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## THE SONG OF ROLAND

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH PROSE

BY  
ISABEL BUTLER



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

The Riverside Press Cambridge



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a sez i ad carbuindes e lanterne  
La sus amunt par geent cel lusterne  
par la nuit la mer en est plus bde  
e cum il uenent en espaigne la tere.  
tut li pais entelast 7 esclart  
I esqua marbule en parunt les noueles. 401.

**G**ent paience ne uoelent cesser unkes.  
Jste de mer uenent as es et dulces.  
Laisent marbrose 7 si laissent marbrise.  
par sebr amunt tut lur nauiries turent  
a sez i ad lanterne 7 carbuindes.  
tut la nuit mult grant clartet lur dunent.  
ai cel mer uenent a sarraguce. 401.

**C**ert est li uire 7 li soleil luisant.  
Et amant est issuc del calan.  
espaneliz foel le uat ad estrane.  
A vu. reis apres le uunt siwant.  
cuntel 7 dux i ad ben ne sai quant.  
suz un loer kiest en mi un camp.  
suz l'erbe uerte getent un palie blanc.  
v fald estoed iunt mis dolifan.  
desur la liet li paien baligant.  
tut li altre sunt. xmes en estant.  
L'ire del pmer parlat auant  
oiez ore franc cheualer uillant  
carles li reis tempere des francs.  
ne deit manger se io ne li cumant.  
par tut espaigne mat fait guere mult grant.

## INTRODUCTION

THE first historic mention we have of a "Song of Roland" takes us back to the year 1066 and the fight at Senlac. Wace, the Norman chronicler, in his account of the battle, says that the minstrel Taillefer, to whom William had granted the first blow, "rode before the Duke on a swift horse, singing of Roland and of Charlemagne, of Oliver and the knights who died at Roncevaux." William of Malmesbury in his "History of the Kings of England" also mentions, though less picturesquely, the fact of the song: "Before the battle, that the men might be encouraged by the martial example of heroes, the 'Song of Roland' was chanted." Whether this song corresponded to any part of the version of "Roland" that has been preserved in the Oxford Manuscript, we cannot know. But, at least, that version, composed soon after the Conquest, gives us the kind of story the Normans liked to listen to.

The poem is one of those called in Old French a *chanson de geste*; literally, a song of history, or, more precisely, an epic poem, founded on some historical event and intended to be sung. Long poems of several thousand lines, their form

was a ten syllabled verse bound together in stanzas of varying length by a common assonance; that is, the last accented syllable of each line in a given stanza had the same vowel, although the consonants following that vowel need not be the same, as in rhyme. More than a hundred of these *chansons de geste* have come down to us. Among them are some traces of earlier epics on the Merovingians, Charles Martel and Pippin; but of those that have survived the most numerous and important are of Charlemagne and his barons. The "Roland," then, was to the men of the middle ages not an isolated poem, but one of a great epic series.

Poetry in the eleventh century was not "printed an' bound in little books," but was a matter of word of mouth. Quite apart from the learned, Latin literature of the clergy, "it sung itself out in the sun," as M. Gaston Paris has said, "in the streets and squares, on the battlefield, along the highroads, among folk going on pilgrimage, in the doorway of churches, and at the feasts of great lords." Carried through the country by wandering minstrels, chanted to the accompaniment of the viol, the epics told the stories of popular heroes in a language everybody could understand.

The tale was sure to be of battle; sometimes, as in the "Roland," it was the war of Christian against heathen; sometimes that of one of the great feudal lords against another, or against his

king. But all alike give us what Stevenson has called "the eternal life of man spent under sun and rain, and in rude, physical effort," at a time when man's chief aim was both how to deal good blows and how to take them. In the stories of Charlemagne, women play little part. Nor do we find anything of the elaborate code of manners of the later poetry of Arthur, or hear of "curteisye" and "vileinye." True, the heroes, as in the later poetry, are always lords and kings; in the "Roland" we hear no word of the common soldier, and only barons have a hand in the battle; but whereas the best of Arthur's Round Table is "the courtliest knight that ever bare shield," the best of Charlemagne's barons is but a good man of his hands. Sir Hector, making lament over Launcelot, says: "Thou wert the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights, and thou wert the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies." But Charles's praise of Roland is: "For the arraying and winning of great battles never has the world seen thy like; though I have other kindred none are brave as thou wert."

Oftenest the *chanson de geste* is a long series of warlike adventures, a story for the story's sake; if, as in the "Roland," there are ideas that rule the action of the story, they are the common property of the time: that Christianity is a thing to be fought for with the sword; that "a

man should hold him ready to lose both hide and hair in his liege lord's service." Common ideas, but carried in the "Roland" to an heroic pitch. The emotions, too, are the rude, common emotions of daring, say, or of pity. Again and again in the story we see one feeling take possession of a whole body of men. When the Franks crossing the mountains hear the sound of the horn, not Charles alone, but the whole army, "are filled with a strange fear for Roland;" when at Roncevaux they find him dead, "of a hundred thousand men there is not one that does not weep for pity." Such emotion easily spread among the minstrel's hearers. And this poetry that reflected the fighting life of the time was dear to men. It is of value to us to-day because, just as the stories of Arthur give us the ideals of the later, chivalric middle ages, so these stories of Charlemagne give us those of the earlier and ruder middle ages.

A word of mouth poetry, composed by men of little book lore, and sung to those of less, dealing, often, with events of centuries before, could not be accurate; so in spite of their claim to truth, we find in the *chansons de geste* less of history than of legend and imagination. If we look back to history for the beginnings of the "Roland" we find only a name and a fact.

In the year 777, certain Saracens, according to the Annals of Eginhard, came to Charles at Paderborn and offered to acknowledge him as their sov-



ereign instead of the Caliph of Cordova. The following spring, Charles, with a great army, made an expedition into Spain. He took Pamplona and razed its walls. Then marching south, he crossed the Ebro, and came near to Saragossa; he received hostages of the Saracens, but without taking possession of the city, turned suddenly north. As he was recrossing the Pyrenees, his rearguard was attacked by the Gascons (*i. e.*, the Basques), and in the engagement that followed "the greater part of the officers of the palace, to whom command of the troops had been given, were slain." Here, then, Roland is not even mentioned, but in Eginhard's "Life of Charlemagne" the disaster is given with more detail:<sup>1</sup> "As the army was advancing in the long line of march necessitated by the narrowness of the road, the Gascons, who lay in ambush on the top of a very high mountain, attacked the rear of the baggage train and the rearguard in charge of it, and hurled them down to the very bottom of the valley. In the struggle that ensued, they cut them off to a man; they then plundered the baggage, and dispersed with all speed in every direction under cover of the approaching night. . . . Eggihard, the king's steward; Anselm, Count Palatine; and Roland, governor of the March of Brittany, with very many

<sup>1</sup> Eginhard, Harper's Half-Hour Series, p. 31. The authorship of the "Annals" is disputed, but the "Life" is undoubtedly authentic

others, fell in this engagement. This ill turn could not be avenged for the nonce, because the enemy scattered so widely after carrying out their plan that not the least clew could be had to their whereabouts."

That is the account given by Eginhard, the secretary and minister of Charles. Opposed to it we have the "*Chanson de Roland*," preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (No. 23 of the Digby Collection). The manuscript, small and plain, of an inferior quality of parchment and much worn by use, was clearly made not for any great personage, but for the convenience of some travelling minstrel. It is the hasty work of a second-rate Anglo-Norman scribe of the latter end of the twelfth century, who was evidently puzzled by the older dialect he had to transcribe. Of its authorship we know nothing. Language and the internal evidence of names and references seem to show that it was composed between 1066 and 1097, more than three centuries, that is, after the event it describes.<sup>1</sup> Language and reference also show

<sup>1</sup> The following illustrate the references generally taken to fix the date between 1066 and 1097: It is thought that the supposed conquest of England by Charlemagne, mentioned in no other of the *chansons de geste*, was suggested by the recent conquest of England by William of Normandy. Again Charles is said to have established the tribute of Saint Peter in England. The reëstablishment of an old Saxon tax formerly paid to Rome was one of the bribes by which William won the favor of the papacy to his expedition; at the time of the Conquest it was much in

it a composite story in which the men of more than one French province have had a hand. In it we find the Roland, who in Eginhard is only a name, the hero of an epic of some four thousand lines, and the obscure battle in the Pyrenees changed into a great national defeat followed by a great national victory.

Great as the change is, it does but follow the natural course by which a people turns its history into legend. When a defeat makes the basis of a story, that defeat must be explained, made even glorious. So the Basques, an obscure tribe, drop out of the popular memory, and in their stead we have the old, powerful enemy of southern France, the Saracens. Charles is represented as he was at the end of his reign; instead of the young king of thirty-five, he is the great emperor, the ruler of many lands, full of years and of dignity. The battle is brought about, not by the wit of the foe, as in Eginhard, but by the treachery of one of the Franks, Ganelon. Though the whole rear-guard is lost, the enemy do not escape, as in his-

men's minds, but at another time a French poet would hardly have thought of this tribute. One reason for dating the poem before the crusades is that in it Jerusalem is always represented as in the hands of the heathen. Another is that no use is made of the names of places or peoples with which the crusades familiarized Europe, but the names given to the men of the paynim host are those of the old warfare carried on along the eastern border of Europe between Christian and heathen, in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries.

tory, "under cover of the night," but for Charles the sun is stayed in the heavens that he may pursue and utterly destroy them. Another victory is won over a second and yet larger army of paynims, Saragossa is taken, and Charles becomes master of all Spain.

Yet all this is but the background of Roland, who, after the manner of epic heroes, has taken to himself the poetry and the hero-worship of generations. He is daring, carried to the highest possible pitch. Like a northern hero of the race of the gods, he is something more than mortal. The blast of his horn carries for thirty leagues through the hills; the weapons of the foe cannot wound him; when he is about to die there is darkness and tempest in France, a mighty mourning for the death of Roland. From the obscure Count of Brittany he has become the nephew of Charles, the great captain who has conquered many lands for the emperor, beloved of the Franks and feared of the Saracens. It is to slay him that the paynims plot with Ganelon the battle; it is through his daring, his refusal to sound his horn and so recall the main body of the army, that the rear-guard is lost; it is by sounding his horn, though too late to save himself or his comrades, that the main body under Charles was made to return. It is to revenge his death, they pursue and slay the Saracens crying to them: "Woe worth the day ye saw Roland." The ivory horn of Roland encour

ages the Franks to the second battle. After the victory there is no rejoicing, but a hasty return to France followed by the trial and punishment of Ganelon, Roland's betrayer. Thus it is about Roland that the whole story centres.

Nothing is definitely known of the growth of the legend. How it began, whether as short, detached songs, or whether from the first it had epic form, is a matter of dispute among scholars. The theory of M. Gaston Paris is, that soon after the battle of 778 the loss of the rearguard was sung in short songs, called, in Old French, *cantilènes*. These proved particularly popular in the March of Brittany, and the Bretons naturally forgot the Anselm and Egghard, of whom they knew nothing, but praised their own lord, Roland. Later, the material of these songs was made into a long epic of which Roland was the hero, but which was, undoubtedly, a much less elaborate narrative than that of the "Chanson" of the Oxford Manuscript. This early epic was carried by minstrels into Maine, Anjou, Normandy, and the Isle de France. The Normans, as we have seen, adopted the "Roland," and made it their battle-song at Senlac. In one version Roland appears not as Count of Brittany, but as Count of Mans, a change that would be made only in Maine. It was undoubtedly to please the Angevin Counts that some minstrel introduced a Geoffrey of Anjou into the story, and made the revenger of Roland, Thierry, the brother

of Geoffrey. It was probably in the royal domain, the Isle de France, that the kingship of Charlemagne, his feudal overlordship, was so emphasized. Thus in several provinces the story was altered, and retold with fresh detail.

Two stages in the development of the epic may be traced, M. Gaston Paris thinks, in two Latin versions of the story, the so-called "History of Turpin," and a song, the "*Carmen de Proditione Guenonis*."<sup>1</sup> The History claimed to be by the Archbishop who fought at Roncevaux, and who, in this version, escapes alive. Accepted by the middle ages as genuine, it has been shown by modern scholars to be a compilation of the twelfth century. Though the work is of later date than the "*Chanson*," chapters xxi-xxix, which give the story of Roland, seem to have had as their source an earlier version of the epic. In this account the Basques have already become Saracens, and the disaster is brought about by the treachery of Ganelon whom the Saracens have bribed. Roland, Count of Mans, and Oliver, Count of Geneva, have been left in command of a rearguard of twenty thousand men and are surprised by fifty thousand Saracens. The Franks destroy the first division of the Saracens, but by the second they are overpowered and scattered. Roland rallies the guard and puts the Saracens

<sup>1</sup> See *Romania*, xi, p. 465, and *Extraits de Roland*, Introduction, p. viii.

to flight, but in the onset loses most of his men and is himself mortally wounded. Just before his death he sounds his horn. Charles, on hearing it, returns, and by the help of the miracle that stays the sun, pursues the Saracens and utterly destroys them. Here, then, we find the story of Eginhard already transformed, although it is far less elaborate than that of the "Chanson."

In the "Carmen," which also dates from the twelfth century, we find trace of a third version that in its detail comes nearer to the "Chanson." Here we have Ganelon's anger against Roland given as a motive for his treachery. The Twelve Peers are mentioned; the number of the Saracens has increased; and the battle is longer. Roland and Turpin are left alone masters of the field, and we have the incident of Turpin's blessing of the dead Peers. The "Carmen" knows little of Oliver. It is only in the "Chanson" that we get the contrast between two types of men in the two comrades. But the "Carmen," with its additions of which the "Turpin" knew nothing, marks, M. Gaston Paris thinks, another step in the development of the story by which we to-day remember Roland.

Mere legend as that story is, it yet has for us an historic value. By its very failure to give us the time of the Carlovingians it does, unconsciously, give us that of the Capetians. The narrator, like all early story-tellers, paints the

dress, the manners, and customs he saw around him. Even the Saracens, it may be noted, are not distinguished from the Franks by dress or custom, but wear the same armor, fight by the same methods, and have the same feudal organization. But the poem gives us more than the dress of the time. Like any epic story of slow growth it has caught something of the life of the folk who made it. As Homer, better than any history, gives us early Greek life, as Sigurd gives us Odin's North, and as Beowulf gives us the adventurous, sea-loving, Baltic folk, so the "Roland" shows us one side of the life of feudal France when France was leader in Europe. In it we hear nothing of the life of men in hall, but it does reflect for us the energy and the daring of that fighting, feudal society that in 1066 helped to make William of Normandy King of England, and in 1074, Robert of Burgundy Count of Portugal; reflects, too, the fighting and believing spirit that at the end of that same century, sent men on the first crusade.

Many another *chanson de geste* tells an heroic tale of old war; that among them all we turn oftenest to the "Roland" is because this had the good fortune to be preserved to us at the happiest moment of its development. It bears the mark of some good workman who knew how to turn to account the good epic material that came ready to his hand. Singularly free from



mediæval digression, turning even the late additions to the story, detached episodes like those of the calling of the twelve peers of paynimry, or the story of the death of Aude, to its central purpose, — the praise of Roland, — it has an effective unity, rare in mediæval stories. Skill there is in its insistence on the more interesting elements of the story, as on the comradeship of Roland and Oliver. Skilful, too, is its use of repetition, the telling over in two or three successive stanzas the same idea in slightly different words. In the later epics this becomes tedious, but in the “Roland” it is used sparingly, only at the great moments of the story, — for Roland when he strives to break his sword, for Charlemagne making lament for Roland, and with the effect, as M. Petit de Julleville has noted, of the repetition of the same theme in music. The style, all brevity and directness, save for this repetition, by its very simplicity keeps a certain dignity. The story we are made to feel from the very beginning is a tragedy; and keeping always, as it does, close to actual happenings, dealing only with action, not reflection, it yet contrives, like those older northern stories of Beowulf and of Sigurd, to give us in its tragedy the sense of fate.

The popularity of the story in its own day is attested by its many versions. In France the form given it followed the taste of the centuries. When, in the thirteenth century, assonance