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THE SONG OF ROLAND



TRANSLATED BY
Dorothy L. Sayers



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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
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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 Egghardt 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.¹ 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.

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.¹ 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.