

AOI in the *Chanson de Roland*: A Divergent Hypothesis*

THE SEQUENCE OF LETTERS AOI, in the right hand margin at various intervals in the Oxford Digby 23 manuscript of the *Roland*, constitute a *hapax legomenon*. For some time now, musicologists, philologists, liturgic historians, and literary critics have attempted to unlock the secret contained in those letters. Are they an abbreviation? Do they constitute a word? What is the nature of their function in the text? There can be no certain answer.

Hypotheses to account for the appearance and meaning of the letters have, nonetheless, been plentiful.¹ For many scholars they appear to be a musical notation.² Other scholars tend to see the letters as a notation for a

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¹ Professor Guy Mermier discusses previous scholarship on the AOI in the Oxford *Roland*, in his "A Thirteenth Hypothesis: The *Chanson de Roland*'s Mysterious AOI," *The Michigan Academician*, 5 (1973), pp. 481-491; reviewed by F. R. P. Akehurst in *Olifant*, 4, No. 2 (December 1976), pp. 119-120. Mermier summarizes the hypotheses advanced by nearly all of the scholars mentioned in this paper. A useful bibliography which supplements Mermier's article is provided by Gerard J. Brault, ed., *The Song of Roland* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 2, p. 253, note to line 9.

²See, for instance, Jacques Chailley, "Le Problème de l'AOI," *Acta Musicologica* (1955), p. 9; William B. Cornelia, "On the Significance of the Symbol AOI," *Romanic Review*, 25 (1934), pp. 126-129; Friedrich Gennrich, *Der Musikalische Vortrag der alt-französischen Chansons de geste* (Halle a.S.: Niemeyer, 1923); Herman J. Green, "The Etymology of AOI and AE," *Modern Language Notes*, 85 (1970), pp. 593-598; Adalbert Hämel, "Aoi im Rolandslied," *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 48 (1926), pp. 382-385; René Louis, "Le Refrain dans les plus anciennes chansons de geste et le sigle AOI dans le *Roland* d'Oxford," *Mélanges István Frank* (Universität Saarlandes, 1957), pp.

performing jongleur. Grace Frank, for example, suggested that the letters were a sign to the performer to speed up or slow down the singing of the text.³ Jenkins thought AOI might serve as a sort of crescendo mark, to indicate special emphasis.⁴ Deferrari considers AOI either a word indicating to the jongleur that he has come to a resting place or a statement alerting his listeners that the story will henceforth take a slightly different turn.⁵ Similarly, Cornelius and Frances Crowley suggest that AOI derived from *adaudi* and meant 'listen'.⁶ Certain scholars have conjectured that AOI was affixed to stanzas to be recited in a shortened version of the *Roland*; if all stanzas were recited, some five hours and twenty minutes would be required for a complete performance.⁷ André de Mandach believes AOI (sometimes written Aoi) to represent *A m.*, an abbreviation for Amen, a response elicited from the audience or else a dramatic declaration from the jongleur.⁸ Finally, many have taken AOI to represent a French or Basque war cry to be uttered by either the performing jongleur or his audience.⁹

Nearly all theories pertaining to the AOI share the assumption that it was directly related to the public performance of the text.¹⁰ As Jenkins

330-360; Louis Réau and Gustave Cohen, *L'Art du Moyen Age et la civilisation française: arts plastiques, art littéraire* (Paris: A. Michel, 1951), p. 337; Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1940), p. 204; Martin de Riquer, *Les Chansons de gestes françaises* (Paris: Nizet, 1957), p. 104; Hans Spanke, "Klangspielereien im mittelalterlichen Lied," *Studien zur Lateinischen Dichtung des Mittelalters*, 1 (Dresden, 1931), p. 175; Wolfgang Storost, "Geschichte der altfranzösischen Romanzen Strophe," *Romanische Arbeiten*, 16 (Halle, 1930), p. 44.

³Grace Frank, "AOI in the *Chanson de Roland*," *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Association*], 48 (1933), pp. 629-635.

⁴T. A. Jenkins, "Old French AOI," *Word Studies in French and English*. Language Monograph No. 14 (Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 1933), pp. 11-13.

⁵Harry A. Deferrari, "O.F. (Norman) 'AOI' and 'AVOI', and English 'AHOY'," *PMLA* [*Publications of the Modern Language Association*], 51 (1936), pp. 328-336.

⁶Cornelius and Frances Crowley, "Le Problème de l'étymologie de AOI dans la *Chanson de Roland*," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 3 (1960), pp. 12-13.

⁷Edwin Place and Dalai Brenes, "The Function of AOI in the Oxford *Roland*," *Romanic Review*, 41 (1950), pp. 161-166. Paul-Louis Faye raises serious objections to this particular hypothesis ("The Arrow-Ladder Method," *Romanic Review*, 43 [1952], pp. 71-73).

⁸André B. de Mandach. "The So-Called AOI in the *Chanson de Roland*," *Symposium*, 11 (1957), pp. 303-315.

⁹For examples, see Mermier's article, cited above (note 1), and Daniel Devoto, "L'AOI dans la *Chanson de Roland*," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 5 (1968), pp. 433-436.

noted: "The size of the Oxford manuscript indicates that it was a jongleur's copy, a sort of pocket edition, and, as no other OF manuscript, so far as known, offers anything exactly similar to AOI, it is probable that we are dealing with some individual device whose purpose was to secure a proper or more effective rendering of the words or music."¹¹ Yet that assumption, common to so many of the hypotheses on the AOI, has never been definitively proven.

The Oxford *Roland* is a literary text. So far as we know, it may never have been performed before an audience. I am not suggesting that the *Roland* — in some other version — was never performed before a medieval audience, but I do suggest that there is no evidence that the Oxford text was before a jongleur's gaze as he performed before listeners. The beauty of the manuscript, the large colored initials, the carefully executed calligraphy, the inherent literary excellence of the composition, together with the uncertainty of its ever having been rendered before an audience, suggest that the Digby 23 manuscript may have belonged to a library rather than to a roving jongleur. If we reject the concept of a *manuscrit de jongleur*,¹² a new hypothesis on the origin and meaning of the letters AOI is

¹⁰There are only two possible exceptions, both of which derive from religious symbolism. Henry and Renée Kahane have suggested a gnostic interpretation ("Magic and Gnosticism in the *Roland*," *Romance Philology*, 12 [1959], pp. 216-231, esp. pp. 225-226). Mermier, in the article cited above, proposes that AOI represent the initial letters of Alpha, Omega and Iesus, and that these letters somehow represent the "breath of God" in the Oxford MS. Yet even Mermier's article explicitly (and unnecessarily) associates AOI with the performance of the *Roland*: "It is also the moral and affective propulsive force which sustains the epic to its conclusion both on the level of performance, involving the juggler and his audience, and on the universal symbolical level where Christ is made present through the recurrence of the mysterious AOI sign" (p. 191).

¹¹T. Atkinson Jenkins, ed., *La Chanson de Roland* (Boston, New York [etc.]: D. C. Heath & Co., 1924; reprint: New York: American Life Foundation, 1977), p. 4, note to line 9.

¹²The term *Manuscrit de jongleur* was first coined by Léon Gautier in his *Les Épopées françaises*, T. 1 (Revised edition, Paris: V. Palmé, 1878), p. 226: "Ils sont de petit format, à une seule colonne, commodes, légers, charmants. L'écriture est du XII^e siècle, ou de la première moitié du XIII^e". A footnote list of seven examples of surviving *manuscrits de jongleurs* includes the Digby 23, although that manuscript dates to the eleventh century.

Scholars by no means agree on which surviving manuscripts could be classified as *manuscrits de jongleur*. With reference to the term, Duncan McMillan writes, "C'est là un concept qui est pour le moins contestable, les deux composants paraissant s'exclure mutuellement." ("La Chevalerie Vivien dans le manuscrit dit 'de Savile': Notes prolégoméniques," *Études de langue et de littérature du moyen âge offertes à Félix Le Croix* [Paris: Champion. 1973], p. 361n.) For further discussion, see Joseph J. Duggan, "The Manu-

possible.¹³

We are fairly certain that the Oxford manuscript is a copy of one or more earlier redactions of the *Roland*. Mrs. Frank's study reveals beyond a doubt that AOI in almost every instance is placed alongside a shift in the narration or situation of the story. Deferrari demonstrates with persuasiveness that *aoi* may have derived from *avoco*, the first person present indicative of *avocare*, sometimes meaning 'to interrupt', 'to break off', 'to divert'. Several times where AOI appears in the Oxford manuscript, a line is absent that indeed occurs in some of the other manuscripts of the *Roland*. Three other manuscripts, for instance, have an additional line after line 46 of the Oxford manuscript, where an AOI occurs. The same situation recurs at line 3493, where it is universally admitted that a line is wanting.¹⁴

In view of these relative certainties, one wonders whether the AOI corresponds to a scribe's indication (to himself or to another) that he was, at that point, departing from the primary manuscript or manuscripts being copied, adding or deleting as he deemed the situation merited. AOI placed beside a given line or at the end of a *laisse* may have been the scribe's notation that at that point "I break off, I divert." The scribe or copyist may then have added or omitted lines or even entire *laises*.

When, in the *Roland*, a series of *laises similaires* occurs, not at all infrequently one of them bears no AOI marking, while the others do.¹⁵ The hypothesis presented here can account for this situation. The *laisse* not set off by an AOI would correspond to one coming from the primary manu-

script Corpus of the Medieval Romance Epic." in *The Medieval Alexander Legend and Romance Epic: Essays in Honour of David J. A. Ross*, ed. Peter Noble, Lucie Polak, and Claire Isoz (Millwood, N.Y., London, and Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1982), pp. 29-42.

¹³In his introduction to the S.A.T.F. edition of the Digby 23 manuscript, Charles Samaran gave numerous, compelling reasons for rejecting the notion that it was a *manuscrit de jongleur*. However, of all the scholars who have written on the AOI, only Place and Brenes, in the article cited above (note 7), have taken to heart his remarks, even though they were first made some fifty years ago. Yet they, too, associate the appearance of AOI with an (abridged) performance. See Alexandre de Laborde et Charles Samaran, eds., *La Chanson de Roland. Reproduction phototypique du Manuscrit Digby 23 de la Bodélique Library d'Oxford* (Paris: Société des anciens textes français, 1933), pp. 36-41.

¹⁴For more examples, see Frank, p. 634.

¹⁵For examples, see vv. 617-633, 1049-1081, 1753-1795, 2355-2396 (Jenkins edition).

script being copied. The others would represent additions not derived from the primary manuscript. By marking them with AOI, the scribe would have indicated his departure from the primary manuscript being copied.

This hypothesis seems more plausible than Mrs. Frank's interpretation (one of the most respected), though no explanation of the AOI can ever be proven decisively. Her hypothesis fails to account for the fact that only some, not all, shifts in situation or narration are accompanied by AOI. I suggest that the absence of AOI in such instances could be an indication that the unmarked shifts were already a part of the primary manuscript being copied. Conversely, some of the breaks in narration that coincide with the presence of an AOI may have then resulted from the scribe's omission of more continuous sorts of passages contained in the primary manuscript. This may even shed light on the unmistakable appearance of AOI well within several of the *laissez*; far from being the result of scribal negligence, the AOI would simply indicate the "last redactor's" departure from the *laisse* of the primary manuscript in favor of a different version of an equivalent *laisse*. This hypothesis would account, as well, for the lack of any dramatic import in many of the lines which are accompanied by an AOI, a serious problem for any hypothesis that assumes the letters to be related to a performance.

To the potential objection that there exists no precedent in medieval literature for a scribal notation of this sort, there is an obvious response: the very presence of AOI in the *Roland* is, in itself, unique. Special cases require special explanations. The only manner in which to avoid the problem presented by the *hapax legomenon* is to adopt a view like that of de Mandach and claim, for example, that we are dealing with an abbreviation for Amen and not at all with AOI.¹⁶

I suggest, then, that the Oxford manuscript of the *Roland* was not a *manuscrit de jongleur* and that the AOI in it was to show something about the relationship between that manuscript and a previous version, a version which the "last redactor" presumably used as a point of departure. Of course, neither this hypothesis nor any other on the AOI can be proven de-

¹⁶De Mandach reads an *m* instead of *oi* in the manuscript (p. 312). Both Mermier (p. 485) and I fail to read *m* for *oi* even in de Mandach's examples.

finitively, but if my suggestion is correct, that information might be of use in attempts to determine something of the nature of pre-Oxford versions of the *Roland*.¹⁷

NATHAN LOVE
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¹⁷See, for example, Robert A. Hall, Jr., "Linguistic Strata in the *Chanson de Roland*," *Romance Philology*, 13 (1959-60), pp. 156-161; "On Individual Authorship in the *Roland*," *Symposium*, 15 (1961), pp. 297-302; "The Individual in Relation to his Society: The *Chanson de Roland*," in *Cultural Symbolism in Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), pp. 17-32, and John Robin Allen, "Stylistic Variants in the *Roland*," *Olfant*, 6, Nos. 3 & 4 (Spring & Summer, 1979), pp. 351-361.

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