Hans E. Keller

Changes in Old French Epic Poetry and Changes in the Taste of its Audience*

About one hundred years after the battle of Hastings, the Norman chronicler Wace mentions, as one of the participants, "Taillefer, qui mult bien chantout,/ sor un cheval qui tost alout,/ devant le duc alout chantant/ de Karlemaigne e de Rollant,/ e d'Oliver e des vassals/ qui morurent en Rencevals."[1] Having requested and been granted the first blow in the battle, "... Taillefer point a desrei,/ devant toz les altres se mist,/ un Engleis feri, si l'ocist,/ desoz le piez, parmié la pance/ li fist passer ultre la lance;/ a terre estendu l'abati,/ pois traist l'espee, aultre feri."[2]

It is quite possible that the figure of the juggler, Taillefer, is historic, for in 1067, only a year after Hastings, the bishop Guy of Amiens mentions him in his De Hastingae Proëlio.[3] Moreover, ten years later, on the Tapestry of Bayeux, being exhibited probably for the first time on July 14, 1077, we find a horseman who had killed one Englishman with his lance and another with his sword, in a scene reminiscent of this deed of courage and devotion. But it is difficult to imagine that a man on horseback could have time to think about singing of Roland, Oliver and the Twelve Peers, his head covered with chain-mail, his helmet with a long nose-piece stretching down over his mouth, as he holds both his shield and the reins of his horse in his left hand and wields his lance or his sword with his right. Wace's account contrasts with the more circumspect one of his source, William of Malmesbury (ca. 1125.[5] While it seems likely that both the Song of Roland and Taille-

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[1]Ed. A. J. Holden, Roman de Rou, III, 11. 8013-8018.

[2]Ibid., 11. 8030-8036.

[3]Ed. C. Morton and H. Muntz, 11. 389-407.

[4]S. Bertrand, La Tapisserie de Bayeux et la manière de vivre au onzième siècle (Bayeux, 1966), pl. 12.

fer were involved at Hastings, the combination of these two elements is the innovation of Wace, an innovation which seemed unlikely even to his contemporaries. Benedict of Sainte-Maure, for instance, did not pick it up again in his Chronicle of the Dukes of Normandy.[6] Wace's way of looking at the recitation of a chanson de geste was Romantic before the fact and reflected the misconception of this literary genre which existed from the time of Eleanor and Henry II, although it was still cultivated and new songs were composed on the model of the old ones.

Wace, then, clearly bears witness to the decline of a literary genre which found its apogee in the second half of the eleventh century. At that time, Christian Europe, so long assailed by pagan and Moslem forces, once again took the offensive that had been lost since Charlemagne. The Normans had been Christian for a century, the Hungarians since the year 1000. Only the Moslems remained, against whom all the potential of the Christian world would be mobilised.

By the end of the eleventh century, therefore, much of the ruling class in France had served time as Crusaders in defense of the Holy Land or in fighting against the Infidel in Spain. There they came into contact with more refined civilizations, and those who did not die or settle in distant lands came home with a broader range of experience and higher standards of comfort. Among the best of the nobility, this increasing refinement of life was accompanied by both moral and intellectual progress. With good reason the Church had directed their warlike ferocity against the Infidel, and regularly blessed the sword of a new-made knight, holding up to him the ideal of protector of the weak and righter of wrongs. These lords were no longer satisfied to fill their leisure hours with hunting and tournaments. They began to show an interest in culture and education. They took a fancy to the poetry sung by travelling minstrels who accompanied themselves on a variety of instruments. A number of feudal courts became centers of literary activity.

In this climate lived, for example, Hugh of Avranches, earl of Chester. According to Orderic Vitalis,[7] among the members of his huge

[5]Willelmi Malmesberiensis Monachi De Gestis Regum Anglorum libri quinque, ed. Willimm Stubbs (London, 1889), II, 302: "Tune cantilena Rollandi inchoata, ut martium viri exemplum pugnaturos accenderet, inclamatoque Dei auxilio, praelium consertum, bellatumque acriter, neutris in multam diei horam cedentibus."

[6]Chronique des ducs de Normandie, ed. C. Fahlin, Uppsala, 1951/1954, 11. 39725ff.

[7]The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), Books V and VI, pp. 216-217.

household was a certain cleric from Avranches, Gerold, who "made a great collection of tales of the combats of holy knights, drawn from the Old Testament and more recent records of Christian achievements, for them to imitate."

Thus, the clerics adapted their exhortations to suit the bellicose tastes of the feudal class of the times. Exploits of holy warriors who had fought for the faith became of prime interest. First came the feats of the martyrs of early Christianity; later, from a more recent period and from their own country, those of heroes such as Saint William, the famous William of Orange.

But this passage from Orderic's Historia Ecclesiastica tells us also that it was not a jongleur who extolled the prowess of St. William of Gellone to the noble knights, but a cleric, and that the story of St. William was put on the same level as that of St. George or St. Eustace.

From this we may see that the chanson de geste had been but a particular type of hagiographic song, essentially the same as the one example of the hagiographic genre remaining from this period, the Vie de Saint Alexis, doubtless written around 1050 at Rouen. In his treatise De Musica from about 1300, Johannes de Grocheo subsumed hagiographic narratives and epics under the same term, cantus gestualis, and even gives a literary and musical description of them. Ever since the famous Tu Autem, composed around 1096-1099 at the abbey of St. Martial in Limoges, we have known the musical scheme of these hagiographic narratives. And from the thirteenth century, we also have specimens of the music of three chansons de geste, doubtless preserved without change, since the second half of the eleventh century.[8]

This relationship between the hagiographic genre and the epic is a general phenomenon, not limited to French literature.[9]

It is evident that the clerics, such as Gerold, took great pleasure in these epic stories which they wrote in Medieval Latin. The audience for these texts was to be found in clerical circles, mainly in the abbeys, where exploits of heroes who had become legendary in that particular monastery inspired the monks to compose new songs concerning their deeds. Without a doubt, the model of the Girart de Roussillon was composed at the abbey of Vézelay in Burgundy where Girart was a legendary figure. In the same way, the abbey of Gellone in Languedoc perpetuated the memory of William of Orange (and for this reason is now called Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert).

[8]Cf. J. Chailley, L'Ecole musicale de Saint-Martial de Limoges jusqu'à la fin du XI[e] siècle (Paris, 1960), p. 352, pp. 357-358.

[9]See P. Zumthor, "From the universal to the particular in medieval poetry," Modern Language Notes, 85 (1970), 816.

These songs were, furthermore, circulated over a wide area. It is attested that a copy of the Vita Sancti Wilhelmi from Gellone in Languedoc was found in Winchester in England before 1120. From there the monk Anthony took it to the abbey of St. Evroult in Normandy where Orderic hastened to make a résumé of it.[10] Their popularity is likewise proved by the existence of Latin prose versions, such as the Hague Fragment (dating from between 980 and 1030) and the Conversio Othgerii militis (composed around 1070-1080 at the abbey of St. Faron at Meaux).

These stories, at first read in Latin and then explicated to the non-learned public by the clerics, were later translated by the same clerics at the request of the cultured laity. Sometimes, a cleric was merely the translator of a Latin poem; at other times he was the author as well. Unfortunately, we do not know of any author who was also the translator of a Latin heroic poem, with the possible exception of the priest Conrad, who tells us in the epilogue of his Ruolantes liet that he is also the author of a Latin version of the Song of Roland.[11] This is hardly surprising, since, as Professor Zumthor rightly insists, "most medieval works are anonymous. . . . The work is entirely 'objectivied'; its 'subject' (the author's subjectivity) has dissolved in the course of time, not only because time has slipped away, but because in some way the author's individuality was not an essential factor of the work."[12]

The clerics transformed existing epic poems—as well as the stories that they themselves invented—into poems which exalted the virile virtues in the service of Christianity and at the same time censured excess and démesure. Such a concept of man clearly reflects the influence of the philosophical school known as "Exaggerated Realism," dominant precisely toward the end of the eleventh century. According to this view, which is already implied in the teaching of John Scotus Eriugena, man is the substantial unity of many individuals (Homo est multorum hominum substantialis unitas).[13] Thus, individual men differ only accidentally from each other. This concept of the individual hero leads to a completely static view of characters with predetermined identities,

[10]Cf. ed. cit., pp. 218-219.

[11]ll. 9080-9083 (Das Rolandslied des Pfaffen Konrad, hgg. von C. Wesle. 2. Aufl. besorgt von P. Wapnewski. Altdeutsche Textbibliotek nr. 69. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967, p. 318).

[12]Op. cit., p. 817.

[13]Cf. Fr. Copleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. II: Mediaeval Philosophy, part 2: Augustine to Bonaventure (A Doubleday Image Book, Garden City, N. Y., 1962), p. 162.

as in laisse XII of the Song of Roland, when the principal actors make their entry into the poem: "Ensembl'od els li quens Rollant i vint,/ E Oliver, li proz e li gentilz./ Des Francs de France en i ad plus de mil./ Guenes i vint, ki la traïsun fist./ Des or cumencet le cunseill que mal prist."[14] The mere mention of specific names is evidently enough by this time to guarantee a tale of a certain type, a type complete in the minds of both poet and audience before the action even occurs. It is not surprising to find such a strong influence of "Exaggerated Realism" in the first part of the Song of Roland since this philosophical theory was held particularly by the School of Chartres, which preserved, even in the twelfth century, a certain conservative spirit and flavor. For some time now, on the other hand, it has been the general consensus that the Song of Roland, such as we read it today in the Oxford manuscript, is traceable, especially through the principal characteristics of its first part, back to a poem composed around 1090 somewhere between Paris and Orleans in the vicinity of Chartres.

Because this poem strongly influenced the oldest vernacular work of the William of Orange cycle, the same conception of characters, the same literary technique and the same oral style are found in the Song of William, which certain scholars have dated later than 1150. But the feeling of community and the comradeship of the Twelve Peers, so typical of the Song of Roland, is absent from the William. The poet instead confines the number of heroes to a small group and glorifies lineage. From this conception of lineage comes the rôle attributed to Guibourc, William's wife, who excites his courage by exalting the glory of the family. We are still, nevertheless, far from the société courtoise of the second half of the twelfth century; we are rather, writes Professor Bezzola,[15] "completely involved in a sacred community, as in the case of the Song of Roland, with the exception that here the great feudal family, lineage, has replaced the empire."

But the idea of empire, as Bezzola sees it in his comparison of the Song of Roland and the Song of William, is developed in the former only in the Baligant episode. It is significant, in this context, that the word empire occurs only in the epilogue of the Roland (cf. C. Segre, ed. cit., l. 3994). We hear for the first time of Baligant, the emir of

[14]Ed. C. Segre. Documenti di Filologia, 16, Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1971, ll. 175-179.

[15]Les Origines et la formation de la littérature courtoise en occident (500-1200). Deuxième partie: La Société féodale et la transformation de la littérature de cour, t. II (Bibl. de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Sciences historiques et philologiques, fasc. 313. Paris: Champion, 1960), p. 503.

Babylonia, in laisse CLXXXVIII, when we suddenly learn that Marsile has been imploring Baligant for aid during the seven years of Charlemagne's campaign in Spain but that Baligant only now has decided to rally to the support of his defeated ally. The Song of Roland, as a story of blind temerity, could doubtless still appeal to a later generation as a monument to a glorious age still within memory and considered as a model to follow, but "as an expression of contemporary needs . . . [it] challenged the poet to an extension."[16] The poet, in responding to cultural attitudes in Capetian France which inspired men to emphasize those aspects of legendary history that could enhance the hope of achieving some kind of political stability in the world, "probably wished to revive an image of Charlemagne enjoying the full prestige that his memory could still evoke. . . . Accordingly, a need arose in the poem for an antagonist of Charlemagne's own stature, one who could pretend to the same universalism as Charlemagne's himself. With the arrival of Baligant, the ideological axis of the poem no longer involved just France and Moslem Spain, but East and West."[17]

It has been noted,[18] furthermore, that, despite the confrontation between East and West depicted in the Baligant episode, the author of this expansion had no intention of inciting the Christians to undertake a crusade, although he is entirely pervaded by the ideas which inspired them to do so. This was also the case, for instance, of the abbot Suger of St. Denis, regent during Louis VII's absence in the Orient. Suger had not favored his king's project of going on a crusade and tried to persuade him not to leave the kingdom, the throne of which many barons were only too ready to occupy in view of the lack of male descendants. And rightly so!!! As soon as the king's army left France in the summer of 1147, disorders broke out and within a very short time there was complete anarchy. But with the help of a few very powerful barons, who were also his personal friends, especially with the help of Geoffrey Plantagenet (1113-1151), duke of Normandy and count of Anjou and Maine, and that of count Thierry of Flanders (died 1168), Suger managed to restore order. These two barons are named as being among the knights of Charlemagne's army against Baligant and helped to revive the emperor after he had fainted at Roncevaux. Gefred

[16]E. Vance, Reading the Song of Roland (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 73.

[17]Loc. cit.

[18]Jules Horrent, La Chanson de Roland dans les littératures françaises et espagnole au moyen âge (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951), p. 319

d'Anjou even bears the notched royal banner (orie flambe). The mention of the royal banner in the Baligant episode proves once again that the author of this continuation of the old Song of Roland must have belonged to the circle of the regent and was writing for his cause and that of the king. The banner in question had been that of the counts of Vexin until, in 1077 or 1081, King Philip I seized the Vexin because of its strategic importance in the struggle against the duke of Normandy, who was now also king of England. But the king of France had no other interest in the Vexin until Suger, abbot of St. Denis since 1122, turned the attention of King Louis VI the Fat to it in 1124, when an Anglo-German invasion threatened France.

It is, indeed, the spirit of Suger which we can detect in the Baligant episode, for, as Erwin Panofsky points out,[19] the mighty abbot of St. Denis placed his superior gifts of organization and political feeling at the service of two ambitions: he wanted to strengthen the power of the Crown of France, and he wanted to glorify the abbey of St. Denis and extend its influence. To Suger, these ambitions did not conflict with each other. On the contrary, they appeared to him as aspects of but one ideal which he believed to correspond both to natural law and to Divine Will.

It seems likely that the Song of Roland was reworked in the years of Suger's regency (1147-1149) and that the poet was also a monk of St. Denis. It is to him that we owe the combination of the old Song of the battle of Roncevaux with the revenge of Roland in the trial of Ganelon, but he is also the author of a third ingredient based on contemporary historical events—including the arrival of Baligant in Spain itself—thus creating a new episode which serves as political propaganda for the central power of the French king.

The immediate effect of this new version of the poem was the mushrooming of epics protesting this propaganda for central power and dealing with a particular hero's struggle with the central authority and especially with the abuses of its prerogatives. William of Orange, Ogier the Dane, Girart of Roussillon, Renaut of Montauban, the barons of the Lorraine, etc. have each their poem which tells the story of the hero, victim of an injustice—or so they believed—on the part of the kings of France, Charles Martel, Charlemagne, Charles the Bald, or a certain Louis. What is striking about these heroic epics after 1150 is the fact that they all focus on the psychological evolution of the hero. This is best demonstrated by the story of the most famous, but also the most terrible, epic of this type, Raoul of Cambrai, which, besides the political attack on the central power of the king, depicts the human tragedy

[19] Abbot Suger on the Abbey of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures (Princeton: University Press, 1946), p. 2.

of Raoul's vassal Bernier, who is bound by the ties of allegiance to his lord, while the latter commits crime after crime in order to avenge what he considers an injustice on the part of the king.

If we are not mistaken, it is again the Song of Roland which attests first to such a description of intimate dreams and of individual conscience, not in the version inspired by Suger, but in the reworked Anglo-Norman text of which the manuscript of the Bodleian Library at Oxford is a close copy. In this text, one finds, besides other minor changes, the purpose of which was to make the poem more contemporary, a more relevant one, an additional laisse dedicated to the conversion at Aachen of the queen of the Saracens, Bramimonde. The Anglo-Norman poet obviously took great interest in the spiritual welfare of the lady. He wished to complete here already very active rôle in the Suger-inspired version by bringing her entirely within the pale of the Christian Church: "En ma maisun ad une caitive franche./ Tant ad oït e sermuns e essamples,/ Creire voelt Deu, chrestïentét demandet." (ed. cit., 11. 3978-3980).

This attitude supposes a completely different audience than that which had applauded those fabulous blows in the battle at Roncevaux. This audience was interested in the salvation of a noble pagan lady who was to be brought to Christianity not by force, not by persuasion, but through her own inner motivation.

This new spirit is not characteristic of the England of the Plantagenet alone, but also, for instance, of the Saxony of Henry the Lion, as is shown by the priest Conrad, whose Ruolantes liet was probably written at the court of Brunswick between 1186 and 1189. Conrad is the only other poet in the whole of preserved Roland literature to report a conversion of Bramimonde. He furthermore gives a very careful description of Brechmunda's religious evolution: she is already a Christian in her heart when Marsilie is dying at Saragossa, as is shown not so much by her cursing the pagan gods aloud and violently, as she does in the French poem, but in her ethics. Conrad is so eager to save this soul that he even changes the plot to have Brechmunda ask for the Christian faith upon opening the gates of Saragossa to Charlemagne. But this is not enough: after her conversion, she gets still further attention from our poet. After the conquest of Saragossa, the Emperor bewails the dead warriors on the battlefield, according to the customs of his ancestors. Brechmunda cannot tolerate this lamentation. The Emperor marvels at her wise words and indeed stops mourning.

There is no more striking proof of the rapid change in taste of the audience than a comparison of this episode with the literary "climate" at the battle of Roncevaux in the French Song of Roland. There the Christians get the blessing of the Church for slaughtering the Saracens like animals; here the highest secular representative of Christianity takes theological advice from, and admires the wisdom of, a lady

recently converted from paganism of her own free will. One could not have a better illustration of how far the heroic epic in the second half of the twelfth century had come from the uniform, collective passions depicted by the poets of those earlier chansons de geste based on the tastes of the audiences in the second half of the eleventh century.

Does this surprise us, however, if we remember that, at the time when an Anglo-Norman poet wrote his version of the Song of Roland, on the other side of the Channel another great poet at Troyes was already writing masterworks in the literary genre of the roman, with its innumerable individual adventures of body and soul? Indeed, from the second half of the twelfth century on, it is no longer possible to distinguish between the tastes of the audience for the chansons de geste and those of audiences more concerned with other literary productions in the vernacular, especially as audiences were not now composed so much of listeners—at least not in high society—as of readers, whether those who merely read for themselves or to a small audience in place of the clerc lisant.

It is clear that after 1150, although the chanson de geste will still remain alive for another century at least, it had lost its intrinsic function, namely, the appeal to the sainte mellee and to the perpetual military pilgrimage in the cause of Christendom. The tastes of the audience now required that the poet praise not so much heroes with extraordinary physical force and endurance in the service of France and Christianity but heroes without ties with their own period, incorporating the virtues defined by the new type of knight of courtly society.

Now, it was precisely for this society that Wace evoked the spirit of the battle of Roncevaux, and in such an atmosphere it is not surprising that he should have failed to grasp the original social function of the chanson de geste.

Hans E. Keller
The Ohio State University

Bette Lou Bakelaar
The Ohio State University