

**Discussion Session on The Old French William Cycle**  
**Room 414 — Conrad Hilton Hotel — Chicago**  
**4:30-5:45 p.m., December 29, 1977**

At the December 1977 Modern Language Association Convention, the Société Rencesvals, American-Canadian Branch, will sponsor, in addition to its customary general meeting and a meeting devoted to the medieval Spanish epic, a discussion session devoted to the Old French William Cycle. Those persons who wish to attend this meeting should write in advance to Professor David P. Schenck (Department of Foreign Languages, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620), the discussion leader for this session. Attendance is limited. Four papers will be discussed, the abstracts of which are presented here.

Sara Sturm-Maddox  
University of Massachusetts  
and  
Donald Maddox  
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**Intertextual Discourse in the William Cycle**

The vitality of epic cyclical narrative lies in its intertextual coherence. Among the catalysts of cyclical coherence in the William cycle, recapitulative and prospective first-person accounts of events that occur in other works of the cycle are a major intertextual component. Sometimes pronounced by secondary characters, they are frequently prominent in the portrayal of Guillaume himself. Critics have debated the apparent "ressemblance du héros à lui-même" (Frappier) in various poems of the cycle; this paper offers a preliminary assessment of Guillaume as a *personnage spéculaire*, whose function as a generator of trans-textual coherence in selected poems links the primary events of a given text with those of the larger cyclical corpus.

John D. Niles  
University of California, Berkeley

**Narrative Anomalies in *la Chançon de Willame***

One principal reason why few scholars have been willing to grant the unity of *la Chançon de Willame* is the presence of flagrant narrative contradictions in the poem as it stands in the unique MS. When one views the poem as a product of oral tradition, however, most of its anomalies fade into insignificance, for they are just the sort of errors which are characteristic of modern oral epic poems collected in the field. Even the baffling scene of the revival of Vivien (vv. 2011-55) falls into place when one reads the poem against the background of Vladimir Propp's paradigm of folk narrative structure, for Vivien recovers at the very moment when a folktale personage could be expected to arise from the dead. If the narrative anomalies of *la Chançon de Willame* are an original feature of what might be called a twelfth century "folk epic" rather than a product of clumsy literary *remaniement*, then there is little reason to postulate the division of the poem into two halves, G<sub>1</sub> and G<sub>2</sub>. (Full text of paper to appear in *Viator* 9 [1978]).

Rupert T. Pickens  
University of Kentucky:

**Mimesis and History in the *Charroi de Nîmes***

In representative early chansons de geste (*Roland, Voyage de Charlemagne, Guillaume, Couronnement de Louis, Prise d'Orange*), the proportion of mimetic content (direct discourse) to diegetic (purely narrative) content is very high; at the same time, there are few overt suggestions of the narrator's presence. The resulting "dramatic" quality of these poems is intensified by the fact that, in the apparent jumble of verb tenses and other temporal references in the narrative portions, the present tense predominates, and verbs constituting a present frame of reference (presents, futures, perfects) outnumber the historical tenses (preterite, imperfect, pluperfect) by about two to one. This ahistorical style contrasts with the vogue for historical writing in later twelfth century works (Wace, Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes,

prose), where mimesis yields to narrative, the historical tenses tend to dominate in narrative passages, and the mediatory narrator strongly imposes his presence.

However, in the early epic, true historical discourse functions universally in mimesis. When characters talk, they situate themselves in time and almost invariably use appropriate verb tenses. Thus, analysis of tense usage in direct discourse is useful not only in casting light on the contrasting narrative style, but also in assessing characters' perceptions of themselves in history (significantly, an excess of futures occurs in the *Roland*).

The *Charroi de Nîmes* is a particularly interesting example of the early epic. Although, on the whole, it typifies the genre, as in the use of the narrative present, certain features are exaggerated to the limits. For example, the court scene, comprising the first half of the poem is constituted almost entirely of direct discourse; and, while Louis's utterances stress potentiality with a maximum of futures and imperatives, William is motivated by a consciousness of the past with his projections into the future linked to unusually detailed accounts of history. Through such tense usage, a major theme emerges: the triumph of *true* words (those which accurately reflect the present and cast the future in view of the past) over *lying* words (such as those of Louis and Aymon, who either ignore the past or falsify the present and future). Yet in the second half of the poem, exaggeratedly static "drama" gives way to the narrated history of heroic action and the poem assumes the normal proportions of mimetic to diegetic content. Simultaneously, however, epic language and style are subverted in the emerging comedy.

Sonia B. Spencer  
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*The Song of William and the Aliscans:  
Comedy and the Epic Bienséances*

Literary criticism of the *Aliscans* has been doubly handicapped by virtue of being under the shadow of the *Roland* and as a direct consequence of the divisions and comparisons imposed on it by the textual discrepancies of the

*William*. Central to any discussion measuring the relative worth of the *Aliscans* in the epic repertory is the comic character, Rainouart. The exclusive concentration on justifying Rainouart's presence within the "elevated" epic style has side-tracked discussion away from a more comprehensive comic perspective.

In studying the function of this controversial character, and in differentiating the essence of the comic from the earlier *William* to the later *Aliscans*, it becomes apparent that the key to the structure of the *Aliscans* must be sought in an interpretation which accounts for the disproportionate amplification of Rainouart's rôle in terms of both serious and comic themes at the expense of the epic heroes, William and Vivien. While much criticism catalogues comic themes, images, and characters, the assumption is made that the comic mood is always subordinate to the tragic one. This study proposes to start from the contention that the comic mood predominates, that it is the unifying element which allows for diversity within its conceptual plan.

Starting from within the confines of a somewhat gigantic but carefully controlled "interpolation," Rainouart's force in the *Aliscans* is exerted outward toward influencing the mood and resolution of the entire epic. The primary difference between the *William* and the *Aliscans* is that in the process of imposing a progressively comic tone on the latter text, Rainouart himself becomes the epicenter of the comic structure while nonetheless continuing to function within the framework of the epic *bienséances*.