The Problematical Representation of the Hero in *The Song of Roland*

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Abstract

This paper engages with the problematical representation of Roland, the hero in The Song of Roland, which is one of the finest examples of the chanson de geste. A chanson de geste or an Old French epic is a medieval French genre that narrates the heroic deeds. Thus, The Song of Roland, the oldest extant French poem, recounts the feats of prowess of Roland, the nephew of Charlemagne. Chanson de geste, meaning song of deeds, is a genre that emerged between epic and romance; thus, it contains the characteristics of both genres. In the same line, the hero of The Song, Roland is constructed as a hero, including the characteristics of both the epic hero and the romance knight. In addition to these characteristics, Roland's identity as a hero is permeated with the motifs of Christianity and feudalism. In this regard, this paper analyzes The Song of Roland by discussing the problematical representation of Roland, the leader of the rear guard in Charlemagne's army, in The Song of Roland.

Keywords: *The Song of Roland*, *Chanson de geste*, Old French Epic, Epic hero

1.   Introduction

Medieval literature as an umbrella term was highly influenced by particular historical incidents, traditions, ecclesiastical, and secular institutions. As the Church was dominant in the Middle Ages, "literary expression was informed by a strong didactic spirit" (Coward, 2002, p. 3). Feudalism was also quite influential in every aspect of medieval life and institutions until the thirteenth century, which encountered "the growth of towns and a less courtly and more bourgeois public" (Coward, 2002, p. 3).

Medieval French literature is such an inclusive term that generalizations cannot work properly. Nevertheless, it still is possible to state that the early texts were evidently the products of long-established oral literary tradition. In spite of the fact that it is inappropriate to determine the "authors" of the texts, it is possible to speak of narrators, translators, and reciters who are also indicated in texts. David Coward (2002) further elaborates upon the oral essence of the texts:

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> The works performed by the itinerant *jongleurs* were not normally their own creations but revisions of old material drawn from sources as different as the Bible, Greek and Roman authors and oral traditions which were constantly reworked. (p. 4)

The *chanson de geste* is one of the finest literary genres arisen from this oral tradition, and *La Chanson de Roland* is the reworked story of a historically identifiable incident – The Battle of Roncevalles.

The Song of Roland was composed almost three centuries later from the Battle of Roncevalles, and it is considered "the oldest extant epic poem in French" (Burgess, 1990, p. 14). *The Song of Roland* is categorized as *chanson de geste,* or the Old French epic along with several poems. The Latin word *gesta* and the French word *geste* mean "things which have been accomplished, deeds," and they also cover the meanings of "family, lineage or simply "those who have accomplished the deeds" (Coward, 2002, p. 8; Crosland, 1971, p. 1; Burgess, 1990, p. 14). A *chanson de geste* is often presented in the form of verse paragraphs called *laisses,* and it is performed by a *jongleur* with a musical instrument called *vielle* (Bayrav, 2001, p. 28).

Chansons de geste is often categorized into three main cycles. These three cycles "are the cycle of the king or emperor, namely Charlemagne to which *The Song of Roland* belongs; the cycle of Doon de Mayence, and the cycle of Garin de Montglane" (Crosland, 1971, p. 17). Although they were written in the twelfth century, each was set in the Carolingian era; hence, the monarch in each case was Charlemagne or his son (Kaeuper, 1999, p. 231). Knowing the monarch of the time of the poem is crucial because, as most scholars believe, "the twelfth-century poems reflect society and issues of their time of composition, not those of the eighth or ninth century setting in which the action takes place" (Kaeuper, 1999, p. 231). For instance, D. A. Trotter (1987) states that *chanson de geste* "contain[s] a sprinkling allusion to the historical events or characters of the crusades" (p. 99). Thus, it is possible to form a reciprocal relationship between the crusades and the emergence and the development of such a genre as *chanson de geste*. Hence, it is maintained that the genre is designed as propaganda to create a Christian atmosphere for the crusades (Trotter, 1987, p. 102). *The Song of Roland*, for example, must have been written with the intentions of propaganda designed "to warm up tepid Christian interest in the Crusade" (Harrison, 1970, p. 12) despite having no direct reference to the crusades in *The Song*. *The Song of Roland*, thus, may also be defined as a Christian epic or a crusader epic.

Despite being an essential component of the *chanson de geste*, Christianity is not the only asset that influenced the genre. Feudalism, which is the system of government of the time, also plays a fundamental role in shaping the characters and relationships in the genre. Therefore, the *chanson de geste* as a literary genre "fused the ecclesiastical and the secular concerns" (Coward, 2002, p. 8). In this issue, Jessie Crosland (1971) asserts, in the ninth and tenth centuries, which coincided with "the break-up of Carolingian empire, the growth of feudalism and the expansion of ecclesiastical power" formed the background for earlier epic poems even before "romantic ideas of chivalry and love began to invade the poetry" (p. 2). Furthermore, Coward (2002) explains the fusion the genre incorporates in a detailed manner:

> It showed the chain of feudal obligation reaching up to the throne; by upgrading local wars between feudal overlords into an international, holy war, it championed the true faith. Harnessed by loyalty to a lord and the office he represented, and pressed into the defence of Christendom, chivalry, a code of honour and military valour, was redefined in terms of

> the Christian ethic. The feudal, crusader epic expressed an alliance of politics and religion and promoted a new collective ideal of service. (p. 8)

Coward gives an accurate picture of the motifs and institutions which formed and developed the genre. Moreover, as the *chanson de geste* is generically an intermediary genre between epic and romance, it displays some characteristics of both genres along with the motifs of Christianity and feudalism.

As mentioned above, *The Song of Roland* belongs to the first cycle involving Charlemagne's deeds and dates back to the eleventh or twelfth century. *The Song* deals with "the eternal conflict between good and evil" (Crosland, 1971, p. 70), namely Christians and Muslims or Franks and Saracens. This conflict constructed between Franks and Saracens will surely be resolved through the victory of Franks and Christianity over the Saracens and Islam. Having conquered all the land except the city of Saragossa in Spain, Charlemagne became "more than an organizing Christian king; . . . he was the Christian, the emperor, and his empire was synonymous with Christendom" (Jackson, 1982, p. 55). Hence, his war is not only against his enemies but also against the enemies of God. Jessie Crosland (1971) states that:

> *Chanson de Roland* is in any sense an allegory. . .There are biblical reminiscences which are almost too obvious to call for remark: Charlemagne surrounded by his twelve peers, of whom one is a traitor, for instance, inevitably recalls Christ and His twelve apostles. (p. 74)

The Song of Roland, employing many Christian elements, attempts to persuade its audience and reader even in the first *laisse* that the defeat of the Muslims is inevitable because Saracens are doomed by their worship of the false gods:

> There is no castle still opposing [Charlemagne]
> Nor town or wall remaining to be crushed,
> Except the mountain city of Saragossa.
> Marsilla holds it; he does not love God
> But serves Mohammed and invokes Apollo.
> No matter what he does, his ruin will come. (*The Song*, 1970, 4-9[2])

Another critical point is that the people of Saragossa are "an alien enemy" (Cook, 1987, p. 3) to the Franks because, as the lines above display, they do not even know Islam is also a monotheistic religion. However, they think the people of Saragossa worship Mohammed and Apollo.

Although there are certain differences between Franks and Saracens, there are also some symmetrical patterns shared by these two societies. For instance, Saracen society has the same feudal order as Franks, and they display the same feudal virtues, which can be observed in the character of Blancandrin, who is depicted as "very chivalrous and dutiful / and able in the service of his lord" (*The Song*, 1970, 25-26). Specific events are also embedded in *The Song* symmetrically. While Roland, nephew of Charlemagne, chooses his warriors and archbishop Turpin for the rear guard, nephew of Marsilla chooses his best men and the evil magician Corsablis. Another symmetrical pattern is that Roland cuts off the right hand of Marsilla, and Roland is often regarded as the right arm of Charlemagne, which will be cut off as well. Here, another function of this symmetrical pattern is that it foreshadows the future events.

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[2] All quotations from *The Song of Roland* are cited in line numbers.

Moreover, there are many repetitions of some paragraphs, *laisse similaires*, and their function is to achieve a kind of thematic unity (Harrison, 1970, p. 46-47). These repetitions are mainly analyzed as the descriptions of the landscape, and they enable smooth transitions from a particular scene to another such as from Saracen society to Frank society. Another equally significant function of these repetitions is to create suspense. Then, bearing the traces of the lyrical origins of epic, *The Song of Roland* is a succession of separate scenes, which are held together by both repetitions and symmetrical plot structure given in a simple yet elevated language.

Another crucial element to note in the ideology of in the genre of the *chanson de geste* is its highly masculine system (Gaunt, 1995, p. 22). This masculine system excludes women from the action in the narrative and assigns them minor roles in the action if they had any. This ideology of masculinity is important in that it plays a vital role in constructing the hero's identity. In this issue, Sarah Kay affirms that, women's exclusion from the plot reinforces the effects of masculinity of the heroes (qtd. in Gaunt, 1995, p. 22). To give an example, in *The Song of Roland*, there is only a brief reference to Oliver's fiancé, who awaits for him to return patiently. Furthermore, there is a strong woman represented as the Saracen queen. She is included in the plot as the Saracen Muslim queen who immediately realizes the falsehood of her own religion and converts to Christianity. She is strategically employed in the plot to strengthen the victory of Christianity over Islam.

The conflict presented in the genre is not only the conflict between Christians and Muslims. The hero of *The Song*, Roland also experiences a conflict in their identities. He is characterized as a hero to defend Christendom in the name of king Charlemagne, yet he also acts as a romance knight desiring to gain glory by setting off and accomplishing a quest. In this context, this paper discusses Roland's status as a hero who maintains the characteristics of both the epic hero and romance knight at the same time in *The Song of Roland*.

2. Roland: The Hero of *The Song*?

As the title of *The Song* suggests, Roland, who is the nephew of Charlemagne and the leader of the rear guard in his army, is obviously the protagonist of *The Song*. Nevertheless, there are several controversies discussing Roland's character. One of the controversies is initiated "whether Roland was presented as worthy of praise for defeating the Saracen enemies of Charlemagne or of blame for excessive pride" (Duggan, 2010, p. 97). It is possible to argue for each part of the interpretation of Roland as a praiseworthy hero or a proud one. That *chanson de geste* as a genre is an intermediary one between two grand genres, namely epic and romance and involves both epic and romance features, plays a vital role in the characterization of the hero as well. That is, the hero expectedly contains the characteristics of both the epic hero and the romance knight. In his first speech, Roland is presented as an ardent crusader, who lists the cities he has conquered boastfully:

> We have been in Spain for all of seven years;
> I conquered for you Noples and Commibles,
> I took Valterne and all the land of Pine,
> And Balaguer, Tudela, and Sezille. (*The Song*, 1970, 197-200)

These lines support the statement of Harrison, who argues that "[*The Song of Roland*] must have been written in the early years of twelfth century as a propaganda piece intended to warm up tepid Christian interest in the Crusade" (1970, p. 12). Likewise, Burgess claims that "the overall spirit of the poem appears to be that of the First Crusade" (1990, p. 8) although there is no direct reference to the Crusade in *The Song*.

Moreover, the most essential point these lines demonstrate is that Roland is characterized as an epic hero, who proudly boasts about what he has succeeded in as a hero. According to Ker (1957), Roland fits perfectly to the definition of an epic hero because

> *The Song of Roland* is . . . heroic in kind, in which the interest is concentrated on the passion of the hero, and the hero is glorified by every possible means of patriotism, religion, and the traditional ethics of battle. (p. 308)

Ker highlights the epic's key function of glorifying the hero's patriotism, piety, and martial skills. In so doing, he puts Roland into the category of an epic hero.

Nonetheless, Ker's statement that labels Roland an epic hero creates a paradoxical situation. Roland is depicted as a devoted Christian, and he bravely defends Christendom and fights for it. At the same time, his excessive pride is incessantly underlined throughout *The Song.* Evidently, pride is one of the characteristics of an epic hero, who brags about his lineage, his triumphs, successes in the battlefield. Yet, it is also one of the seven deadly sins condemned in Christianity. Therefore, it may be argued that the old tradition and Christianity coexist and clash within the same song. Roland risks his life and many Christian warriors' lives because of being too proud to sound the oliphant to ask for help despite Olivier's warning:

> "Companian Roland, sound your oliphant,
> So Charles, who's going through the pass, will hear;
> I promise you, the Franks will soon return."
> "May God forbid," flung Roland back at him,
> that it be said by any man alive
> I ever blew my horn because of pagans!
> My family shall never be reproved. (*The Song*, 1970, 1070-1076)

Roland refuses to sound the oliphant to ask for Charlemagne's help and leads himself to his own end and his warriors to death.

Also, he acts as an epic hero when he encourages his men to fight to the death and to strike their enemies heroically although there is no escape from dying: "[W]e shall die today / Lay on Franks! I'll attack once for you! / God damn the slowest! / And at these words the French go wading in" (*The Song*, 1970, 1926-1939). The gentler side of Roland comes to the foreground, and "his actions and words are characterized by humility, gentleness and courtesy" (Crosland, 1971, p. 86) when he sees his comrades die because of him. It may also be discussed that Roland emphasizes his personal honor without thinking about his men's lives, which complicates his identity as an epic hero. Since epic heroes are generally depicted as responsible for their people and community, Roland's pursuit of his own honor instead of his warriors' lives contradicts with the definition of an epic hero.

Realizing that sounding the oliphant will not save their lives anymore, Oliver blames his companion, Roland. Despite being in vain, Roland intends to sound the oliphant, "our fight is getting rough/I'll sound my horn—King Charles is sure to hear it" (*The Song*, 1970, 1713-1714):

> Then Roland says: "You're angry with me—why?
> And he replies: "Companion, you're to blame,
> For bravery in no sense is bravado,
> And prudence is worth more than recklessness.
> Those French are dead because of your caprice. (*The Song*, 1970, 1721-1725)

Companionships between warriors as we see in the case of Roland and Oliver are very common in medieval epics. Oliver in this song functions as a foil to Roland. They are similar in spirit; that is, they are both devoted Christians and brave warriors; however, the narrator signifies their striking difference: "Roland is bold, Oliver is wise/and both of them are marvellously brave" (*The Song*, 1970, 1093-1094). In this sense, critics accentuate "Oliver's wisdom" as opposed to "the Roland's foolhardiness" (Jackson, 1982, p. 64). In Crosland's words (1971), "Roland's actions were dictated by pride and folly" (p. 79). Roland, whose only concern is his reputation, is compared to Achilles in many aspects. Nonetheless, "there is more of a crisis and a climax in *The Song of Roland* than in the several battles of the *Iliad*" (Crosland, 1971, p. 294). Hence everything goes to the agony and to [Roland's] glory as "the unyielding champion of France and Christendom" (Crosland, 1971, p. 294).

Oliver's heroic stance occupies a crucial place in *The Song*. For Oliver, the individual reputation and chivalric glory must be subordinated if they serve the greater good of the general cause. Therefore, as Jackson clarifies (1982), his primary function is to act "as the voice of God, ignored by Roland and unheard by Charlemagne" (p. 64). Hence, Oliver is the martyr while Roland may not even be a martyr with his "simple-minded piety" (Tillyard, 1873, p. 133). In Christianity, one should sacrifice himself for the cause of Christianity to achieve martyrdom. Yet, Roland died because of his self-inflicted wound when he blew the oliphant fervently to make Charlemagne hear it and return to take revenge for his vassals. Thus, "his motivation is not Christian," argues Jackson (1982) and states that "his abandonment of personal hono[u]r . . . is the result of an entire epic consideration" (p. 66). His motivation is not Christian, but an act of pure revenge. Therefore, the old tradition or the old system of justice again clash with Christianity. However, while he is dying of his wound, he identifies himself as the vassal of God by offering his right-hand glove to God:

> Now Roland is aware his time is up:
> He lies upon a steep hill, facing Spain,
> And with one hand he beats upon his chest;
> . . .
> He lifted his right-hand glove to God;
> From heaven angels came to him down here. (*The Song*, 1970, 2366-2374)

Indeed, it is a gesture that a vassal makes to his lord to show his reverence and loyalty. This indicates that Christianity is organized around the idea of vassalage, and the relation between man and God is feudal. Therefore, Christianity and feudalism are intertwined in *The Song*, and the identity of the hero is greatly influenced by this intertwinement as observed in Roland's gesture.

Roland's in-between situation as an epic or a romance hero is also problematized with Ganelon, another important character in *The Song*. Ganelon, the stepfather of Roland, is known as the traitor figure, who causes the death of Roland and many other warriors. According to some scholars, Ganelon's treason is contradictory while other scholars easily label him the traitor. For example, Jackson (1982) opposes "such interpretation [which] ignores the fact that he is described as noble, handsome, brave, and wise" (p. 67). It is true that the narrator does not describe him as a simple villain, but elaborates the case depicting him as loyal and bold even before Marsilla. In his collaboration with the Saracens, he still considers himself loyal to Charlemagne. While Marsilla talks of Charlemagne as old since he is depicted as two hundred years old, Ganelon bravely defends his king:

> No man who ever sees and comes to know him
> I cannot praise or laud him to you so

> That he will not have yet more worth and honor.
> His mighty courage—who would itemize it?
> God made such heroism shine in him
> That he would rather die than fail his barons. (*The Song*, 1970, 530-536)

He praises Charlemagne and believes he maintains his loyalty to him. However, he seems he cannot understand the fact that he cannot destroy Roland without betraying Charlemagne. Ganelon supposes he is wrongly treated by Roland whose "laughter and willingness, indeed eagerness, to send him on a dangerous mission" (Jackson, 1982, p. 67) obviously reminds him "earlier hostility between himself and Roland" (Tillyard, 19873, p. 127).

Ganelon's trial displays "the struggle between the interest of the emperor and those of individual nobles" (Jackson, 1982, p. 67). During his trial, Ganelon never denies what he did, and he defends himself by simply stating that it was a matter of personal enmity; hence, it cannot be regarded as treason:

> And Ganelon says: "Damned if I shall hide it!
> Since Roland took my gold and property,
> I therefore planned his suffering and death;
> But I'll concede to no one this was treason." (*The Song*, 1970, 3757-3760)

Ganelon attempts to persuade the barons that he is always loyal to the king and Christianity because they are to advise Charlemagne what they should do with him:

> You barons, hear me, for the love of God!
> --My lords, I went along in Charles's host
> And served him there with loyalty and love.
> His nephew Roland nursed a grudge for me
> And had me doomed to agony and death.
> I went as envoy to the king Marsilla
> I came to safety only by my wit.
>> I offered battle to that warrior Roland,
>> And Oliver, and all of their companions—
>> Charles heard it, as did all his noble lords.
>> Although I got revenge, there was no treason. (*The Song*, 1970, 3768-3778)

Ganelon's defence uncovers "the essential struggle between hero and the king" (Jackson, 1982, p. 69), and it also evokes a significant historical fact, that is, "the right of medieval . . . noblemen to private feud" (Jackson, 1982, p. 69). In heroic societies, kinship is a fundamental bond and demands a specific set of rules. According to it, if one of your kin is slayed by someone from another kin, you have the right to avenge. This old rule evolves into a new one in medieval relationships. In this case, as Ganelon and Roland have personal enmity, Ganelon feels the need to take his revenge on Roland. Due to the right of private feud, Ganelon denies the accusations of treason and considers his action as revenge.

Although the central authority wants to eradicate private feuds, the struggle between "private hono[u]r [and] public policy" (Jackson, 1982, p. 69) has a long way to be eliminated. Then, it may be stated that Ganelon might have remained good; however, he is tempted by an old hostility and jealousy. He cannot be saved by Pinabel, who is defeated by Thierry, who is depicted relatively weak, with the help of God. Hence, "his ligaments are horribly distended/, and every member of his body broken / bright blood comes spilling down upon green grass" (*The Song*, 1970, 3970- 3973).

3.   Conclusion

The Song of Roland as an old French epic recites the heroic story of Roland idealistically with a strong emphasis on the glorious triumph of Christianity over Islam. This victory is even strengthened with the conflict of good and evil, which is designated between Christians and Muslims. Obviously, this conflict is resolved through the victory of Christendom. *The Song* also displays the motif of feudalism highly imbued with Christian virtues in the relationship between Charlemagne and his warriors. The idealized representation of warfare, Charlemagne as the ideal king figure, feudal order of society, and Christianity's rightful victory over Muslims are all accomplished with the hero of *The Song*, Roland. In addition to these motifs and patterns, the genre of *The Song* contains the characteristics of both epic and romance. Therefore, Roland involves the features of both the epic hero and romance knight. In this context, this paper explores the debates on Roland's heroic characteristics and analyses the problematical representation of him.

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