



# WORLD LITERATURE I (ENG 251)

## Roland Study Guide

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### CHARLEMAGNE AND RONCEVAUX

Pope Leo crowned Charlemagne in Rome in Christmas Day, 800, making him the first Western Roman emperor in more than 300 years. As head of the Holy Roman Empire, Charlemagne became a figure of legend and stories for hundreds of years.

Note: Charles = Charlemagne; Franks = French

August 15 778 Battle of Roncevaux

What really happened according to French and Arab Chroniclers of the time:

Charlemagne went into Spain "at the request of the ...Saracen governor of Saragossa...who was in revolt against his master, the...emir of Cordova. ...Charlemagne appeared at Saragossa, where he thought the gates would open [but]...The city resisted, the siege dragged on; bad news from Saxony necessitated a hasty return.... On the way they encountered a city that refused them passage although it was Christian: Pamplona. The emperor razed it without mercy, then fell into the fatal ambush in which he came to know the "treachery of the Basques." But it is possible that the Basques were given considerable assistance by the Arabs." (Le Gentil, 14-15)

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### ARABS IN SPAIN

To twelfth century Europeans, "The Arab world was...a civilization apparently superior to their own in most if not all aspects of daily living, one whose trade goods were coveted and depended on [and] whose luxury was astounding...."

"By Christian standards, the Arabs were heretics, and what they had done to merit such a marvelous destiny was a mystery and a source of some concern. And...the orthodox establishment was appalled....in Europe in the Middle Ages the foreign devil was an Arab."

Europeans thought that Islam was "either a pagan religion or a Christian heresy...characterized by moral licentiousness, permissiveness, self-gratification and cultural decadence." (Menocal, 40-45)

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### CRUSADING SOLDIERS OF CHRIST

The "peace of god" movement was essentially a response of the church to the breakdown of the royal Carolingian authority in France. The church tried to establish a peace which declared that it was immoral to harm unarmed churchmen or unarmed peasants, or to harm churches and their possessions. One effect of this peace was the development and codification of a Christian warrior ethic... which became associated with "building of the kingdom of God" as a soldier. (Duby, 86-87; 169)

"During the late eleventh century the Eastern Empire was being raided by new enemies, Turkish tribesmen from central Asia, and in 1091 the Emperor Alexius I requested the help of Pope Urban II....what he got, in 1096, was the First Crusade. From that time onward, throughout the whole of the twelfth and until well into the thirteenth century, successive waves of crusading armies continued to arrive from the West."

By 1096 the idea of "'fighting for Christ' could be interpreted as militant knight-service....The knight set forth under the banner of Christ, war-leader and king, to wrest the "land of His birthright from the infidels; if he fell, he had his reward in Heaven; if he conquered he won renown, an estate on earth and the Kingdom of Heaven besides." (Heer, 126, 127)

"The eleventh-century crusaders were certain that they had God's support against the infidels; each of them felt, at some decisive moment, that he was part of a celestial army." (Gentil, 123)

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## FEUDALISM

There is currently a great deal of controversy over what exactly feudalism was, or even if it ever existed. However, the concept is useful for understanding the roles in Roland, especially the relationships of Roland to Charlemagne and of Roland to God.

A vassal was a "free man who put himself under the protection of someone more rich and powerful...The vassal had the obligation of rendering his lord "aid and counsel"...[which] meant...supporting the lord in all his business and in his numerous lawsuits and disputes" and providing military service. (Heer, 35-37)

"In return for his service, the vassal was granted...a gift..." of land, office or position at court. Ideally a fief. This was a two-way contract; but the obligation was to the death of the lord, but no further. (Harrison, 23) There was also a religious model of the concept of feudalism, which is expressed in Roland, as when he offers his glove to God.

The duties of a loyal vassal to his lord are clearly expressed in Roland:

"A man must bear some hardships for his lord,  
stand everything, the great heat, the great cold,  
lose the hide and hair on him for his good lord.  
Now let each man make sure to strike hard here..."

(all English quotes of Roland are from Goldin's translation in Norton)

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## CHANSONS DE GESTE

"In the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, [French] heroic epics known as chansons de geste (songs of great deeds) were enormously popular... warlike and heroic in mood, they often consisted of exaggerated accounts of events in the reign of Charlemagne.... Like old-fashioned Westerns, the chansons de geste were packed with action, and their heroes tended to steer clear of sentimental entanglements with women. Warlike prowess, courage, and loyalty to one's lord and fellows-in-arms were the virtues stressed in these heroic epics. The battle descriptions, often characterized by gory realism, tell of Christian knights fighting with almost superhuman strength against fantastic odds. " (Hollister 262-3)

The chansons de geste "all went back to the French Chanson de Roland and celebrated the noble Franks as invincible warriors in their fight against "infidel gods...." (Heer, 166) More than eighty of the chansons de geste survive, in whole, or partially. (Pepin, 113)

Gaston Paris' theory of epic fermentation is based on the notion that people react to contemporary events by composing "short songs, fragmentary and impassioned, called cantilenes. When united and organized around a central theme or character so as to form long, continuous narratives, they became the chansons de geste." (Gentil, 55)

An interesting idea about the origins of the Chansons de Geste is the pilgrim route theory of epic origins. "Bedier believes that in the eleventh century there were pilgrimage routes; on these routes, sanctuaries; and in these sanctuaries, monks. Local and religious legends, linked either with the monuments or with regional disputes and organized to varying degrees, grew up along these routes. They were preserved in the sanctuaries and maintained by the monks for propaganda purposes.... Thanks to such favorable conditions as the Crusades or the eleventh-century cultural renewal, the jongleurs and the monks revived them." (Gentil, 58)

However, Ramon Menendez Pidal "believes that the origins of romance literature go much farther back than the existing texts and can only be explained if a long and rich tradition of lost works is supposed." he has much excellent scholarship to support this. (Gentil, 66)

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## ■ CHANSONS AS POETRY:

The chansons were sung or chanted by singers called jongleurs; we do not know what the melodies were like. The poems were divided into stanzas called "laissez" of irregular length. They used assonance, not rhyme to tie each laisse together-- e.g. all the lines in a laisse used the same final vowel. The following example is a part of laisse 176 showing assonance. (from Le Gentil, p. 152)

Li quens Rollant se jut desuz un pin;  
 Envers Espaigne en ad turnet sun vis.  
 De plusurs choses a remembrer li prist,  
 De tantes teres cum li bers conquist,  
 De dulce France, des humes de son lign,  
 De Carlemagne, sun seignor, kil nurrit;

Note how each line uses the same final vowel, in this case, "i," and also note the pause at the end of each line. The English translation of the same section echoes the repetition of final vowels, but not to the extent of the original French:

Count Roland lay stretched out beneath a pine;  
 he turned his face toward the land of Spain,  
 began to remember many things now:  
 how many lands, brave man, he had conquered;  
 and he remembered: sweet France, the men of his line,  
 remembered Charles, his lord, who fostered him:

Repetition was also used in "laissez similaires" which use the same group of themes and motifs, with some variation, in two or more successive verses.

A number of laisses end with the letters AOI. No one knows what they mean, although they may be either some kind of musical indication or an abbreviated prayer. They do seem to occur at important moments in the poem.

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## ■ PARATACTIC STRUCTURE

Auerbach calls the structure of the Roland "paratactic," meaning that the individual parts or laisses are strung together like beads instead of being interwoven like a tapestry (as is the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*). A modern example of paratactic structure is the MTV video, where images flash one after the other, often repeating with minor variations, not unlike the laisses similaires. There is very little logical connection among these images, but they are thematically related as are the laisses in Roland.

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## CHANSON DE ROLAND

The Roland, as we have it, was composed about 1100; our text (Oxford Ms.) dates from around the second quarter of 12th c., Anglo-Norman dialect. The author may have been a man named Tuoldus, since the last line says (maybe) that Tuoldus wrote this poem. Although it claims to tell the story of a real battle, it is mostly fiction.

The Chanson de Roland "describes Charlemagne's expedition into Spain and the disastrous battle of the rear guard...It recalls one of the most famous victims of the ambush. But this is absolutely all that connects it to history. The rest...is legend and poetry." (Gentil, 15)

The dating of the poet is supported by the content and emotional context of the Roland, which expresses attitudes prevalent at the time of the first crusade: "the ideal by which he is inspired, the conflict he recalls, and the meaning he gives it, all suggest that he lived in the memorable years that knew Christianity while Urban II was pope, particularly since it is the First Crusade to the East...that dominates his thought." (Gentil, 23)

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## THE STORY OF THE CHANSON DE ROLAND

The poem can be divided into four major units:

1	the betrayal of Roland by Ganelon
2	the first battle at Roncevaux --Roland dies
3	the second battle at Roncevaux--Franks win
4	Ganelon's trial and death

The story opens in the Saracen court in Saragossa, where King Marsilion is weary of fighting Charlemagne and asks his men for advice on how to get him to leave Spain. Blancandrin advises Marsilion to send treasure and noble sons as hostages to Charlemagne, and promise to meet him in Aix on Michaelmas to convert to Christianity. The Saracens, of course, won't show and the hostages will be killed, but it's better than losing Spain.

Blancandrin goes to Charlemagne's camp with gifts of treasure and the Saracen proposal. The French barons debate it; Roland is against trusting the Saracens; Ganelon wants to end the war and go home. The barons agree to send an envoy and several volunteer, including Roland, but Charlemagne refuses to risk losing them; then Roland suggests Ganelon, who becomes furious even before Roland laughs at him. Ganelon warns Roland he will get revenge.

Ganelon lets Charlemagne's glove drop, a super discourtesy, but goes off on his errand to the Saracens. On the way, Ganelon and Blancandrin plot to get rid of Roland, since they mistakenly think that Roland's death will bring the war to an end, which they both desire.

When Ganelon gets to the Saracen camp he first insults them, getting King Marsilion furious, and then proposes his "deal" to get Roland into the rearguard so that the Saracens can destroy him. It's a deal.

Ganelon returns to Charlemagne, telling him that he has a truce with the Saracens who will come to France in one month to convert to Christianity.

Charlemagne and the troops prepare to leave Spain and Ganelon volunteers Roland to protect the rearguard. Charlemagne and Roland are furious, but cannot refuse.

Roland and 20,000 Franks are left behind and are promptly ambushed. Although they fight valiantly against the demonic Saracens, they do not stand a chance, since they are completely outnumbered.

Roland and his men have three horn blowing discussions:

1	Oliver asks Roland to blow the horn to summon Charlemagne and Roland refuses because he does not want shame for himself and his kin.
2	Roland wants to blow horn, but Oliver says no because it's too late to do any good.

3	Turpin says that Roland should blow the horn, not for rescue, but for revenge and Christian burial.
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In the first horn blowing discussion, Oliver asks Roland to blow his horn, but Roland refuses because he does not want shame for himself and his kin

Said Oliver: "The pagan force is great;  
 from what I see, our French here are too few.  
 Roland, my companion, sound your horn then,  
 Charles will hear it, the army will come back."  
 Roland replies: "I'd be a fool to do it.  
 I would lose my good name all through sweet France." (laisse 83)

Oliver's request makes good sense, but Roland is stubborn and proud.

Roland replies: "May it never please God  
 that any man alive should come to say  
 that pagans--pagans!--once made me sound this horn:  
 no kin of mine will ever bear that shame." (laisse 85)

Here Roland shows his *démesuré* or rashness as well as his fear of being shamed.

In the second horn blowing discussion, Roland wants to blow the horn, but this time Oliver says no.

And Roland said: "I'll sound the olifant,  
 Charles will hear it, drawing through the passes,  
 I promise you, the Franks will return at once."  
 Said Oliver: "That would be a great disgrace,  
 a dishonor and reproach to all your kin,  
 the shame of it would last them all their lives.

Oliver is mad and says it's too late now. (laisse 129)

"I will tell you what makes a vassal good:  
 it is judgment, it is never madness;  
 restraint is worth more than the raw nerve of a fool.  
 Frenchmen are dead because of your wildness." (laisse 130)

Oliver's point is that it is too late now to expect Charlemagne to save their lives, so it would be dishonorable to summon him to help them (e.g. he would fail at rescue).

Oliver is wise, Roland is brave. But, one cannot jump to easy conclusions, because wisdom of limited value in this situation, where Roland is heading for holy martyrdom against the demonic pagans.

In the third horn blowing discussion, Bishop Turpin says that Roland should blow the horn, not for rescue, but to call Charlemagne's troops, so they can provide Christian burial and revenge.

Roland finally blows his horn and ruptures his temples; he will die from this self-injury; no pagan injures him. Now Roland goes through a process of repentance and prayer which prepares him for his final ascent to heaven. He continues to kill pagans while Charlemagne's troops sound their horns to warn away the pagans who flee leaving the dying Roland. Roland weeps for the dead Franks, walks toward Spain, and collapses.

He tries to break his sword, but cannot. He lies facing the Saracens, with his sword and the olifant beneath him and "offers his glove, for all his sins, to God." He prays and God sends the Angel Gabriel to take his glove and bear Roland's soul directly to heaven.

This is the end of the selection in our textbook, but the story goes on...

God stops the sun so Charlemagne's returning troops have time to drive Marsilion's pagan troops into the river Ebro, where they all drown.

Meanwhile...

Marsilion flees to Saragossa; his right hand was cut off by Roland during the battle.

Marsilion had sent for Baligant 7 years earlier when Charlemagne had first invaded Spain. Baligant finally arrives at Saragossa the day after Roland's death. Baligant is a negative parallel to Charles, even older (alive in the time of Homer and Vergil!) and a pagan, demonic threat to Christian France.

The dying Marsilion gives his lands to Baligant, to reinforce the point that Baligant represents the whole pagan world fighting against the whole Christian world.

The pagan host includes many monstrous creatures, some are not ordinary human soldiers (e.g. demonic troops opposing Christian troops)

Marsilion, his right hand cut off by Roland, weighted by sin, dies of grief "and yielded up his soul to lively devils."

Charles defeats Baligant in single combat, aided by God who sends the Angel Gabriel to encourage him. Once Baligant is dead, the pagans all flee "God wills them not to stay." Charlemagne takes Saragossa, destroys the mosques and synagogues, forces more than 100,000 pagans to convert to Christianity and kills those who refuse.

Roland, Olivier and Turpin are buried at Blaye on the way home. When Charlemagne reaches Aix, the trial of Ganelon begins. Charles accuses Ganelon who says his acts were revenge, not treason. The barons debate, they don't want trouble, and except for Thierry, are not inclined to condemn Ganelon. Thierry explains his case:

Though Roland may have injured Ganelon,  
 your service should have guaranteed his safety.  
 Betraying him made Ganelon a felon'  
 he broke his oath to you and did you wrong.  
 For this I judge that he should hang and die. (laisse 277)

Then, Thierry offers to combat a kinsman of Ganelon to decide who is right. Pinabel offers to fight Thierry; Charles asks for thirty of Ganelon's kinsman as hostages for this fight. Thierry kills Pinabel

The Franks shout: "God has worked a miracle!  
 It's only just that Ganelon be hanged,  
 together with his kin who took his side."  
 So, the Franks hang Ganelon's thirty relatives, saying:  
 "A traitor kills himself as well as others."

This is strong message about the wickedness of treason and how it spreads to the entire family. Then Ganelon is torn into quarters and goes "to his damnation."

Finally, the Angel Gabriel comes from God to Charles to tell him that he must go and help the besieged Christians of Imphe. Charles does not want to go and cries, "God, how tiring is my life!" e.g. eternal struggle against pagans is brutal and exhausting; it's no fun being emperor.

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## ISSUES: KINGS AND HEROES

Roland is a perfect embodiment of European Christian feudal warrior virtues. Roland is quite different from most other heroes we have observed, such as Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Achilles, and Aeneas.

Roland is in many ways most like the greatest of Greek warriors, Achilles, who was under a high king, Agamemnon, at Troy.

However Achilles did not have a vassal relationship, nor did he exhibit piety, although he was emotional and rashly bold. Neither Odysseus nor Gilgamesh display a strong sense of responsibility to their countries. Aeneas does display powerful moral responsibility, but is not rash; he is able to control his emotions and is only ferocious when there is good reason (belt of Pallas). Aeneas is more like Charlemagne than like Roland.

Roland's Character: Roland is a good vassal, both of Charlemagne and Christ. At death he delivers his fealty to God. Roland is fierce, proud, courageous, a loyal vassal, a warm friend, very conscious of honor, fears failure, and is pious

Roland's flaw is ungovernable pride or rashness (*démesuré*). Roland provokes Ganelon to treason at Roncevaux and refuses to sound the horn when first attacked.

However, although Roland is responsible for Roncevaux, he repents and his sacrifice is not in vain nor ambition wrong because he is fighting for God and Christianity. His martyr's blood promises resurrection of the soul and the triumph of faith. He dies of blowing the horn; no Saracen weapon touches him.

Roland and his fellows die as Christian martyrs and their bodies are treated as such. The hearts of Roland, Olivier and Turpin are cut out and put in a marble casket--reliquary, such as was used for saints' body parts.

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## ISSUES: RESPONSIBILITY

The poet judges actions "in terms of whether they help or harm the Crusade. Thus Roland's rashness, his *démesuré*, is transformed into an ideal sacrifice worthy of glorification. But Ganelon's desire to avenge himself for a personal injury leads him to commit the most unpardonable of crimes." (Gentil, 50)

"Ganelon believes that he is taking revenge against one man, while in fact he is betraying a sacred cause." (Gentil, 94)

Did Ganelon's action constitute treason?

- Ganelon says no:
- Roland had committed certain unspecified wrongs against him in the past.
- He (Ganelon) had publicly challenged Roland, so there was no treason.
- The jury of peers waffles.
- Thierry says yes, Ganelon is guilty, and combats Pinabel to prove it.
- Thierry wins, THEREFORE Ganelon is a traitor and must die (along with 30 of his relatives).
- God aids Thierry. The outcome is controlled by the principle of success--the winner is right because he wins; he wins because he is right.

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## PAGANS, DEMONS AND FOREIGNERS

Pagans as Demonic:

The pagan world is presented as a demonic mirror-image of the Christian. For example, the pagans, like the Franks, have twelve peers. Also, while Charles is presented as a Christ figure, Blancandrin is presented as an anti-Christ figure who is willing to send his own son to certain death as a hostage in order to keep his own honor and lands.

Saracens are described as rather noble at first to build up their worth as an enemy. In the actual battles they are demonic and rotten. When they are killed, Satan carries off their souls to hell, while angel Gabriel carries off Roland's soul to heaven.

When the pagans lose the first battle at Roncevaux, they become angry and overthrow the idols of their gods because they failed to protect them:

They scurry to Apollo, in a crypt,  
insult him, mutilate him horribly:  
"Oh evil god, why bring such shame on us?  
Why our king you allowed to be defeated?  
You give poor pay to those who serve your well!"  
They take away his scepter and his crown,  
then hang him from a column by the hands,  
and topple it to earth about their feet.  
They pound on him and shatter him with mauls.  
They strip the fire-red gem off Termagant  
and throw Mohammed down into a ditch,  
where pigs and dogs will gnaw and trample him. (laisse 187)

Note the bizarre combination of Apollo, Termagant and Mohammed. The Roland poet was ignorant of other religions, and could not differentiate one from another, which did not keep him from hating all of them.

The point of the poem is that Charlemagne overthrows the pagan religion as well as a physical army; this is a Christian victory, a Crusade.

Because pagan idols were thought to be inhabited by demons if not the descendents of the ancient pagan gods, after Charlemagne conquers Saragossa:

He sends a thousand Frenchmen through the town  
to hunt out all the synagogues and mosques;  
with mauls of iron and axes which they carry,  
they smash the effigies and all the idols;  
no sorcery or magic will be left. (laisse 266)

The Franks hate, loathe and fear anything not French and Christian.

Finally, Charlemagne's troops forcibly baptize 100,000 souls and kill any who resist, which evidently was pleasing to their feudal Crusading Christian God.

The Universal Duel between Good and Evil

God intervenes three times:

1	when Roland is about to die
2	when Charlemagne battles Baligant
3	when Thierry battles Pinabel

The battles at Roncevaux are part of an unending, painful crusade of the Christian West against the Pagan East which requires eternal vigilance and sacrifice from the Christians.

This eternal conflict between Christian good and Pagan evil peaks in the duel between Charlemagne and Baligant. Their battle involves all the forces of Islam against all the forces of the Christian West:

Charlemagne himself is the figure of militant Christianity in the Crusades. Consequently, God appears in the action several times as in the duel between Charles and Baligant:

Charles staggers, comes quite close to falling down,  
but God does not desire him dead or vanquished.  
Saint Gabriel has hurried to his side  
and asked: "What are you doing, mighty king?"  
When he hears the angel's blessed voice, King Charles  
no longer is in fear or dread of death;  
his mind clears and his energy returns.  
With France's sword he smashes the emir  
The pagans flee--God wills them not to stay

Baligant and Charlemagne are the embodiment of the two conflicting religions, Islam and Christianity. Consequently, God and the angels quite naturally get involved.

As we have seen, after Charlemagne wins, he destroys the mosques and idols of Islam and forcibly baptizes the pagans to emphasize the Christian Crusading nature of the battle that has been won.

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