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The Ordeal at Roncesvalles: *Francs e paiens, as les vus ajustez.*

READING THE OPENING EVENTS of the central conflict in the *Chanson de Roland*—that is, the combats between the chief French heroes, Roland, Oliver, and Turpin, and their first three Saracen opponents—one is struck by a peculiar parallelism in the narrative.[1] This episode, following v. 1188,[2] is of course one of the main episodes of the whole poem, being the beginning of the long, bloody battle between the French rear guard and the Saracens, which is central in the narrative. We can expect to find in this scene a repetition, or even several repetitions, of the elements of the action, as the poet exploits the drama of the circumstances and reinforces it in his audience's ears.[3] But what is curious is not so much the fact that the poet repeats himself in *laisses* 93, 94, and 95 with

[1]In *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic craft* (Berkeley, 1973), pp. 144-5, Joseph J. Duggan points to this close parallelism of structure in the three *laisses* 93, 94, and 95. He sees in them the poet's use of a number of set formulas but does not examine why the poet chose the particular formulas or sequence of formulas that he used in each case. In the same way Renate Hitze in *Studien zu Sprache und Stil tier Kampfschilderung in den Chansons de Geste* (Geneva & Paris, 1965) studies the conventional terminology which appears in descriptions of battle scenes in the old French epic in general. This work would be a very useful means to broaden the scope of the present study so as to examine in all early French *chansons de geste* the concept that any battle is in fact a formal ordeal before God. While I can see this belief underlying combats in a number of other poems, I have restricted myself here to dealing solely with the *Chanson de Roland.*

[2]The edition by F. Whitehead, *La Chanson de Roland (Oxford,* 1942), is used as the text source throughout this study.

[3]Jean Rychner (*La Chanson de geste: Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs,* [Geneva & Lille, 1955], 151) sees this episode merely as an illustration of the poet's use of a sort *of amplificatio* and *ornamentum.* "Un motif peut être plus ou moins développé, orné avec plus ou moins d'abondance: c'est une question de métier. L'auteur du *Roland* profite de cette possibilité pour grandir les trois figures de ses protagonistes: les trois combats que livrent d'abord Roland, Oliver et Turpin sont développés, le motif est orné du motif secondaire 'injures avant et après le combat', alors que les combats des personnages moins importants sont ensuite traités plus simplement. Les moyens traditionnels et professionnels sont ainsi mis volontairement au service d'intentions dramatiques et poétiques."

very close parallelism—such repetition from *laisse* to *laisse* is common enough in the *Roland* and in other early French epics[4]—but rather that the words and actions which are repeated are themselves an imitation of a procedure which was established in the formality of judicial trial in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. And, further, what is extremely useful here is that the words and actions of this scene, as the opponents close for the first time in battle, can throw new light upon the poet's conception not only of the meaning of warfare at this time but particularly of the relationship between Christians and pagans.

The three *laisses* in question are as follows:

93

a) Li nies Marsilie, il ad a num Aelroth,
Tut premereins chevalchet devant l'ost.
De noz Franceis vait disant si mais moz:
'Feluns Franceis, hoi justerez as noz;
Traït vos ad ki a guarder vos out;
Fols est li reis ki vos laissat as porz.
Enquoi perdrat France dulce sun los,
Charles li magnes le destre braz del cors!'
Quant l'ot Rollant, Deus! si grant doel en out,
Sun cheval brochet, laiset curre a esforz,
Vait le ferir li quens quanque il pout.
L'escut li freint e 1'osberc li desclot,
Trenchet le piz, si li briset les os,

[4]In a recent article, "Composition stylisée et technique littéraire dans la *Chanson de Roland," Romania*, 94 (1973), 1-28, Edward A. Heinemann dealt at some length with precisely these *laisses.* What caught Mr. Heinemann's attention was the parallelism that exists between certain of the phrases in these stanzas. "Le lyrisme du passage atteint son degré le plus haut dans l'attaque elle-même, où les laisses se ressemblent le plus étroitement. Les éléments de l'attaque y marquent autant de points fixes, renforcés par certaines répétitions d'expression, et ceux-ci forment un cadre à l'intérieur duquel la variation formulaire, comme une sorte de modulation, joue un rôle musical" (p. 20). These repetitions may very well result in part from the poet's desire to produce a lyric effect, but only insofar as identical words or phrases are concerned. Again, what interests me is the structure of each of these three *laisses,* and in particular why each *laisse* presents the sequence of events that it does. My feeling is that there is a parallelism here in large part because the sense of the battle requires the invariable following of a formal series of actions in each case, somewhat like the fulfilling of a prescription, and not just because of the lyric effect which such a parallelism produces.

Tute l'eschine li desevret del dos,
Od sun espiét l'anme li getet fors;
Enpeint le ben, fait li brandir le cors,
Pleine sa hanste del cheval l'abat mort,
En dous meitiez li ad brisét le col;
Ne leserat, ço dit, que n'i parolt:
'Ultre culvert, Carles n'est mie fol,
Ne traïsun unkes amer ne volt,
Il fist que proz qu'il nus laisad as porz,
Oi n'en perdrat France dulce sun los.
Ferez i Francs, nostre est li premers colps!
Nos avum dreit, mais cist glutun unt tort.' AOI

94

b) Un duc i est, si ad num Falsaron.
Icil er frere al rei Marsiliun,
Il tint la tere Dathan e Abirun,
Suz cel nen at plus encrisme felun.
Entre les dous oilz mult out large le front,
Grant demi pied mesurer i pout hom.
Asez ad doel quant vit mort sun nevold;
Ist de la prese, si se met en bandun
E s'es(es)criet l'enseigne paienor,
Envers Franceis est mult cuntrarïus:
'Enquoi perdrat France dulce s'onur.'
Ot le Oliver, si.n ad mult grant irur,
Le cheval brochet des oriez esperuns,
Vait le ferir en guise de baron,
L'escut li freint e l'osberc li derumpt,
El cors li met les pans del gunfanun,
Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort des arçuns.
Guardet a tere, veit gesir le glutun,
Si li ad dit par mult fiere raison:
'De voz manaces, culvert, jo n'ai essoign.
Ferez i, Francs! kar tresben les veintrum.'
Munjoie escriet, ço est l'enseigne Carlun. AOI.

95

c) Uns reis i est, si ad num Corsablix,
Barbarins est d'un estra[n]ge païs,
Si apelad le[s] altres Sarrazins:
'Ceste bataille ben la puum tenir;
Kar de Franceis i ad asez petit.
Cels ki ci sunt devum aveir mult vil,
Ja pur Charles n'i ert un sul guarit.

Or est le jur qu'els estuvrat murir.'
Ben l'entendit li arc[e]vesques Turpin.
Suz ciel n'at hume que [tant] voeillet haïr,
Sun cheval brochet des esperuns d'or fin,
Par grant vertut si l'est alét ferir.
L'escut li freinst, l'osberc li descumfist,
Sun grant espiét parmi le cors li mist;
Empeint le ben, que mort le fait brandir,
Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort el chemin;
Guardet arere, veit le glutun gesir,
Ne laisserat que n'i parolt, ço dit:
'Culvert païen, vos i avez mentit;
Carles, mi sire, nus est guarant tuz dis,
Nostre Franceis n'unt talent de fuïr,
Voz cumpaignuns feruns trestuz restifs;
Nuveles vos di, mort vos estoet susfrir.
Ferez, Franceis, nul de vus ne s'ublit!
Cist premer colp est nostre, Deu mercit.[']
Munjoie escriet por le camp retenir.

The persons involved in these first combats of the battle are, appropriately, Roland, Oliver, and Turpin. Their opponents are, as a result of a deliberate concern for parallelism, respectively the nephew of the Saracen king (Roland is the nephew of Charlemagne), a Duke of the royal family who is a brother of Marsile *(quens* Oliver is Roland's most intimate *cumpainz, amis, frere),* and the Berber king of a foreign land (he has been qualified at v. 886 as being "mult de males arz": Turpin, however, clearly represents godliness). Firstly, the Saracen slanders the French:

a) De noz Franceis vait disant si mals moz; (v. 1190)
b) Envers Franceis est mult cuntrarïus: (v. 1222)
c) 'Cels ki ci sunt devum aveir mult vil.' (v. 1240)

Secondly, the French warrior reacts angrily:

a) Quant l'ot Rollant, Deus! si grant doel en out, (v. 1196)
b) Ot le Oliver, si.n ad mult grant irur, (v. 1224)
c) Suz ciel n'at hume que [tant] voeillet haïr. (v. 1244)

Thirdly, the two enemies clash violently and the Saracen is defeated:

a) Pleine sa hanste del cheval l'abat mort, (v. 1204)

b) Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort des arçuns. (v. 1229)
c) Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort el chemin. (v. 1250)

The fourth stage consists of a double action: the victor first sneers at the lifeless body beneath him:

a) Ne leserat, ço dit, que n'i parolt . . . (v. 1206)
b) Si li ad dit par mult fiere raison . . . (v. 1231)
c) Ne laisserat que n'i parolt, ço dit . . . (v. 1252)

Then, looking up, he exhorts his compatriots to strike as valiantly as he has done:

a) 'Ferez i Francs, nostre est li premers colps!' (v. 1211)
b) 'Ferez i, Francs! kar tresben les veintrum.' (v. 1233)
c) 'Ferez, Franceis, nul de vus ne s'ublit! (vv. 1258-9)
Cist premer colp est nostre, Deu mercit.

Again, what is curious here is not particularly that the poet has repeated the same actions, and even extensively the same words, in three successive but distinct encounters (distinct at least in that six different persons are involved and that it is not merely a reiteration of a single event); rather it is the stages in each episode, the clarity and explicitness of the four steps in themselves which catch the reader's attention. They suggest that the poet had something more precise in mind for these scenes than merely the brutal bashing in a battle to the death. The concept of a formal order seems to have determined the sequence of elements in each *laisse,* so that each pair of combatants seems in large measure merely to be fulfilling the requirements of a formula.

In v. 1212 we may gain some insight into what was probably going on in the poet's mind as he arranged the details of the combats described in *laisses* 93-95:

'Nos *avum dreit,* mais cist glutun *unt tort.'*

The simple ethic expressed here has already been voiced by Roland (v. 1015. " 'Paien unt tort e chrestïens unt dreit' " and in fact reflects the absolute conviction which brought Charlemagne into Spain on his crusade in the first place; it now expressly constitutes the basis for the present conflict between Christians and Saracens. The first-time reader normally smiles at this gross simplification and nods wisely at how

charmingly simple-minded these near-barbarians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were: it was sufficient, for their immature sense of morality, merely to affirm that all they did as Christians was necessarily approved, even sanctioned, by God and that the infidel, *qua* infidel, could in no way ever claim to be anything but wrong.

The double sense which the reader is tempted to give to the word *dreit*, as to the English word *right*, is a relatively modern distinction. In the twelfth century, the legal-rational sense ("He has been proven right; it was the right answer") corresponded to the moral sense ("He was right to do it") because rightness of any sort was decided by the ultimate authority, God. Whether in ethical or in judicial questions, God alone offered absolute truth. If ever there was a question as to what constituted rightness, one had only to consult God for a definitive ruling on the matter. That is essentially what happened in the Ordeal:[5] the question of good or bad, lawful or unlawful, pure or impure, guilty or innocent, was put to God by *requiring* Him to intervene in a situation and so pronounce Himself one way or the other on it. No matter how complex the problem, it had to be presented to God in such a form that His ruling would be clear: the simpler the statement of the problem, the less likelihood of misreading God's will. For problems of justice which could not be solved between the parties to the dispute, or in broader tribunals of men, the appeal to God by means of the Ordeal offered a perfect court of last

[5]I would not of course claim to be the first to point out this judicial sense of the word "droit" here and elsewhere in the poem: Aebischer drew our attention to it in 1948, but without, however, seeing that the concept of battle which the poet reveals when he uses this word has had any significant echoes or corollaries in his choice of vocabulary, in his very careful arrangement of events, or in the general theme and structure of his poem as a whole. Speaking of the Charlemagne-Baligant confrontation, Aebischer says, "Bataille qui est une terrible bataille, sans doute; mats qui est avant tout un combat judiciaire. 'Carles ad dreit' s'écrient les barons français (vv. 3359-3367). ... Pour gagner une bataille qui est un combat judiciaire, la vaillance ne suffit pas, ni le nombre des combattants: il faut avoir pour soi le bon droit." Paul Aebischer, "Pour la défense et l'illustration de l'épisode de Baligant," *Mélanges de Philologie romane et de littérature médiévale offerts à Ernest Hoepffner* (Paris, 1949), 173-182 (pp. 178-9).

resort;[6] all the really important issues of Christian society could be referred in full confidence to the Ordeal.

For the twelfth-century jurist, God's judgment was absolute and sure.[7] For the poet of the *Chanson de Roland there* is apparently likewise little doubt about God's readiness to indicate clearly where the right lies, because the pattern he makes use of in the three *laisses* reproduced above comprises precisely those stages, formal and invariable, followed in primitive judicial procedure.

The so-called "accusatory system" of procedure[8] placed the accuser and defendant into public confrontation and provided both for the plaintiff's accusation to be made in the presence of the defendant and for the defendant then to reject it as an untruth or calumny. The difference of opinion which existed formally from that moment between the adversaries could be submitted to God, in the form of an ordeal to which the parties would be willing to submit; if this ordeal[9] took the form of a combat between the two parties or their champions, divine justice would undoubtedly protect the man who was on the side of right and condemn the man who, whether it was in the accusation or in the rejection of the

[6]"Everywhere there can be noticed the influence of the idea that the revelation of secret crimes may be left to the direct intervention of the Deity, who would surely bring the truth to light and would not suffer the innocent to perish." A. Esmein, *History of Continental Criminal Procedure, with special reference to France*, trans. John Simpson (Boston, 1913), pp. 35-6. The sentence is found near the end of the Preliminary Chapter III, "Primitive [i.e. pre-1200] Germanic Criminal Procedure" and summarizes the sense of the chapter.

[7]It is worth noting that God is termed *le vrai justicier* quite commonly in early French literature. Tobler and Lommatzsch list a dozen illustrations, including *Deus est fort justisier(Ph.* de Thaun), *Et jure Deu lo verai justisier (Mort Aymeri de Narbonne), S'ele creüst a Dieu, le verai jotissier (Siège de Barbastre), Se Deu plaist, le verai jostissier; 'Je vos comment au verai jostissier' 'Et ge vos, sire, a Deu le droiturier.' (Aymeride Narbonne).* The concept of God as supreme judge in men's affairs is general and widespread.

[8]Esmein, *History*, 3-8.

[9] Etymologically the word "ordeal" has to do with *dole*, a dividing and portioning out. The northern Indo-European root, at the origin of both the medieval Latin *ordalium* and the modern German *Urteil*, points to the concept that God judges by distinguishing the just from the unjust.

accusation, had made use of falsehood.[10] The person selected by God to be victorious could then properly proclaim that his position in the affair was just, that God had necessarily sustained the right and designated that man as possessing it. It was an eminently clear and satisfying method of arriving at absolute truth and justice when one could rely utterly upon the omniscience, integrity, and equity of God.[11]

Each of the stages of the accusatory "trial" is faithfully followed by the poet of the *Roland.* Aelroth, the nephew of Marsile, opens the confrontation by denigrating the French.

> De nos Franceis vait disant si mais moz. (v. 1190)

And just to make the enormity of this slander quite clear, the poet reproduces his very words: the French are dishonorable, their emperor is not only a traitor to his vassals and to his feudal oath to protect them but a fool as well, and the French will of necessity suffer for it. In the same way Falsaron approaches the French forcefully slandering them: the French will soon be without any honor. And Corsablis, too, calls out loudly that the French may with impunity be despised: they will not survive the day.

[10]The defendant's formal oath, which is described by Guillaume du Breuil as required even as late as about 1330, still refers to the foundation of a defence upon three elements: God's help, the defendant's weapons, and the rightness of his cause.

> Item, fera ainsi le défendeur comme dit est, et jurera comme l'autre sur les sains et dira: "Homme que je tiens par la main, par Dieu et par ses sains, j'ay bonne défense contre toy, et tu m'as appellé faussement et mauvaisement, et as mauvaise querelle contre moy; et que je n'ay brief, ne pierre, ne herbe, ne autre chose par quoy je te cuide vaincre, se ce n'est par l'aide de Dieu et de mes armes et pour cause du bon droit que j'ay."
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> Guillaume du Breuil, *Stilus Curie Parlamenti, e*d. F. Aubert (Paris, 1908), 116.

[11]The ordeal *per duellum,* the *jugement de Dieu,* remained in continual use throughout the Middle Ages despite determined ecclesiastical efforts made in 867, 1203 and 1215, and again an attempt by Louis IX in 1260, to prohibit it. The efforts were largely futile, and Philippe le Bel softened the official attitude in 1303 and 1306 by allowing a variety of exceptions to the ban; after 1315 and up until the sixteenth century the judicial duel was again in general favor. See Adolphe Tardif, *La Procédure civile et criminelle aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Paris, 1885), 91. In this work Ch. II, sect. XII, pt. ii "Preuve par gages de bataille", pp. 91-101, is particularly useful.

This opening gambit can quite properly be called the "challenge" since the word *calenge* was still semantically related to its etymological sense of 'calumny'. Interestingly enough, the poet himself uses the term elsewhere in the poem in precisely the circumstances we have here and with the same meaning of a belittling or defamation which is tantamount to an invitation to defend oneself if one can.[12]

In each of these three combats, of Roland, Oliver, and Turpin, the challenge originates with the Saracen and is directed, as a calumny, against the whole body of the French or against their leader and representative Charles.[13] The Saracens are the aggressors, or plaintiffs, in all three of these cases, perhaps in part because a long-standing principle of justice required the accuser to prove his charge or else suffer the punishment which would result to the accused had he been shown to be guilty.[14] Justice is seen all the more satisfyingly to come when the accusers, the Saracens, are themselves manifestly confuted: the only true God has rendered sentence!

What clearly amounts to the second stage of an accusatory confrontation follows immediately in each *laisse,* just before the actual combat. The French have been vilified; the charge is energetically rejected

[12]At line 3787.

[13]The declaration that the emperor is in the *wrong* is again, as we shall see later on in the battle, considered sufficient argument to enhearten the Saracens to believe that they will ultimately be victorious:

> Quant paien virent que Franceis i out poi,
> Entr'els en unt e orgoil e cunfort;
> Dist l'un a 1'altre: 'L'empereor ad tort.'
> (vv. 1940-2)

The curious causal relationship expressed here (the opponent is weak, *therefore* he is in the wrong) is simply the result of a multiple logical equation: Victory means strength means righteousness.

[14]This was the principle of retributive or retaliatory justice. It tended to restrain the plaintiff from making extravagant demands. "L'acte formel [de l'accusation] fonctionne mécaniquement; mais c'est une arme à deux tranchants; elle se retourne contre celui qui l'emploie, s'il y recourt à tort ou s'il commet des irrégularités." Jean-Baptiste Brissaud, *Cours d'histoire générale de droit français public et privé,* 2vol. (Paris, 1904), 1:567. This *lex talionis* is found even in Cicero and by the time of the *Chanson de Roland* was undoubtedly a broadly recognized judicial concept.

in turn by each of the French heroes, who are mortally outraged. The poet, wishing to demonstrate this anger as dramatically and as concretely as possible, has each knight spur his horse forward against the Saracen: there can be no delicately pondered deliberations here.

Roland: Sun cheval brochet, laiset curre a esforz,
Vait le ferir li quens quanque il pout.
(vv. 1197-98)

Oliver: Le cheval brochet des oriez esperuns,
Vait le ferir en guise de baron.
(vv. 1225-26)

Turpin: Sun cheval brochet des esperuns d'or fin,
Par grant vertut si l'est alét ferir.
(vv. 1245-46)

The French recognize the offensive nature of the challenge, reject the accusation, and will defend utterly their innocence of the charge. It might be noted in passing that, although each French knight, by setting spur to horse, constitutes himself formally a champion of the cause of right, the Christian cause, his own personal feelings are strongly involved. The anger which the poet gives each knight befits the personal nature of a juridical confrontation between accuser and accused: the conflict we are to witness is made all the more dramatically intense.

Roland: Quant l'ot Rollant, Deus! si grant doel en out.
(v. 1196)

Oliver: Ot le Oliver, si.n ad mult grant irur.
(v. 1224)

Turpin: Ben l'entendit li arc[e]vesques Turpin.
Suz ciel n'at hume que [tant] voeillet haïr.
(vv. 1243-44)

Once the accusation has been made and rejected, the battle itself will serve to evince sufficient proof for the one cause or the other. From the first there is no doubt about which way each combat will go. And not only is God's view of the question never in doubt, but the violent manner in which the French warrior slaughters his opponent indicates clearly how strongly God holds that view.

Roland: Enpeint le ben, fait li brandir le cors,
Pleine sa hanste del cheval l'abat mort.
(vv. 1203-04)

Oliver: El cors li met les pans del gunfanun,
Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort des arçuns.
(vv. 1228-29)

Turpin: Empeint le ben, que mort le fait brandir,
Pleine sa hanste l'abat mort el chemin.
(vv. 1249-50)

The fourth stage of the scene offers the audience certain logical conclusions that can be inferred from the outcome of the combat. We may, I think, call this stage the explication. Since the victory is really a victory of one cause over the other—and consequently a judgment that one party is in the right and that the position of the other is wrong—it is necessary that the sense of this judgment be clearly explained to the public. Either the accuser is held to be justified in his claims, or he is guilty of holding and uttering groundless and malicious, if not iniquitous, falsehoods. It is precisely for this purpose of interpreting and elucidating the meaning of the victory that the poet insists upon each of the three French peers casting a righteously haughty glance back upon the corpse of his opponent and repeating the words of the accusation that had been used.[15] It is not, as it may appear at first glance, a matter of three immature warriors airily vaunting themselves over their prowess with perhaps too much arrogance,[16] but rather, as the very parallelism between the accusation of the Saracen and the terms used by the French knights (at least by Roland and Turpin) indicates, the addresses are entirely formal and serve explicitly to demonstrate how the specific accusation has been demolished. In the case of Oliver, the accusation against the French is not reported verbatim by the poet, but there is no doubt that in speaking to the corpse of the defeated Saracen, Olivier refers directly to the substance of his charge:

[15]This fourth phase of the combat is what G.F. Jones, *The Ethos of the Song of Roland* (Baltimore, 1963), p. 19, refers to as "the vaunting vilification of the vanquished." It is, however, not merely a vilification: it is an explicit repudiation of the charge. By repeating the sense of the original charge as it was made by his Saracen opponent, the French victor, pointing to the results of the combat, says in effect, "I told you so! You were wrong and I was right all along."

[16]G.F. Jones says of a similar jibe of Roland at v. 1335, *'Culvert, mar i moüstes. De Mahumet ja n'i avrez aiude. Par tel glutun n'ert bataille oi vencue":* "He taunts his dead victim . . . . Although contrary to modern ideas of gentlemanly behavior, such conduct seems to have been admired in the twelfth century" *(Ethos*, p. 19).

'De vos manaces, culvert, jo n'ai essoign.'
(v. 1232)[17]

This last term itself, *essoign,* is drawn from the proper legal terminology (Latin *exonium)* of the day and designated an excuse or impediment

[17]The word *menaces* appears to designate a challenge, or a charge which will be the basis for a combat. This sense can be surmised in the context even of the following extracts:

'Conbatre t'an covient a moi,
se tu ne le me clainmes quite.'
'Or, avez vos folie dite,
fet Erec, au mien escïant;
ce sont menaces de neant,
que tot par mesure vos dot.'
'Donc te desfi ge tot de bot;
car ne puet estre sanz bataille.'
(Erec et Enide, *e*d. Roques, vv. 852-9)

Lors li vient sus li charretons,
si jure quan qu'il puet veoir
que mar le fist el gué cheoir
et son panser mar li toli.
La dameisele que o li
li chevaliers amenee ot
les menaces antant et ot.
(*Le Chevalier de la charette, e*d. Roques, vv. 884-90)

Sans autre plet, sanz sairement,
sanz menaces, sanz desfiances
se requierent as fers des lances.
*(Eneas, e*d. Salverda de Grave, vv. 9698-9700)

Li chevaliers tantost s'eslaisse
sans desfïance et sanz manace.
*(Le Roman de Perceval, e*d. Roach, vv. 8392-3)

The word *manace* appears again in the *Roland,* spoken by the self-confident knight himself in the scene which culminates with Ganelon's declaration,

Co set hom ben, n'ai cure de manace.'
(v. 293)

Desfi les ci, sire, vostre veiant.'
(v. 326)

which held a person back from complying with a summons to court.[18] What Oliver is declaring here is that he has no intention of avoiding facing his opponent's charge: he will not seek an exemption or escape from this mortal confrontation; such a charge can readily be proved wrong.

A second general conclusion implicit in the victory of one champion over the other bears upon the sense this victory has for the rest of the army and for the whole of the Christian-pagan confrontation. Since these *combats judiciaires* are merely the beginning of a more general battle, each of the three *laisses* ends with an appropriate publication to the rest of the French warriors of the results of the first trials with the enemy, that Roland, Oliver, and Turpin were victorious in their respective encounters is considered significant not merely as a model for the others to follow, or from which they may draw inspiration because of their

[18]"*Quand on avait épuisé les délais de contremand, on pouvait encore se dispenser de comparaître en présentant des essoines (essonia,* ancienne *sunnis)* ou excuses légitimes. Ces essoines varient un peu suivant les coutumiers, mais il en est qu'on retrouve partout .... L'essoine pouvait être proposée dans toute affaire, à toutes les phases de la procédure et par toutes personnes, nobles ou vilains, par les témoins aussi bien que les parties." Adolphe Tardif, *La Procédure civile et criminelle aux XIIe et XIVe siècles* (Paris, 1885), pp. 55, 56. Tardif bases these observations upon the *Très ancien coutumier de Normandie,* the *Grand coutumier de Normandie,* and upon the *Coutumes du Beauvoisis* by Philippe de Beaumanoir.

"Distinct excuses for non-appearance [of the defendant before the accuser] ('sumnis'; 'sunnis') were recognized by the Frankish law; later, they were subsumed under the head of 'genuine necessity'." Arthur Engelmann, *A History of Continental Civil Procedure* (Boston, 1927), p. 182.

On the matter of *essoigne* in this early period see also Charles Johnson, "Notes on Thirteenth-Century Judicial Procedure," *English Historical Review,* 62 (1947), pp. 508-21; 511. François Ragueau, *Glossaire du droit françois contenant des mots difficiles qui se trouvent dans les ordonnances des roys de France, dans les coustumes du royaume, dans les anciens arrests et les anciens titres* (Niort, 1882) has an entry *essoine: embarras,* and cites this very line in the *Chanson de Roland.*

leaders and peers impressive powers, but also because these first victories are a sure sign that God is with the French and Christian cause.[19]

Roland: 'Ferez i Francs, nostre est li premers colps!
Nos avum dreit, mais cist glutun unt tort.'
(vv. 1211-12)

Oliver: 'Ferez i, Francs! kar tresben les veintrum.'
(v. 1233)

Turpin: 'Ferez, Franceis, nul de vus ne s'ublit!
Cist premer colp est nostre, Deu mercit.'
(vv. 1258-59)

Since God has granted recognition to the French at the outset, everyone may be certain that, no matter what setbacks the French may suffer in the course of their confrontation with Error, He will accord ultimate triumph to His vicar Charlemagne.

The initial scenes of the actual battle between the Christians and pagans are not the only instance of the poet's close adherence to formal juridical procedure. Ganelon's trial at the end of the poem is clearly based upon the frame of the accusatory procedure and judicial duel, and has been well studied as a detailed example of a contemporary *ordalie,*

[19]It would be for this same reason that those who are eager to demonstrate the justice of their cause request the privilege of the "first blows." It is a distinct honor to demonstrate to the world that one's own side is in the right. In a sense the opening moments of a battle are just as significant as its ending and certainly more so for all of the warriors themselves because both sides should be able to see clearly from that time where "right" lies. By bringing about the death of Roland after his initial victory the poet effects a dramatic twist in his plot: the audience *knows,* because of these initial victories of Roland, Oliver, and Turpin, that God favors the Christian cause and the French *must* eventually triumph over the Saracens. The audience therefore also knows that Roland's death cannot be ascribed to any sort of inferiority on the Christian side; it must then be attributed only to a particular tragic flaw in the leader of the rear guard himself.

giudizio di Dio or *Gottesgerichtliche Zweikampf.*[20] But apart from these specific episodes in the *Chanson* there are still other features or elements which seem to indicate that the poem as a whole was conceived to express in much the same way as these rather explicitly judicial scenes that the whole story is a grand trial of right *versus* error in which Heaven is to act as arbiter. That Heaven sympathizes with the right is clear in *laisse* 111, where the poet produces a most terrifying storm and earthquake. He introduces it just after noting that, despite valiant fighting, the French are suffering serious defeats. Those in the wrong are beginning to triumph over the righteous: Heaven is outraged and demonstrates its anger very violently.[21]

Along the same line it is obvious that the poet is unwilling to show his chief heroes defeated directly by a Saracen arm in a fair combat. Not only would this reflect upon the hero's prowess, but the mortal blow he receives, the eventual cause of his downfall, is necessarily also the judicial stroke of sentence: if a Saracen champion prevails, then obviously the Saracens are in the right. When the time comes, the poet has Oliver receive what proves to be his death-blow *from behind (v.* 1945), an attack which is manifestly most unfair according to the rigorous formal require-

[20]In Ruggero M. Ruggieri, *II Processo di Gano nella "Chanson de Roland"* (Florence, 1936), Chapter 2 ("Le varie fasi del processo di Gano e i loro punti di contatto cogli usi attestati dalle fonti storiche e letterarie") is a good study of the episode of the trial. Other works which deal with procedural authenticity in Ganelon's trial and which may usefully be consulted are: Wilhelm Tavernier, "Vom Rolanddichter" in *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie,* 38 (1917), pp. 412-446; G. Baist, "Der gerichtliche Zweikampf, nach seinem Ursprung und im Rolandslied" in *Romanische Forschungen,* 5 (1890), pp. 436-448; M. Pfeffer, "Die Formalitäten des gottesgerichtlichen Zweikampf in der altfranzösischen Epik" in *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie,* 9 (1885), pp. 1-74. In an article entitled "La croyance en la justice immanente à l'époque féodale" in *Le Moyen Âge,* 54 (1948), Paul Rousset also considers briefly how some of the terminology used in the course of Ganelon's trial reflects the rôle of the trial as an ordeal (pp. 237-238).

[21]Paul Rousset, "La croyance," 232, shows how similar natural catastrophes (fires, drought, floods) were interpreted in the eleventh and twelfth centuries as signs of God's displeasure. "Adémar de Chabannes propose une explication … à propos d'un tremblement de terre et d'un vent violent qui secouèrent Rome; on découvrit que des sacrilèges avaient été commis par des Juifs, et on voulut voir là l'origine du malheur public. Les Juifs furent mis à mort et le vent cessa: *Quibus decollatis fur or ventorum cessavit.* "The episode is reported in the *Chronique* of Adémar de Chabannes at the beginning of the eleventh century.

ments of the ordeal. God can hardly be considered to have spoken in the result of such a cowardly attack, iniquitous in itself. Yet the first line of the following *laisse*,

> Oliver sent que a mort est ferut,
>
> (v. 1952)

confirms our fears that this is indeed the action which will end Oliver's rôle in the poem. To underline the serious significance of this combat, the poet does not have Oliver die immediately but has him turn and dispatch his attacker, the Caliph, with a mighty, head-splitting blow; and it should be noted that for this very attack and counterattack the poet returns to the formal procedure of accusation, defence, trial/execution, and public vindication. Not since the initial series of three combats involving Roland, Oliver, and Turpin has the poet had the warriors explicitly use this trial framework: he clearly feels that Oliver must, in counter-attacking and killing his opponent, reassert the real significance of the battle—perhaps for the last time. The sequence of events is clear: having just smitten Oliver, the Caliph thinks that he is now justified in claiming a vindication of the Saracen cause.

> 'Un col[p] avez pris fort.
> Carles li magnes mar vos laissat as porz,
> Tort nos ad fait, nen est dreiz qu'il s'en lot;
> Kar de vos sul ai ben vengét les noz.'
>
> (vv. 1948-51)

The "vindication" turns out, however, to be merely another *calumnia*, because Oliver has not been executed—and far from it, for Oliver has a fair chance now to strike the Saracen who, understandably, is overwhelmed in this return bout. After executing him Oliver alone has right to the real vindication, and it takes the usual form of a sneering jibe:

> 'Paien, mal aies tu!
> Içо ne di que Karles n'i ait perdut;
> Ne a muiler ne a dame qu'aies veüd
> N'en vanteras el regne dunt tu fus,
> Vaillant a un dener que rn'i aies tolut,
> Ne fait damage ne de mei ne d'altrui.'
>
> (vv. 1958-63)

What might have been an awkward development for the poet to have to justify—Oliver, worthy Christian warrior and close friend of Roland,

must be eliminated from the narrative—has been handled very skillfully: Oliver *will* be killed off, but it is clear to the audience, by the nature of the Caliph's blow, that this has nothing to do with the justness or unjustness of Oliver's cause, and, quite the contrary, Oliver himself shows in his own successful counterattack that he is most surely still in the right.

In the case of Turpin, the defeat is brought about, again, not in the course of fair combat but by very improper, not to say ignoble, even "unchivalric" means: surrounded by 40,000 enemy on horse and 10,000 on foot, he is hit by four spears *thrown from a distance;* he does not come into direct contact with the enemy who slay him, and there is no real contest between the two causes. Again, the poet is not content to leave any suggestion at all that the Christian cause may, by the death of Turpin in battle, be considered to have been adjudged the weaker, for, side by side with Roland, he fights on until the Saracens flee from the field. Whatever the tactical superiority of the Saracens may be at this point in the battle, the ultimate cause of Turpin's death is the thoroughly Christian act of comforting his suffering comrade:

> En Rencesvals ad un' ewe curant,
> Aler i volt, si.n durrat a Rollant.
> (vv. 2225-26)

And so he, too, is eliminated from the plot, but without at all discrediting the Christian/French cause.

As for Roland himself, the poet has cleverly related his death not to any unfortunate but inevitable stroke of battle, even to the perfidious attack of the mass of spearmen who surround Roland and Turpin, but rather to that basic flaw in Roland's character itself, his pride.

> En la teste ad e dulor e grant mal,
> Rumput est li temples por ço que il cornat.
> (vv. 2101-02)

In calling Charlemagne with his olifant Roland has burst his temple, and it is to this self-inflicted wound that he eventually succumbs, a very classical conclusion. The poet, in fact, is careful to make it clear that it is *not* the Saracens who will kill him. As their warriors mill uncertainly around Roland and Turpin — at a distance — the poet has them declare distinctly,

'Li quens Rollant est de tant grant fiertét,
Ja n'ert vencut pur nul hume carnel.'
(vv. 2152-53)

So they throw their javelins, spears, and lances, and again, just in case the audience might have inferred that these may have contributed to any extent to Roland's death, the poet states that though they killed Veillantif, his horse, and damaged his shield and hauberk,

. . . enz el cors ne l'ad mie adesét.
(v. 2159)

Roland's death must in no way be attributable to a champion of the Saracen cause, because the audience is aware that the outcome of this battle is to be interpreted primarily as a judgement of God.

But Roland does die, along with Oliver, Turpin, and the whole of the French rear guard. Whatever the efficient cause of their deaths, there is now, because of Roland's summons to Charlemagne by the horn, a need for vengeance as well as a satisfactory conclusion to the contest between the Saracen cause and that of the French. And it is precisely here that the poet inserts the only miracle in the whole of the poem: God intervenes so as to make it possible for the Christians to engage the Saracens further. In this way alone, on the same day as Roland's battle was fought[22] (and as improbable as this may seem, requiring as it does the rapid ride back after the horn blast which carries thirty leagues through the mountains), is it

[22]It is absolutely necessary that the Saracens who challenged and attacked the French rear guard be defeated before sundown on this day. According to the rules of the judicial combat, battle between the two parties must be conclusively terminated by the end of the same day. "The burden of the proof was on the combatant who fought for an affirmative proposition; his adversary won if the stars appeared before the fight was over." F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law before the time of Edward I*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1968), II, p. 634. The poet cannot afford to leave the continuation of the battle, which Charles will wage, until the next day; the final decision must be made by sundown. See also Tardif, *Procédure*, p. 96. For the angel's words to Charles as he grants the miracle of the lengthened day:

'Venger te poez de la gent criminel.'
(v. 2456)

The specific term *venger* confirms that Charlemagne is merely "vindicating" a claim already made by Roland but left undetermined at his death.

possible for the poet to show that there can be no doubt about which side God favors in the struggle.

But God's judgment on behalf of the French must be rendered even more manifest, so the poet has them submit to a new sort of ordeal, that of water. To bring Charlemagne's chase to an end within the limits of this miraculously lengthened day, the poet lays a deep river ahead of the rout. The Saracens, before entering the water, entrust themselves to one of their gods,

> Paiens recleiment un lur deu Tervagant,
> Puis saillent enz, mais il n'i unt guarant.
> (vv. 2468-69)

They are doomed. It is not that Charlemagne, worthy and mighty warrior that he is, has defeated them, but rather that the Christian God has, by His own action, decisively concluded the affair of the Saracen attack upon the French rear guard.[23] Though God may have let Roland, Turpin, and Olivier die earlier in the engagement, He had still not pronounced Himself as to the guilt or innocence of the parties. He reserves their sentence and the execution of their sentence for Himself, so that the audience may understand the full significance of their death. Again it is apparent that the poet conceives of the whole central conflict of the poem in terms of a dispute over right, which dispute is laid judicially before God for a decision.

Within the conflict itself, right at the height of battle, we have a most curious confirmation that this is indeed the poet's conception of the nature of a battle: a judicial duel. In an apparently gratuitous incident

[23]Paul Aebischer's proposition that since Marsile is merely a vassal of Baligant, Charlemagne could not deign to settle the score with him for the damage done to his own vassal Roland, but must seek a vengeance with Baligant himself, his political equal, is only partially satisfying. *(Préhistoire et protohistoire du Roland d'Oxford* [Berne, 1972], pp. 259-68). While the theory can utilise a certain symmetry in the plot (vassal A slays vassal B, so lord B slays lord A) and justifies the whole Baligant episode as an integral, essential part of the *Chanson,* it does overlook the fact that Marsile had already summoned Baligant before Charlemagne appeared on the battlefield and that it was Baligant who sent the challenge of battle to Charlemagne and not Charlemagne to Baligant. In any case Charlemagne himself is not personally responsible for Marsile's defeat: God, *the justicier,* takes care of that. Charlemagne, the chief champion of Christianity is reserved to fight the chief champion of paganism.

Oliver strikes, of all people, his companion Roland.[24] The general rules of any combat required the meticulous observation of a succession of stages both before and after the actual struggle; otherwise there could be no force or clarity in God's pronouncement at the conclusion of the struggle and there might be doubt about whether the case had been laid properly and fairly before God and whether indeed God had actually spoken at all in an improperly presented case. The fidelity of both combatants to each of the elements of the ritual was essential if the fight was to have any sense and if the interpretation placed on the outcome was to have any validity at all.[25] Now what happens in the incident of *laisse* 148 is that the formal procedure was not followed. Oliver, having been treacherously struck from behind by the Caliph, is blinded by his own blood and strikes Roland; Roland likewise is incapacitated (how else could Oliver have been able to strike him?), having fainted upon his horse. Fortunately the blow was not serious and Roland recovers consciousness enough to speak to Oliver. Their exchange is curious enough to warrant reproducing the passage at length:

[24]Virtually every editor of the *Chanson* has felt obliged to offer an explanation, or rather justification, of this extraordinary passage. For example, according to Gérard Moignet, *La Chanson de Roland* (Paris, 1969), p. 153, the poet is seeking here to restore a "sérénité sublime" to the relationship between Roland and Olivier just before their deaths, since they have been in conflict with each other from the beginning of the battle.

[23]The same insistence upon proper formal procedure at the outset of a battle can be seen in the *Chanson de Guillaume*. A pagan, Alderufe, approaches Guillaume defiantly:

"Ancui perdras la teste.
Ne te garreit tut liu ors de Palerne."
(vv. 2104-5 ed. McMillan)

Guillaume retorts that the decision on the outcome of their battle is God's alone and adds that the pagan must clearly state whatever grievance he may have towards Guillaume. Only then will Guillaume decide whether to "receive" it (to accept the accusation) as grounds for a combat or whether, presumably, to admit that the grievance is founded on truth—that there is, in effect, no contest.

"Ço ert en Deus,' dist li marchis Willame.
"Sarazin, frere, quant tu te vols combatre,
Ke me dites ore de quele chose me blames,
Si t'ai fait tort, prest sui que dreit t'en face,
Sil vols receivre, jo t'en doins mun gage."
(vv. 2106-10)

Si li demandet dulcement e suef: 1999
'Sire cumpain, faites le vos de gred?
Ja est ço Rollant ki tant vos soelt amer,
Par nule guise ne m'aviez desfiét.'
Dist Olivier; 'Or vos oi jo parler, 2003
Jo ne vos vei; veied vus Damnedeu!
Ferut vos ai? car le me pardunez!'
Rollant respunt: 'Jo n'ai nïent de mel.
Jo.1 vos parduins ici e devant Deu.' 2007
A icel mot l'un a l'altre ad clinét.
Par tel amur as les vos desevréd!

It is a pathetic colloquy, full of concern for the other's feelings and for the niceties of proper behavior in the midst of a tragic battle, with the French hard-pressed and falling on every hand. But what catches the reader's attention is that Roland does not seem particularly perturbed by the fact that his friend Oliver is attacking him. Perhaps the audience is to understand that they had, after all, recently and rather seriously quarrelled over the blowing of the olifant and that the angry Oliver had gone so far as to threaten to break his sister Aide's betrothal to Roland. What most peculiarly does concern Roland, though, is that Oliver had not challenged him before the actual blow was struck. The sense of the fight was not properly stated by Oliver in a *défi*[26] or "accusation" by which he would have declared what was in dispute between them. Roland's very first question is, "Is it with deliberate, conscious intention that you are attacking me?" The misunderstanding is quickly cleared up, both men reaffirm their amity, and they part.

The episode is brief. What the poet seems particularly concerned with

[26]*Desfier* is the proper formal term by which a person revokes *the fiance*, the trust or state of amity, which another person enjoys with him. It is what Ganelon said with the gravest formality when he publicly declared the state of hostility between himself and Roland and the peers, and again later, when he reminds Charlemagne of that declaration:

'Desfi les ci, sire, vostre veiant.'
(v. 326)

'Jo desfiai Rollant le poigneor.'
(v. 3775)

is in part the pathetic irony of the situation,[27] and in part the formal ceremony by which the awkward problem is resolved. That the situation arose at all is due solely to the way in which the poet made it possible for Oliver to violate the first and fundamental element in any combat: blinded by his own blood, he thought he was attacking another Saracen, and that, therefore, he was merely continuing a combat for which no new challenge was necessary. It is, as we have seen, the absence of this challenge which most disturbs Roland:

> 'Par nule guise ne m'aviez desfiét.'
>
> (v. 2002)

His protest, a recrimination, is sufficient to transform the entire situation, so that Oliver must now explain this breach of military etiquette and entreat forgiveness for it. The lack of a *défi* is not merely an impoliteness: an accusation is an absolute necessity for any combat to have any final meaning whatsoever. Victory and defeat always have a moral sense so that the grounds on which a battle is fought, the moral positions which each combatant will stand upon, have to be clearly understood. Again, Roland is bewildered not by the fact that Oliver should have attacked him at all, but much more significantly because Oliver did not first declare that he, Oliver, was in the right (about something) and that Roland was in the wrong. The poet's notion of the formal nature of combat, and of the means it offered to obtain divine justice, pervades the *Chanson* even to this dramatic and pathetic incident.

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[27]G.F. Jones *(Ethos,* p. 42) sees the passage as significant only as a strange reflection of twelfth-century conceptions of honor. "In the fog of battle soldiers often shoot inadvertently at their friends, yet no one today would ask his best friend if he had done so on purpose. Nor would anyone remind his confused friend that he had not declared war on him before shooting. But honor was a fragile thing in the twelfth century, when men of honor had to be punctilious even with their friends. Turold probably considered Roland magnanimous enough for pardoning Oliver's blow as well as his previous reproach. Perhaps Roland was the twelfth-century ideal of a perfect friend, but such a friend would hardly have been appreciated during World War II."