

CHANSON DE ROLAND

The French Epic. *The Chanson de Roland* was one of many heroic songs, some of epic dimension, which circulated throughout France in the Middle Ages, and which were very popular from the 12th to the 14th centuries. (We need to note that France was during this period not yet quite France, but was a loosely bundled together collection of duchies and kingdoms, in which royal courts hosted entertainment both for the nobility and for the man and woman serving as serfs on the manor.) These songs were recited (to music) by a group of *jongleurs*, who were no doubt familiar with the basic outlines of the songs they performed, but at the same time improvised as their genius permitted. The writing down of this traditional heroic material is hard to date, but we are in any case certain that composers came along, in the course of time, who brought tales to a certain fullness, and that then clerics were primarily responsible for the written texts. In the case of the epic before us, the *Chanson de Roland*, the decisive composer, Tuoldus by name, was the one who wrote out the text of the epic, containing some 4,004 lines, in the form we now call the Oxford manuscript. The date of Tuoldus' brilliant composition was between 1140-1170.

The hero of the epic. The hero of the *Chanson de Roland* is a noble knight fighting in the army of Charlemagne. (Note: the fighting involved, and described in the poem, dates from three hundred years prior to the composition by Tuoldus.) The plot of the tale is complex as is the significance of it, and we have to marvel at the internal brilliance of the oral popular tradition. It goes like this. The army of Charlemagne is engaged in combat with the Saracens in Spain; the armed conflict between Christians and Muslims is raging. Charlemagne decides to propose a truce to the Saracens, and thereupon the French army, under the command of Roland, decides to send a deputation to Spain to negotiate a settlement. Roland chooses his uncle, Ganelon, to carry out this sensitive mission. Ganelon accepts the assignment, but with deep resentment, because he knows the fatal dangers of the mission, and suspects Roland of wanting to get rid of him. So deep is Ganelon's resentment that instead of negotiating a peace settlement he plots with the Saracens to ambush Roland and his men as they withdraw from Spain. The treacherous ambush takes place, Roland finds himself and his men cut off, and then Roland makes a gesture which characterizes him and brings the moral energy of the epic to the fore. In his pride and honor he refuses to call on Charlemagne's help, which he could have done by blowing Roland's famed hunting horn—which acquires almost a magical power here. Only when it is too late does Roland, expiring, blast out his lungs into the trumpet, but the gasped fury is so strong that the hero dies in the effort, and is in that moment taken up into heaven. In the aftermath, still within the epic, Charlemagne fights the battle of Roncesvalles, finally making the Saracens his servants.

The Christian Tenor. The contemporary reader must work to assess the Christian tenor of this epic. Roland is called *proulx*, brave, but one must read into this trait his entire knightly dignity. (We are reading about the world of Charlemagne, which was itself already touched by early mediaeval Christianity. At the same time we are reading a poem composed *at the time of the Crusades*, when the image of the faithful knight hero was predominant.) Roland's ascension into heaven is a credible event horizon, given a pervasive world view that includes the everpresent possibility either of salvation or damnation.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Song of Roland, trans. Crossland (Cambridge, Ontario, 1999), pp. 1-78.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/391>

Secondary source reading

Keen, Maurice, *Chivalry*, 1984.

Further reading

History of Old French Literature; Holmes, Urban (Nook Books, 2012).

Original language reading

La Chanson de Roland, ed., tr. Joseph Bedier, 1937 (and often republished)

Suggested paper topics

What kind of hero is Roland? Does he use good judgment in sending Ganelon to negotiate in Spain? Is his refusal to call for assistance, after the ambush of his forces, heroic or foolish? What do you make of his instantaneous ascension into heaven? Does that event indicate God's total approval of Roland's behavior?

The *Chanson de Roland* was apparently composed, as a full scale epic, some three centuries after the events that form its material. From what perspective does the epic seem to be written, that of the participants in the 'original events,' or that of the world of the composer, Turoludus? Do many epics reflect a significant time gap between the composer's perspective and that of the participants in the original events of the epic?

Excerpt

<http://www.wright.edu/~christopher.oldstone-moore/roland.htm>

XXX

Oliver mounts upon a lofty peak,
Looks to his right along the valley green,
The pagan tribes approaching there appear;
He calls Rollanz, his companion, to see:
"What sound is this, come out of Spain, we hear,
What hauberks bright, what helmets these that gleam?
They'll smite our Franks with fury past belief,
He knew it, Guenes, the traitor and the thief,
Who chose us out before the King our chief."
Answers the count Rollanz: "Olivier, cease.
That man is my good-father; hold thy peace."

LXXXI

Upon a peak is Oliver mounted,
Kingdom of Spain he sees before him spread,
And Sarrazins, so many gathered.
Their helmets gleam, with gold are jewelled,
Also their shields, their hauberks orfreyed,
Also their swords, ensigns on spears fixed.
Rank beyond rank could not be numbered,
So many there, no measure could he set.
In his own heart he's sore astonished,
Fast as he could, down from the peak hath sped
Comes to the Franks, to them his tale hath said.

LXXXII

Says Oliver: "Pagans from there I saw;
Never on earth did any man see more.
Gainst us their shields an hundred thousand bore,
That laced helms and shining hauberks wore;
And, bolt upright, their bright brown spearheads shone.
Battle we'll have as never was before.
Lords of the Franks, God keep you in valour!
So hold your ground, we be not overborne!"
Then say the Franks "Shame take him that goes off:
If we must die, then perish one and all."