

The Song of Roland

The Song of Roland, an epic romance based off the legend of Charlamagne's campaign in Spain, is a depiction of the chivalry, religious fervor, and thematic ideals which preoccupied the minds of medieval Europe during the first Crusades. In this essay, we will examine why this poem was so prevalent in Europe around the time of the 11th century, the Crusader ethos within the text, and the poet's potential critique of the Church. We will also investigate the relationship of heroes and villains depicted in the Christian knights and their Muslim enemies, the expression of chivalric and heroic ideas, and the vassal relationship between Charlamagne, Roland, and God.

Two hundred years after the historical defeat of Charlamagne's rear guard, the *Roland* evolved into the epic poem we have today. Told to an audience of Anglo-Normans, it took all of Europe by storm, not only because the pass where the battle occurred lay on the pilgrimage route to the shrine of St. James of Compostella, but because the 10th and 11th century was the realization of the feudal system, chivalric ideals, and most eminently, the explosion of 'Holy War' across the continent.¹ The influence of the *Roland* cannot be underemphasized as 'some version of Roland's story was sung to fire up knights' fighting spirits'² and 'the ghost of Charlemagne stalked the minds of those who fought for Christendom.'³ No other poem was more widely read, recited, or translated in the Middle Ages.⁴ The first half of the poem which deals directly with Roland ends in tragic defeat and death at Muslim hands; a reality which echoed the Crusading movement by the late 13th century. Beyond the emotional expression of a mirrored defeat, the *Roland* is inherently nationalist, calling to arms a united Christian Europe against Islam. It deals with the binding factors of a common enemy and the elevation of a legendary past.⁵ It is no wonder with the Christian world on fire for defense of the Holy Land that the regal figure of Charlemagne and the heroic fortitude of Roland, pitted in heated battle against the hated pagans, captured the imagination of Europe.

By the 11th century, the nobleman had become a warrior and with the 'exception of the nobly-born members of the clergy, an adult male who was not a *miles* was not a noble.'⁶ This ideology is exhibited by Turpin who claims that all knights of breed who are not brave enough to advance in battle should turn 'monk in monastery meek.'⁷ Such a militaristic society was opposed to the

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction,' *The Song of Roland* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 5 [eBook].

² John R. E. Bliese, 'Courage and Honor, Cowardice and Shame: A Motive Appeal in Battle Orations in "The Song of Roland" and in Chronicles of the Central Middle Ages,' *Olifant*, 20, 1 (1996), p. 192.

³ Laura Ashe, 'A Prayer and a Wacry' The Creation of a Secular Religion in the "Song of Roland," *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 28, 4 (1999), p. 353.

⁴ David Aberbach, 'European National Poetry, Islam and the Defeat of the Medieval Church,' *Nations and Nationalism*, 18, 4 (2012), p. 606.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 617.

⁶ Sidney Painter, *French Chivalry: Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Mediaeval France* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 3.

⁷ Sayers, *Song of Roland*, 1881.

tenants of the Church which preached 'All who take the sword will perish by the sword.'⁸ The ferocity and bloodshed in *Roland*, on both the Christian and the Muslim sides, seems antithetical to the peace of Christ. However, with the papal decreed Holy War, which was effectively God-ordained and meritorious in of itself, these two strands of brutality and salvation were harmonized. The Crusades provided the answer for 'a society whose inherent violence had, finally, come to possess the possibility of signifying salvation rather than damnation.'⁹ This makes Turpin's reassurance that though they all may die, to them 'stand open the gates of Paradise / There with the holy sweet Innocents to bide.'¹⁰ Violence becomes not just a sin in need of absolution, but a vehicle to a knight's martyrdom and hence, his ascension into Heaven.

While the Crusading ethos is prevalent within the text of the *Roland*, Laura Ashe argues strongly for the poem as a critique of the Church. Since secular rulers held the 'Divine Right of Kings,' their relationship with God was unmediated, essentially booting out the role of the Church. God intercedes on Charlamagne's behalf holding back the sun, even Roland at the end of his life interacts directly with the angel Gabriel, a glaring oddity in a time when papal assertion was at an all-time high. More than this, the knight's loyalty to their liege reflects a Christian's loyalty to God, for he is 'the final guarantor of victory.'¹¹ Charlamagne, as a sacred, secular king, receives his authority not from the pope but from heaven and the warriors trace their loyalty straight to God.¹²

⁸ English Standard Version, 'Matthew 26:52' Bible,

⁹ Ashe, 'A Prayer and a Warcry', p. 352.

¹⁰ Sayers, *The Song of Roland*, 1522-23

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 359.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 357.



FIG 1. JSTOR, *Chartres: Cathedral: Song of Roland* (Chartres, 1210-1220).

The interplay between the heroes and villains of the *Roland* is a complex subject with its antecedents in the tension of Crusading narratives. Such lines as 'Paynims are wrong, Christians are in the right!'¹³ depict the core ethos of Crusading propaganda. The Saracens are 'false and foul' and are borne to Hell after they die; yet treacherous Ganelon is not describe any better, whose most shameful trait is his disloyalty. Valor and beauty are prized in both the Paynims and the Franks, for even the enemies are portrayed as noble because of the medieval preoccupation with the chivalric code.¹⁴ Yet the Saracens are doomed to fail, for 'King Marsilie does not believe in "the one and only God..."'¹⁵ When we combine this with the religious metaphors of the vassal's obedience to his Lord and the Christian's loyalty to his God, you begin to see the theme undergirding the *Roland*. Compare Marsilie's fatal weakness of hating God's name¹⁶ with

¹³ Sayers, *The Song of Roland*, 1015.

¹⁴ Sayer, *The Song of Roland*, 3156-83.

¹⁵ Andreas Kablitz, 'Religion and Violence in the "Song of Roland,"' *MLN*, 126, 4 (2011), p. 119.

¹⁶ Sayers, *Song of Roland*, 'll. 7.

the tragic figure of Roland, who as he dies, extends his glove—an action of fealty from a vassal to his lord—to the sky, repents of his sins, and finds salvation. It is through his death in the name of defending Christianity against the Muslims that he is martyred. His death transforms into a triumph. Courtesy and bravery—knightly ideals are praised on both sides—but the loyalty of a vassal to his lord, reflected in the relationship of the knights to God, is the determining factor of the Frank's victory.

The *Song of Roland* takes the narrative themes inherent in the Crusades and develops them in a poetic and emotional way. Its poetry is a mark of its time and allows insight into the ideals of the Middle Ages as well as the knightly virtues that were propounded.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

JSTOR, *Chartres: Cathedral: Song of Roland* (Chartres, 1210-1220),
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.13718731>.

Sayers, Dorothy L., *The Song of Roland* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 5 [eBook].

Secondary Sources

Ashe, Laura, 'A Prayer and a Warcry' The Creation of a Secular Religion in the "Song of Roland," *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 28, 4 (1999), pp. 349-367.

Bliese, John R. E., 'Courage and Honor, Cowardice and Shame: A Motive Appeal in Battle Orations in "The Song of Roland" and in Chronicles of the Central Middle Ages,' *Olifant*, 20, 1 (1996), pp. 191-212.

Aberbach, David, 'European National Poetry, Islam and the Defeat of the Medieval Church,' *Nations and Nationalism*, 18, 4 (2012), pp. 603-623.

Painter, Sidney, *French Chivalry: Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Mediaeval France* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2019).

Kablitz, Andreas, 'Religion and Violence in the "Song of Roland," *MLN*, 126, 4 (2011), pp. S115-S158.