

# Holy War in *The Song of Roland:* The “Mythification” of History

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In *The Song of Roland*, the French epic written down in the last years of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, good and evil are clearly delineated and understood. On the battlefield that is the setting for much of the poem, super-mortal forces fight for control of the Earth, utilizing the bodies of the warring Christians and pagans as pawns in a game of cosmological significance. While there is truth at the base of *The Song of Roland*, much of the history behind the work was “edited” in the three centuries that transpired between the battle of Roncevaux and the recording of the poem. It is true, as the poem claims, that in 778 the rear guard of Charlemagne’s army was massacred at Roncevaux. But in reality—and in contrast to the claims of the song—the Basques, and not the Muslims, destroyed the rear guard of the Frankish forces (Kalchoff, 46). In actuality, the campaign the Franks were waging in Spain was not a holy war: the

year before the massacre, Sulayman ibn al-‘Arabi came to Charles in revolt against the Emir, ‘Abd ar-Rahman. They asked the chief of the Franks for aid. Charles granted it to them, and he prepared a great army to traverse the Pyrenees, to place Sulayman on the throne, and to receive Iberia as a fief (Lafont, 123-128). The re-writing of history we see in *The Song of Roland* is that which Paul Aebischer calls the “mythification” of events:

[D]ans la souci de la censure impériale de cacher le désastre des Pyrénées, d’en minimiser les conséquences, de conserver au roi sa réputation de chef invincible... nous ne sommes pas plus dans l’histoire, mais dans la légende, dans une atmosphère mythique. (Aebischer, 3)

In the attempt of imperial censure to conceal the disaster of the Pyrenees, to

*In 778, Charlemagne and his army invaded Spain in an attempt to depose the Emir and replace him with a Muslim who would serve as a vassal to the Frankish king. Although the campaign achieved some measure of success, as the Frankish troops were returning to France over the Pyrenees, their rear-guard was attacked and massacred by an army of Basques. When Charles and the main body of the army returned, they found their companions dead, and found no sign of whither the Basques had fled. This campaign, over time, became firmly entrenched in the mentality of the French people. Around 1095, the year in which the First Crusade was launched, we find the first extant version of the great French epic, *The Song of Roland*, in which the campaign is re-written. No longer is it a political maneuver, but it has become a holy war, waged against the Muslims of Spain, with Charlemagne returning victorious at the call of his rear guard to vanquish his foes. This paper was originally titled “Guerre sainte dans La Chanson de Roland: La ‘mythification’ de l’histoire.” It was translated by Mark Dominik for this publication.*

minimize the consequences, to preserve the reputation of the king as invincible head of state... we are no longer in the realm of history, but in that of legend, in a mythic atmosphere.

In a world of myth, symbols occupy a special place, one more important than that of concrete fact. *The Song of Roland*, as national epic, gives religious significance to secular acts, appropriating the campaign of 778 not only as holy war but as war between God and Satan. Anne Lombard-Jourdan notes that there is a long tradition of appropriation and transformation of pagan symbols by the Christian monarchs of France, for “les rois étaient désireux de conserver les anciens emblèmes qui assurent aux yeux de tous leur légitimité. [The kings were desirous to conserve the ancient emblems that assured in the eyes of all their legitimacy]” (Lombard-Jourdan, 13). The case with

the battle of Roncevaux is the same: after the result of the battle slipped out of living memory, the campaign of 778 was rewritten as a battle between good and evil in order to give to the French kings—the heirs to the legacy of Charlemagne—a moral imperative to justify their rule and to give the church a brilliant past history to inspire its soldiers as they marched eastward on the First Crusade.

## Narrative Perspective

The authors of the Frankish epic shaped the reaction of their audience by diverging from the traditional narrative structure found in *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*; the two classical epics valorize both warring factions, heightening the station of the victor, whereas the perspective of the medieval poem is entirely Christian: “Its story is narrated from a valorial position which is that of the Christians as against the Saracens. The latter are to be converted or to be killed: there is no empathy for alterity in this text” (Haidu, 37). More anti-Christian than Muslim, the pagans in the poem “do not bear any ‘real’ relationship to their presumed referents: they do not ‘refer’ to the concrete, historical societies that occupied either Spain or the Near East” (Haidu, 36). According to the theories of Edward Said, the authors of *The Song of Roland* projected Christianity onto the pagans in a trope common to occidental literature in order to create a new society—a society marked specifically as anti-Christian. This anti-Christian society, according to Norman Daniel, is constructed to convince, or perhaps to amuse, Christians, but has little resemblance to actual Arabs or the actual Arab world. This is a case of what Said calls the “theater of the Orient,” in which caricatures of Orientals take the place of actual men:

The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. (Daniel, 259-260 in Said, 63-65)

In *Roland*, the Orient is defined as

anti-Occident. If Occidentals have positive value—and they do—Orientals have none. Thus in the Frankish epic, the pagans are never unconditionally praised as we see in Greek and Latin epics such as the *Iliad*:

There the Trojans and their companions were marshaled in order. Tall Hektor of the shining helm was leader of the Trojans, Priam’s son; and with him far the best and the bravest Fighting men were armed and eager to fight with the spear’s edge. (Lattimore, ll. 815-818)

In the poems of Homer, admitting the valor of the Trojans amplifies the Greek victory. But this is not the case in the French epic, in which valor in the pagan camp is noted only with a lamentation that the worthy pagan is not Christian:

Sa vasselage est suvent esprovet. Deus! quel baron, s’ouïst chrestientet!

His vassalage was certainly proven. God! what a baron, were he but Christian! (v. 3163-3165)

When pagans are valorous, it is noted as a strictly individual characteristic. The enemies in *Roland* are collectively rewritten as “feluns” and “criminels,” giving the Frankish army a moral imperative to conquer.

However, the fact that the symbolic system of the pagans in the poem is simply the inverse of the Christian system complicates the issue and raises new questions. Peter Haidu sustains that during the Middle Ages “strictly human alterity could only be recognized as a negatively marked version of the self” (Haidu, 37). If we accept the theory of Haidu—that the Other is the negative version of oneself—we find that the pagans of *Roland* have more sins to account for: they are heretics. From the narrative viewpoint in the song, the pagans believe in a caricature of the true faith. They have a trinity of gods, named Apollin, Tervagant and Mahomet, whom the pagans beg to intercede for them in battle, much as the Christians do with respect to their God. The pagans’ belief in three gods—not one God in three persons—is closely allied with the beliefs of a number of heretical movements of 11<sup>th</sup> century France, which denied the existence of a

Trinity (Wakefield & Evans, 21). One manifestation of this heresy, Catharism, subscribed to the belief that:

[L]e Père, le Fils, le Saint-Esprit ne sont point, pour eux, un Dieu en trois personnes. Le Père est plus grand que le Fils et que le Saint Esprit. (Nelli, 286)

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit are not, themselves, one God in three persons. The Father is greater than the Son and than the Holy Spirit.

The pagans also transform the Christian practice of veneration of idols into worship—another manifestation of their lack of comprehension of the true faith. As those who worship idols, they look towards and move towards nothingness. According to Saint Paul: “nous savons que l’idole n’est rien—ou est le Rien—en ce monde [we know that the idol is nothing—moreover the Nothingness—in this world]” (I Corinthians 8:4), and Saint Augustine states that before he found religion, he tended towards nothingness like an idol (Soliloquies, 167). But the greatest sin in the pagan camp is the rejection of Christ. Since they have rejected the mercy brought by the voluntary death of the son of God, they are still marked by the stain of Original Sin:

Difatti noi abbiamo offeso (Dio) nel primo Adamo, non osservando il suo precetto; però siamo stati riconciliati nel secondo Adamo, diventati obbedienti fino al morte. (Testa, 5)

In fact we offended God with the first Adam, not observing his precept; but we have been reconciled by the second Adam, following obediently to the death.

All are culpable for the sin of Adam, save the Christians who accepted the saving grace of Christ. Culpability for this sin, among the others, rests with the pagans until they accept the true faith.

## Symbolic Systems

By not ascribing to the Christian faith, the pagans become evil in the theological system of the Middle Ages. Evil, according to Augustine, comes from the improper usage of the free will God gave to mankind. Boethius expanded upon Augustine’s thesis,

reaching the conclusion that good emanates from God into all things. Normally, beings tend towards the good because it is nature for a being to desire the good. It is, however, possible for a being to be deceived into wishing for evil—that is, to act against God’s will (Nash-Marsh, 210-218). In Boethius’s schema, evil can come from lack of knowledge, from fortune, and from lack of divine order (Boethius, 67-68). In *The Song of Roland*, one finds proof of the lack of knowledge on the part of the pagans: “Ço est une gent ki unches ben ne volt. AOI [This is a sort of which has never seen goodness. AOI]” (v. 3231). According to the philosophical system of Boethius, to tend towards evil (or away from good) is to tend towards a state of non-being:

Hoc igitur modo, quicquid a bono deficit, esse desistit. Quo fit, ut mali desinant esse, quod fuerant – sed fuisse homines adhuc ipsa humani corporis reliqua species ostentat—quare versi in malitiam humanam quoque amiserunt naturam. Sed cum ultra homines quemque provehere sola probitas possit, necesse est, ut, quos ab humana conditione deiecit, infra hominis meritum detrudat improbitas; evenit igitur, ut, quem transformatum vitiis videas, hominem aestimare non possis (IV, 3, 48-54; Boethius, 86-87).

Thus, whoever turns away from the good ceases to exist. That is, he who tends towards evil—he who was a man becomes an empty shell of a man—because to move toward evil is to forsake nature. But when other men, whoever they may be, continue on like this, it is necessary that those who deviate from human nature be thrown out of the ranks of meritorious men; this transformation being so, we cannot esteem them to be men.

According to Boethius, a “creature would neither be nor be good if God did not cause it” (McInerney, 243). God, then, is the arbiter of good and evil; those who are with him are good, and those who are against him are evil.

If God is he from whom all good things come—the absolute good—then Satan is the opposite. The pagans, who have chosen the path towards evil, tend towards Satan, breaking the unity of the cosmological order that God established (Girard, 65). To restore unity and

prepare the way for God’s kingdom, one of two things must transpire: either the pagans must accept God, or the Christians must kill them. The pagans, *prope suo iure*, ought to be killed and cast into hell. It is thus common to associate, in the song, the death of a pagan with the action of a demon. There are at least three deaths where one finds a demon carrying away the soul of one of the damned (v. 1267-1268, 1551-1553, 3644-3647). In fact, the last words Angelier, the Gascon of Bordeaux, utters to the dying pagan Escremis de Valterne explains the condition of the pagans *post-mortem*: “Turnet estes a perdre! [You have chosen damnation]” (v. 1295-1296).

The Christians, in contrast to their adversaries, fight for God and for good. In the battle between the pagans and the Christians, “Païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit [the pagans are in the wrong and the Christians in the right.]” (v. 1015). The Christians fight a holy war, and vengeance against a criminal people is part of their motivation:

La flur de France as perdut, ço set Deus. Venger te poez de la gent criminel (v. 2455-2456).

The flower of France is lost, thus God knows.  
Wreck vengeance against the criminal race.

In the eyes of the French, the pagans are criminals. They rejected Christ, from whom all good things come, and they occupied a part of Europe that was Christian at one time. The frontier between France and Muslim Spain was fraught with tension: it was the space between those who fought for God and those who fought for Satan. The battle memorialized in *The Song of Roland* can be read as a new contest between God and Lucifer. In this space men are pawns in the game of absolute forces, as men are pawns in the hands of their divinities in the poems of Homer. From the mouths of the soldiers themselves one can hear the words that hand over their fates to their gods: the Christians “Recleimet Deu e l’apostle de Rome [Call upon God and the apostle of Rome]” (v. 2998) and the pagans

Dedavant sei fait porter sun dragon  
E l’estandart Tervagan e Mahum  
E un ymage Apolin le felun (v. 3266-

3268).

Before them carried their dragon  
And the standard of Tervagan and  
Mohammed  
And an image of Apollo, the felon.

The *oriflamme* that the Christians carry into battle in place of the pagans’ idols, the sign of holy war, functions as a symbol of the power of the Christian God. And the Christians utilize many other emblems to bring them good fortune: “Seignat sun chef de la vertut poisant [signing their heads with the powerful virtue]” (v. 3111) and “Sis beneit Carles de sa main destre [Charles blessed them with his right hand]” (v. 3066). These signs of Christ’s presence are used as talismans against evil.

In a system constructed of symbols, it is necessary to destroy the other’s signs in order to achieve victory. By destroying the pagan idols, Charlemagne destroys the pagans themselves:

E Tervagan tolent sun escarbuncle,  
E Mahumet enz en un fosset butent,  
E porc e chen le mordent e defulent (v. 2589-2591).

And they threw down Tervagan  
And threw Mohammed in a ditch  
And pigs and dogs bit at them and defecated on them (v. 2589-2591).

The capacity to choose that which will happen to the gods of another is to establish power over the other. In holy war, if one loses one’s gods, one has lost the war.

## Christological Symbolism

Both Roland and Charlemagne function as Christ figures in the text. During the first half of the poem, Roland is a sacrificial Christ, who dies freely. The treason of Ganelon, a Judas figure, finds its resolution in the voluntary act of Roland:

Ce dénominateur c’est la violence intestine; ce sont les dissensions, les rivalités, les jalousies, les querelles entre proches que la sacrifice prétend d’abord éliminer, c’est l’harmonie de la communauté qu’il restaure, c’est l’unité sociale qu’il renforce. (Girard, 22)  
This is inherent violence; there are dis-

sentions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels between friends and relatives that the sacrifice seeks to eliminate, it is the harmony of the community that it restores, and it is social unity which it reinforces.

By Ganelon's treason, Roland is killed and the *dénouement* of the work begins. Roland does not call for the help of Charlemagne until he knows that he will die—sacrificing voluntarily his life for the Christian cause. It is appropriate that a cleric—Turpin the archbishop—signals when the time to sound the oliphant is come:

“Sire Rollant, e vos, sire Oliver,  
Pur Deu vos pri, ne vos cuntraliez!  
Ja li corners ne nos avreit mester,  
Mais nepurquant si est il asez melz:  
Venget li reis, si nus purrat venger;  
Ja cil d’Espaigne ne ‘en deivent turner  
liez.  
Nostre Franceis i descendrunt a pied,  
Truverunt nos e morz e detrenchez,  
Leverunt nos en bieres sur sumers,  
Si nus plurrunt de doel e de pitet,  
Enfuerunt [nos] en aitres de musters;  
N’en magerunt ne lu ne proc ne chen.”  
Respunt Rollant: “Sire, mult dites  
bien.” AOI (v. 1740-1752)

“Sire, Roland, and you, sire Oliver,  
For God I pray, do not speak against  
each other!  
Already we are on the verge of defeat,  
But nevertheless it is much better:  
The king will avenge us, if he can;  
Already the king of Spain is lost.  
Our companions will return,  
Finding us dead and disordered  
They will carry us off on biers of honor,  
And cry for us with sadness and pity,  
They shall bury us properly;  
We shan't be eaten by wolf or pig or  
dog.”  
Roland responded: “Sire, you speak  
well.” AOI

It is the act of a cleric that makes the choice to call for aid by sounding Roland's horn. Lombard-Jourdan suggests that the oliphant calls not only human aid, but also celestial aid, amplifying the cosmological status of the hero of the work (Lombard-Jourdan, 225). When Roland's death nears, the religious symbolism becomes stronger. Most of the Franks need a priest to confess their sins, but Roland confesses

directly to God:

“Veire Patene, ki unkes ne mentis,  
Seint Lazaron de mort resurrexis,  
E Daniel des leons guaresis,  
Guaris de mei l’anme de tuz perilz  
Pur les pecchez que en ma vie fis!” (v.  
2384-2388).

“True father, which is no lie,  
You raised Saint Lazarus from the dead,  
And protected Daniel from the lions,  
Protect my soul from all dangers  
From the sins that in my life I have  
committed!”

Reading these lines, one recalls the prayers of Christ in the garden before his treason. God, of course, accepts the confession of Roland, as he heard the prayers of his son, and he sends his angels to save the soul of he who symbolizes Christ:

Deus tramist sun angle Cherubin,  
E seint Michel del Peril;  
Ensembl’ od els sent Gabriel i vint.  
L’anme del cunte portent en pareis  
(2393-2396).

God sent forth his Cherubims,  
And Saint Michael, guardian in danger;  
With the others Gabriel went.  
They carried Roland's soul into  
Paradise.

Here the story of Roland comes so close to that of Christ that it seems that Roland's very destiny is to be killed as a holy martyr, and to be received in heaven as a man, almost divine.

When Charlemagne arrives on the battlefield, he searches for the bodies of the 12 companions, and that of Roland in particular: “U estes vos, bels nies? [where are you, good nephew?]” (v. 2402), he asks. In Latin Christianity, the body holds great importance. The cult of the saints, originally growing out of the veneration of martyrs in the catacombs, was institutionalized because the cult gives power to he who wields it (Brown). By recovering the bodies, Charlemagne creates a new cult of saints, carrying his relics back to France:

Vint à Burdeles, la citat de [valor].  
Desur l’alter seint Severin le baron  
Met l’oliphan plein d’or e de manguns:  
Li pelerin le veient ki la vunt.

Passet Girunde a mult granz nefz qu’i  
sunt;  
Entresque a Blaive ad cunduit sun  
nevold  
E Oliver, sun nobilie cumpaignun,  
E l’arcevesque, ki fut sages e proz (v.  
3684-3691).

He came to Bordeaux, that great city.  
Above the alter to Saint Severin  
He put the oliphant, full of gold and  
gems:  
The pilgrims who come there can see it.  
He passed Girunde and the great ships  
there  
And he came to Blaive whither he carried  
his nephew  
And Oliver, his noble companion,  
And the archbishop, who was both wise  
and brave.

With this material history, the cult of Charlemagne is infused with value. These relics enhance the dynasty of Charlemagne, and his descendants were to use the cult to amplify their power and prestige—as we see in the very song that is handed down to us today.

Roland, however, does not die with the death of his body. Charlemagne supplants Roland, becoming the figure of Christ the avenger, Christ of the last judgement. He arrives on the scene to cast the pagans into hell. Charlemagne brings with him justice, swift and true, like that of Christ in *Revelation*. The idols and false gods of the pagans cannot save them from the judgement of the Christian deity:

E cil respunt: ‘Morz estes, Baligant !  
Ja vostre deu ne vos erent guarant’ (v.  
3513-3514).

And he responded, “You are dead,  
Baligant !  
Your gods cannot protect you.”

Charlemagne, as an avenging Christ,  
executes the justice of God:

Carles ad dreit vers la gent [pa]iesnie;  
Deus nus ad mis al plus verai juise (v.  
3367-3368).

Charles was in the right against the  
pagans  
God never administered more true justice.

## Rewriting History

In reality, the battle at Roncevaux was one fought between an alliance of Christians and Muslims, and another group of Christians. The life of human memory, however, is short. In the Middle Ages, 60 years—the span of memory of a village's most elder citizen—was frequently conceded as the definition of the collective memory of a people. Until 829, the annals of the history of the Frankish people admitted the defeat of the army at Roncevaux. But the annal of Egihard, written in that year, is the last which treats the campaign with the exactitude of history:

Aduvabat in hoc facto Wascones et levitas armorum et loci, in quo res gerebatur, situs, econtra Francos et armorum gravitas et loci iniquitas per omnia Wasconibus reddit impares. In quo proelio Eggihardus regiae mensae praepositus, Anselmus comes palatii et Hruolandus Britannici limitis praefectus cum aliis conpluribus interficiuntur. Neque hoc factum ad praesens vindicare poterat, quia hostis re perpetrata ita dispersus est, ut ne fama quidem remaneret, ubinam gentium quaeri potuisset. (Einhard, 53)

It helped the Basques that they came to this place where the battle was being fought, lightly armed, whereas the French were heavily armed and in a disadvantageous place and they were unequal to the Basques in every respect. In this battle—according to Egihard, chronicler of the king—Anselm, the count of Palatine and Roland the Breton, prefect of that land, were killed with many others. Nor could this deed be avenged by the Frenchmen present, because the enemy had scattered, so that no rumor remained to be learned of where they had gone.

According to Lafont, 51 years after the battle, the clerics began to re-write the history of the campaign (Lafont, 125-126). Roland, a character of whom the existence is uncertain, and whose actions strike us as unusual, is present in the annal of Egihard. But history had

not yet become myth. Three centuries later, when the first versions of *The Song of Roland* were being recorded, one finds that the fight at Roncevaux had been completely rewritten as a sacred battle. The Roland of the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century is infused with a very contemporary sentiment. At that moment, Charlemagne was interpreted as the prototype of the crusader, and Roland as a Christian hero:

Charlemagne devient le type du roi chrétien par excellence, combattant 'pur eschalcier sainte crestienté'. Roland, un héros de la foi mourant pour son Dieu et pour son roi, un modèle des vertus chevresques selon l'Église: chevalier, croisé, martyr.... C'est entre ces deux dates, entre 800 et 1100, mais plus particulièrement au XI<sup>ème</sup> siècle, que se situe la formation de l'idée de guerre sainte qui aboutit à la croisade et rejoint le *jihad*. (Flori, 31-34)

Charlemagne became the Christian king par excellence, waging war for the holy church. Roland, a hero of the faith who died for his God and his king, became a model of chivalric virtues according to the Church: knight, crusader, martyr.... It is between 800 and 1100, but moreover in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, that we situate the idea of holy war that departs from that of crusade and arrives at *jihad*.

At the time of the first crusade, the fear of the other that is evinced throughout *The Song of Roland* was omnipresent. The memory of the Viking and Saracen invasions still menaced the minds of the French (Duby, 52). The 11<sup>th</sup> century belief that the end of time was approaching amplified this fear of alterity. The Church moved more and more to ban the killing of other Christians, in an effort to prepare for God's peace. Christians, during the last half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, became more and more amenable to the idea of killing pagans (Duby, 212). In 1095—at the same moment that *The Song of Roland* was being recorded—Pope Urban II called on the crowd of Frenchmen on the field at Clermont to go to the holy land as warriors of Christ, and to purge the

Levant of the pagans who infested it in order to prepare for the coming kingdom of God, for the kingdom would not be established until all subscribed to the true faith (Duby, 63). To further inspire religious fervor, clerics found parallels and justifications in Scripture for a holy war:

La Terrasanta come Terra Promessa (Esodo, 3, 8) e la certezza che Dio combatte col Popolo Eletto contro i suoi nemici (Salmi, 67, 22) in Roberto, il compimento delle profezie con l'entrata delle Nazioni nel Tempio (Salmi, 78, 1-4) e la funzione mosaica del pontefice che prega con le mani alzate mentre il Popolo Eletto combatte come gli ebrei contro gli Amaleciti (Esodo, 17, 11) in Baudri. (Cardini, 36)

The holy land as promised land (Exodus, 3, 8), and the certainty that God will combat with the chosen people against their enemies (Psalms, 67, 22), the fulfillment of the prophesy of the entry into the nations of time (Psalms, 78, 1-4) and the Mosaic function of the pope who prays with upraised arms while the chosen people wage war as did the Hebrews (Exodus, 17, 11).

The assumption of the war against Spain into the Christian system gave the kings of France a heritage with a moral power and gave the crusades a tradition of victory and an epic poem to inspire the armies. It is certain that *The Song of Roland* was not born in 1095—Roland was a celebrated individual before the first crusade. But the song was written down at this moment because the clerks and the king were searching for a fitting form of propaganda. The history of the campaign in Spain—rewritten across the centuries—furnished them propaganda of the best sort: that which gives divine righteousness to its possessors. Carrying the oriflamme another time as symbol of just war, (Lombard-Jourdan, 229) the French army marched from *la douce France* to the Holy Land to prepare the world for the reign of God.

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