



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

# THE SONG OF ROLAND

TRANSLATED BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS

Although its origins are obscure,  
*The Song of Roland* was almost certainly  
written by one hand

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*The Song of Roland*, as Dorothy Sayers remarks in the introduction to this fine translation, is "the earliest, the most famous, and the greatest of those Old French epics which are called Songs of Deeds." Writing around the end of the eleventh century, and recalling an actual disaster in 778, the anonymous poet describes in detail the betrayal and slaughter by Saracens of the rear-guard of Charlemagne's army under Roland at Roncevaux and Charlemagne's bitter revenge. Nowhere in literature is the medieval code of chivalry more perfectly expressed than in this masterly and exciting poem.

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
1. The Poem	7
2. The Feudal Picture	29
3. Vassalage	31
4. Tokens	32
5. Chivalry	33
6. The Rules of Battle	34
7. Nurture and Companionship	37
8. Horses and Swords	37
9. The Verse and the Translation	38
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	45
A NOTE ON COSTUME	47
THE SONG OF ROLAND	51
NOTE ON LAISSE 50	205

# INTRODUCTION

## I. THE POEM

IN the year 777, a deputation of Saracen princes from Spain came to the Emperor Charlemagne to request his assistance against certain enemies of theirs, also of the Moslem faith. Charlemagne, who was already engaged in a war against the Saxons, nevertheless accepted their invitation, and, after placing garrisons to fortify his frontiers, marched into Spain with all his available forces. He divided his army into two parts, one of which crossed the eastern Pyrenees in the direction of Gerona; the other, under his own command, crossed the Basque Pyrenees and was directed upon Pampeluna. Both cities fell, and the two armies joined forces before Saragossa, which they besieged without success. A fresh outbreak of hostilities by the Saxons obliged Charlemagne to abandon the Spanish expedition. As he was repassing the Pyrenees, the rear-guard of his army was set upon by a treacherous party of Basques, who had disposed an ambuscade along the high wooded sides of the ravine which forms the pass. Taking advantage of the lie of the land and of the lightness of their armour, they fell upon the rear-guard, slaughtered them to a man, pillaged the baggage-train, and dispersed under cover of the falling night. The chronicler Eginhardt, who recounts this sober piece of history in his *Vita Caroli*, written about 830, concludes: "In the action were killed Eggihard the king's seneschal, Anselm count of the palace, and Roland duke of the Marches of Brittany, together with a great many more." Another manuscript of the ninth century contains an epitaph in Latin verse upon the seneschal Eggihard, which furnishes us with the date of the battle, 15 August 778. The episode is mentioned again in 840 by another chronicler, who, after briefly summarising the account given in the *Vita Caroli*, adds that, since the names of the fallen are already on record, he need not repeat them in his account.

## INTRODUCTION

After this, the tale of Roncevaux appears to go underground for some two hundred years. When it again comes to the surface, it has undergone a transformation which might astonish us if we had not seen much the same thing happen to the tale of the wars of King Arthur. The magic of legend has been at work, and the small historic event has swollen to a vast epic of heroic proportions and strong ideological significance. Charlemagne, who was 38 at the time of his expedition into Spain, has become a great hieratic figure, 200 years old, the snowy-bearded king, the sacred Emperor, the Champion of Christendom against the Saracens, the war-lord whose conquests extend throughout the civilised world. The expedition itself has become a major episode in the great conflict between Cross and Crescent, and the marauding Basques have been changed and magnified into an enormous army of many thousand Saracens. The names of Eggihardt and Anselm have disappeared from the rear-guard; Roland remains; he is now the Emperor's nephew, the "right hand of his body", the greatest warrior in the world, possessed of supernatural strength and powers and hero of innumerable marvellous exploits; and he is accompanied by his close companion Oliver, and by the other Ten Peers, a chosen band of superlatively valorous knights, the flower of French chivalry. The ambushade which delivers them up to massacre is still the result of treachery on the Frankish side; but it now derives from a deep-laid plot between the Saracen king Marsilion and Count Ganelon, a noble of France, Roland's own stepfather; and the whole object of the conspiracy is the destruction of Roland himself and the Peers. The establishment of this conspiracy is explained by Ganelon's furious jealousy of his stepson, worked out with a sense of drama, a sense of character, and a psychological plausibility which, in its own kind, may sustain a comparison with the twisted malignancy of Iago. In short, beginning with a historical military disaster of a familiar kind and comparatively small importance, we have somehow in the course of two centuries achieved a masterpiece of epic drama - we have arrived at the *Song of Roland*.

The poem itself as we know it would appear to have achieved its final shape towards the end of the eleventh century. It is not difficult to see why the legend should have taken the form it did, nor why

## INTRODUCTION

it should have been popular about that time. The Saracen menace to Christendom became formidable about the end of the tenth century, and led to a number of expeditions against the Moors in Spain with a definitely religious motive. At the same time, a whole series of heroic legends and poems were coming into circulation along the various great trade-routes and pilgrim-routes of Europe – legends attached to the names of local heroes, and associated with the important towns and monasteries along each route. The pilgrim-road to the important shrine of St James of Compostella led through the very pass in which Charlemagne's rear-guard had made its disastrous last stand: what more natural than that the travellers should be entertained with a glorified version of the local tragedy? It was also the tenth century that saw the full flowering of the feudal system and the development of the code of chivalry which bound the liegeman in bonds of religious service to his lord and loyalty to his fellow-vassal. And finally, the preaching of the First Crusade set all Christendom on fire with enthusiasm for the Holy War against the followers of Mohammed.

We have little external evidence about the *Song of Roland*. Such as it is, it seems to agree with the internal evidence (of language, feudal customs, arms and accoutrements, names of historical personages anachronistically annexed to the Charlemagne-legend, and scraps of what looks like authentic knowledge of Saracen territories and peoples) in placing the *Chanson de Roland*, as we have it, shortly after the First Crusade. I say, the *Chanson* as we have it – for the *legend* of Roland must have begun much earlier. Our poet, in beginning his story, takes it for granted that his audience know all about Charlemagne and his Peers, about the friendship of Roland and Oliver, and about Ganelon: like Homer, he is telling a tale which is already in men's hearts and memories. What no scholar has yet succeeded in tracing is the stages by which history transformed itself into legend and legend into epic. Roland, duke of the Marches of Brittany, must have been an important man; but no further historical allusion to him has as yet been traced – why should he have been chosen for this part of epic hero to the exclusion of others who fought and fell with him? How was the story transmitted, and in what form? Ballads? Earlier improvisations of a

## INTRODUCTION

primitive epic kind? We do not know.' We can only fall back on the vague but useful phrase "oral tradition", and refer, if we like, to Sir Maurice Bowra's monumental work, *Heroic Poetry*, which reveals how quickly and how strangely, even at this time in parts of Central Europe, the history of today may become the recited epic of tomorrow. One thing is certain - the extant *Chanson de Roland* is not a chance assembly of popular tales: it is a deliberate and masterly work of art, with a single shaping and constructive brain behind it, marshalling its episodes and its characterisation into an orderly and beautifully balanced whole.

Happily, we may leave scholars to argue about origins: our business is with the poem itself - *the Song of Roland*; just one, the earliest, the most famous, and the greatest, of those Old French epics which are called "Songs of Deeds" - *Chansons de Geste*. It is short, as epics go: only just over four thousand lines; and, though it is undoubtedly great literature, it is not in the least "literary". Its very strength and simplicity, its apparent artlessness, may deceive us into thinking it not only "primitive" (which it is) but also "rude" or "naïve", which it is not. Its design has a noble balance of proportion, and side by side with the straightforward thrust-and-hammer of the battle scenes we find a remarkable psychological subtlety in the delineation of character and motive. But all this is left for us to find; the poet is chanting to a large mixed audience which demands a quick-moving story with plenty of action, and he cannot afford the time for long analytical digressions in the manner of a Henry James or a Marcel Proust.

The style of epic is, in fact, rather like the style of drama: the characters enter, speak, and act, with the minimum of stage-setting and of comment by the narrator. From time to time a brief "stage-direction" informs us that this person is "rash" and the other "prudent", that so-and-so is "angry" or "grieved", or has "cunningly considered what he has to say". But for the most part we have to watch and listen and work out for ourselves the motives

1. A page, recently rediscovered, from the Codex Emiliense 39 attests the existence, at or shortly before the date of the *Chanson de Roland*, of a Roland-legend, analogous to, but independent of, the *Chanson* (see *Revista de Filología Española*, 1953, pp. 1-94).



## INTRODUCTION

which prompt the characters and the relationship between them. We are seldom shown their thoughts or told anything about them which is not strictly relevant to the action. Some points are never cleared up. Thus we are never told what is the original cause of the friction between Roland and his stepfather; not until the very end of the poem does Ganelon hint that "Roland had wronged [him] in wealth and in estate", and we are left to guess at the precise nature of the alleged injury. Very likely it was all part of the original legend and already well-known to the audience; or the traditional jealousy between stepparent and stepchild, so familiar in folklore, could be taken for granted. But we do not really need to know these details. The general situation is made sufficiently clear to us in the first words Roland and Ganelon speak. The opening scenes of the poem are indeed a model of what an exposition should be. The first stanza tells us briefly what the military situation is; the scene of Marsilion's council gets the action going and shows us that the Saracens are ready for any treacherous business; the great scene of Charlemagne's council introduces all the chief actors on the Christian side and sketches swiftly and surely the main lines of their characters and the position in which they stand to one another: Charlemagne – at the same time cautious and peremptory; Roland, brave to the point of rashness, provocative, arrogant with the naïve egotism of the epic hero, loyal, self-confident, and open as the day; Oliver, equally brave, but prudent and blunt, and well aware of his friend's weaknesses; Duke Naimon, old and wise in council; Turpin, the fighting archbishop, with his consideration for others and his touch of ironic humour; Ganelon, whose irritable jealousy unchains the whole catastrophe. Ganelon is not a coward, as he proves later on in the poem, and his advice to conclude a peace is backed up by all his colleagues. But it is unfortunate that, after Roland has pointed out that the proposed mission is dangerous and that Marsilion is not to be trusted, he does not at once volunteer to bell the cat himself. He lets others get in first. Charlemagne vetoes their going, and so shows that he too is aware of the danger and doubtful about Marsilion. Then Roland names Ganelon – and coming when it does, and from him, the thing has the air of a challenge. And Charlemagne does not veto Ganelon – infuriating

## INTRODUCTION

proof that he values him less than Naimon or Turpin, less than Roland or any of the Twelve Peers. Ganelon's uneasy vanity reacts instantly: "This is a plot to get rid of me" – and Roland (who has quite certainly never had any such idea in his simple mind) bursts out laughing. That finishes it. Rage and spite and jealousy, and the indignity of being publicly put to shame, overthrow a character which is already emotionally unstable. Self-pity devours him; he sees himself mortally injured and persecuted. He is obsessed by a passion to get even with Roland at the price of every consideration of honour and duty, and in total disregard of the consequences. The twentieth century has found a word for Ganelon: he is a paranoiac. The eleventh-century poet did not know the word, but he has faithfully depicted the type.

What is interesting and dramatic in the poet's method is the way in which the full truth about Ganelon only emerges gradually as the story proceeds. We are kept in suspense about him. We cannot at first be certain whether he is a brave man or a coward. When he refuses, with a magnificent gesture, to let the men of his household accompany him to Saragossa – "Best go alone, not slay good men with me" – are we to take the words at their face-value? Is it not rather that he does not want witnesses to the treachery that he is plotting? It is, indeed. Only when, after deliberately working up the fury of the Saracens to explosion-point, he draws his sword and "sets his back to the trunk of the pine", do we realise that, so far from being a coward, he is a cool and hardy gambler, ready to stake his life in the highly dangerous game he is playing. Even when at last brought to judgement, he remains defiant, brazenly admitting the treachery, claiming justification, and spitting out accusations against Roland. If his nerve fails him, it is not till the last moment when his own head and hands can no longer serve him, and he cries to his kinsman Pinabel: "I look to you to get me out of this!" There is a hint of it, but no more.

Ganelon, like all his sort, is a fluent and plausible liar, but this, too, we only realise by degrees. His first accusations of Roland are obviously founded on fact: Roland is rash, quarrelsome, arrogant, and his manner to his stepfather suggests that the dislike is not all on one side. The tale Ganelon tells Blancandrin (LL. 383–388)

## INTRODUCTION

about Roland's boastful behaviour with the apple is entirely in character – invention or fact, it has nothing improbable about it. Ganelon's offensive report of Charlemagne's message (LL. 435–439) certainly goes far beyond the truth, but it may, for all we know, truly express what Ganelon believes to be Charlemagne's intentions; even the further invented details (LL. 474–475) may only be "intelligent anticipation". So far we may give Ganelon the benefit of the doubt. But when he returns to the Emperor's camp and explains his failure to bring back the Caliph as hostage (LL. 681–691) by a long, picturesque, and circumstantial story which we know to be a flat lie from first to last, then we know where we are. And after that, we are not inclined to believe in the apple-story, or in Ganelon's alleged wrongs, or in anything else he says.

Similarly, we may accept, and even admire, throughout the council-scene and the scenes with Blancandrin and Marsilion, Ganelon's scrupulous deference and fervent loyalty to the Emperor. If nothing is too bad for Roland, nothing is too good for Charlemagne; this is the voice of the faithful vassal uplifted in praise of his liege-lord. But when the plot has been laid and is going well, then, as he rides homeward with Charlemagne, they hear the sound he never thought to hear again – the blast of Roland's horn. "Listen!" says Charlemagne, "our men are fighting." Ganelon answers with scarcely veiled insolence: "If any man but yourself said this, it would be a lie." And when the Emperor insists, the insolence breaks out undisguised:

"You're growing old, your hair is sere and white;  
When you speak thus you're talking like a child."

There is in him neither faith nor truth nor courtesy; for all his wit and courage, he is rotten through and through. Yet perhaps he was not always so; he had won the love of his men, and the French held him for a noble baron; there must have been some good in the man before the worm of envy gnawed it all away.

Before the King stood forth Count Ganelon;  
Comely his body and fresh his colour was;  
A right good lord he'd seem, were he not false.

So the poet sums him up and leaves him.

## INTRODUCTION

The portrait of Charlemagne is partly stylised by a number of legendary and numinous attributes belonging to his status as the sacred Emperor. The holiness of the Imperial function, handed down from Constantine through Justinian to the emperors of the West, hovers about him still. He is of unfathomable age – or rather, he is ageless and timeless, for his son and nephew are both young men: his flowing white beard, his strength unimpaired by “two hundred years and more”, are hieratic and patriarchal in their symbolism; he is God’s vicegerent, the Father of all Christendom, the earthly image of the Ancient of Days.<sup>1</sup> Angels converse with Charlemagne, and the power from on high over-shadows him.

Beneath this larger-than-life-size figure, we discern another: the portrait of the ideal earthly sovereign – just, prudent, magnanimous, and devout. In Charlemagne, the poet has done his best to depict for us the early-mediaeval notion of what we should now call a “constitutional” monarch. He “is not hasty to reply”; he does nothing except by the advice of his Council; he has (it seems) the right to veto any proposition before it has been put to the vote, but once it has received the unanimous assent of the Council, he is bound by that decision, whether he personally approves of it or not. In this, he is carefully contrasted with the Saracen king Marsilion, who conducts most of his negotiations himself, and is at one point restrained with difficulty from throwing his javelin at an ambassador; and also with the Emir Baligant, who, when he calls a Council, merely announces his own intentions, whereupon the councillors advise him to do what he has already said he is going to do. By some writers, Charlemagne’s constitutional behaviour has been reckoned as a sign of weakness; but I do not think that is at all what the poet meant. He appears to consider it very proper conduct in a monarch, though we may be doubtful about the extent to which it reflects the behaviour of any actual monarch in the

1. The ceremonial beard and the exterior marks of great age linger on for a long time in literature as the conventional expression of paternal authority. We do wrong to enter into realistic calculations about the respective ages of Cordelia and Lear, Juliet and Old Capulet; the “aged father”, like the aged king, is a semantic device, which may be used either to inspire reverence, or, in the customary comic reversal of order, to make a mock of reverence.

## INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

Charlemagne's weeping and fainting we can draw no conclusions about his character except that the poet has represented him as a perfect model of the "man of feeling" in the taste of the period.

Compared with the subtleties of Ganelon, Roland's character is simplicity itself. Rash, arrogant, generous, outspoken to a fault, loyal, affectionate, and single-minded, he has all the qualities that endear a captain to his men and a romantic hero to his audience. He has no subtlety at all; other men's minds are a closed book to him. He refuses at first to believe in Ganelon's treachery, and when the truth is forced upon him he can only suppose that the crime was committed "for gold". He never really understands why Oliver is angry with him, nor how much his own pride and folly have contributed to the disaster of Roncevaux. He has the naïve egotism of an Achilles, which will wreck a campaign for a piece of personal pride; but he is a much pleasanter person than Achilles. He never sulks or bears a grudge; he endures Oliver's reproaches with a singular sweetness of temper. Beneath all his "over-weening" there is a real modesty of heart, and a childlike simplicity of love and loyalty - to God, to the Emperor, to his friend, to his men, to his horse, his horn, his good sword Durendal. His death-scene is curiously moving.

But the picture that remains most vividly with us is that of gay and unconquerable youth. No other epic hero strikes this note so ringingly:

Through Gate of Spain Roland goes riding past,  
On Veillantif, his swiftly-running barb;  
Well it becomes him to go equipped in arms,  
Bravely he goes and tosses up his lance,  
High in the sky he lifts the lancehead far,  
A milk-white pennon is fixed upon the shaft,  
Whose falling fringes whip his hand on the haft.  
Nobly he bears him, with open face he laughs;  
And his companion behind him follows hard.  
The Frenchmen all acclaim him their strong guard.  
On Saracens he throws a haughty glance,  
But meek and mild upon the men of France,  
To whom he speaks out of a courteous heart—

## INTRODUCTION

So he rides out, into that new-washed world of clear sun and glittering colour which we call the Middle Age (as though it were middle-aged), but which has perhaps a better right than the blown summer of the Renaissance to be called the Age of Re-birth. It is a world full of blood and grief and death and naked brutality, but also of frank emotions, innocent simplicities, and abounding self-confidence – a world with which we have so utterly lost touch that we have fallen into using the words “feudal” and “mediaeval” as mere epithets for outer darkness. Anyone who sees gleams of brightness in that world is accused of romantic nostalgia for a Golden Age which never existed. But the figure of Roland stands there to give us the lie: he is the Young Age as that age saw itself. Compared with him, the space-adventurers and glamour-boys of our times, no less than the hardened toughs of Renaissance epic, seem to have been born middle-aged.

“Roland is fierce, and Oliver is wise.” Oliver is Roland’s “companion” – brought up with him, according to the practice of the time, sharing his pursuits and training – and he displays something of that blunt, hard-headed common-sense which is the traditional characteristic of the “hero’s friend”. Wisdom, in the sense of practical prudence, is a valuable, but not a showy or perhaps a very endearing quality. It is the disastrous Mary Stuarts of history, not the cautious and thrifty Elizabeth Tudors, who flame their way through the pages of ballad and romance. Oliver is a sounder soldier than Roland – more concerned with military necessities than with his own prestige. He mounts a hill before the battle to find out how many enemies they have to reckon with – an action which, by *chanson de geste* standards, scarcely becomes a gentleman; finding the odds unreasonable, he urges Roland to summon assistance – a thing which that hero considers to be beneath his dignity. He goes grimly and gallantly to a task which he knows to be impossible, but he cherishes no illusions, and is unromantic enough to feel no pleasure in the knowledge that “someone had blundered”. He has not Roland’s sunny disposition; he is capable of cherishing resentment, and when his forebodings have proved all too true, he has a regrettable tendency to say, “I told you so”:

## INTRODUCTION

“Companion, you got us in this mess.  
There is wise valour, and there is recklessness;  
Prudence is worth more than foolhardiness.  
Through your o’er-weening you have destroyed the French;  
Ne’er shall we do service to Charles again.  
Had you but given some heed to what I said,  
My lord had come, the battle had gone well,  
And King Marsile had been captured or dead.  
Your prowess, Roland, is a curse on our heads.”

Only too true. Is it a little ungenerous to rub it in like this in the moment of disaster? Perhaps; but it is very natural. Responsibility yoked with irresponsibility, however brilliant, has been known to speak its mind thus. A good many married women will sympathize with Oliver.

He has his own pride. It flashes out, sullen and embittered, when Roland, seeing the rear-guard reduced from twenty thousand men to sixty, proposes at long last to summon Charlemagne. “When I told you to do it, you would not; if you had, you would have saved the day and saved our men. To do it now (i.e. when there is nobody to save but ourselves) would be shameful.” The Archbishop intervenes, saying that although nobody can now be saved, Charlemagne can avenge them and give them all Christian burial. To this excellent argument Oliver submits in silence. He is a very reasonable young man.

The figure of Archbishop Turpin is “historical” in the same sense that those of Charlemagne and Roland are historical; that is to say, there actually was an Archbishop Tilpinus of Rheims at the end of the eighth century, but his portrait in the poem probably owes more to imagination than to fact. Not that it is an altogether impossible portrait – the warrior-priest is not unknown to Christian history; but Turpin is surely *hors concours*, both for prowess and for personal charm. The poet treats him with very special honour: in the first assault of the Saracens he is given a distinguished place, immediately after Roland and Oliver (LL. 1243 *sqq.*); in the second assault he has the honour of “opening the battle” (L. 1487); and he is the last left to stand beside Roland when all the rest are slain. Turpin belongs to an age, which, when the *Song of Roland* was



## INTRODUCTION

made, was already passing – an age when the secular priest lived very close to the laity. At a later period, Turpin's slighting reference to the life of the cloister (LL. 1880–1882), would have come very oddly from an Archbishop's lips; "evidently", as Marc Bloch remarks, "the Gregorian reform had not yet got round" to our poet. Yet, when the French cry: "Well doth our Bishop defend us with his crook!" (or, more literally, "In our Archbishop the crozier is strong to save"), the words are meant in a double sense. With all his fighting qualities, Turpin is a good churchman and a good pastor. He is wise in council; with strong good sense and mild but firm authority he composes the quarrel between Roland and Oliver; his address to the troops is a model of brevity and simple piety, and he takes his priestly duties seriously; his last dying action is a heroic attempt to aid another. There is something peculiarly touching in Roland's lament for him:

"Ah, debonair, thou good and noble knight!  
Now I commend thee to the great Lord of might;  
Servant more willing than thee He shall not find.  
Since the Apostles no prophet was thy like  
For to maintain the Faith, and win mankind.  
May thy soul meet no hindrance in her flight,  
And may Heav'n's gate to her stand open wide!"

This is perhaps the right place at which to speak of the essential Christianity of the poem. It is not merely Christian in subject; it is Christian to its very bones. Nowhere does the substratum of an older faith break through the Christian surface, as it does, for example, in *Beowulf*. There is no supernatural except the Christian supernatural, and that works (as being fully Christian it must) only to influence men's minds and actions, and not to provide a machinery for the story. And it is a Christianity as naïve and uncomplicated as might be found at any time in the simplest village church. These violent men of action are called on to do their valiant duty to the Faith and to the Emperor; and when they die, they will be taken to lie on beds of flowers among – strangely but somehow appropriately – the Holy Innocents, in a Paradise inhabited by God and His angels. They make their prayers directly to God Himself – no

## INTRODUCTION

saints are invoked, not even, I think, the Mother of God; it is as simple as that.

Simplicity does not mean ignorance. The poet is not likely to have been a monk or an ecclesiastic in major orders, but he was "clerkly" enough to be acquainted with the lections and liturgy of the Church, and his theology, so far as it goes, is correct. But like most of his Christian contemporaries he has only the vaguest ideas about the Moslem religion. For him, Saracens are just "Paynims" (i.e. Pagans) and therefore (most inappropriately) idolaters. They worship an "infernal trinity", very oddly made up of Mahound (Mohammed), Termagant (a diabolic personage of obscure origin) and - rather unexpectedly - Apollo, who is in process of degenerating into the "foul fiend Apollyon" familiar to us from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The images of these "false gods" are carried before the Saracen armies, and worshipped on bended knees; when disaster overtakes the Paynim cause they are abused, and maltreated after the manner of savage fetishes. The "law" (i.e. doctrine) of "Mahound and Termagant" is contained in a book, though it is not clear whether the poet is aware of the existence of the Koran, or is merely supposing, on the analogy of the Bible, that every religion must have a sacred book of some kind. (That the ignorance was mutual may be seen by anybody who cares to examine the account of Christian worship and customs given in parts of the *Thousand Nights and a Night*.)

Some slight attempt is made to differentiate Oriental manners from those of the Occident. The Paynim King, Marsilion, holds his council lying down on a dais or divan, whereas Charlemagne sits upright on a faldstool (chair, or throne); the use of darts and other throwing-weapons is confined to the Saracen armies; and the description of the taking of Saragossa suggests that the poet had in mind the great walled cities of Moslem Spain, where the art of fortification was much more advanced than in Northern Europe. It is also perhaps significant that the Emir Baligant is made to promise his warriors not only booty but "fair women" as the reward of valour. Generally speaking, however, Moslem society is deemed to conform more or less closely to that of the West, and is credited with much the same kind of feudal structure. Nor is the

## INTRODUCTION

Christian poet ungenerous to the enemy. Marsilion is, of course, treacherous, and the autocracy of the Emir is contrasted with the "constitutional" monarchy of Charlemagne; but prowess and personal courage are plentiful on both sides, and though many of the Saracen champions hail from sinister and mysterious territories abounding in devils and sorcerers, they make no unfair military use of magical aids; it is all good, clean fighting. The great and chivalrous figure of Saladin had not yet risen up to compel the admiration of the Franks, but the reputation of the Moslem fighter stood high, and is ungrudgingly admitted:

From Balaguet there cometh an Emir,  
His form is noble, his eyes are bold and clear,  
When on his horse he's mounted in career  
He bears him bravely armed in his battle-gear,  
And for his courage he's famous far and near;  
Were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear.

Roland and his Peers are not merely overwhelmed by numbers; they are given foemen worthy of their steel. This is as it should be; you cannot make an epic out of a conflict where all the heroic qualities are on one side.

The battle-scenes are described with immense relish and, from our point of view, at rather tedious length. We must remember that for mediaeval people warfare was not only a calling but the greatest of all sports. They enjoyed the details of fights and the enumeration of the various warriors engaged as we today enjoy a running commentary upon a Test Match or a Cup-Tie Final, with biographical notes upon the players.

The fighting is all done upon horseback, and only the "noble" weapons of spear and sword are employed. There is no mention of foot-soldiers, or of the archers who played so large a part in the Battle of Hastings. This is partly due to the epic convention, but it is also historically true that at this period the most important part in a battle was played by the cavalry charge. Neither was it in fact very desirable to encumber an army with great numbers of infantry, especially in a foreign country; speed of movement was essential when long distances had to be traversed over few and bad roads, with poor facilities for transport and victualling.

## INTRODUCTION

Of the activities of the rank-and-file we are not told much, beyond that, in a general way, "the French" or "the Paynims" exchange good blows in the mellay; the emphasis is all placed on personal encounters between the leaders on either side. We shall notice the same thing in sober historical accounts of mediaeval battles. This, again, is not merely a convention, still less is it (as some writers would have us believe) the manifestation of an "un-democratic" spirit or a contempt for the common man. There was a very practical reason for it. Under the feudal system, it was the duty of every great lord to serve the King in battle, bringing with him so many armed vassals, each of whom in turn brought so many lesser vassals of his own, and so on down the whole scale of hierarchy. Each vassal was bound by oath of allegiance to his own lord and to his own lord only, "while their lives should last"; consequently, if a great lord was killed in battle, his followers were automatically released from their allegiance; they could—and some did—retire from the conflict and take no more part in it. Similarly, if he was taken prisoner or fled from the field, they were left without leader and tended to disintegrate.<sup>1</sup> Hence it was of enormous importance that a lord should lead his men boldly, fight with conspicuous bravery and (if possible) not get killed, or even unhorsed, lest his followers should lose sight of him and become discouraged. This is why Ganelon is so insistent that, if only Roland can be got rid of, the flower of the French army, most of whom are Roland's vassals, will melt away; and this is why, when Marsilion is wounded and flees, the whole Saracen army turns tail. Similarly, when, in the final great battle, the Emperor Charlemagne and the Emir Baligant, lord of all Islam, meet face to face, the whole

1. The situation is made very clear in the *Geste* called the *Chanson de Willame*. Here, the cowardly Count Esturmi flees before the battle begins, and his followers, showing an excellent spirit, call on Count Vivian to lead them. Vivian replies that he will gladly do so, but that he sees one great objection:

"You're not my vassals, and I am not your lord;  
Should you desert me you would not be forsworn."

Esturmi's vassals see the force of this, and at once regularise the position by taking a personal oath to follow him loyally "as long as you shall live".

## INTRODUCTION

issue of the war hangs upon their encounter. Baligant falls; and the entire Paynim army at once flees the field.

The poem is called *The Song of Roland*, but only the first half of it deals with the exploits of Roland himself. He dies (l. 2396) at the end of his great stand with the rear-guard against the treacherous assault of King Marsilion.<sup>1</sup> The remainder of the story is concerned with the vengeance which Charlemagne takes for his death, and for the slaughter of the other eleven Peers and the twenty thousand French who are slain with them. By the standards of the time, the tale would be left incomplete without the vengeance, and the name of Charlemagne would be left under a cloud, for to allow the slaying of one's vassal or kinsman to go unavenged was held to be a very shameful thing.<sup>2</sup> But there is more to it than that; there is a question which concerns the whole scope and function of epic, and of the *Roland's* right to bear that majestic title.

When, as an undergraduate, I first "did" *The Song of Roland*, I accepted easily enough the then-fashionable verdict upon the second part of the poem. "I cannot", said Gustave Lanson,<sup>3</sup> "but range myself on the side of those who think that the revenge of Charlemagne upon the Emir Baligant and his Marsilion is a shabby (*mesquin*) addition, designed to flatter national vanity at the expense of the poetry." Re-reading the poem, after an interval of forty years, for the purpose of translating it, I have found it quite impossible so to range myself.

What has happened in the interval has been, for one thing, the change-over from the "Romantic" notion of the nature and aim of epic poetry to a much more "Classical" conception. At the turn of the century, attention still tended to focus itself narrowly upon the charm of sympathetic personalities and the exploiting of pathetic situations: the reputation of the *Iliad* rested upon the parting of Hector and Andromache, the meeting between Priam

1. Note that he does not die by any Paynim hand - his person is too sacred - but as a result of his own superhuman exertions.

2. Compare the structure of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which, in the same way, is the story of a murder, duly and correctly followed by a vengeance.

3. *Histoire de la Littérature Française* (1894) p. 25.

## INTRODUCTION

and Achilles, and other such selected "beauties"; the *Aeneid* was valued for the sorrows of Dido; the *Divine Comedy* for the Paolo and Francesca episode and the pleasing horror of Ugolino in the Tower of Famine. The wider theme and structure of these monumental works received comparatively little recognition: one ploughed through the bulk of the story for the sake of the "poetical" passages. This point of view still survives in the minds of many film-directors, and of those who produce potted versions of classical novels, or present us with Homer and the Bible in terms of comic-strip technique; and those who most deprecate its latest results would do well to remember that, like many another seedy degenerate, it can boast a highly respectable ancestry. But it is no longer possible for serious criticism to adopt the Romantic attitude; it is committed once more to considering the poem as a whole.

Now if we examine Lanson's statement in the light of the *Roland* itself, we shall notice that he has actually got the facts the wrong way round. It is not the second part of the poem but the first that appeals to national vanity. The famous rear-guard is composed entirely of "Frenchmen of France"; when Marsilion asks on whom Charlemagne relies for his military victories, Ganelon answers: "Upon the French"; the Emperor in council "does nothing but by advice of the French." The war itself is at first presented to us as a struggle for power between (admittedly) Saracen Spain and Christian France, but, for all that, chiefly between Spain and France. It is only when the flower of the French chivalry lies dead in Roncevaux, and Marsilion has fled, mortally wounded, to Saragossa, that there loom up behind the figures of the French champions and the Spanish King the more august images of Emperor and Emir, West and East, Christ and Islam. The world expands before our eyes: we look beyond Saragossa to Alexandria and fabled Babylon; "from forty kingdoms" Baligant summons his powers. And now, embattled alongside the French, for the first time we see "the Franks", and hear the voice of all Christendom. In the final encounter of the last great battle Charles and Baligant meet face to face:

Quoth the Emir: "Bethink thee, Charles, and see  
That thou repent what thou hast done to me.

## INTRODUCTION

My son is slain; I know it was by thee;  
And on my lands thou wrongfully hast seized.  
Become my man, and I will be thy liege;  
Then come and serve me, from here unto the East.”  
Quoth Carlon: “Nay, I’d hold it treachery;  
Never to Paynims may I show love or peace.  
Do thou confess the Faith by God revealed,  
Take Christendom, and thy first friend I’ll be.  
The King Almighty then serve thou and believe.”  
Quoth Baligant: “Thy sermon’s but ill preached.”  
Once more with swords they battle, each to each.

At last the word is spoken that should have been spoken long ago: “Never to Paynims may I show love or peace.” It should have been spoken at that first disastrous council; but Charlemagne, though his mind and conscience misgave him, takes counsel of the French, and the French, swayed by Naimon and Ganelon, choose to have peace for peace’s sake. True, Marsilion has promised, if the military threat is withdrawn, to embrace Christianity and do homage to the Emperor; but is a man who is capable of murdering ambassadors likely to honour this kind of promissory note at three months, or to set very much value upon the life of his own hostages? Charlemagne, when he first heard of the offer, had indicated that he had doubts as to what was really in Marsilion’s mind. But in the council, this point is not debated. Roland alone is peremptory against trusting the Saracen an inch; he wants total surrender, on terms imposed by the conqueror. Unhappily, he gives too much the impression of counselling the right course for the wrong reason, and of wanting war for war’s sake. Diplomacy has its way; Christendom is forgotten. That is the sin that brings the tragedy about: worldly prudence plays into the teacherous hands of Ganelon and Marsilion; the price is the loss of the Twelve Peers and twenty thousand French. And in the end the issue has to be faced after all; before ever Marsilion sends envoys to the Emperor’s camp, Baligant has set sail from Alexandria.

So the grand outline of the poem defines itself: a private war is set within a national war, and the national war again within the world-war of Cross and Crescent. The small struggle at the centre

## INTRODUCTION

shakes the whole web. The evil that is done can never be undone. God is vindicated, Marsilion and Baligant slain, Saragossa taken, its inhabitants set to choose between death and baptism, Queen Bramimonda peaceably converted; but Roland is dead, and the Peers are dead, and to the war between Belief and Unbelief there is no ending. Marsilion had asked concerning Charlemagne: "He is old; when will he weary of going to the wars?" And Ganelon had replied: "Never, while Roland lives. If Roland were dead we should have peace." It was a lie. Old as he is, and bereft of his best help, Charlemagne is Christ's vassal still. "Never to Paynims may I show love or peace." The Angel summons him, and go he must.

Small heart had Carlon to journey and to fight;  
"God!" says the King, "how weary is my life!"  
He weeps, he plucks his flowing beard and white.

Here ends the geste—

It ends, like the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*, in a minor key, and on a falling cadence. I do not think it has anything to fear from the comparison.

Once we have seen the thematic structure of the poem, it is difficult to look upon the Baligant-passages as an "episode" or on the vengeance-story as an "addition". And even if we consider only the "poetry", where are we to make the cut? After the death of Roland? But we have already heard the blast of Olifant and the sounding of the Imperial trumpets. After the vengeance upon Marsilion, losing the lament for Roland, losing the death of Alda, leaving the tale of Ganelon unfinished, missing so much and so much? I had forgotten, till I read it again, how good and how vivid the second half of the *Roland* is. The sailing of the Saracen fleet, whose "unnumbered lanterns and carbuncles ablaze" make the night beautiful and light up the whole coast of Spain, is brilliant as the page of an illuminated missal. Marsilion, disgraced and dying in his high vaulted chamber, surrendering his glove and fief to Baligant, puts on a dignity he never had in life. The last encounter of the last battle, when those two terrible old men fight hand to hand and all earth and heaven stand breathless to see the issue, is a



## INTRODUCTION

moment that seems to happen outside time. They are great, they are supernaturally ancient, their beards are "white as any flower on thorn". Charlemagne receives a buffet that goes near to bring him down: the voice of St Gabriel, rallying him, has that tart stringency which distinguishes the Divine word from pious vapourings:

"And what", said he, "art thou about, great King?"

There is an authentic toughness here which St Theresa of Avila would have recognised. The entry into Saragossa, the funeral journey to Blaye, the return to Aix, the death of Alda, the subtle to-and-fro of the pleadings at the trials, the ordeal by battle, the ghastly execution of Ganelon, and the gay little scene of Bramimonda's baptism follow one another with rapid accuracy and with never a wasted word. It would be easy to mistake this speed for hastiness - easy, but superficial. We have done with the private quarrels, the indecisions, the slow progress of debate and intrigue. The events are now God's hammer-blows, and they fall swiftly. It is a common defect in mediaeval narrators to be unable to vary their pace to suit their matter; but this one knows what he is about. Short as it is and simple in its style, the *Song of Roland* achieves epic stature. It is not a romantic anecdote, but a great poem on a great theme.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the great poems in the world, the *Roland* is perhaps the starkest, not only in theme but in treatment. The style is wholly unadorned: direct statement, direct speech; there are scarcely any general reflections. Only here and there a brief apophthegm sums up a situation or points a moral:

1. Looked on thus, as a whole, it has a much greater theme than that of the *Iliad*. This does not mean that it is a greater poem; it is not, by a long way. In style and technique it is primitive, and has nothing to compare with Homer's music and accomplishment. But in depicting, as both poems do, a struggle between two civilisations, the Christian poet is much more conscious of a serious purpose, and the mainspring of the action is something more important than the recapture of a wife or a quarrel about booty. In virtue of this greater seriousness and self-awareness, the *Song of Roland*, though "primitive" in form, is entitled to take rank with "secondary" epic, and to be compared (from this point of view only) with Virgil and Milton rather than Homer. (For the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" epic, see C. S. Lewis: *A Preface to Paradise Lost*.)