



### **The Hero Roland and the Question of Intentionality**

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Roland, nephew of the emperor Charlemagne and leader of the rearguard in his army, is the most renowned hero of the tradition of epic in the Romance languages. He is the hero, of course, of the *Song of Roland*, which has survived in seven substantial versions. The best known is the Oxford version, a text of nearly 4,000 lines composed in assonanced verse paragraphs called *laissez*. It is both the oldest text and the most widely known. In fact, it is the only version that is commonly read outside the small circle of academic specialists in the *Song of Roland*. The longest complete version, however, which is in rhymed *laissez*, is found in the Châteauroux and Venice 7 manuscripts (*CV7*), and at just under 8400 lines it is over twice the length of the Oxford text. This paper will focus on Roland as he is presented in the Oxford version, which dates from around 1100, with concluding remarks on *CV7*, which dates from a century later.

A controversy raged among specialists in French epic in the 1960's and 1970's about how to interpret Roland's character in the Oxford *Song of Roland*. This conflict was initially framed in terms of whether Roland was presented as worthy of praise for defeating the Saracen enemies of Charlemagne or of blame for excessive pride. In the Oxford version, the hero encourages his men in their battle against the Saracens with the exhortation "Let a bad song not be sung about us!" (*Male cançun de nus*

*chantét ne seit!*<sup>1</sup>), “bad song” having here the sense of unfavorable or condemnatory song. In this construct, the epic song is itself the instrument for sanctioning good or bad conduct, and the *Song of Roland*, while it is in this sense a “bad” song about Roland’s step-father Ganelon who betrays the French rearguard to the Saracens, is a “good” song about the French who die in the battle of Roncevaux.

But how does this accord with Roland’s own conduct in the song? After the rearguard under Roland’s command is subjected to a surprise attack by an immense army of Saracens led by King Marsile of Saragossa, Roland at first refuses to call back the main body of Charlemagne’s army and insists on having the rearguard alone repel the Saracen attack, only blowing his elephant-tusk horn, the *olifant*, when the time for effective reinforcement has passed. He only blows the horn so that Charlemagne and his men, returning, can bury the bodies of the Frankish warriors. His delay results in the destruction of the entire rearguard, twenty thousand men in all. Roland himself dies, not from a wound inflicted by the enemy, but rather from the force of blowing the *olifant*, which causes his temple to burst (ll. 1764, 1786). This is not a suicidal act but a manifestation of the hero’s strength, which is prodigious to the point of causing him mortal injury.

It is interesting to compare Roland’s actions in the poem with the stances of other heroes. In this typology, the closest are heroes in the Germanic tradition. This is not surprising because, although the language of the *Song of Roland* is Old French, a linguistic descendant of Spoken Latin, Roland is, after all, a Frank, that is to say he belongs to the West Germanic people that first crossed the Rhine in the third century and later established itself as the dominant power in Gaul. To take just one parallel with the heroic stance found in the *Song of Roland*, in the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon *Battle of Maldon*, one of the warriors defending his land against a force of Danish invaders exhorts his companions by saying: “Thought shall be the harder, heart the keener,/ Mood the more, as our might lessens.” With this sentiment in mind, the English defenders fight until they are all killed (*Battle of Maldon*, Alexander 1970, ll. 312-13). Roland utters a similar sentiment when he is told that the Saracen forces far outnumber the rearguard: “My desire (*talenz*) grows all the greater on this account!” (*Oxford Roland*, l. 1088) and his men likewise fight until they all die. The heroic code can be summed up as the determination of

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<sup>1</sup> L. 1014. All references to the Oxford *Song of Roland* are to Ian Short’s edition in Duggan 2005, vol. 1.

the hero and his warband not merely to accept death in battle, but to take advantage eagerly of the opportunity of giving their lives in defense of the collectivity to which they belong: being outnumbered only increases the desire of Roland and his companions to fight on. This determination allows them to conclude their lives without incurring the shame that accommodation and retreat would bring. Roland names the collectivities that he wants to avoid shaming: first his political group (invoked as *France*, the Frankish land and people, ll. 1054, 1064), and then his kin group (l. 1063). Similar sentiments are found in the Icelandic saga where, for example, Gunnar dies at the hands of his enemies in *Njal's Saga* rather than take refuge to fight another day.

Looking at the fates of other heroic figures, one finds that Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* is killed by Hagen, who strikes him in the back with a spear. Beowulf is poisoned while doing battle with a dragon. The Cid and Girart de Roussillon die of natural causes. In the French epic, Raoul de Cambrai is killed in battle by his former squire Bernier. Guillaume d'Orange dies in a monastery. While helping to build the cathedral of Cologne, Renaut de Montauban is killed by rival workmen. The Irish CuChulainn is killed by the blow of a spear. In ancient epic, Hektor is killed by Achilles, who in turn dies, outside the plot of the *Iliad*, when shot in the heel by one of Paris's arrows. No other epic hero of whom I am aware dies by the force of his own act as Roland does in blowing his *olifant*. To what do we owe the singularity of Roland's death in the pantheon of epic heroes?

No discussion of Roland's character is complete in isolation from his precise relation to his own lineage. That Roland is Charlemagne's son, conceived as a result of the emperor's incestuous relationship with his own sister, is reflected, beginning in the twelfth century, in a number of iconographic and textual sources.<sup>2</sup> One of the best known of these is a stained-glass window from around 1225 in the ambulatory of Chartres cathedral devoted to Charlemagne (Lejeune and Stiennon 1971: 1, pp.

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<sup>2</sup> Although this was known to scholars since the nineteenth century, interest in the topic was revived by Baudouin de Gaiffier (1955) and the ground-breaking analysis in Lejeune 1961. De Gaiffier, concentrating on the Latin tradition, pointed out that the legend that Charlemagne was guilty of mortal sin is found in three texts of the ninth century, but only one, Walafrid Strabo's *Visio Wettini*, specifies a sin of the flesh, undefined. Lejeune provided a subtle reading of the scene of the naming of the ambassador, with its emphasis on Ganelon as Roland's step-father, as influenced by knowledge of Charlemagne's sin of incest.

145-52, 169-77, 192-98, and Maines 1977). A panel in that window shows Roland blowing the *olifant* and attempting to break his sword against a boulder while a hand reaches down from a cloud. In another panel in the same window, an angel delivers a document to a priest who is saying mass at an altar. The priest is the emperor's confessor St. Giles. Charlemagne is on the left. The story behind the image is that, after having intercourse with his sister Gisele, Charlemagne refrained from confessing this sin of incest to Giles. The document is a letter from God himself, delivered by the angel Gabriel while Giles is saying mass. It contains a message to the effect that, as a result of Charlemagne's action, his sister is pregnant with a son who is to be named Roland, and that the emperor is to take care of him because someday he will need him. Roland is thus both Charlemagne's son and his nephew, the unadulterated offspring of the Frankish ruling family. Furthermore, the message instructs Charlemagne to marry his sister off to a certain Milon. When confronted with the information in the message from God, Charlemagne confesses his great sin and is absolved.<sup>3</sup>

Although a sin of Charlemagne is mentioned in the tenth century *Life of St. Giles*, which is the first work to recount the Mass of St. Giles, the narrative I have just presented is found in the earliest text to identify the precise nature of the sin, branch I of the *Karlamagnús Saga*, a thirteenth-century Norse compilation of the life of Charlemagne up to the battle of Roncevaux (see Hieatt 1975-80, branch 1, chapter 36). (On the interpretation of Charlemagne's sin as necrophilia or sodomy outside the French tradition, see Hafner 2002.) The saga was compiled for King Hakon IV of Norway, who reigned from 1217 to 1263. Branch I of the *Karlamagnús Saga* appears to be based largely on now-lost versions of Old French epic poems that likely dated to the twelfth century (Aebischer 1972: 19). In the fragmentary Occitan version of the *Song of Roland* known as *Ronsasvals*, Charlemagne himself mentions, in his regrets over Roland's body, that he has sinned with his sister:

“Fair nephew, I had you, through my great sin,  
From my sister, and through my fault,

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<sup>3</sup> In the original organization of the window depicting the Mass of St. Giles, the panel opens a sequence of scenes representing Charlemagne's Spanish expedition, which terminates with a panel announcing Roland's death. See Maines 1977, pp. 821-23, who posits that the window combines the legends of Charlemagne's Sin and combat with the Saracens of Spain, largely based on the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, in an affirmation of Christian triumph.

For I am your father, likewise your uncle,  
And you, dear lord, are my nephew and my child.”

*Ronsasvals* is dated to between 1180 and 1250.<sup>4</sup> An Italian romance of the late fourteenth century, the *Spagna*, also has Charlemagne call the dead Roland his nephew and son (*nepote e figliulo*; see Roques 1940-41: 458). The legend of Roland’s incestuous birth may also have been known to the author of *Roncesvalles*, depending on how one interprets a line: see Horrent 1951: 22, and Lejeune 1961: 346-47. The fourteenth-century French epic *Tristan de Nanteuil* narrates Charlemagne’s Sin in leisurely detail. Although in this poem the Mass of St. Giles takes place in Avignon, it also leads to the revelation that Charlemagne impregnated his sister (ll. 21707-08). According to the text:

The sin was horrible; it was not known;  
But some explain, and they are the most knowledgeable,  
That it was the sin when he engendered Roland  
In his own sister; and we continue to suppose this  
For no one relates it to you exactly;  
But many do imply it thus.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in the late fourteenth century, Jean d’Outremeuse refers to the story obliquely, calling Roland “the nephew or son of Charles” and a

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<sup>4</sup> Gouiran and Lafont 1991, ll. 1624-27:

“Bels neps, yeu vos ac per lo mieu peccat gran  
de ma seror e per mon falhimant,  
qu’ieu soy tos payres, tos oncles eyssamant,  
e vos, car senher, mon nep e mon enfant.”

See Schulze-Busacker 1989 for the dating.

<sup>5</sup> Sinclair 1971, ll. 21705-10:

Le peché fut orribles, on ne le sot neant;  
Mais li aucun esponent et tous ly plus sachant  
Que se fut le peché quant engendra Roland  
En sa sereur germaine; se va on esperant,  
Car il n’est nul qu’au vray vous en voit recordant,  
Mais ensement le vont plusieurs signiffiant.

The whole tale of Charlemagne’s Sin occupies ll. 21499-21710 of *Tristan de Nanteuil*. The cathedral of Sainte-Croix in Orléans was also said to have been the locus of Giles’s mass and in the sixteenth century claimed to possess the document written by the hand of God. See Vulliez 1990. In the *Karlamagnús Saga*, the incest and, presumably, Giles’s mass take place in Aachen.

“bastard” in his universal history *Ly Myreur des Histors* (Goosse 1965: 15).<sup>6</sup>

The widespread diffusion of this story is worthy of remark. In addition to the stained-glass window in the cathedral of Chartres, that same cathedral contains three other representations of the Mass of St. Giles—a stained-glass lancet window in the clerestory of the north nave (Manhes-Deremble 1993: no. 133b), a wall painting in the chapel of St. Clement in the crypt, and a sculpture on the south portal (Rolland 1982: 271)—witnesses to the overriding importance that the cathedral’s canons accorded to the story of the emperor’s sin and Roland’s incestuous birth (see also Sauerländer 1972: 433). A fresco dating to around 1170 from the chapel of Saint-Laurent in the parish church of Le Loroux-Bottereau near Nantes shows St. Giles absolving Charlemagne and the emperor’s sister Gisele preparing to marry Milon (Davy 1999: 150-53). A fresco in a church at Saint-Aignan-sur-Cher in the Loire Valley from around 1200 includes a cycle of St. Giles that depicts the saint saying mass in the presence of Charlemagne, a rolled scroll, and a boy who appears to be Roland (Kupfer 2000: 649, and 2003: 98-99). Another fresco, this one from the late thirteenth century in the abbey of Aiguevive in the Loire valley, depicts St. Giles, Charlemagne, Gisele, and the hand of God bestowing a blessing, and in a sculpture on the main portal of the abbey an angel is portrayed bearing a rolled piece of parchment, representing the message relating Charlemagne’s Sin (Demaux 1982: 279-92 and Kupfer 2003: figure 102). From the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century comes a wall painting in Civray near Poitiers showing the Mass of St. Giles and Charlemagne’s confession (Deschamps and Thibout 1963: 131-32). The famous reliquary of Charlemagne in the cathedral of Aachen, from 1215, includes a bas-relief depicting a double scene: Charlemagne confessing to Giles and also kneeling before an altar at which Giles says mass. An angel descends holding a scroll on which is written: “The mortal sin is turned into a venial one” (Schnitzler 1959: 19-21 and figure 41; for the inscription, see Arens 1921: 164, 193), but there is no allusion to the nature of the sin. Finally, St. Giles is depicted celebrating his mass in the presence of Charlemagne and Gisele in the Psalter of Lambert le Bègue made for Beguines of the city of Liège, which dates from around 1260 (ms. 431 of the Université de Liège;

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<sup>6</sup> A miniature in a fifteenth-century manuscript of *Ly Myreur des Histors* depicts the Mass of St. Giles and the saint showing the message to Charlemagne. See Demaux 1982, vol. 1, p. 290.

Lejeune and Stiennon 1971: vol. 1, plate V; Demaux 1982: 289). The tale of Charlemagne's paternity is obviously not a localized curiosity but a narrative that enjoyed wide distribution in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, in France, Flanders, Germany, and Italy. Dozens of European churches have St. Giles as their patron, and the city of Saint-Gilles-du-Gard in Southern France is named for him.

The Oxford *Song of Roland* is a spare text that contains very little commentary. For that reason, when the poet does comment, the weight of the intervention is all the more striking and worthy of notice. In line 2098, the poet declares: "He who does not know that much has not understood it at all." This statement serves to focus attention on the three preceding lines, which contain an oblique reference to the tale of Charlemagne's Sin. Archbishop Turpin, one of Charlemagne's most skilled warriors, has just succumbed to the enemy and the text mentions that when Charlemagne returned to the battlefield he found Turpin's body surrounded by the corpses of four hundred Saracens. Recounting this, says the poet, are the tradition (*geste*) and he who was on the battlefield, namely "the baron ... Giles, for whom God makes miracles and made the document that is in the monastery at Laon" (*li ber ... Gilie, por qui Deus fait vertuz/ e fist la chartre el muster de Loim*, ll. 2096-97), probably the monastery of St. Vincent. Even though this passage is earlier than any other reference of its kind, it seems highly probable that the collocation of Giles's name with miracles and a document made by God himself must refer to the Mass of St. Giles and the circumstances of Charlemagne's Sin. Looking again at line 2098, I believe that the object of the verb *entendre* 'to understand' is the story told in the *Song of Roland* itself. An alternate interpretation, taking *chartre* as synonymous with *geste*, is not in keeping with the sense of *chartre*, which designates a short document and not a tradition or a history. It also trivializes the claim that "he who does not know that much has not understood it at all." For me, *tant*, 'that much,' refers to the message miraculously delivered by the angel to St. Giles, namely that Roland is the son of Charlemagne. What is in danger of not being understood is the meaning of the *Song of Roland* itself.

Before dying, Roland asks forgiveness for all the sins he has committed in his life (ll. 2368-72). Angels, including Michael and Gabriel, descend to convey his soul directly to paradise (l. 2396). He dies as a victor rather than as a result of wounds inflicted by the enemy, entering heaven after calling back the Franks and insuring that the warriors of the rearguard can have a fitting burial. But if Roland is

victorious at Roncevaux, why does he die there of his own prodigious effort? The answer depends on whether we concentrate on the hero's immediate motivation for fighting to the end, that is to say his adherence to a heroic code, or, step back from the action of the poem to take into account the circumstances of his birth.

I believe that Roland dies in the *Song of Roland* as no other hero does because his birth has resulted from an act of incest. He dies as divine punishment for the sexual passion of his father, which led to his own conception. Is it likely, however, that a hero would be killed off for an offense that was the result not of his own intention but of someone else's, namely that of his father?

The Middle Ages knew two radically different types of sin. The first was the sin for which one's personal intention was irrelevant, namely Original Sin, committed by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden when they ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, which according to Christian doctrine resulted in human concupiscence. The authorities for the concept of original sin are Paul's Epistle to the Romans (5:12-21) and Epistle to the Corinthians (15:22), which declare that sin entered the world through the action of Adam, all of whose descendants suffered the effects of his misdeed. Original Sin is only redeemed ultimately through the death of Christ and God's grace.

The other type is personal sin. Even after confessing this kind of sin, the sinner had to undergo punishment to pay for having sinned. Charlemagne is forgiven, but must still suffer punishment for having committed incest. This punishment is his son Roland's death. In the Oxford version, after returning to the battlefield, Charlemagne searches for Roland's body and mourns him for 90 lines, distributed in no fewer than seven consecutive *laissez* (*laissez* 204-210, ll. 2855-2944). At the climax of this long passage, the emperor says that the one who has killed Roland has shamed France (*Ki tei ad mort, France dulce ad hunie*, l. 2935): since it is the force of Roland's horn-blast that has killed Roland rather than a blow from any weapon, Charlemagne must be referring to a more distant cause, either himself or the traitor Ganelon.<sup>7</sup> That the reference is to Ganelon is the traditional interpretation of this line, but that Charlemagne may be referring to himself is suggested in the line that

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<sup>7</sup> The variant cause of death, mentioned explicitly in the *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela* and implied in the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, namely that Roland expired from thirst, is discussed in Grisward 1982.



immediately follows, in which the emperor expresses the wish that he himself should die.

In his *Ethics*, the great scholastic philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard, building on the thought of his teachers William of Champeaux and Anselm of Laon who in turn were influenced by Augustine, developed in the late 1130s the concept that sin depends not so much on the nature of the sinful act as on the intention of the person committing the act (Clanchy 1997: 84, 129).<sup>8</sup> The theory of intention was, in fact, the central concern of Abelard's *Ethics*, which is the main reason why he has been called "the first modern man" (see Chenu 1969: 32). Abelard went so far as to declare that those who crucified Christ were committing no sin if they believed they were pleasing God (Clanchy 1997: 215). Carrying his logic further to consider the nature of expiation, Abelard held that it is not the performance of acts of penance that leads to the remission of sins but rather the sinner's intent in feeling genuine sorrow for having sinned, even if this intent preceded the act of confessing to a priest. The primacy of intent was a revolutionary idea at the time, since the issue of legal guilt had previously centered above all on the question of whether the offensive act was in fact committed by the accused, rather than on the state of mind of the person committing it. Although Abelard's idea was not immediately taken up by those whose responsibility it was to judge the sinfulness or the illegality of actions, it slowly worked its way into both moral theology and jurisprudence and is, of course, the crucial principle according to which actions are judged in modern courts. This emphasis on state of mind rather than the action committed was part of a larger movement taking place in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries that has been called the "awakening of conscience," another of whose manifestations was the practice of private confession to a priest followed by penance that did not need to be performed in public, both confirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. It was decreed at this same council that clergy were forbidden to participate in the judicial ordeal, the so-called "judgment of God."

The trial of Ganelon in the Oxford *Song of Roland* reflects an older layer of jurisprudence and includes a judgment of God in the form of

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<sup>8</sup> Abelard's teaching career was brought to a close by his trial for heresy at Laon in 1140. He appears to have been born in 1092 or 1094 (Clanchy 1997: 174) and was also tried for heresy at Soissons in 1121, as a consequence of which the first edition of his *Theologia* was burned. Pope Celestine II and Abbot Peter the Venerable of Cluny, however, appear not to have acquiesced in this view of Abelard as a heretic (Clanchy 1997: 218).

trial by combat. The outcome depends on the victory of Charlemagne's kinsman and champion, Thierry, over Pinabel, Ganelon's kinsman. The judicial combat only takes place when Thierry objects to the outcome of a trial by jury which, if allowed to run its course, would have resulted in Ganelon being permitted to reconcile with Charlemagne without suffering punishment. Even though the principle that Roland's function as a member of Charlemagne's army should have protected him against attack by any of the emperor's men (Oxford version, l. 3828: *Vostre servise l'en doiüst bien guarir*), and even though the traitor himself abruptly raises the defense that Roland had cheated him out of material goods, the trial includes no inquiry into Ganelon's state of mind. In fact, such an inquiry would have anticipated the establishment of inquisitorial procedure that took place only toward the very end of the twelfth century in reaction to the emergence of heresies. After Thierry kills Pinabel, thirty hostages who stood as guarantors for Pinabel are hanged, with no inquiry into their states of mind or personal guilt either. Their execution is likely carried out because Pinabel was the champion of Ganelon, who betrayed the emperor's own son, Roland, equivalent to an act of regicide.<sup>9</sup>

The rhymed *Song of Roland* in the Châteauroux and Venice 7 texts also presents Roland as dying from his own horn blast. Roland's death was too well known to be altered with impunity. But this rhymed version frames the notion of responsibility differently. To begin with, the name of St. Giles appears nowhere and the text merely mentions that God makes miracles for Charlemagne and that an unspecified written greeting (*salu*) is preserved at Laon (l. 3600). Thierry is not Roland's kinsman but his squire (l. 7905). He wins the battle against Pinabel, but there are no hostages given in the trial scene so their execution does not occur. Contrary to the Oxford version, the emphasis is on Ganelon's state of mind, as he confesses his guilt just before being executed. Between the Oxford and CV7 versions, nearly a century elapsed, a period in which concepts of responsibility and justice were transformed by the emerging importance of intentionality.

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<sup>9</sup> The municipal law of Cuenca (Spain), based on Visigothic tradition which is a branch of Germanic customary law, specifies that in the case of regicide not only the perpetrator but his entire family are condemned to death (Duggan 1992).

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