Fidelity And Treachery: Thematic and Dramatic Structuring of the Laisses in an Episode of the Couronnement de Louis (laisses 43-54)

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In his discussion of strophic structure in La Chanson de geste, Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs (Société des Publications Romanes et Françaises 53, chapter 4), Jean Rychner makes it clear that the laisse as it is structured in the Chanson de Roland is the laisse par excellence, the standard by which he measures the beauty of other chansons: "Dans le Roland, la laisse est ce qu'elle doit être . . ." (124). Its excellence derives from the coincidence of its narrative and lyric units. Its beauty lies in the functional nature of this perfect fit: "Ce qui est fonctionnel est beau" (124)!

The corollary to this esthetic makes the long, composite laisses of the Montage Guillaume, which Rychner likens to the Couronnement de Louis, flawed and functionless: "... ses laisses ... ne remplissent aucune fonction" (124). Where the narrative and lyric units of such chansons appear to be "out of sync," Rychner sees an imperfect composition. The weakened strophic structure corresponds, in his thinking, to an essentially narrative, rather than lyric, quality. The result is a chanson de geste that, for Rychner, falls short of its potential beauty.

Notwithstanding the functional esthetic of the Roland's strong strophic structure, nor the lack of synchronization between narrative unit and strophe in the Couronnement, further study of the latter poem seems warranted in the light of the observations of Edward A. Heinemann concerning the artistic structuring of certain of its laisses. Heinemann draws attention to an "unorthodox" mode of composition in which the use of laisse structure and laisse boundaries is quite unlike that of the Roland.

The "orthodox" structure as exemplified by the Chanson de Roland satisfies two criteria set out by Rychner (107): 1) The laisse is the basic element—both formal and narrative—of the poem. (The division of the story into events, incidents etc. should correspond to the stanza divisions). Composite laisses, then, are seen to weaken the strophic structure. 2) Other formal elements, such as reprises, coincide with the
laisse to emphasize the strophic structure. In addition, verbal tones of intonation and of conclusion often serve to heighten the awareness of laisse outlines.

A cursory reading of the *Couronnement de Louis* is sufficient to see that these criteria remain unfulfilled. Professor Heinemann, in his examination of laisses 29 to 31, for example, observes that "ce n'est pas l'unité de la laisse qui a présidé à la composition de cet épisode" ("Sur l'art de la laisse dans le *Couronnement de Louis*" 385). He suggests that another esthetic may be at work, one which manipulates the strophic structure in such a way that important moments in the story are highlighted by their position at the laisse boundaries—often with strong links to the adjoining laisses—rather than appearing as central incidents at the heart of the laisse.

Although such structuring may give predominance to the narrative at the expense of artistic unity, as Rychner claims, it seems scarcely the case that the laisse has no function, or that the poet displays an inability to use the strophic form to artistic advantage. Heinemann's view that a different esthetic explains the laisse structure merits further investigation.

The present article will examine the strophic structure of another portion of the *Couronnement de Louis* (laisse 43 to 54/55) in which the construction, bizarre in comparison to that of the more unified laisses of the *Chanson de Roland*, seems designed to highlight certain narrative elements—ones that serve to illustrate a theme, or ones that heighten dramatic tension.

The passage in question corresponds approximately to the second half of the poem's third episode, Jean Frappier entitles the episode "Guillaume protège Louis et châtie les rebelles" (95). In the second half, most of Guillaume's heroic activity in support of his king is divided between two locales, Tours and Normandy, with an elaborate transition passage in which rebellions in other parts of the kingdom are brought under control. The passage to be considered covers the end of the Tours phase, in which the rebellious Acelin is defeated, and the remainder of the episode, with a concluding portion that extends into laisse 55.

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The value system apparent in the themes of the *chanson* is founded on the feudal concept of reciprocal obligation between lord and vassal. Whereas the first episode sets out the duty of a king of France:

Rois qui de France porte corone d'or
Preudom doit estre et vaillant de son cors; (vv.21-22)

the theme of the following episodes is the corresponding duty of the good vassal, exemplified by Guillaume:

En son servise vueill ma jovente user. (v.2649)

As a sort of contrastive corollary of the second theme, the traitorous vassal like Acelin must be punished:

Qui traison velt fere a seignorage
Il est bien droiz que il i ait damage. (vv.1756-1757)

An examination of laisses 43 to 54/55 leads to the conclusion that the structuring is strongly influenced by an intention to highlight the theme of vassalic duty, or of its corollary, rather than by a concern to match narrative unit to strophe.

Such an esthetic does not preclude the use of composite laisses. Indeed, the first laisse in question, laisse 43, is a good example of one that is composite, but not lacking in design. It is obvious that this laisse, a relatively long one (72 verses), contains several incidents, all portraying either the behaviour of the traitor or the consequences of his treachery. In fact, in a manner that is typical of the poem's construction, this series of events has been introduced in the preceding laisse when Guillaume sends Alion into Acelin's camp to tell him that he should come and recognize Louis as his rightful lord. Acelin has refused and has deepened his treachery by offering lands and riches to Guillaume if he will agree to join the rebels.

The portrayal of Acelin's defiance might have ended with this laisse, but instead the treachery is underlined by its recurrence on the other side of the laisse boundary. The defiance concluding Acelin's speech in laisse 42:

Quant ge n'i puis pes trover ne amor,
Ge le deffi, ce li di de par nos. (vv.1814-1815)

The portrayal of Acelin's defiance might have ended with this laisse, but instead the treachery is underlined by its recurrence on the other side of the laisse boundary. The defiance concluding Acelin's speech in laisse 42:
becomes amplified in detail, including threats to the messenger, in the reprise opening laisse 43:

Quant ge n'i truis ne pes ne amisté,
Ge le deffi de la teste tranchier,
Hui le fari par membres depecier,
Que j'ai o moi bien .vii.c. chevaliers
Et .iii. contes qui mout font a prisier :
Ne me faudront por les membres tranchier.
Ne fust por ce que ru es messagier,
Ge te feïsse cele teste tranchier
Et tot le cors destruire et essillier. (vv. 1826-1834)

The overflowing of the laisse boundary focuses attention on the traitor's defiant behaviour which concludes, in the interior of the laisse, with Acelin's preparations for battle.

The termination of this incident and the beginning of the next, far from displaying stylistic neglect, are clearly marked within the laisse by recognizable signs of narrative articulation. The interior rhymes of verses 1836-1837 contribute to a satisfying tone of conclusion:

De la cort ist, onques n'i quist congie. Acelins fist sa gent apareiller. (vv.1836-1837)

while a subsequent tone of intonation is established by a construction frequently used in the chanson de geste whereby a subject is introduced in a first hemistich filled by the proper name and its attribute (IIn1S in Heinemann's classification); Li frans Aleaumes est montez el destrier (v.1838)

The sections that follow the expanded reprise possess a coherence in the sense that they all flow from Acelin's perfidious refusal:

i) Guillaume receives Alion's report of it—an opportunity to emphasize the treachery through echoes (vv.1832-33=vv.1847-48, for example). Furious with what he hears, he rounds up all the traitors who are in the town and confiscates their wealth and armour (vv.1838-1864);

ii) Guillaume and his companions attack and defeat Acelin's troops (vv.1865-1884);

iii) the fleeing traitor is pursued by Guillaume who taunts him by offering him an ironic "coronation" (vv.1885-1890).

It should be noted that each of these subsequent sections is similarly marked by an introductory verse with the IIn1S tone of intonation:

i) Li frans Aleaumes est montez el destrier, (v.1838)
ii) Li quens Guillelmes commença a brochier (v.1865)
iii) Li quens Guillelmes le suit au dos derrier, (v.1885).

This laisse, then, although it may appear diffuse at first glance, shows both coherence and organization: it is composed of related segments that are clearly articulated within the laisse; it begins by giving primacy of place to the echo of a significant act of treachery; and it ends by according the other privileged position to the first mention of the consequent punishment. Expressed in Heinemann's terms, one might say that the relationship that exists between structure and meaning is one in which "la laisse confère au récit des rythmes porteurs de sens" ("Rhythmes sémantiques de la chanson de geste" 181). In the present case, the laisse as one metric incident imposes thematic cohesion on its contents (perhaps entitled "The consequences of Acelin's defiance"); the boundary at LL.42/43 takes advantage of the implicit pause to highlight an important narrative element; and specific internal rhythms (type IIn1S) mark the beginning of new narrative incidents within the metric incident.

Rather than seeing a lack of poetic skill in the design of the laisse, one is led to believe that there is an intentional structuring used here, as elsewhere in the poem, to highlight particular moments in the narrative—moments that serve to illustrate a theme, whether that of duty or of its corollary, treachery and its punishment.

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The entire laisse that follows, laisse 44, advances the action only slightly; rather it is a sort of lyric interlude in which the audience is offered a moment of satisfaction (and oblique edification) as they contemplate the discomfiture of the unfaithful Acelin. As in the preceding case, the linking of laisses 43 and 44 highlights a thematic
element, for the new laisse picks up again, with variation and amplification, the subject of the final segment of the preceding laisse—the harsh and humiliating treatment due a rebellious vassal. The phonic break between the laisses, instead of marking the conclusion of one incident and the beginning of another, emphasizes the reprise.

At the end of laisse 43, Guillaume has caught up with the fugitive, whom he taunts and humiliates by inviting him to return to the church to be “crowned” in such a way that his brains will be crushed to his feet. Verses 1891-1892 open laisse 44 with an echo of verses 1885-1886. The amplification of a hemistich, *Li quens Guiellelmes* (v.1885), into a full verse, *Li quens Guiellelmes a la fiere persone* (v.1891), slows the pace slightly, in preparation for the important reproach in which Guillaume invokes God's punishment of the treachery committed by one who has no inherited right to kingship:

«Traïtres lerre, le cors Deu mal te done!  
Por quoi fesoies ton droit seignor vergoigne?  
Richarz ton pere ne porta one corone.» (vv.1893-1895)

Then an exchange with Bertran varies and amplifies the initial sarcastic invitation. The ironic offer which extended through four verses and was addressed directly to Acelin in the second person, *Si vos venez . . . ,* now appears as a six-verse dialogue in which Acelin is referred to in the third person, *Quar li metons . . . .* Its repetition underscores a moment of dramatic tension in which the villain is made as uncomfortable as possible. Moreover, the delay of the killing, while Guillaume considers a suitably shameful means (vv.1904-1911), provides an opportunity to emphasize the moment by slowing down the pace of the action. Here a good storyteller appears to be taking advantage of the strophic structure to exploit a dramatic moment, one which drives home a part of the central theme.

The narrative thread which has been held in suspension since the end of laisse 43 is taken up again and brought to its gory conclusion at the beginning of laisse 45 when Guillaume carries out the threats and quite literally beats Acelin's brains out.

Like a musical motif that recurs with variations, the three occurrences of the words relating to the ironic "crowning" draw attention to the horrible punishment inflicted on a traitor.

**L.43** - The hero speaks directly to the traitor about his death:

*Si vos venez coroner au mostier.  
Nos vos metrons tel corone en cel chief  
Dont la cervele vos venra trusqu'as piez.* (vv. 1888-1890)

**L.44** - The hero's adjuvant speaks about the traitor's death in his presence:

*Quar le metons enz el chief la coronne  
Dont la cervele li espande en la bouche.* (vv.1902-1903)

**L.45** - The narrator describes the traitor's death inflicted by the hero:

*Fiert Acelin enz en la croiz del chief,  
Sanc et cervele an ala trusqu'as piez;* (vv.1918-1919)

Laisse 45 strongly resembles laisse 43: it is comparatively long (78 verses) and has a similar composite construction. It consists of four segments, each of which points up acts of duty and loyalty on the part of the good vassal, Guillaume, who goes about defeating rebels in the kingdom:

i) he puts Acelin to death (vv.1912-1922);

ii) he punishes Acelin's father, the duke Richard, in a humiliating fashion by cutting off his hair, after administering to him one of his famous blows to the neck (vv.1923-1960);

iii) he announces to the abbé Gautier his decision to clear the rebels from Poitiers and entrusts to him the task of protecting the king in his absence (vv.1961-1975);

iv) he mobilizes his men and leads them to Poitiers in defence of the king (vv.1976-1989).

As in laisse 43, there is a clear metric marking of each narrative articulation by an introductory verse of the *IIIn1S* type—the first hemistich introduces the subject of the grammatical sentence by his proper name accompanied by an attribute, *Li quens Guiellelmes*. The marking is made even stronger by the exactness of the repetition.

In addition, the second hemistich in each case creates the sensation of a momentary regrouping before another narrative démarre.
Although it contains the predicate, the second hemistich either stops the flow of the action (i and iv) or advances it very little (ii and iii):

i) fu mout bon chevalier: (v.1912)
ii) commença a brochier, (v.1923)
iii) ne volt mie atargier, (v.1961)
iv) fu mout bon chevalier: (v.1976).

Without overstating the thematic unity of the laisse, it is worth noting that the two concluding verses do seem to sum up what the hero has been about in this portion of the narrative:

Grant peneance soffri le chevalier
Por son seignor maintenir et aidier. (vv. 1988-1989)

As if to put additional emphasis on the voluntary suffering of the faithful vassal, the entire short laisse that follows, laisse 46, is an echo of the concluding portion of laisse 45. Rychner, viewing this construction as falling short of the "laisse similaires" status, dismisses it as "une variété de l'enchaînement"(101-102). In this instance, however, its effect is stronger than that of a simple "enchaînement;" it stands out as a sort of short, lyric punctuation mark that stresses the vassal's devotion, particularly in the strong echo of the two concluding verses:

Grant peneance soffri le bacheler
Por son segnor garantir et tenser. (vv.1997-1998)

The reprise is not simply a perfunctory reworking to fit a new assonance. The number of feast days on which a loyal follower gladly serves is expanded: Jor de Noël (v.1986) becomes . . . jor de Pasques . . . la Nativité, / Feste Toz Sainz . . . (vv. 1993-1994); and there is a reversed presentation of the verses that describe the good knight armed for battle and those that name the feast days. Moreover, the temporal perspective seems somewhat more distant in the second version because the completed aspect of three full years is stressed at the outset, whereas a chronological order prevails in the earlier rendering.

The punctuating tone of laisse 46 signals a change of pace, an altered rhythm, as far as strophic structure is concerned. A look back at the strophic outlines of the passage up to this point reveals an alternating structure. Laisse 43 and 45, the longer composite laisses, have carried the narrative weight of this segment, while the shorter laisses, 44 and 46, have provided a more lyric quality, emphasizing the shame of the traitor and the service of the loyal vassal. An alternating pattern, both in form and in function, has developed between narrative stretches and lyric interludes. The following illustration represents the approximate proportions:

L.43- .......................................................... (72 verses)
L.44- .......................................................... (21 verses)
L.45- .......................................................... (78 verses)
L.46- .......................................................... ( 9 verses)

This long/short rhythm is now set aside temporarily, in favour of a series of three very short parallel laisses, laisses 47-49, two of which are limited strictly to a single "incident;" the third is prolonged to include the dismissal of the troops after the series of conquests.

The strong lyric quality of the passage is the result of a parallel structuring that skilfully manipulates a number of components:

1. Each laisse begins with a verse of intonation of the same grammatical type. Heinemann classifies this as IIIn—a verse in which a noun phrase occupies each hemistich and this verse depends on a main verb in another verse (in these cases, the following one).
2. a) The subject occupies both hemistichs of the introductory verse.
   b) The first hemistich remains constant, presenting the proper name and its attribute, Li cuens Guillelmes.
   c) The second hemistichs present, in similar constructions, a positive attribute:
      a la fiere personne (v.1999)
      a l’aduré corage (v.2004)
      a la chiere membree (v.2009).

3. The verb of the second verse in each case denotes a "turning toward," accompanied by the name of a city, with a reversed order in the third instance:
S'en est tornez vers Bordeaus sor Gironde; (v.2000)
S'en retourna par devers Pierrelarge; (v.2005)
Vers Amadore a sa voie tornee; (v.2010)

(From this point on, laisse 49 no longer shares the close parallelism of
laisse 47 and 48, although it possesses similar details.)

4. The vanquished kings are then named in parallel form:
   le fort roi Amaronde; (v.2001)
   Dagoubert de Cartage, (v.2006).

5. After some variation in the penultimate verses (v.2002 / v.2007), the
   laisses conclude with only two small variables:
   De Looëys i reçut sa corone
   Et les hennors, qui erent granz et longues. (vv.2002-2003)
   Qui tint la terre de Looëys le sage
   Et ses hennors, qui erent granz et larges. (vv.2007-2008)

   The elaboration of the narrative in the third conquest serves to
   introduce a variation and to accentuate the virtue of Guillaume. (He
   saves the church at Saint Gilles from destruction and he assures a
   lasting peace by requiring hostages.) His troops are then dismissed.

   In this transition segment, then, narrative yields to lyricism as the
   laisse shortens, its contents simplify, and verbal repetitions emphasize
   both narrative similarities and the contours of the laisse. Laisse
   boundaries are both formal and narrative points of articulation.

   The thematic element remains strong as the summary style of each
   laisse gives the impression that the hero has taken it upon himself to
   suppress, as efficiently as possible, the last traces of rebellion before
   releasing his men and taking his own well-deserved rest.

   With laisse 50 comes a return not only to the form of the longer,
   composite laisse (63 verses) but also to the theme of treason, the foil for
   Guillaume's virtue. The laisse is composed of three approximately
equal parts:

   i) Guillaume's peace-time travels through the north of France and into
   Richard's territory (vv.2022-2039);
   ii) Richard's plot to kill Guillaume (vv.2040-2061);
   iii) the activities of the unsuspecting knight as he is stalked by the
   duke and his men, culminating in the dramatic moment of their meeting
   (vv.2062-2084).

   This time the treachery is carried out, not only indirectly against
   the king, but directly against Guillaume himself, for the accord
   reached at Tours is repudiated by Richard as he plots the murder of the
   man who has once spared his life.

   Although the thematic elements are certainly implicit here, it is
   clear that this laisse is structured for dramatic effect, by creating a
   crescendo of suspense which will reach its peak in the final four verses.
   Richard's murderous plan having been revealed, the tension mounts as
   the verses slowly set forth an idyllic picture of the count's unsuspecting
   relaxation. Then suddenly he is aware that he is being stalked by
   Richard and his fifteen bold knights:

   Atant ez vos le duc Richart le viell.
   Qui tote jor l'avoit fet espïer,
   O lui bien .xv. de hardiz chevaliers.
   Voit le Guillelmes, mout en fu esmaiez. (vv.2081-2084)

   The strong final position of esmaiez brings to a climax the dramatic
   "punch" of the last verse. The audience is led right to the brink of a
   crucial moment before the break between laisses. The effect achieved at
   the laisse boundary shows the skill of the good storyteller as structure
   is cleverly used for narrative purposes. (Compare Victor Hugo's use of a
   similar structure to create this effect as he closes a chapter. A
   comparable power resides in the last word, as the protagonist becomes
   aware of his desperate situation: 'A l'instant où le premier se retourna,
   la lune éclaira en plein son visage. Jean Valjean reconnut parfaitement
   Javert [Les Misérables, 1:539].)

   Underscored by its position at the laisse boundary, the point of
   tension is then extended into laisse 51, first by a strong echo in the
   introductory verses:
A tant ez vos le duc Richard le ros
Et o lui .xv. de hardiz poignëors.
Voit le Guillelmes, mout l'en prist grant frëor; (vv.2086-2088)

and then by the pause-for-consultation tactic used previously just as Acelin was about to be assassinated (vv.1896-1911). The result here is that a moment of tension is expanded to the status of an entire laisse, exploiting to the full its dramatic potential.

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Laisse 52, neither particularly long nor composite, is an interesting case from a structural point of view, for it begins by giving the impression that its structure is quite orthodox, in the Rychnerian sense. The narrative start-up is indicated by a typical verse of intonation, of the InIS type, which establishes the subject in a particular situation:

Li quens Guillelmes vint au pont toz premiers, (v.2104).

The action develops as the laisse moves forward (Richard rejects Guillaume's reminder that they had reached an accord in Tours), and reaches a peak right at the centre of the laisse, at the moment of combat.

In fact, the grammatical rhythm of the central verses attracts attention to the action and excitement at the core of the laisse. Of eight verses describing the attack on the traitor (vv.2123-2130), six show a strong thrust toward the end of the second hemistich. As blow after blow falls on Richard, verse after verse shows a strong semantic weight situated in the final words, in the vivid verbs that complete the clause, whether infinitives or past participles: 

\[ \text{fendre et percier;} \]
\[ \text{derompre et desmaillier;} \]
\[ \text{raier, deschargié;} \]
\[ \text{fichié;} \]
\[ \text{rompié;} \]

Desoz la boucle li fet fendre et percier;
Le blanc hauberc derompre et desmaillier;
El flanc senestre li fet coler l'acier,
Que de .ii. parz en fet le sanc raier.
Li bons chevaus s'est del fes deschargié,
Le coing de hiaume est en terre fichié
Par si grant force .ii. des laz en rompié.
Sor lui s'areste et tret le brant d'acier; (vv.2123-2130)

Even the further complication of the action, brought about by the arrival of the fifteen warriors, could be included in an orthodox laisse. Nevertheless, orthodoxy is once again firmly "turned back at the border." No tone of conclusion is to be found there; in fact the knight is left open-mouthed, as it were, on the point of addressing the fugitives. There is no question, after all, of a neatly closed construction.

Just as the boundaries between laisses 43 and 44 highlighted Guillaume's pursuit and taunting of the perfidious Acelin, the echo that links laisses 52 and 53 emphasizes an act of chasing down and "dressing down" fleeing traitors. The pursuit described in the final three verses of laisse 52:

\[ \text{Li .v. s'en fuient que navré que plaie.} \]
\[ \text{Li quens Guillelmes les suit au dos derrier,} \]
\[ \text{Si lor a dit un vilain reprovier. (vv.2141-2143)} \]

is echoed and then amplified by the expansion of a single hemistich, \textit{un vilain reprovier} (v.2143), into four verses of direct discourse (vv.2147-2150), criticizing the shamefulness of yet another act of treachery: the five fugitives have abandoned their rightful lord in a moment of need.

\[ \text{Li .v. s'en vont fuiant par mi un tertre;} \]
\[ \text{Li quens Guillmes les enchaunce grant erre;} \]
\[ \text{Il lor a dit une ramposne bele:} \]
\[ «\text{Segnor baron, por Dieu le roi celestre,} \]
\[ \text{Comment sera la grant honte sofferte?} \]
\[ \text{Vo droit segnor en menromes en destre.} \]
\[ \text{Dex! quel barnage, se resqueus pooit estre!» (vv.2144-2150)} \]

When the pitiful group begs for mercy, Guillaume abruptly turns back.

It should be noted that, in the last four laisses, the structure again shows a rhythmic grouping that alternates between somewhat longer, more narrative laisses and shorter laisses which, this time, are given over principally to interludes of discourse. The illustration again represents approximate proportions:
The echo at the opening of laisse 54 once again puts in relief what has just happened at the preceding laisse boundary. Although the vassal's fidelity is not the primary concern here, his exemplary behaviour in combat is highlighted by the narrative slowing-down which results from an amplified reprise: a hemistich, *Ot le Guillelmes*, is modified and enlarged into a verse, *Quant voit Guillelmes qu'il ont merci proie*. The remaining hemistich, *s'a guenchïé sa resne*, is similarly expanded: *Isnelement est retornez arrier*. The supplementary verse that is inserted between the two, *N'en touchast un por les membres tranchier*, underlines the restraint and generosity of Guillaume in dealing with those who beg for mercy. What the form highlights here is the ideal epic hero—the warrior knight whose might is tempered with wisdom.

The laisse as a whole skilfully combines two functions. First, it draws together the loose ends of the narrative by bringing the hero back to the scene of the combat, where Richard and his ten knights are taken captive, and then to the spot where Bertran and the others are camped. Secondly, the return to the camp provides a logical opportunity to present a second rendering, in summary form, of the exploits of the model vassal as he himself reports the events to Bertran. Typically overflowing the laisse, the dialogue stresses Guillaume's willingness to suffer for his lord, and concludes with a thematically-important "fanfare" couplet that is both retrospective and foreshadowing:

*Quar en grant paine vueill ma juvente user,*
*Ainz que cist rois n'ait ses granz heritez.* (vv.2188-2189)

In the eight verses that follow, the devoted vassal, his mission supposedly accomplished, rejoins his lord, King Louis, at Tours. Here the traitorous Richard is put into prison where, we are told, he dies of grief and weariness. This brings to a fitting conclusion the Tours/Normandy portion of the poem's third episode. (The following three verses, indicating that Guillaume is not going to receive his well-earned rest after all, form the transition to the next episode in which he will reclaim Rome).

The fact that a major articulation occurs once again at some distance from the laisse boundary is consistent with the now-familiar asymetrical structure in which narrative units are *not* coincident with strophic units.

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Obviously, laisse boundaries in this portion of the *chanson* (laisses 43-54/55) are not intended to mark boundaries between incidents. What is striking is the frequency with which they serve, instead, to highlight important thematic elements or dramatically powerful moments—an arrangement that is too consistent to be simply accidental. The asymmetrical pattern is due neither to negligence nor to lack of skill (the attention given to rhythmic variations in laisse length and laisse groupings, as well as the manipulation of verse structure, attest to poetic sensitivity and competence). Rather, the divisions separating incidents are deliberately offset—a departure from the rolandian esthetic.

Certainly, the type of *chanson/récit* tension that typifies for Rychner the ideal epic poem (125) is affected by this structuring. The use of laisse boundaries for thematic and dramatic emphasis does strengthen the poem's narrative nature, although not to the exclusion of lyricism. What we have observed here is neither a careless nor a purposeless use of the laisse, but rather one that frequently manipulates strophic structure to serve the needs of effective storytelling through highlighting and rhythmic variation. Long laisses of a composite character, then, are not inherently flawed. They must simply be judged by different criteria from those applied to the *Chanson de Roland*.

In a sense, it is quite possible to apply Rychner's "Ce qui est fonctionnel est beau" to the *Couronnement de Louis*. If the structure's function is to keep an audience attentive to and impressed by Guillaume's heroic achievements in devoted service to his feudal lord, then, in this portion of the *chanson* at least, the strophic structure has served remarkably well.
Notes

1. See Heinemann, "Sur l'art de la laisse dans le Couronnement de Louis;" see also "Measuring Units of Poetic Discourse: Analogies between Laisse and Verse in the chanson de geste."
3. This article will follow the laisse and verse numbering of the Rédaction AB of Yvan G. Lepage.
4. II—the verse is filled by a clause;
   IIIn1—a noun phrase fills the first hemistich;
   IIIn1S—the phrase is the grammatical subject of the clause.
Heinemann's classification system, an expansion of Rychner's, is explained fully in "Rhythmes sémantiques de la chanson de geste: Types grammaticaux du vers et pulsions à la césure."

Works Cited