



**Three new worthies: *Les Trois fils de roi***

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If you undertake a holy journey against the Turks in Sicily, your fame,  
after your death, will surpass Alexander's and Hector's renown.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the claim made by young knights at the court of France, eager to accompany Phelippe, son of the king of France, on a crusading mission to Sicily, in the anonymous romance *Les Trois fils de roi*. Such is the prestige of ancient heroes in the late Middle Ages that a religious expedition against the enemies of Christianity is compared, albeit

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<sup>1</sup> The French text actually reads: "Se vous empreniés cestuy voyage, vous auriés toute la sieulte du monde. Chascun seroit joyeux de soy mettre soubz vous. Oncques Hector de Troyes ne Alexandre n'eurent la renommee que vous auriés après vostre mort!", *Les Trois fils de roi*, ed. Giovanni Palumbo, Paris: Champion (CFMA), 2001, p. 93 ( In the text the number in parentheses indicates the page number in Palumbo's edition).

deemed superior, to the deeds of pagan characters involved in wars that to the eyes of Christians were far from holy. The ideal represented by ancient warriors had been displaced in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries by that of Christian knights. Charlemagne, Roland and his peers had successfully outshone the illustriousness of Hector and his likes in a new form of epics, the *chanson de geste*. Ancient heroes did survive, even thrive, in many narratives such as *romans antiques*, but they led a career parallel to that of Christian knights, even if some mutual influence can be detected. They merged again, so to speak, at the end of the Middle Ages: on the one hand, the distinction between romance and *chanson de geste* became very blurry. On the other hand, Antiquity was very much in fashion, especially at the court of Burgundy. The height of this genuine *Antiquity-mania* was reached during the reign of Philippe le Bon, who, in 1430, founded the Order of the Golden Fleece, promoting Jason as the patron of this elite knightly fraternity. He also encouraged the redaction, compilation and translation of books recounting the deeds of ancient heroes as well as works of art (paintings, tapestries) celebrating them<sup>2</sup>. Yet Philippe was also obsessed with the desire to lead a new crusade against the Turks whose western progression was becoming more and more threatening. Thus the old *chanson de geste* ideals were very much admired too and they combined with ancient values. I propose to analyse *Les Trois fils de roi*, a romance written in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, very likely at the court of Burgundy, in order to assess the influence of medieval and ancient epics, and to determine which values it upholds. I contend that this romance advocates a new kind of prowess and of "worthies".

According to its modern editor, Giovanni Palumbo, *Les Trois fils de roi* was either presented to Philippe le Bon, or first to Jean V de Créquy

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<sup>2</sup> See Georges Doutrepont, *La littérature française à la cour des ducs de Bourgogne. Philippe le Hardi, Jean sans Peur, Philippe le Bon, Charles le Téméraire*, Paris, 1909 (Genève: Slatkine, 1970); Jean Rychner, *La littérature et les mœurs chevaleresques à la cour de Bourgogne*, Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l'Université, 1950; *Splendeurs de la Cour de Bourgogne*, ed. Danielle Régnier-Bohler, Paris: Laffont (coll. Bouquins), 1995; Jacques Monfrin, "Le Goût des lettres antiques à la cour de Bourgogne au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Bulletin de la société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1967, p. 285-287. For a good recent summary (accompanied by a bibliography), see Sandrine Hériché, *Les Faicts et les Conquestes d'Alexandre le Grand* de Jehan Wauquelin, critical edition, Genève: Droz, 2000, introduction p. XI-XVII.

and his wife, who subsequently gave the original copy to the Duke<sup>3</sup>. Philippe then asked his scribe David Aubert to provide a new copy of the romance. Aubert dutifully complied, but as is usual with this *escripvain*, introduced many stylistic variants, as well as a dedicatory prologue to Philippe le Bon<sup>4</sup>. Of the 8 remaining manuscripts, 5 give the prologue, a sign that this romance is strongly connected with the Burgundy court. *Les Trois fils de roi* tells the story of three young princes, Phelippe, Onffroy and David, respectively sons of the kings of France, England and Scotland, distressed by the fate of the kingdom of Sicily and Naples: Turks are besieging cities, raiding the countryside, and the king, his wife and their beautiful daughter Yolente are in danger. Hiding their intentions from their fathers, Phelippe and Onffroy secretly leave their countries, change their names, and fight incognito the Infidels in Sicily. As for David, he is sent with a contingent of young nobles to Italy. While the fleet is trying to land despite the fierce opposition of the Turks, a violent storm disperses or sinks the Christian ships. David is taken prisoner. He eventually manages to join up the Christians and becomes fast friend with the other two heroes. The three princes amply prove their valiance and their faith during that war and after the resounding defeat of the Saracens, they reveal their identity. Their fathers having opportunely died upon their return or during their absence, they become kings. This brief summary, which does not do justice to a well-crafted story, also conceals the close relationship between the romance and the historical context in which it was written. As Giovanni Palumbo remarks in his introduction, many characters bear names of historical figures, such as Alphons, Charles, Frederich, Ferrant, Onffroy/Humphrey, David, Yolente<sup>5</sup>. The crusading atmosphere, the imminent threat posed by the Turks on the verge of taking over the kingdom of Sicily, the tergiversations of the different European courts, all recall 15<sup>th</sup> century circumstances: the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the numerous talks about sending troops against the Turks. As for the episode of the *vœux du*

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<sup>3</sup> *Les Trois fils de roi*, introduction p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> On David Aubert, see *Les manuscrits de David Aubert "escripvain" bourguignon*, textes réunis par Danielle Quéruel, Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999; and Richard Straub, *David Aubert, escripvain et clerc*, Atlanta-Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Introduction p. 71. This play on names contributes to the complex intermingling of reality and fiction, a characteristic of *chansons de geste*, according to J. Frappier, as quoted by Palumbo, p. 73.

*paon*, it evokes the famous *banquet du faisan* held at Lille in 1454<sup>6</sup>. This complex interaction between historical reality and literature in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, each one influencing the other, is well-known<sup>7</sup> and *Les Trois fils de roi* offers one more example of this mirroring phenomenon. I will not dwell on this aspect which has been investigated by Palumbo, but I will concentrate on the epic tradition inherited by our romance.

*Les Trois fils de roi* describes a war against the Infidels. The kingdom of Sicily has been invaded by Saracens, led by the *Grant Turk* and his brother, Fierrabras, king of Persia. Alphons, king of Sicily, who married the daughter of the king of Spain, hoping that this alliance would provide him support in his war against the Turks, finds himself isolated and on the verge of defeat, despite the numerous calls for help sent to all the European courts. This situation undoubtedly inspired by reality as I have suggested<sup>8</sup> also recalls scenarios in numerous *chansons de geste*. The traditional enemy is the Turk who embodies all the features of the villain. Whereas his brother and his son have names, the leader of the Saracens is simply referred to as "le Turk" or "le Grant Turk" (103). He and his allies are said to hold "la dampnable loy de Mahom" ("the despicable law of Mohammed", 86, 88). The Turk is cruel and disloyal, given to fits of rage to the point that he forgets his son, his brother and

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<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Paviot, "Burgundy and the Crusade", in *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century. Message and Impact*, ed. Norman Housley, London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004, p. 70-80. Giovanni Palumbo, "Le Livre et histoire royal (ou Livre des trois fils de roys): politique, histoire et fiction à la cour de Bourgogne", in "A l'heure encore de mon escrire". *Aspects de la littérature de Bourgogne sous Philippe le Bon et Charles le Téméraire*, études rassemblées et présentée par Claude Thiry, *Les Lettres Romanes*, n° hors série (1997), pp. 137-145. In the same volume, Jean Devaux, "Le Saint Voyage de Turquie: croisade et propagande à la cour de Philippe le Bon (1463-1464)", p. 53-70.

<sup>7</sup> See Michel Stanesco, *Jeux d'errance du chevalier médiéval, aspects ludiques de la fonction guerrière dans la littérature du Moyen Age flamboyant*, Leiden: Brill, 1988. Michel Zink, "Le Roman" in *GRLMA VIII-1*, 1988, p. 197-218.

<sup>8</sup> J. Paviot recalls that in 1451, at the chapter of the Order of the Golden Fleece, Jean Germain delivered a "homily, in the course of which he described the terrible desolation of the Church militant, the conquests of the Moors [sic] in Syria, the profanation of the Holy Places, the Muslim attacks on Cyprus and Rhodes, and the conquests of the Turks in Asia and Greece." ("Burgundy and the Crusade", p. 72). On the numerous diplomatic missions aiming at convincing European princes to take part in a crusade, see p. 74-75.

his faithful men and puts their lives in jeopardy by his rash behavior<sup>9</sup>. As befits such a character, the Turk is killed in the final battle between Christians and Saracens. The Turk's son, Orkais, and his brother, Fierrabras, are more positive. The young Orkais will eventually make friends with the three Christian princes and convert in the hope of gaining Yolente's hand. As for Fierrabras, he is a strong and valiant warrior, true to his word. Taken prisoner, he is released against hostages and on the promise to liberate all Christian prisoners in Saracen lands. When back in his country, he loyally complies and saves the life of Onffroy despite the Turk's fierce opposition<sup>10</sup>. For an audience familiar with *chansons de geste*, the name Fierabras calls to mind a famous Saracen giant who defies Charlemagne, fights in single combat with Olivier, Roland's companion, is captured by the Christian knight and converts to Christianity before becoming a holy man, saint Florent. His story first told in a 12<sup>th</sup>-century *chanson de geste* was extremely popular in the Middle Ages and several prose versions (either *derimages* or adaptations) as well as translations in many languages remain as testimonies to its success<sup>11</sup>. At the court of Burgundy, a version of Fierabras' story was included in the *Croniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine*, a compilation made by David Aubert, the same scribe who copied one of the manuscripts of *Les Trois fils de roi* (BNF, fr. 92), as already mentioned. There is another intriguing link between these two texts: the prologue to the first volume of the *Croniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine* is dedicated to "monseigneur de Crequy" (13), and the prologue to the second volume (as well as the explicit) to Philippe le

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<sup>9</sup> "Et par la grant fureur ou il estoit, il oublia toute amour paternele, avec ce aussi tous les services que les seigneurs payens qui estoient prins avec son filz luy avoient fait. Avec ce mist il en oubly son propre frere, quy estoit prisonnier de celluy qu'il vouloit faire pendre, par lequel, en le rendant, il le pavoit reavoir ou Orkais, son filz." (*Trois fils de roi*, p. 289).

<sup>10</sup> The Turk, not knowing that Fierabras has already sent Onffroy back to the Christian lines, tries to seize his brother's prisoner in order to have him killed. Revolted by this treason, Fierabras gives up the war and retires to his kingdom. We do not learn of his subsequent fate.

<sup>11</sup> *Fierabras*, ed. Marc Le Person, Paris: Champion, 2003, p. 12-15 and p. 197-200; André de Mandach, *Naissance et développement de la chanson de geste en Europe. V. La geste de Fierabras*, Genève: Droz, 1987. See also Frédéric Duval, *Lectures françaises de la fin du Moyen Age. Petite anthologie commentée de succès littéraires*, Genève: Droz, 2007. Duval devotes a notice to *Fierabras* (p. 398-405).

Bon<sup>12</sup>. Both the *Croniques* and *Les Trois fils* thus exhibit the same ambiguity about the original patron of the work, Jean de Crequy or Philippe le Bon, another sign of the likely influence of the *chanson de geste* on our romance. One of the reason *Fierabras* was popular with the dukes of Burgundy might be that it celebrates the deeds of Guy de Bourgogne who marries Floripas, sister of Fierabras, and becomes king of Spain<sup>13</sup>.

The connections between *Fierabras* and *Les Trois fils de roi* are striking. In both texts, Fierabras, whose overconfidence in the romance recalls the giant's arrogant challenge in the *chanson de geste*, is captured at the beginning of the story. In *Les Trois fils de roi*, the Saracen has conquered the city of Feude, near Capoue whose captain is Olivier, brother of the king of Sicily's senechal, Ferrant. Having learned that Ferrant is back from Spain and is visiting his brother, he decides to make a show of his power near Capoue, in the hope of making prisoners who will inform him on the success of Ferrant's mission in Spain. The Christians, seeing that the Saracens are much more numerous, do not reply at first to his provocation. Nonetheless when the enemies split in smaller groups to surround the city, they come out and after a fierce combat, they manage to capture Fierabras. Although Fierabras is taken by the *Depourveu* (the nickname Phelippe took when he left France in secret), it is no accident that one of the characters in the episode, Olivier, bears the same name as Fierabras' adversary in the *chanson de geste*. Olivier is only a minor character in *Les Trois fils de roi*, second to his brother Ferrant. Yet he is praised for his wisdom in warfare matters: "Olivier (...) estoit homme fort duit a la guerre" ("Olivier was very skilled in military matters", 107). Thanks to the brothers' good judgment (for Ferrant is as prudent as Olivier), Fierabras' scheme does not succeed, and, worse, results in his capture. Another detail is amusing: Ferrant, as noted by Palumbo, is the name of the son of Alfonso the Magnanimous, king of Naples. But it is also that of Olivier's horse in *Fierabras*. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century *chanson de geste*, Olivier has a very special relationship with his horse, "le blanc Ferrant d'Espeigne"<sup>14</sup>. Olivier blesses it, when his squire brings it to him, and talks to the animal with affection. David Aubert's version of the story only mentions the name of the horse and

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<sup>12</sup> *Croniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine*, ed. Robert Guiette, Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 2 volumes, 1940 and 1943.

<sup>13</sup> See André de Mandach, *La geste de Fierabras*, p. 67-72.

<sup>14</sup> See *Fierabras*, v. 237-241.

adds that the horse knew him better than any man in the world<sup>15</sup>. The author of *Les Trois fils de roi* seems to have used names found in *Fierabras*, but redistributed them with humorous fantasy.

Another episode of *Les Trois fils de roi* is probably inspired by *Fierabras*: the *emir* Balan, father of Fierabras in the *chanson de geste*, is besieging Aigremore. While the Christians are foraging outside the city, Gui de Bourgogne is captured. Balan decides to have him hanged in view of the besieged, hoping that they will come out to save him. The Saracens bring Gui to the gallows, beating him. He has a rope around his neck and he is blindfolded<sup>16</sup>. The Christian knights do come to the rescue and liberate him. A similar scenario is used in *Les Trois fils de roi*: the Turk is besieging Naples and manages to capture the *Surnommé* (another of Phelippe's pseudonyms). He wants to hang him in view of the besieged. He himself beats his prisoner and takes him to the gallows with a rope around his neck. The *Surnommé's* friends rescue him. In the resulting battle, the Turk is killed. As for Balan, he is later captured during yet another battle around Aigremore and since he refuses to convert, he is beheaded by Ogier.

What makes the connection between the *chanson de geste* and the romance even stronger is the religious fervor that permeates them both. According to Marc Le Person, the editor of the 12<sup>th</sup> century version, *Fierabras* adopts a clear hagiographic slant. It celebrates the conquest of power and lands over pagans, the extension of the kingdom of God at the expense of the Saracens: "jamais une chanson de geste n'aura illustré avec autant de force l'un des thèmes essentiels du genre épique:

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<sup>15</sup> "En apres, demanda Ferrant son destrier, qui mieulx le congnoissoit que homme nul du monde." (*Croniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine*, ed. Guiette, vol. 2, p. 32). The fourteenth-century anonymous prose version (*Fierabras, roman en prose de la fin du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, critical edition by Jean Miquet, Ottawa: éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1983) does not mention the name of the horse. As for Jehan Bagnyon's *Histoire de Charlemagne* (ed. Hans-Erich Keller, Genève: Droz, 1992), it states that his horse was "entre les aultres special [et] se nommoit Ferrant d'Espagne." (p. 36).

<sup>16</sup> *Fierabras*, v. 3568, v. 3596-3596a. *Croniques et Conquestes* : Gui is "lyé et les yeux bendez et vilainement demenez" (p. 68. No mention of the rope tied around his neck). Jehan de Bagnyon: [les sarrasins] "ne cesserent point de frapper sur son corps de gros bastons de pommier, qui du tout luy tresperçoi[en]t la cher. Vous pouvez pensser en quel estat estoit son corps quant on le desrompoit ainssy villaynement. Quant il avoit les mains liees derriere son dos moult estroittement, quant il sentoit une grosse corde en son col, quant il avoit les yeulx bendés et n'y veoit riens ne ne sçavoit ont il ailloit...." (p. 112).

"essaucier seinte crestienté" ("no other *chanson de geste* illustrates with such strength one of the essential topics of the epic genre: the exaltation of holy Christianity"<sup>17</sup>). *Les Trois fils de roi* similarly exalt the heroic acts of Christian knights fighting for "accroistre et augmenter la Crestienté et la garder d'oppression" ("to expand and accrue Christianity and protect it from oppression", 327). When the old German emperor dies and it is time to elect a new one, the king of Sicily is chosen because "c'estoit celluy quy pour la foy catholique avoit eu plus a endurer et, d'autre part, c'estoit celluy quy plus avoit hanté la guerre contre les ennemis de nostre foy." ("he was the one who had endured most hardships for the Catholic faith and besides, he was the one who had most waged war against the enemies of our faith."<sup>320</sup>).

Exalting the Catholic faith entails fighting and killing the Infidels or converting them. The *motif* of the Saracen's conversion appears twice in the romance. The Turk's son, Orkais, has been taken prisoner, like his uncle Fierabras. He makes friends with the Christian heroes and falls in love with Yolente, daughter of the king of Sicily. He then converts in order to be able to take part in a tournament, the prize of which is the beautiful maiden. The romance does suggest that his conversion is merely tactical: baptism is his only means of conquering Yolente; yet he rightly fears the reaction of his people (404-405). As it turns out, Yolente will marry Phelippe, king of France, and Orkais will have to be content with one of Onffroy's sisters. Nonetheless, Orkais does not abjure his new faith and proves his commitment later on by redeeming all Christian captives in Muslim lands. His Christian friends praise his "bonne volenté (...) qu'il avoit au bien et accroissement de la Crestienté" ("his good will to favor the interests and growth of Christianity", 440) and vow to help him in case his subjects were to rebel "a cause du saint sacrement de baptesme que de nouvel il avoit receu" ("because he had recently received the holy sacrement of baptism", 440). Whereas Fierabras, the Saracen giant of the *chanson de geste*, converts because he has been touched by divine grace, Orkais converts for love. Such conversions, that François Suard dubs "les miracles du sentiment" ("miracles of emotion"<sup>18</sup>), are fairly common in *chansons de geste*. What is more original is that the Saracen is deprived of the reward attached to his conversion and yet does not recant. The second occurrence of the

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<sup>17</sup>Fierabras, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> François Suard, *Guillaume d'Orange. Etude du roman en prose*, Paris: Champion, 1979, p. 429.



conversion *motif* is also unusual in that it involves a woman showing some resistance. Orkais, now baptised and named Charles, wants to marry his sister to his friend Ector, now king of England. Yet the maiden must convert first. Although aware of the honor and sensitive to the young king's charm, she firmly refuses on the grounds that she will endanger her soul. For a few days neither threats nor exhortations from her brother, blandishments from ladies and from princes can change her mind. Her steadfastness is actually admired since it shows her "franc vouloir" ("constancy of her will", 427), her independence and loyalty to her religion. Saracen knights refusing to convert are familiar characters in *chansons de geste*. As we have seen, Balan, Fierabras's father in the *chanson de geste*, would rather die than be baptised. But usually their tenacity, often mixed with fierceness, is condemned as mere stubbornness. Orkais's sister is more akin to Orable in the Prose *Guillaume d'Orange*. In this late prose adaptation of the well-known *chanson*, Orable is torn between her love for Guillaume and her loyalty to her people. Reflecting on both religions, she finally decides that Christianity is better than her own faith and then converts<sup>19</sup>. As for Orkais's sister, she is instructed by two or three clerics into "le mistere de la foy Jhesu Crist" ("the mystery of Jesus Christ's faith"), to such effect that "a paines se elle ne cuidoit estre dampnee de tant de reffus que fait avoit." ("hardly did she not believe that her long resistance had condemned her to hell", 430). She is then baptised and marries Ector. Both women thus convert on religious grounds, because they now perceive the superiority of the Christian faith. In *Les Trois fils de roi*, the conversion *motif* is not a mere cliché. It strongly contributes to the religious meaning of the romance.

If the crusading atmosphere is thus very obvious and the values celebrated by *chansons de geste* such as *Fierabras* have found their way into this 15<sup>th</sup>-century romance, what about ancient virtues, so much prized at the court of Burgundy? Echoes from the Ancient world can be heard as well, yet much more faintly. I quoted at the outset of this paper the statement made by Phelippe's companions at the court of France, comparing his future fame should he go on a crusade, to that of Alexander and Hector. Later on, the great battle opposing pagans and Christians before Naples is said to have resulted in the worst number of casualties since "la grant bataille de Thesalle" (314), i.e. the battle of Pharsale opposing Pompeius and Cesar.

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<sup>19</sup> See Suard, *Guillaume d'Orange*, p. 432-433.

More interesting than these mere allusions are the names that the princes choose when hiding their identity. Whereas Phelippe picks a pseudonym, *le Depourveu*, referring to his situation (later changed by the daughter of the king of Sicily into *le Surnommé*), his two companions adopt names of ancient heroes. Onffroy, son of the king of England, changes his name to Ector (258). Although neither the author nor the character explains his choice, any 15<sup>th</sup>-century reader would have thought of the Trojan hero. Hector was very much admired in the late Middle Ages and was from the very start one of the three pagan *preux* alongside Cesar and Alexander, in the famous list of the Nine Worthies<sup>20</sup>. Onffroy is later referred to as *le gentil Ector* and *le preu Ector* (268, 279). Both adjectives reinforce the link between the modern hero and his namesake, especially the second one which is most often attached to the name of the ancient hero.

As for David, son of the king of Scotland, he pretends to be called Athis. Less famous than Hector, Athis is an Athenian knight in the *Roman de Thèbes* as well as in its original model, Statius' *Thebaide*. He is also one of the two main characters in the well-known 13<sup>th</sup>-century romance *Athis et Prophilias*<sup>21</sup>. One more detail reinforces the correlation between the hero of this last text and the character in *Les Trois fils de roi*. On arriving in Italy (149), David lands in Gaiette (the modern Gaète in the province of Latium), a city later conquered by the three companions (321). But Gaiete is also the name of Athis' wife in *Athis et Prophilias*. As already noticed in the case of Ferrant et Olivier, it looks like the author was playing with names found in various sources, transferring them from animals to human beings, from human beings to places.

When the three companions take back their original identities at the end of the romance, Athis reverts to David and *le Surnommé* to Phelippe, yet Onffroy remains Ector. Why does he keep his borrowed name? I believe that it has to do with the status acquired by the heroes. The three companions, Ector, David, Phelippe, form a glorious triad, a short list of *preux*, which intersects with the list of the Nine Worthies. As already mentioned, Hector is one of the three pagan Worthies, David one of the three Jewish ones<sup>22</sup>. As for Phelippe, he is not one of the three Christians,

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<sup>20</sup> The first occurrence of this list is found in the *Vœux du Paon*, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century romance by Jacques de Longuyon. It had become extremely famous by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century.

<sup>21</sup> There is also an Athis in the Prose *Guillaume d'Orange*. See Suard, p. 510.

<sup>22</sup> The other two pagans are Alexander and Cesar, the two Jewish, Judas Maccabeus and Josue.

who are Arthur, Charlemagne and Godefrey of Bouillon. Orkais, son of the *Grant Turk*, does take the name of Charles, after his conversion,. Yet Orkais, while presented as valiant, is not on the same footing as the three princes. Charles is also the name of Phelippe's father, the king of France at the beginning of the romance. But, as we have seen, Charles refuses to take part in a crusade and even to send troops. Why is the main hero named Phelippe rather than Charles? It looks like the writer wants to promote a new worthy, replacing or displacing Charles. While Charlemagne, in the epic tradition, and in particular in *Fierabras*, was the leader of the crusading mission, in *Les Trois fils de roi*, Phelippe is the new leader of the war against the Saracens, even if he is never the official chief of the Christian army. Palumbo remarks that "Phelippe, le héros du récit, porte un nom habituel dans l'onomastique royale française, qui est, en même temps, un hommage évident au duc Philippe le Bon." ("Phelippe, the hero of the narrative, has a name common in French royal onomastic, which is, at the same time, an obvious homage to the duke Philippe le Bon")<sup>23</sup> The romance character is thus a strange combination of historical figures: future king of France, he bears the name of a famous duke of Burgundy who dreamed of crusades, although never went. By choosing as its hero a French king, the writer sets his romance in a series of texts stressing the historical subordination of Burgundy to France<sup>24</sup>. Yet by naming him Phelippe, he flatters his patron and recalls Philippe's leading role in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century crusading aspiration.

Whatever the reason for this preference, what matters, for my purpose, is that by putting forward three *preux* whose virtues are extolled as the most valuable, the most honorable, the author is in effect redefining prowess. While his heroes might inherit names from pagan and Jewish *preux*, their values are thoroughly Christian. This is why Phelippe can surpass Alexander and Hector, according to his young companions. This statement that we were tempted to dismiss as mere *cliché* (for new heroes are always compared to ancient ones) takes its full meaning here. Alexander and Hector, however admirable, embody ancient values superceded by Christian ones<sup>25</sup>. Phelippe is not destined to equal ancient heroes but to supplant them. What makes the three

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<sup>23</sup> intro. p. 72.

<sup>24</sup> See J. Devaux, "*Le Saint Voyage de Turquie...*", p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Unknowingly, the author of *Les trois fils de roi* echoes Chrétien de Troyes' prologue to the *Conte du Graal*: Chrétien opposes Philippe de Flandres' charity to Alexander's *largesse*.

companions superior to their ancient counterparts, is that they are engaged in a different kind of war. They are not fighting for glory, booty, land conquest, but for "la garde et la deffense de la foy" ("to keep and defend [Christian] faith" 124), "pour [l]a sainte foy [de Nostre Seigneur Jhesus maintenir" ("to maintain the holy faith of our Lord Jesus Christ", 88).

The other quality that distinguishes them from ancient heroes as well as from epic heroes such as Roland is their profound humility. The best example is Phelippe who, despite being the son of the most powerful prince in the Christian world, accepts to humble himself, to follow the examples of martyrs and saints whose lives he has been assiduously reading. When his father refuses to let him go to Sicily he retreats into his room where he reads the lives of saints and martyrs:

"Et se retray en une petite chambrette a part et aucuns de ses plus privez avec luy, ausquelz il fist lire plusieurs histoires et vies de sains, servans a la foy crestienne, par lesquelles histoires il veoit les paines et travaulz que les sains, appostres et martirs, avoient souffert pour acquerre la gloire pardurable."

("he retreated in a small room aside with some of his most intimate attendants and asked them to read several stories and lives of saints, who served the Christian faith, by which stories he saw the suffering and hardships endured by saints, apostles and martyrs in order to gain eternal glory." 93).

Heeding the call of the Gospel, he decides to abandon his kingdom and all his friends to go to Sicily (94). He secretly leaves the court of France and rides alone to Spain, a difficult and trying journey:

"En tres brief terme et avant qu'il fust parvenu es Espaignes il fu si deffait et amaigry que peu de gens l'eussent recongneu. Car il n'avait pas la gouverne ne les aises delicieux qu'il avoit accoustumez, dont tant luy desplaisoit que, se la grace de Dieu ne l'eust reconforté, je ne croy pas que il fust venu jusques es Espaignes sans estre en tresgrant dangier de sa vie."

("In a short time and before he reached Spain, he was so wasted and so emaciated that few people would have recognized him. For he did not have the way of life and the

luxuries that he was used to, a condition most unpleasant to him and if he had not been comforted by divine grace, I believe that he would not have reached Spain without putting his life at risk. 97).

When in Spain, he stays with a family of bourgeois who take good care of him when he becomes ill. He recovers after being seriously sick for more than six months, and enters the service of Ferrant, the seneschal of the king of Sicily. Ferrant, who has come to Spain to secure assistance for his master, thinks that he has been unsuccessful since he could not convince the king of Spain to send any troops. He does not know that by bringing with him this new young servant, he will change the fortune of war. Yet from the start, everybody is aware of the young man's virtues. Ferrant is deeply impressed by his companion's humility, beauty, and behavior:

"Et si pensoit en son coeur que s'en armes et vaillances il avoit autant de vertus qu'il a bon corps et belle maniere, ce seroit la plus parfaite chose que Nostre Seigneur Dieu eust fait naistre puis le temps de sa passion."

("And he thought in his heart that if his valiance and his ability in combat were equal to the beauty of his body and to his natural elegance, he would be the most perfect being that God our Lord had brought to life since the time of His Passion."106).

This surprisingly strong statement suggests an analogy between Phelippe and Christ himself: as Christ came down to earth and became man to save mankind, Phelippe left his kingdom and became a simple knight to save Sicily. This analogy is strengthened later on. First, Olivier's men recount that:

"ung jenne homme, comme ung angle en beaulté et comme ung saint Jeorge en vaillance, leur estoit venu, et oncques puis sa venue ne avoient eue que bonne adventure et tous leurs faiz estoient venus a bonne conclusion."

("a young man, an angel in beauty, a saint George in valiance, had come to them, and since his coming they had met only

good fortune and all their undertakings had come to a good end." 168).

Striking is the repetition of *venu(e)* (come), as verb or noun: Phelippe's arrival is presented as an advent of almost religious significance. When Phelippe, rescued by his companions after his near-death at the hands of the Turk, goes through the town, people are so comforted by his sight "qu'il sembloit que Dieu feust descendu entr'eulx" ("it seemed that God had descended in their midst." 292). Then the king of Sicily compares Phelippe's achievement in the war to the grace of the Holy Spirit:

"Puis la venue du Surnommé, oncques mal ne nous advint par sa seule vaillance, comme se la grace du Saint Esperit nous fust survenue."

("Since the Surnommé's coming, no harm befell us, thanks only to his valor, as if the grace of the Holy Spirit had come to us."338).

For most characters in the story, war against the Saracens is seen as a Christian duty, whether they take it on or not. For Phelippe, it is also an *imitatio sanctorum et martyrium*, i.e. an *imitatio Christi*. But for those who meet the young knight, he is a God-sent being, an angel, a reincarnation of saint George, who, as in many *chansons de geste*, comes to the rescue of Christian knights.

His companions, Ector and Athis, are as humble and devout as he. Indeed the three friends share the same virtues, the same ideals to the point that "la pensee d'eulz trois estoit toute une" ("the three of them shared only one way of thinking", 315)<sup>26</sup>. Their humility and meekness at home are matched only by their fierceness on the battlefield:

"Quant ilz estoient a l'ostel retournez et qu'ilz estoient desarmez, ce sembloient a veoir propres angles tant humbles, doulx et courtois se moustroient; et armez, entre leurs ennemiz,

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<sup>26</sup> See also p. 279: "Tant amoient les trois compaignons l'un l'autre que freres germains ne pouoient plus ne mieulx amer. Oncques n'eurent que ung logis, une bourse et ung seul vouloir. Jour de leur vie n'eurent une felle parole ensemble."

ilz estoient tant cruelz que le plus assureé ne les ouzoit attendre  
ne regarder tant les doubtoient."

("When they were back in their lodgings and had put down  
their arms, they looked like genuine angels so humble, meek  
and courteous was their behavior, yet, when armed, among  
their enemies, they were so cruel that the most confident  
adversary did not dare wait for them nor look at them, for he  
feared them highly." 315).

Their submission to their master Ferrant<sup>27</sup>, their patience in all their  
trials, their modesty when their identity is finally revealed, all are  
Christian virtues that explain and justify their heroic deeds:

"Chascun recordoit les biens et les vertus des trois jennes  
serviteurs de Ferrant, et disoient que Nostre Seigneur Dieu  
propre pour le recouvrement de ce royaume, le Tout Puissant  
de sa tres benigne grace, les avoit celle part envoyés."

("Everybody was recalling the worth and the virtues of  
Ferrant's three young servants and was saying that God Our  
Lord, the All-Powerful, with kind Grace, had sent them that  
way for the recovery of this kingdom only." 325).

In *Fierabras*, Olivier, and not Roland, fights the Saracen giant.  
Fierabras had asked to face either Roland, Olivier or Ogier the Dane.  
Charlemagne first requests Roland to take up the challenge. But  
Roland's feelings are hurt: the night before, he was teased by  
Charlemagne and some of his old companions who had come to his aid  
and to Olivier's rescue during the day. Charlemagne bragged that the old  
knights had fought better than the young ones<sup>28</sup>. Let the old ones take up

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<sup>27</sup> When Phelippe first enters Ferrant's service, he somewhat resents having to  
put up with the Turks' provocation. He then disregards his master's order to  
retreat and unwillingly puts Ferrant's life in danger. Conscious of being  
responsible for a *mesaventure*, he manages to save his master and to capture  
Fierabras (108-110). He thus had to learn humility and submission.

<sup>28</sup> "Puis le soir vous vantastes, quant fustes enyvré./ que li viel chevaliers  
qu'avies amené/ L'avoient [mout] miex fait que li geune d'asé.", v. 159-161  
(Then at night, while drunk, you bragged that the old knights that you had  
brought with you had done quite better than the young ones).

the challenge, scorns Roland when urged to fight Fierabras<sup>29</sup>. A violent quarrel ensues, during which Charlemagne strikes Roland who draws his sword against the emperor and squarely refuses to go and fight. Olivier, although seriously injured the day before, accepts the challenge. Roland's arrogant behavior and his subsequent anger call to mind Achilles' wrath, as Le Person notes in his introduction:

"la rancœur et la fureur de Roland contre Charles (...) rappelle la célèbre colère d'Achille, replié sous sa tente et refusant de partir au combat, dans l'Iliade, sentiment épique par excellence."

("Roland's resentment and his rage against Charles recalls Achilles's famous anger, when the hero retreats into his tent and refuses to fight, an exemplary epic feeling."185).

Achille's passion is thus transferred to Roland in *Fierabras*. Yet Roland's rage does not have the same damaging consequences as Achilles'. It merely disqualifies him, in favor of Olivier who outshines his old companion, so much so that in *Les Trois fils de roi*, Roland disappears altogether! Whereas Fierabras, Olivier, even his good horse Ferrant, find their way into the story, with major transformations as we have seen, Roland's name is never even cited. The reason is that Roland, like Achilles, embodies virtues that are not valued in our romance: violence, excessive pride, disobedience. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the *chanson de geste Raoul de Cambrai* questions *demesure* by staging a hero prone to that passion. It condemns Raoul's excess, yet betrays its fascination for a superhuman hero, inhabited by *furor*<sup>30</sup>, and thus capable, like Roland, of the most amazing feats<sup>31</sup>. Raoul is reprovved not because of his

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<sup>29</sup> "Or i para des viex con vos en aidere[z]", v. 164 (We shall see how the old knights will come to your rescue).

<sup>30</sup> On the notion of *furor*, see David Konstan's essay.

<sup>31</sup> See Laurence Harf-Lancner's essay.



violence, but because he misdirects it. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Les Trois fils de roi* completely exclude such passion and promote three heroes remarkable precisely because of their humility. These new worthies may take up names of ancient heroes such as Hector, they may fight the same enemies as Roland, yet they embody values that were prized, if not practiced, in 15<sup>th</sup>-century courts: meekness, submission to the prince, piety and willingness to comply with one's religious duties. The warrior's *furor* has been controlled and will be unleashed only in very specific circumstances: on the battlefield, against enemies of the Christian faith. At the cross road of epic and romance, *les Trois fils de roi* combines heroic virtues with Christian ones.

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