

Abstracts of Selected Papers

Tenth Annual Medieval Conference - 1976
Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies
State University of New York at Binghamton

Bernard F. Huppé
SUNY at Binghamton:

Nature in *Beowulf* and *Roland*

Nature in *Beowulf* is analogous to nature in the *Book of Kells*, where initial monsters, intertwining serpents, and menacing animals lurk dangerously in the margins, outside the sacred Word but always ominously ready to encroach. The monsters are symbolic of evil from which the Holy Word saves us and are, as it were, exorcised by the Gospel. The monsters in *Beowulf*, like those in the *Book of Kells*, live in outer darkness, in a hostile habitat of cold, dark, and storm, from which they threaten the warm, light world of human society. They inflict themselves with revenge both against the Holy Word (the creation hymn sung in Heorot) and also against mankind without saving grace. The monsters and their habitat represent post-lapsarian nature, completely hostile to man except through the intervention of providential design. In the *Book of Kells* the Holy Word keeps hostile nature out, while in the pagan world of *Beowulf* man and nature must intermingle, to the detriment of man. By means of poetic imagery in the nature descriptions in *Beowulf* the poet displays a progressive intertwining of man and the deathly forces of unnatural nature. The analogy between the role of hostile nature in the *Book of Kells* and in *Beowulf* points up a meta-linguistic, meta-visual understanding of nature by a people sustained by a missionary Christian faith.

A similar analogy drawn from a poem and a roughly contemporaneous work of art from a later period of Christian civilization shows a strikingly different view of nature. In the Bayeux tapestry nature has become merely part of a framing design, consisting chiefly of the fauna of fable, contained in the upper and lower margins; of the sea as a place of crossing, where the centrality of human action forces the story to flow into the margins (with no ill effects); and of the flora of trees which serve simply to frame narrative episodes. Similarly in the *Song of Roland* nature also does not loom very large, but serves as a framework of reference for the central action of men living within a providential design. Natural details, such as certain trees, flowers, and the green grass, repeated in *Roland*, serve a structural purpose, framing some episodes, linking and contrasting others. Only by metaphor does nature menace man in the *Roland*, where the storms and animals are part of a visionary symbolism and mean much the same thing as they did in *Beowulf*, except that here they will be conquered by God's Christian agent, Charlemagne. But the main use of nature in the *Roland* is similar to that in the Bayeux embroidery. In both works nature is a neutral background for man's actions, a stage setting that enhances and serves the story with artistically appropriate images. The conflict is between good men and their own bad nature, as it was in *Beowulf*. These two different

views of nature are separated from each other in time by about three centuries and in outlook by the difference between a missionary spirit and a crusading spirit of Christianity. Because the two views, each in its time, are not limited by artistic media, they probably represent two basic cultural understandings of Nature.¹

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Eleventh Conference on Medieval Studies
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, May 1976

Penny Gold
Knox College:

From Actor to Object: Women in *Chanson de geste*
and Romance

This paper is based upon a detailed analysis of the structure of the actions and images of women in the *Chanson de Guillaume* and Chrétien's *Yvain*. In the *Guillaume*, the spheres of male and of female activity—the battlefield and the home—are distinct. This separation is mitigated, however, by the fact that the values of men and women are the same—the preservation of the honor of the family, the *lignage*—and the major female character, Guiborc, makes important decisions and actions with respect to the carrying out of this goal.

The separation of male and female spheres is found as well in romance, but instead of the mediation and integration of the division through the ideology of the family, one finds an antagonistic and contradictory relation, as the male character Yvain strives to shape his own *individual* identity. In the working out of this struggle, the woman is of central importance and attains, in fact, a structural prominence not found in the earlier *chanson de geste*. But whereas Guiborc helped the major male characters, and even made decisions for them, Laudine, the central female in *Yvain*, does nothing active herself but exists rather as a goal that Yvain must attain. And since, within the romance, female desires and male desires are seen to be in opposition with each other, the attainment of the woman is a very difficult task, the accomplishment of which forges Yvain's final identity.

This structural analysis of women in *chanson de geste* and romance yields, then, a picture of two different paradigms for women in French literature of the twelfth century, one as actor, and one as object. This is a serious departure from the accepted opinion that women, unimportant in *chansons de geste*, become the centrally important characters in romance.

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¹Abstract prepared by Mrs. Sylvia Horowitz, SONY at Binghamton.

Paul F. Reichardt
Drury College:

The Theme of Force in the *Chanson de Roland*

The *Chanson de Roland* depicts an attitude toward violence consistent with Christian chivalry: wars are necessary when the cause is just (Augustine); force may be used for defense but not for personal gain (Alain de Lille). These concepts explain the initial dissension among Charlemagne's forces in the poem: the first third of the epic shows the Franks as aggressors, often acting for "personal glory, private animosity, and material gain." At Roncevaux, however, the rôles are reversed as the pagans become the aggressors: only then does the poet declare that "Païen ont tort e chrestien ont dreit." Roland changes character during the course of battle, and his actions are honorable. Later, poetic approval of defensive violence is seen when Charlemagne defeats Baligant only after the latter had nearly killed the emperor and had thus "firmly established [himself] in the rôle of aggressor." The same near-defeat transformed into ultimate victory occurs in the Thierry/Pinabel duel. The concluding *laisse* of the poem also evokes the concept of righteous warfare, as the archangel Gabriel commands Charles to go to the defense of the city of Imphe.

The whole of the *Roland* is thus seen to symbolize "the progress of Christian culture" as the epic passes from a depiction of "a world before chivalry" to show "a 'new world' in which chivalry moderates the violence and arrogance of the warrior class." (JRA)

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American Association of Teachers of French
Teaching the *Song of Roland* (French I)
Chairman: William W. Kibler, Texas
Philadelphia, December 1976

Gerard J. Brault
The Pennsylvania State University:

Elucidating the *Song of Roland* with the Help of Art

Editions of the *Song of Roland* and manuals of French literature generally use two kinds of pictures to illustrate this work: (1) sketches or photographs of objects or places mentioned in the poem; (2) works of art (manuscript illuminations, sculpture, tapestries, etc.) inspired by other versions of the story. Scholars also refer to contemporary tympana in discussions of the epic's structure.

At best, the first type of illustration offers a limited view of the world in which Turolfus lived and emphasizes the military aspect of the poem to the exclusion of practically everything else. Photographs of surviving villages from the eleventh century, e.g., Sainte-Suzanne (Mayenne), often give a better idea of patterns of daily living. Scholars concerned with the structure of the work would do well to familiarize themselves with forms of Romanesque design other than the tympanum.

Rita Lejeune and Jacques Stiennon's monumental study of the Roland legend in medieval art (1966) has done much to acquaint specialists with the manner in which artists visualized certain scenes which also figure in the *Song of Roland* (the Oxford manuscript has no illuminations). But Romanesque models also exerted considerable influence on Tuoldus's poetic imagination in ways not investigated by the Belgian scholars.

Romanesque iconography helps us understand the concept of Sapientia, the rôle of the virtues and vices, the function of landscape, the apple anecdote, the arrival of the Saracen embassy at Galne, the alignment of the slain French heroes at Roncevaux, the significance of the solitary pine, the two trees, and the four marble objects in the scene depicting Roland's death, the christening of Bramimonde, and so on. These and other insights into the meaning and narrative techniques of the poem are to be brought together in the author's two-volume edition of the *Song of Roland*, scheduled for publication at the Pennsylvania State University Press in early 1978.

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Jean-Louis Picherit
University of Wyoming:

La Chanson de Roland au niveau undergraduate

Au niveau *undergraduate*, la littérature médiévale n'est souvent offerte que dans un cours unique. Il convient alors de se servir d'une adaptation en français moderne. Certains aspects de la *Chanson* pourront retenir l'attention des élèves et améliorer leur jugement:

- La civilisation—en particulier la féodalité—est assez éloignée pour éveiller la curiosité.
- L'analyse des personnages constituera le travail le plus formateur.
- Le relevé de quelques allusions à des textes antérieurs au *Roland* permettra d'initier les étudiants aux problèmes posés par les poèmes épiques.
- La lecture d'une autre courte épopée (*Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*) servira à atteindre des enseignements plus généraux sur l'épopée.

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Paula Gilbert Lewis
Howard University:

The Christian European Mind versus "The Other": Teaching
La Chanson de Roland to Minority Students

Medieval texts offer numerous examples of the distorted, dangerous misconceptions of Europeans toward other "inferior" peoples. In the *Chanson de Roland*, while Christians are portrayed with reference to right, good

symbolism, the "infidel" is presented primarily with negative exoticism, especially in reference to left symbolism. Proper names connote evil beings, dismal regions, and pejorative attitudes (*culvert*) on the part of the French. Physical portraits are frightening. Black Africans are particularly physically and symbolically fearsome, human savage beasts, associated with demons. The only two women of consequence, Bramimonde and Aude, exist either for the true religion or for their Christian men.

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A fourth paper, "Roland: Dead or Alive," was presented by Jeanette Beer (Fordham University) at this meeting, but the abstract was unavailable for publication.

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Tristania

Tristania, a journal devoted to the study of all aspects of the Tristan legend, has now completed its second year of existence and is about to publish the first of a series of Monographs. The journal appears semi-annually, in November and May, and subscriptions are made on a two-year basis at a cost of \$5.00. The monographs will be sold separately. For further information, contact Professor Lewis A. M. Sumberg, Editor, *Tristania*, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Tennessee 37401.