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**Ganelon After Oxford**

The conflict between Roland and Ganelon and the subsequent trial form an important part of the *Chanson de Roland*. How one looks at the trial and Ganelon's role in the text bears significantly on one's interpretation of the epic. While most critics acknowledge that Roland is the hero of the *chanson* and Ganelon the traitor, many, perhaps a majority, find flaws in Roland's character or conduct and accept the argument that Ganelon had some justification for his actions in the eyes of Charlemagne's barons and, perhaps, in the view of the medieval audience.

Roland, of course, is blamed for *desmesure* and Ganelon is justified by the argument that his open defiance of Roland and the peers in the council scene gave him the right, according to the ancient Germanic ethical and legal code, to take vengeance on his declared adversaries. Proponents of this thesis allege that the *Chanson de Roland*, a text which they date to the eleventh century, reflects a growing tension and conflict between the powerful feudal barons and the growing power of the monarchy. The barons represent the traditions and custom law of a decentralized state where the king is *primus inter pares*, but essentially a baron like themselves. As the French monarchy grew in strength and was bolstered in a theoretical sense by the centralizing themes of Roman law, conflict between the crown and the nobility became apparent.


2 For excellent summaries of these conflicting themes of government, see Fritz Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948).
For many the *Roland* reflects this conflict between an old order and an approaching new reality.

In the trial scene scholars often find ambivalence toward Ganelon. When Charlemagne accuses him of treason, Ganelon argues that he never betrayed the emperor or France; he only took vengeance on Roland. Since he had defied him openly and warned him in front of everyone, he had the right, he alleges, to cause Roland's death. At this point Charlemagne asks the barons for judgment. When the barons return from deliberation, they do not sentence Ganelon but propose that he be pardoned on this occasion and restored to his former good service:

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\text{Dient al rei: "Sire, nus vos prium} \\
\text{Que clamez quite le cunte Guenelun,} \\
\text{Puis si vos servet par feid e par amor.} \\
\text{Vivre le laissez, car mult est gentilz hoem.} \\
\text{Ja por murir n'en ert veüd gerun,} \\
\text{Ne por aveir ja nel recuverum.}^3
\]

Here many see the barons's suggestion as an acknowledgement that Ganelon's argument is correct. The author emphasizes the intimidation of Pinabel and Ganelon's clan, but scholars who support this view minimize the factor of intimidation and argue that ancient Germanic tradition gave the family right of vengeance in the old law of the feud. Deep down, they assert, the barons have sympathy for Ganelon's argument; in their eyes he has custom and the tradition of ancient usage on his side.

The question of Ganelon's rights within the Germanic legal tradition is far too complicated a question to treat in the space of a


3 Gérard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland*, Vol. II (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978) lines 3808-3813. T. A. Jenkins reads *getun* for *gerun*, interpreting *geton* or *giton* to mean "scion of the family." Thus he translates "Never at any cost will any scion of his (Roland's) be seen" *(La Chanson de Roland [Boston: B.C. Heath, 1924] 266, n. to V. 3812).*
single article.\textsuperscript{4} One should, however, consider other versions of the trial, especially in texts allegedly no later than the twelfth, thirteenth, or early fourteenth century, a period not too far removed from the late twelfth-century date assigned to the Oxford manuscript.\textsuperscript{5}

Curiously, the other versions of the \textit{Roland} do not preserve the trial of Ganelon in the form found in the Oxford manuscript. The Venice IV manuscript has a text close to Oxford for the first 3845 lines (to 3681 in Oxford), then departs to add a six-hundred-line narrative of how the returning troops took Narbonne. The final sixteen hundred lines have a different conclusion, one which includes an expanded and altered version of Ganelon's trial.\textsuperscript{6} In this

\textsuperscript{4} I am in the process of completing a book on the trial of Ganelon, which I hope can appear in 1988 or 1989.

\textsuperscript{5} Jules Horrent compares the trial scenes in the Karlamagnus \textit{Saga}, the pseudo-Turpin, and the \textit{Carmen de prodicione Guenonis} with the Oxford \textit{Roland}. Although some allege that these poems preserve an older tradition, Horrent argues both for the Oxford text's artistic superiority and its earlier date \textit{(La chanson de Roland dans les littératures française et espagnole au moyen âge} [Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1951] 150-55). Horrent also compares the trial scene in the various French manuscripts only briefly, noting the two basic versions of the trial and asserting that the Oxford text is the older of the two. Basically he belabors the later texts for oversimplification: "Dans celui-ci, il n'y a pas de procès véritable: il y a un long duel entre Pinabel et Thierry et un long débat sur le supplice le plus cruel à infliger à Ganelon. La scène complexe et difficile d'Oxford a été simplifiée, réduite à sa partie la plus spectaculaire et celle-ci interminablement allongée. La digne réserve d'Oxford sur le choix du châtiment n'a pas été suivie par le remanieur qui prend plaisir à nous dépeindre les hauts barons de l'empire imaginant avec une verve sadique le supplice idéal" (203).

\textsuperscript{6} The Châteauroux, Paris, Cambridge, Venice VII, and Lyon manuscripts all have this version of the events, though minor details do vary from text to text. See Raoul Mortier, editor of the series of volumes, \textit{Les Textes de la Chanson de Roland}, Vol. 2 \textit{La Version de Venise IV}; Vol. 4 \textit{Le Manuscrit de Châteauroux}; Vol. 5 \textit{Le manuscrit de Venise VII}; Vol. 6 \textit{Le Texte de Paris}; Vol. 7 \textit{Le Texte de Cambridge}; Vol. 8 \textit{Le Texte de Lyon}. In his paper at the Twenty-second International Congress of Medievalists at Kalamazoo entitled, "The Poetics of \textit{Abbreviatio}: The Lyon \textit{Roland}" William Kibler stressed that the Lyon redactor's abbreviation had the effect of focusing the text more on the treason of Ganelon.
version of the trial, much maligned by Mortier, there is a very different sequence of events. Ganelon manages to flee his captors twice. The first time he escapes briefly, only to be pursued by a number of chevaliers and eventually recaptured. The second escape is very brief, as he never actually gets out of sight. After his second attempted escape, a messenger arrives to tell Ganelon that Pinabel is coming. Following the combat between Pinabel and Thierry, Charlemagne asks his barons how he should punish Ganelon. Several of them propose punishments, after which Charlemagne has Ganelon tied to four horses and torn asunder.

Except for the combat between Pinabel and Thierry and Ganelon's actual manner of death, this version of the trial would seem to resemble the Oxford version only slightly. Indeed, it is notable because it has a sequence of events so radically different from the better-known Oxford rendition. Yet a closer look at the Châteauroux manuscript, a well-developed account of the trial, shows that this version of events makes an interpretation of the trial in which the motives and attitudes are made explicit.

The early part of the epic in this version is essentially the same for our purposes: Roland and Ganelon argue in the first council scene; Naimes supports Ganelon; Naimes, Oliver and Turpin all offer to go on the mission before Roland suggests Ganelon; Ganelon defies Roland, Oliver and the peers; and Ganelon threatens Roland.

Just prior to the trial Ganelon escapes Otes, the man responsible for his captivity. After he has been retrieved, the trial is to begin. As Ganelon is brought from the tower he is described as a handsome warrior, the kind of description which often leads critics to think that the author is expressing admiration. Yet just as in the case of the Saracen, whose handsome portrait is often diminished by the statement that if he were only a Christian he would be a great knight, Ganelon's portrait is undercut by his fear and the fact that his guilt cannot let him await "raison":

D'armes porter resanble ben baron,  
Mais de combatre n'atendra ja raison.
Or si porpense q'il qesra garison,  
Il s'en fuira cui q'en poist ne qi nom. 

Up to this point in the text Ganelon imagines that he will have to defend himself in single combat (just prior to these lines Gandebuef de Frise offers to prove Ganelon's treason by combat). The "raison" which Ganelon shall not await is the proof (single combat) which medieval society accepted as a revelation of God's truth. Ganelon's fear is not the result of cowardice as a knight, rather it stems from the knowledge that he would be, in a sense, fighting against God. He would be trying, through combat, to prevent the truth of his treason from being disclosed. Ganelon does try to escape, but he is captured quickly and Charlemagne asks for judgment. Before sentence can be given, a messenger interrupts the proceedings to announce that Pinabel is coming with fifteen-hundred men to defend Ganelon's cause.

Here we have an important gloss on the implications of the Oxford Roland. In the Oxford text Ganelon speaks with Pinabel prior to the council's judgment. He depends on Pinabel to defend him. Also in the Oxford version there is the threat of Pinabel and Ganelon's clan. In the Châteauroux manuscript Ganelon is portrayed openly as one afraid to engage in single combat, and the expressed intimidation of Pinabel becomes explicit in Châteauroux by his appearance with fifteen-hundred armed knights.

Ganelon now speaks for himself, the only equivalent to his pre-combat defense in the Oxford manuscript. In the Châteauroux manuscript, however, he must explain his flight, which would be evidence for a case of presumption of guilt. In the Oxford Roland he cleverly masks the true charge by attempting to claim that he had a just claim to vengeance. In the Châteauroux version his deceit is made explicit: he claims that he had no intention of fleeing; he was merely out "mon cheval esprover" (v. 7627). Just as Pinabel

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8 It is interesting that Pinabel appears here as if he were not among Charlemagne's men, perhaps a meaning given to his being from Sorrence (Sorrento?) or Florence, as Mortier reads the Châteauroux text.
defends Ganelon's statement of the case in the Oxford manuscript, so here he upholds Ganelon's pretense that he was not trying to escape. Pinabel claims that Ganelon fled only when he saw the host of knights bearing down on him. It was his natural instinct to flee these pursuers, who seemed intent on doing him harm. Whereas the Oxford version of Ganelon's defense seems plausible to a modern audience with little knowledge of the period, the Châteauroux text leaves no room for doubt: both Ganelon and Pinabel intend to deceive.

In the Oxford Roland only Thierry is willing to fight, a Worthy knight but only slight of build in comparison with Pinabel. The Châteauroux version exaggerates even more the disparity between the two combatants, thus emphasizing the David and Goliath motif. After Ogier, Count Richer of Aspremont, and Gerart de Viane have all offered to fight Pinabel, Thierry comes forward and is given precedence:

Tieris ot non et si fu escuer
Al bon .R. qi le tenoit mot chier. (vv. 7711-12)

Here Thierry's relationship to Roland is not family; he is a vaslez and his escuer. This underscores the fact that the combat is between Pinabel, a formidable knight, and a much younger, untried opponent. But Pinabel shows in the Châteauroux text that he is fully aware of the deceit involved. When he bends to kiss the relics before combat, he does not touch them with his lips: "N'en plot a Damedeu! Tot tramblant se leva" (v. 7867). This helps to explain Pinabel's offer of compromise during the combat. After Thierry has killed Pinabel, his partisans flee. Ganelon is again given a handsome description as he is brought from the tower; again the description serves to make apparent the uselessness of beauty and physical strength when not brought to proper fruition: "Mar i fu sa failure quant il ne vint a gre" (v. 8043).

Charlemagne then ponders the reasons for Ganelon's betrayal. He concludes that he does not know, except that Ganelon sold them out, as Judas had sold Christ. After Pinabel's death Ganelon admits that he had caused the death of Roland and the twelve peers, but he argues that he should not be blamed, in that Roland had judged him to the mission. This is the closest one gets to the defense Ganelon makes in the Oxford text. In all subsequent
versions emphasis is placed on Ganelon's mercenary motives and his deceit. The emphasis on Ganelon's speaking ability and his clever use of language in the other versions of the Roland is intended to be pejorative. Critics of the Oxford Roland never pay enough attention to this trait, which is only subtly developed in the Oxford text. In fact, Auerbach's article on parataxis only served to denigrate Roland's own speech in the council scene by implying that the blunt, paratactic style was particularly appropriate to the

9 In the mid-twelfth-century Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi the martyrdom of Roland is underscored heavily. The author also makes it clear that Ganelon's motive was greed. The trial is treated cursorily and Ganelon is tied to four horses at the conclusion: "Ilico duos milites armatos Pinabellum pro Ganalono et Teodericu pro semetipso ad declarandam veritatem congredi iussit: quorum Teodericus illico peremit Pinabellum. Sicque Ganalonius tradidit declarata iussit illum Karolus quatuor feroevisimis totius exercitus equis alligari et super eos sessores quatuor agitantes contra quatuor plagas celi, et sic digna morte discruptus interiit" (H.M. Smyser, The Pseudo-Turpin [Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1937] 89). See also the edition of C. Meredith-Jones, Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi ou Chronique du Pseudo-Turpin (Paris: Droz, 1936) for nearly identical language. Willem de Briane's Anglo-Norman version of the Chronique de Turpin has no argument between Roland and Ganelon nor any Blancandrin episode. Ganelon is associated with Judas and the emphasis is on bribery (André de Mandach, Chronique de Turpin, Vol. II of Naissance et développement de la chanson de geste en Europe [Genève: Droz, 1963]). In thé Carmen de Prodicione Guenonis Roland suggests Ganelon for the mission to the Saracens because he loves him. Ganelon takes offense and the two men quarrel. In the concluding scene there is no duel between Tieri and Pinabel (G. Paris, "Le Carmen de Prodicione Guenonis et la légende de Roncevaux," Romania 11 [1882]: 465-518). Not only do these texts emphasize that Ganelon's principal motive was greed, they also stress Ganelon's essential deceit and his clever tongue. When Roland finally sounds the horn in desperation, Ganelon, cognizant of his suffering, attempts to persuade Charlemagne, just as in the Oxford Roland, that Roland might just be joking: "quia Rotolandus pro minimo solet tubicinare cotidie. Scias quia nunc auxilio tuo non indiget, sed venandi studio aliquam feram persequeatur per nemora concinando discurrat" (Meredith-Jones 192,194). The author then comments on Ganelon's profoundly deceitful nature: "O subdola lingua, ludae proditoris traditioni comparata!" (Meredith-Jones 194).
unreflective young warrior, hot-tempered and eager for battle.\textsuperscript{10} Contrarily, Ganelon’s counter argument is smoother and gives the semblance to the modern reader of a more reasonable disposition and thoughtful perspective. Naimes's support of Ganelon and the general approval of the barons only add to the impression that we are supposed to subscribe to the more reasonable argument. However, one should keep in mind that Ganelon uses language throughout the text to deceive: in the initial council scene just discussed,\textsuperscript{11} to persuade Charlemagne not to heed the sound of the horn, and in choosing clever language to sidestep the accusation of treason at the trial.\textsuperscript{12} The authors of the Latin versions discussed in the note above, all from the mid-twelfth century, understood that Ganelon’s heroic appearance and linguistic ability were part of the veneer which covered the deeply deceitful nature of the traitor.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{11} Ganelon’s speech is marked by connectives but it is also subtle in implying a lack of concern for the Franks on Roland’s part. Note that Ganelon conveniently discounts the previous experience of Basan and Basilie until he has been named to the embassy.

\textsuperscript{12} It is common in medieval texts for the subtle, clever argument to be deceitful and associated with the snake’s tongue. In the Jeu d’Adam Adam’s honest and upright answers are laconically blunt. It is the snake’s language that is subtle in syntax and thought, thus allowing him to work his way into Eve’s confidence.

\textsuperscript{13} In the Konrad version of the Roland the trial resembles that in the Oxford text. The author notes that the “Carolingians” would like to save him (laisse ccxxvii). But when Ganelon admits his pleasure at having caused the death of Roland and the peers, his family concedes his great crime and begs for mercy on his behalf. Charlemagne laments their request, says that the crime was murder and too great for pardon (laisse ccxxix). Binabel attempts to defend Ganelon’s statement as a legal defense (laisse cccxx) and challenges anyone to dispute his claim. Here one sees the clear intimidation, which the Oxford author mentioned, in sharp relief. Ganelon’s kin saw no legitimate case in his open defiance. Binabel conceives this and offers to prove his version of the defense by
Scholars are not unaware that the Oxford *Roland*’s strong conclusion in favor of Charlemagne and against Ganelon leaves little room for the argument that the author considered Ganelon's defense justifiable. The problem is often solved by supposing that a later redactor or a clerical author changed the conclusion to make it more Christian or more acceptable to a later age. Adalbert Dessau proposes such a solution to explain how reconciliation concludes such rebellious vassal epics as *Chevalerie Ogier de Danemarche, Renart de Montauban, Girart de Roussillon* and *Raoul de Cambrai*. In his view the Germanic judicial question involved, in which the lord has wronged the vassal, would have reached a just conclusion by the vassal taking vengeance. To explain the ending he did not expect, Dessau suggests a later redaction giving the text a moral, Christian ending.\(^{14}\) Henning Krauss sees the texts as being written at a later date altogether, when during the period of Philippe II and a strong central authority,\(^{15}\) the Germanic, baronial position was no longer acceptable.

Perhaps it is time for us to question an interpretation of the *Roland* trial that requires one to posit earlier versions and later redactions to reconcile this interpretation with the later versions. If the later versions are correct in their interpretation of the trial and Ganelon's conduct was perceived to be that of a deceitful traitor, clever in his use of language, then perhaps what is wrong is our combat. During the combat between Tirrich and Binabel, Tirrich offers to intercede, as in the Oxford text, on Binabel's behalf, if he drops his suit on behalf of Ganelon. Binabel gives the classic answer for those who have made a pact with the devil: he has pledged his word to Ganelon and cannot fail in it. Recognizing this aspect of Binabel's pact, Tirrich tells him that he is a prisoner of the devil (laisse cccxxvii). After the combat the hostages are beheaded and Ganelon is tied to horses and dragged to his death (*Das Rolandslied des Pfaffen Konrad, Herausgegeben von Carl Wesle, Zweite Auflage besorgt von Peter Wapnewski* [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1967]).


desire to reconstruct Ganelon, to make him into a somewhat more admirable character. It is true that such a Ganelon, loyal to France, courageous, even wise, becomes a much more interesting figure to our modern eyes. If he is a noble figure whose momentary hatred has caused his undoing, then he becomes a classic figure in the tragic mold. In our eyes, texts where the principal characters are more complicated and less easily drawn as good or bad are more profound and worthy of our admiration. Such concerns, however, should not take precedence over our interest in discovering what the text was thought to mean in its own time.

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