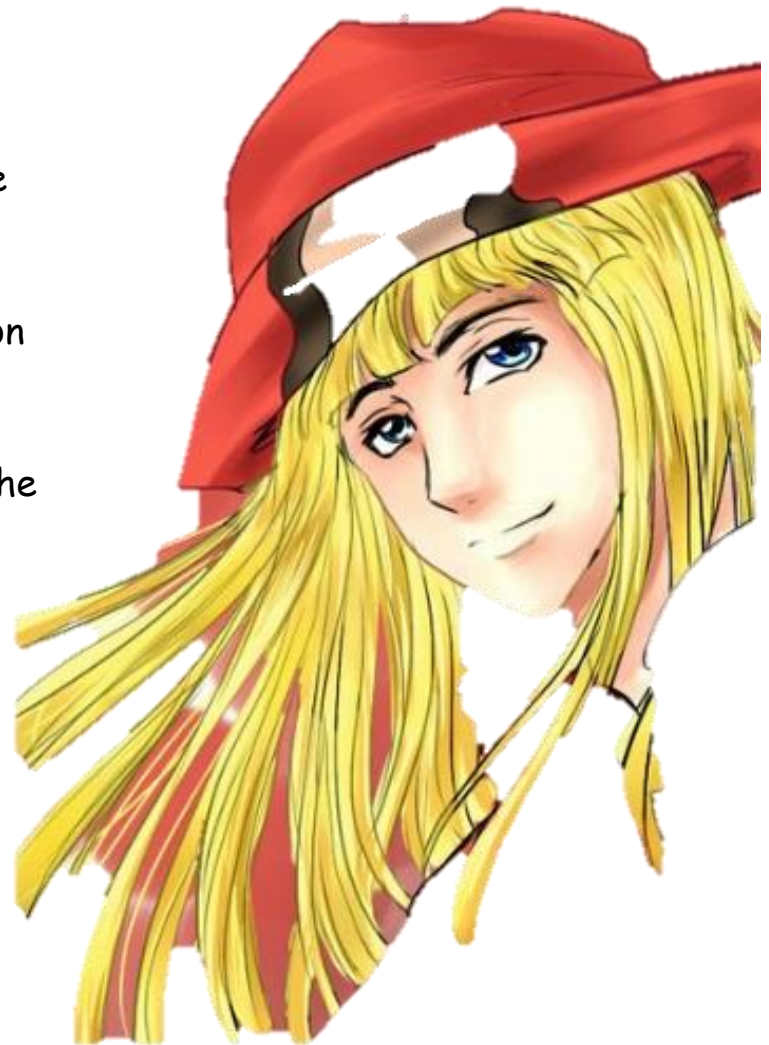
Clanchy, M. T. (2006). *England and its Rulers: 1066–1307*.  
Blackwell Classic Histories of England (Third ed.). Oxford, UK:  
Blackwell.

## William

William was a boy living in Cornwall, England during the late Middle Ages.

He was the son of a minor nobleman and for this reason he was an upper class member of his society.

How did it happen that William became a member of the upper class?



This had to do with ancestors. People in Cornwall usually didn't pay much attention to who their ancestors were—with one exception. William's mother was English (Anglo Saxon) and that's all people knew, or cared to know, about that side of the family. However, if someone in Cornwall happened to be descended from the Normans—well that was a different story. And William's father's ancestors were Normans.

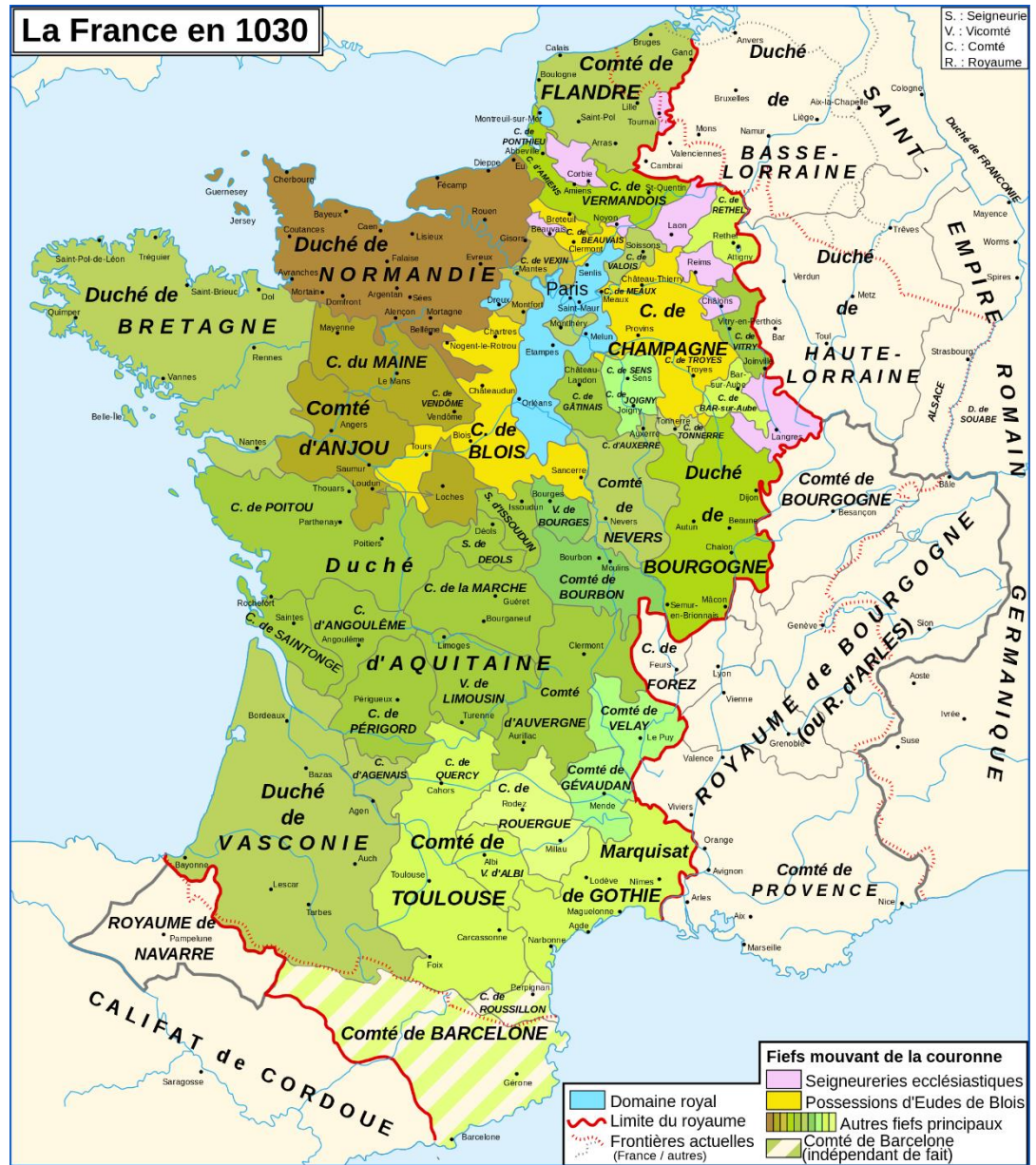
So you might ask—Who were the Normans and why did this make such a difference?



# The Normans

The Normans were a very powerful ethnic group whose homeland was in the northwestern corner of France. Their area was very close to England.

The Normans were much more powerful at this time than the English.



In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Normans were led by a military man called William the Conqueror. In 1066 William and his army of knights invaded England.

They were successful and took over the entire country.



The Normans kicked most of the English people off their properties and divided up the lands for the Normans and the Norman Catholic Church. They set up castles and kingdoms (called fiefdoms) all over England, and these were run by the Normans.

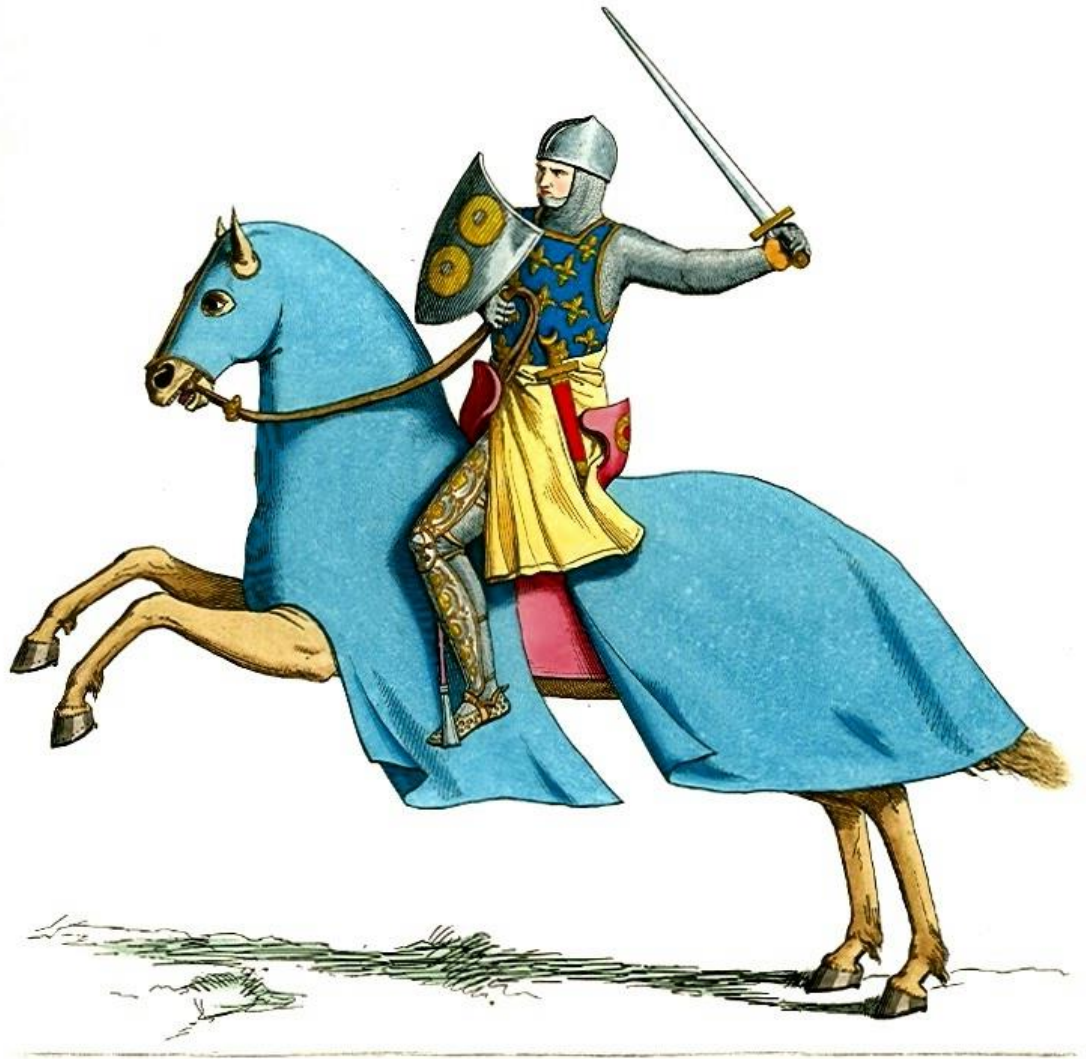
While the Normans did some good things, like ending an ancient form of slavery in England, they also impoverished the English. Most of the English had to work as peasants on the lands owned by the Normans. These peasants were called serfs.



## William's tribulations

When the Norman men were given land, they had to sign a pact promising to defend Norman territory. This usually meant that a land-holding nobleman would give over sons to become knights.

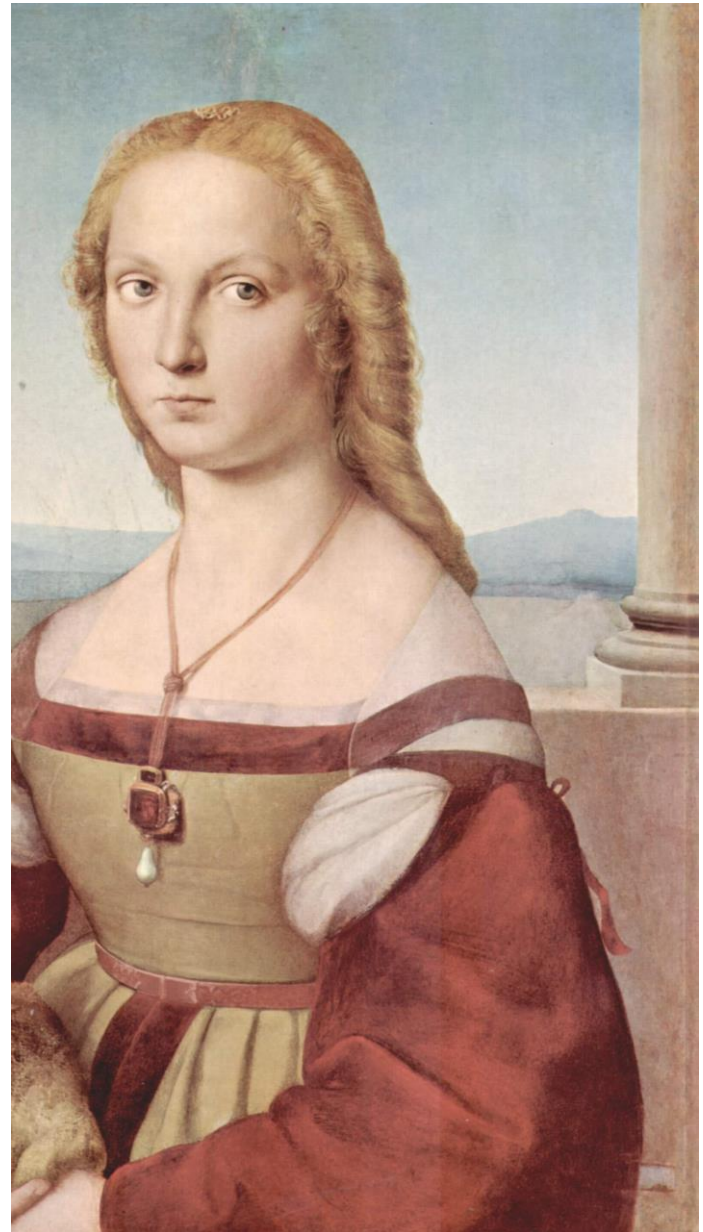
And this would become one of the tribulations of William.



But William had many tribulations growing up. William was the child of a mixed marriage. The Normans didn't usually marry Englishwomen because they believed them to be inferior.

But William, named of course after William the Conqueror, loved his mother and did not like the way Normans looked down on her. During his youngest years, William's mother taught him to speak perfect English, Norman French, and understand Latin.

No member of the family could read or write. Literacy was not common in England at that time.





But there was a more serious tribulation for William. He was forced out of the happy home of his childhood.

At the age of eight, William's father told him that he was going to be taken to the castle of a more powerful nobleman, called a seigneur (or lord). There he and many other children of noblemen would go into training to become knights.

The evening before he left his home forever, William went outside his house and cried and cried.



The next day, William arrived at the enormous castle of the seigneur. He saw his army of soldiers and servants.



The new environment scared William. While he saw that he would be served by a large number of English servants, he also realized that the castle had been built for war.

It had defense features like gatehouses and moats (see right) of water where invaders would drown if they tried to attack the castle.

It was a fearsome sight.



William's unhappiness became immediately obvious to the other boys who were in training at the castle.

"It is a great honor to be chosen to become a knight," insisted an boy named Richard one day, "You will never want for a thing once you become a knight. You must learn to appreciate this if you are to get along and be part of our group."



William knew that the boy was right. He would never return to his parents or his happy home again. This was now his home. He must learn to fit in with the boys.



William started out as a page. Here he groomed horses and waited on the knights.

He began learning many skills, but of course reading and writing were not among them.



After years of training as a page, William graduated from his station and became a squire. He would now begin learning the important social and warrior skills of a knight.

He was twelve-years old at his initiation ceremony. For the first time since he was eight, he saw his parents in the audience at the ceremony'.

He tried not to cry.



As soon as William became a squire, his training moved very quickly. There were rumors of English peasant revolts in other fiefdoms and his seigneur wanted all the boys to be ready for battle.

There were parts of his training that William liked and parts he did not like.





He liked learning the knights' "Principles of Justice and Truth." Here he had to be loyal to his Catholic faith and his seigneur, but he also had to take an oath to be a defender of the weak and the powerless. He must always demonstrate gentlemanly chivalry and charity to those in his kingdom who could not help themselves. William liked being kind.



William understood that the punishment for any squire or knight who did not abide by these principles would be shunning by their peers and their seigneur. That meant that no one would speak or associate with him.

He'd be all alone.



William also learned to play chess. When he was done with his daily work, he would enjoy a game with the other boys, and at times, he'd try and learn by watching the knights play.



As a squire, William could now attend some of the castle feasts. He loved the pies, cakes, and roasts.



But William was also being trained in the skills of battle. He learned archery, how to attack a target, horse training, wrestling, and fencing.

This part of his training was another tribulation to William.



But a greater tribulation would follow.

One day William was out training a very spirited horse. As he rode the horse to the far end of his fiefdom, his mind began to wander.



He remembered seeing his parents in the audience at his initiation ceremony. He felt salty tears well up in his eyes as he remembered his parents and his brothers and sisters back home.

He thought of the Christmas celebrations he used to love in his village.

Then he thought about coming battles he might have to fight.



William's salty tears blurred his vision as the horse began to take him back to the castle.

What William failed to see with his eyes full of tears and his wandering mind was a blind man in the road, signaling him for help.





That evening, one of the other squires, a boy named *George*, came to his quarters.

"William, I dread telling you this. But one of the knights picked up a blind man on the road this afternoon. The blind man said that you passed him while training the horse and failed to help him when he summoned. The knight will take this information to the court of the seigneur in the morning, I fear."



William gasped. He remembered seeing some blurry figure on the road, but his mind had been so far away

How could he have done this?



As soon as *George* left, *William* went to his knees and prayed. He cried in repentance. He knew that he had broken the Principles of Justice and Truth and would now be shunned by his peers—the only family he had left.



That night William took his horse and went to see the castle's priest. William told him what he had done and that he understood what his punishment would likely be.

The priest bowed his head and asked this question: "What was it that weighed so heavily on your mind today that you didn't see the blind man?"



"Mon frere," William began. "it is that we are learning all there is about honor and justice, and yet we learn this while we are preparing ourselves to kill others.

"I came from a family of mixed backgrounds. My mother, you see, was not Norman, but English. I was very happy in my home. Yet I fear that I may be forced to kill members of my mother's own family one day."



The priest still did not lift his head.

"I understand your tribulation, my son. But you must also understand that your training will prepare you also to protect the Church and all the principles it stands for, including the principles of justice you speak of."

William nodded.

"We will see what the seigneur and your peers have to say in the morning."



And in the morning, the knight took the complaint against William to the seigneur and his court. The seigneur shook his head as he heard the story.

The other squires watched, waiting for the order to shun William.

The seigneur then asked his castle priest to give testimony. "I will abide by your advice, mon frere, as this is an issue of morality and justice."



The priest stood up. "In the matter of William, I believe that his failure to come to the aid of a blind peasant is one he understands as breaking the knightly code of conduct.

"But at the same time, I believe this young man possesses a high standard of ethics and is able to see injustices beyond even our eyes. I think William will make a fine knight and may one day become a spokesman for high morality in the kingdom. I don't think shunning will help him to reach this potential."





And as William looked on, he once again felt the tears well up in his eyes.

But this time it was not because of his tribulations, but now it was because of what the priest had said. He had potential. He may not have his family or the comforts of his home, but he had a direction. He could become a knight and later work toward changing the bad things about his world. He could become a peacemaker.

And so it would be.



And the feudal system that the Normans brought to England eventually ended. But it would take many, many hundreds of years before people all over the world began to see the cruelty of prejudice and discrimination.

Wars would be fought over ethnic purity. There would be attempts to kill off or enslave entire ethnic groups. There would be civil rights movements everywhere. And some things have gotten better, but the world has still not solved all its ethnic tribulations.



The End

Let's talk!!!