

A QUICK INTRODUCTION TO *THE SONG OF ROLAND*

by George Grant, Parish Presbyterian Church • Medieval History and Literature Series

All werthy men that luffes to hear
Of chevallry that byfore us were
That doughty weren of dede
Of Charles Magne de Fraunce, the heghe Kynge of alle
That oft sythes made hethyn men for-to falle,
That styffely satte one stede;
This geste es soothe; witnes the buke,
The ryghte lele trouthe, whoso will luke,
In cronekill for-to rede.¹

That strange mixture of action and adventure, intrigue and suspense, mystery and treachery, betrayal and heroism that we'd expect from a Hollywood blockbuster was the stock and trade of the medieval *chansons de geste*—or “songs of deeds.” Some literary historians assert that the very idea of the modern novel emerged from these songs of chivalry, of knights in shining armor, and of the legends of the crusaders. One of the very earliest—and one of the best—of these is *The Song of Roland*. It is one of those great, classic works of literature that is almost entirely fictional but which nevertheless is more truthful than most history books filled with carefully verified facts. Indeed, its “true lies” tell us much about ourselves, our world, and

the shaping of Western civilization that we might not otherwise know.

Traditional folk musicians, troubadours, minstrels, and jongleurs, would often travel from town to town, market to market, and castle to castle singing about the epic adventures of great heroes from the distant past. The best stories were, over long periods of time, standardized into a single form. About a hundred of these popular epic poems survive, dating from around the eleventh to the fifteenth century.

Thus, we do not actually know who the various composers of *The Song of Roland* were or even when the poem took its present form. All indications are that there was a single, very gifted, final editor who took various strands of the popular oral tradition and wove them together into a creative masterpiece sometime between 1098–1100. This would mean that the poem was written during the time of the First Crusade—indeed, most scholars believe that the story was intended to encourage Christians to fully comprehend the danger of Islam posed to Christian civilization.

The poem actually describes events that had occurred several centuries earlier, during the reign of the Frankish warrior-king Charlemagne. Though almost none of the

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details of the poem are historically accurate, they became an essential part of what Europeans remembered about the past. History is, after all, not so much what actually happened, as it is what we think happened. As a result, fictionalized legends like this one can often have more influence than careful historiography can.

The composer got nearly all the facts terribly wrong: Charlemagne was not yet the emperor; the bandits who slaughtered the rear-guard of the army were Basques not Saracens; the invasion of the Spanish Moors was but a brief expedition not a seven-year-long campaign; revenge for the ambush was never undertaken; and the rivalry between Roland and Ganelon never happened, so far as we know—in fact, there is good reason to suspect that the two men were not even alive at the same time.

Here is what we do know with some certainty: during the afternoon of August 15, 778, the rearguard of Charlemagne's Frankish army was ambushed and slaughtered in the Roncesvalles of the Pyrenees Mountains while returning from a raid on Moorish garrisons in northern Navarre and Leon. Accounts from this distant age are usually very sketchy, but the most reliable account of the event comes from Einhard, who was Charlemagne's court historian and biographer. From his slight and fragmentary account, romantic balladeers began to piece together a tale of courage, honor, passion, betrayal, adventure, enmity, and revenge that eventually became not only a great work of literature but also the essential historical reference point for the whole system of noble Christian chivalry.

Chivalry is a rather romantic notion that brings to mind Arthur and his Round Table, Ivanhoe and his lost honor, Guenevere and her threatened virtue, and Rapunsel and her dire straits. It evokes sentimental images of the long ago and the far away. But chivalry is actually a code of honorable conduct that need not necessarily be tied to any particular time or place or cultural context. Instead, it is a standard of virtuous

behavior that has inspired great men and women through all the ages—causing them to long for a kinder, gentler society that abides by the conditions of genuine civilization. Drawn equally from biblical standards of virtue and from the examples of godly heroes of the faith, chivalry was a kind of moral philosophy for society, manners, and justice.

The Song of Roland both established and illustrated the notion that chivalry is a humane ideal—ultimately based on Scripture—that defines the limits of proper action toward friend and foe alike. For several generations of European Christians, it was one of the most powerful means by which such cultural standards were woven into the hearts and lives of the people. At first glance, that might be a little difficult for us to understand since we only have the written version of the poem with which to interact—in fact, we probably ought to admit right from the start that as it appears on the page, the poem is a little dry, repetitive, and overbearing. Actually, the *chansons de geste* were not intended to be read. They were written to be performed.

So today, we're at something of a disadvantage: *The Song of Roland* was meant to be seen and heard, accompanied by music, perhaps actors, and certainly in the context of feasting and celebration. In addition, the poem probably would not have been performed at a single sitting. Instead, the *jongleur* might only perform a few scenes from the poem, merely summarizing the essential preceding parts and for the sake of context. Several features of the poem made such performances easier: it consists of roughly 4,000 lines of verse, divided into 298 poetic units called *laissez*; these *laissez* are irregular in length, averaging just under fourteen lines; the lines are mostly decasyllabic, and are connected by either assonance which is something like a very weak rhyming scheme; the *laissez* are regularly punctuated with a kind of echo effect so that slightly different versions of the same event recur consecutively in order to slow the pace of the story—kind of like slow motion

in a movie; the *laisses* are filled with formulaic phrases which helped the performer remember the tale and provided easy “visual” clues for the listener—a technique commonly employed in epics since the time of Homer. All in all, the style, structure, and literary composition of the poem would have made it a kind of operatic drama.

There is never a doubt about who the good guys and the bad guys are. Good and evil are easy to pick out. There is no moral ambivalence about war and its hazards here as in the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. Virtue and vice are set in plain opposition to one another. God’s good providence and the machinations of greedy, foolish, and unscrupulous men are exposed for what they actually are. So, the message of the poem is never in question. But, that is not to say that it is either simple or simplistic. Like virtually all the *chansons de geste*, the poem has a veritable cast of thousands. And there are battle scenes galore. You’ll really have to pay attention to follow all the details, the twists and turns of the plot, and the symbolic details in the names, the places, and the peculiar providences evidenced in the tale.

A few tips for the modern reader are therefore in order:

First, read *The Song of Roland* aloud. Accentuate the drama. Listen for the musical refrains. Allow the architecture of the plotting to dictate your pacing.

Second, read the poem in a group. Divide up the parts, the characters, and the scenes. Read with the full emphasis of voices, accents, and sound effects.

Third, read the poem in a setting of revelry. Have a meal or a party or a time of fellowship as a backdrop. Decorate for the occasion. Use firelight or candlelight for dramatic effect.

In other words, treat the poem as if it were a script or a screenplay. In that way, you will begin to see and hear and experience just why the poem became so immensely popular and influential.

The storyline of *The Song of Roland* is full of blood and thunder, valor and betrayal, faithfulness and vain-

glorying, romance and adventure—in other words, it is full of all the things that make for a great yarn. There is something very attractive about the bravery, loyalty, and noble bearing of Roland’s lost cause that continues to attract our attentions and affections. It is a great classic tale—and it sheds as bright a light on our own time as on the days of Charlemagne it portrays so beautifully.

FOR FURTHER READING

Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

Stephen A. Shepherd, *Middle English Romances*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

Byron York and William Nolan, *Chansons de Geste*, (London: Belvedere Press, 2001).

NOTES

1. From the Middle English romance, *The Siege of Melayne*: “All worthy men who love to hear/of past chivalry/of those valiant deeds/of Charlemagne of France, the exalted king of all/that oft times made the heathen fall/that proudly sat upon war-steed/this song is true; here is the sourcebook/whoever will investigate will discover the truth/herein is the chronicle for all to read.”