The Story of the Middle Ages

Excerpt from The Song of Roland

Carlon the King, our Emperor Charlemayn,
Full seven years long has been abroad in Spain,
He’s won the highlands as far as to the main;
No castle more can stand before his face,
City nor wall is left for him to break,
Save Saragossa in its high mountain place;
Marsilion holds it, the king who hates God’s name,
Mahound he serves, and to Apollyon prays:
He’ll not escape the ruin that awaits.
AOI
Marsilion sat in Saragossa town,
He sought an orchard where shade was to be found,
On a bright dais of marble he lies down;
By twenty thousand his vassals stand around.
He calls before him all his dukes and his counts:
“Listen, my lords, what affliction is ours!
The Emperor Charles that wears fair France’s crown
Invades our country our fortunes to confound.
I have no host but before him gives ground,
I find no force his forces for to flout;
Wise men of wit, give counsel to me now,
Save me from death and loss of my renown.”
There’s ne’er a paynim utters a single sound,
Till Blancandrin, Valfonda’s lord, speaks out.

Blancandrin’s wise amid the paynim horde;[24-46]
He was for valour a mighty knight withal,
And fit of wit for to counsel his lord.
He tells the king: “Be you afeared for naught,
But send to Charles in his pride and his wrath
Your faithful service and your friendship henceforth.
Promise him lions and bears and hounds galore,
Sev’n hundred camels and a thousand mewed hawks,
Four hundred pack-mules with gold and silver store,
And fifty wagons, a wagon-train to form,
Whence he may give his soldiers rich rewards.
Say, in this land he has made enough war;
To Aix in France let him go home once more;
At Michaelmas you’ll follow to his court,
There you’ll submit unto the Christian law,
And be his man by faith and fealty sworn.
Hostages too, if for sureties he call,
You’ll let him have, ten maybe or a score;
’Twere good we send the sons our wives have borne:
I’ll send mine own, though he should die therefor.
Better by far the heads of them should fall
Than we should lose honour, estate and all.
And be reduced to beggary and scorn.”

Quoth Blancandrin: “I swear by my right hand[47-75]
And beard that flutters about my girdle-span,
Straightway you’ll see the Frenchman’s host disband:
They’ll hurry home to France, their native land,
When each within his favourite haunt is back,
Charles in his chapel at Aix will take his stand,
And there he’ll hold high feast at Michaelmas.
The time will pass, the trysted hour elapse:
No news of us, no message will he have.
Fierce is the king, a cruel-hearted man;  
Our sureties’ heads he’ll smite off with the axe.  
Better their heads should fall into their laps  
Than that fair Spain should fall from out our hands,  
And we should suffer grave losses and mishap.”
The Paynims say: “There is some truth in that.”

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The King Marsile had ended the debate;  
He calls before him Clarin of Balagate,  
Estramarin, and Eudropin his mate;  
And Garlon Longbeard and Priamon he names,  
And Machiner and his uncle Matthay,  
John of Outremer, and Malabayn,  
And Blancandrin; these ten make up the tale,  
Ten matchless villains, to whom he’s said his say:  
“Barons, my lords, get you to Charlemayn,  
Who sits at siege, Cordova town to take.  
Bear each in hand an olive-branch displayed;  
Peace and submission are signified that way.  
If you contrive this treaty to arrange,  
Of gold and silver I’ll give you goodly weight,  
And lands and fiefs as much as heart can crave.”[76-100]  
The Paynims answer: “That will be ample pay.”

AOI

6

Marsile the king his conference had ceased.  
He tells his men: “My barons, go with speed;  
Bear in your hands boughs of the olive tree.  
On my behalf King Charlemayn beseech,  
For his God’s sake to show me clemency.  
Say, this month’s end in truth he shall not see  
Ere I shall seek him with thousand vassals leal.  
The law of Christ I’ll then and there receive,  
In faith and love I will his liegeman be.  
I’ll send him sureties if thus he shall decree.”
Quoth Blancandrin: “Be sure he’ll grant your plea.”

AOI

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Marsilion sent for ten mules white as snow,  
(A gift that erst Suatilia’s king bestowed),  
Their saddles silver, their bridles all of gold.  
Now are they mounted, the men who are to go;  
All in their hands the olive-branches hold.  
They came to Carlon that hath France in control;  
They’ll trap him somehow, for it is fated so.

AOI
The Emperor Charles is glad and full of cheer.
Cordova’s taken, the outer walls are pierced,
His catapults have cast the towers down sheer;
Rich booty’s gone to all his chevaliers,
Silver and gold and goodly battle-gear.
In all the city no paynim now appears[101-29]
Who is not slain or turned to Christian fear.
The Emperor sits in a great orchard near,
Having about him Roland and Olivere,
Samson the duke, and Anseis the fierce,
Geoffrey d’Anjou the King’s gonfalonier,
And Gerin too, and with him too Gerier;
And where these were was many another fere—
Full fifteen thousand of France the fair and dear.
Upon white carpets they sit, those noble peers,
For draughts and chess the chequer-boards are reared;
To entertain the elder lords revered;
Young bachelors disport with sword and spear.
Beneath a pine beside an eglantier
A faldstool stands all of the red gold clear;
Of fairest France there sits the king austere.
White are his locks, and silver is his beard,
His body noble, his countenance severe:
If any seek him, no need to say, “Lo, here!”
From off their steeds lit down the messengers,
Well did they greet him with shows of love sincere.

Before them all Blancandrin forward stood;
And hailed the King: “God give His grace to you,
The glorious God to whom worship is due.
Thus speaks the king, Marsilion, great in rule:
Much hath he studied the saving faith and true.
Now of his wealth he would send you in sooth
Lions and bears, leashed greyhounds not a few,
Sev’n hundred camels, a thousand falcons mewed,
And gold and silver borne on four hundred mules;[130-53]
A wagon-train of fifty carts to boot,
And store enough of golden bezants good
Wherewith to pay your soldiers as you should.
Too long you’ve stayed in this land to our rue:
To Aix in France return you at our suit.
Thither my liege will surely follow you,
[And will become your man in faith and truth,
And at your hand hold all his realm in feu!”]
With lifted hands to God the Emperor sues;
Then bows his head and so begins to brood.

The Emperor bode long time with downcast eyes;
He was a man not hasty in reply,
But wont to speak only when well advised.
When he looked up, his glance was stern and high.
He told the envoys: “Fair is your speech and fine;
Yet King Marsile is foe to me and mine.
In all these words and offers you recite
I find no warrant wherein I may confide.”

“Sureties for this”, the Saracen replies,
“Ten or fifteen or twenty we’ll provide.
One of my sons I’ll send, on pain to die;
Others, yet nobler, you’ll have, as I divine.
When in your palace high feast you solemnise
To great St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide,
He’ll follow you, on that you may rely,
And in those baths God made you by His might[154-70]
He would turn Christian and there would be baptized.”
Quoth Charles: “He yet may save his soul alive.”

Fair was the ev’ning and clearly the sun shone;
The ten white mules Charles sends to stall anon;
In the great orchard he bids men spread aloft
For the ten envoys a tent where they may lodge,
With sergeants twelve to wait on all their wants.
They pass the night there till the bright day draws on.
Early from bed the Emperor now is got;
At mass and matins he makes his orison.
Beneath a pine straightway the King is gone,
And calls his barons to council thereupon;
By French advice whate’er he does is done.

The Emperor goes beneath a tall pine-tree,
And to his council he calls his barony:
There Duke Ogier, Archbishop Turpin meet,
Richard the Old and his nephew Henri,[171-95]
Count Acelin the brave of Gascony,
Miles, and his cousin the Lord Tibbald of Rheims,
Gerin likewise and Gerier are convened;
And County Roland, there with the rest came he,
And Oliver, noble and good at need;
All French of France, thousand and more, maybe;
And Ganelon that wrought the treachery.
So starts that council which came to such sore grief.

“Barons, my lords”, began the Emperor Carlon,
“From King Marsile come envoys, seeking parley.
He makes me offers of treasure overpassing:
Of lions and bears and hounds to the leash mastered,
Sev’n hundred camels, and falcons mewed and hearty,
Four hundred mules with Arab gold all chargèd,
And fifty wagons well-laden in a cart-train.
But now to France he urges my departure,
And to my palace at Aix he’ll follow after,
There change his faith for one of more advantage,
Become a Christian and of me hold his marches.
But his true purpose—for that I cannot answer.”
The French all say: “We’d best be very guarded.”
AOI

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The Emperor Charles had finished all his speech.
The County Roland, who fiercely disagrees,
Swift to oppose springs up upon his feet:
He tells the King: “Nevermore trust Marsile![196-225]
Seven years long in land of Spain we’ve been.
I won for you both Noples and Commibles,
I took Valterna, the land of Pine I seized,
And Balagate, and Seville and Tudele.
Then wrought Marsile a very treacherous deed:
He sent his Paynims by number of fifteen,
All of them bearing boughs of the olive tree,
And with like words he sued to you for peace.
Then did you ask the French lords for their rede;
Foolish advice they gave to you indeed.
You sent the Paynim two counts of your meinie:
Basan was one, the other was Basile.
He smote their heads off in hills beneath Haltille.
This war you’ve started wage on, and make no cease;
To Saragossa lead your host in the field,
Spend all your life, if need be, in the siege,
Revenge the men this villain made to bleed!”
AOI

15
The Emperor Charles sat still with his head bended;
He stroked his beard and his moustaches gently;
Nor good nor ill he answers to his nephew.
The French are silent, Guènes alone excepted;
But he leaps up, strides into Carlon’s presence,
And full of pride begins thus to address him.
He tells the King: “Trust not a brawling fellow,
Me nor another; seek only your own welfare.
If King Marsile informs you by this message
He’ll set his hands in yours, and fealty pledge you,
And hold all Spain from you, at your good pleasure,
And to that faith we follow give acceptance,
The man who tells you this plea should be rejected[226-51]
Cares nothing, Sire, to what death he condemns us.
Counsel of pride must not grow swollen-headed;  
Let’s hear wise men, turn deaf ears to the reckless.”

AOI

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Naimon at this stood forth before them all:  
No better vassal was ever seen in hall.  
He tells the King: “Well have you heard, my lord,  
The arguments Count Ganelon sets forth.  
There’s weight in them, and you should give them thought.  
The King Marsile is vanquished in the war,  
You’ve taken from him his castles and his forts,  
With catapults you’ve broken down his walls,  
You’ve burned his cities and his armies outfought.  
Now that he comes on your mercy to call  
Foul sin it were to vex him any more.  
Since he’ll find sureties his good faith to support,  
We should make haste to cut this great war short.”  
The French all say: “The Duke speaks as he ought.”

AOI

17

“Barons, my lords, whom shall we send anon  
To Saragossa, to King Marsilion?”  
“I, by your leave,” saith Naimon, “will begone,  
Therefore on me bestow the glove and wand.”  
“You are my wisest”, the King makes answer prompt:  
“Now by the beard my cheek and chin upon,  
You shall not go so far this twelvemonth long.  
Hence! sit you down, for we summon you not!”

AOI

18

“Barons, my lords, whom shall we send of you[252-76]  
To Saragossa, the Sarsen king unto?”  
“Myself”, quoth Roland, “may well this errand do.”  
“That shall you not”, Count Oliver let loose;  
“You’re high of heart and stubborn of your mood,  
You’d land yourself, I warrant, in some feud.  
By the King’s leave this errand I will do.”  
The King replies: “Be silent there, you two!  
Nor you nor he shall on that road set foot.  
By this my beard that’s silver to the view,  
He that names any of the Twelve Peers shall rue!”  
The French say nothing: they stand abashed and mute.

AOI

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Then from their ranks arose Turpin of Rheims;  
He tells the King: “Leave your French lords at ease;  
Full sev’n long years in this land have you been,  
Much have they suffered of perils and fatigue;  
Pray you then, Sire, give wand and glove to me;
The Saracen of Spain I’ll seek and see,
And in his looks his purpose will I read.”
The Emperor answers with anger in his mien:
“On that white carpet sit down and hold your peace;
Be still, I say, until I bid you speak.”

AOI

20

The Emperor said: “My free and knightly band,
Come choose me out some baron of my land
To bring my message to King Marsilion’s hand.”
Quoth Roland: “Guènes my step-sire is the man.”[277-302]
The French all say: “Indeed, he is most apt;
If he’s passed over you will not find his match.”
Count Ganelon is furious out of hand;
His great furred gown of marten he flings back
And stands before them in his silk bliaut clad.
Bright are his eyes, haughty his countenance,
Handsome his body, and broad his bosom’s span;
The peers all gaze, his bearing is so grand.
He says to Roland: “Fool! what has made thee mad?
I am thy step-sire, and all these know I am,
And me thou namest to seek Marsilion’s camp!
If God but grant I ever thence come back
I’ll wreak on thee such ruin and such wrack
That thy life long my vengeance shall not slack.”
Roland replies: “This is all boast and brag!
Threats cannot fright me, and all the world knows that.
To bear this message we must have a good man;
I’ll take your place if the King says I can.”

AOI

21

Quoth Ganelon: “My place thou shall not take;
Thou’rt not my vassal, nor I thy suzerain.
Charles for his service commands me to obey.
I’ll seek Marsile in Saragossa’s gates;
But rather there some deadly trick I’ll play
Than not find vent for my unbounded rage.”
When Roland heard him, then he laughed in his face.

AOI

22

When Ganelon sees Roland laugh outright[303-28]
He’s fit to burst for anger and despite,
And very nearly goes clean out of his mind.
He tells the Count: “I love you not, not I;
You’ve picked on me unfairly, out of spite.
Just Emperor, here I stand before your eyes,
Ready to do whatever you think right.
To Saragossa I see that I must shift me;  
There’s no return for him that journeys thither.  
Bethink you well that my wife is your sister,  
A son she bare me, fairest of goodly children,  
Baldwin” (quoth he) “and a champion he will be.  
To him I leave all my lands and my living;  
No more I’ll see him; take care, Sir, of your kinsman.”  
Quoth Charles: “Your heart is too tender within you;  
Go now you must, for even so I bid you.”

Then said the King: “Stand forward, Ganelon,  
Here at my hand receive the glove and wand;  
You’ve heard the French—you are the man they want.”  
“Messire,” said Guènes, “Roland hath done this wrong!  
I’ll never love him the whole of my life long,  
Nor Oliver his friend and fellow fond,  
Nor the Twelve Peers by whom he’s doted on;  
Sire, in your presence I defy the whole lot.”  
Then said the King: “Your passion is too hot;  
I bid you go and so you must begone.”  
“Well may I go, but safeguard have I not, Basile had none, nor Basan none, God wot.”

The King holds out to him his right-hand glove;  
Fain would Count Guènes be an hundred miles off!  
When he would take it, it fell into the dust.  
“God! what is this?” cry all the French at once;  
“For sure this message will bring us great ill-luck.”  
“My lords,” quoth Guènes, “you’ll know it soon enough.”

“Sire, give me leave” quoth Guènes, “hence to hie;  
Since go I must, it boots not to abide.”  
“Go”, said the King, “by Jesu’s leave and mine.”  
With his right hand he’s absolved him and signed,  
And to his care letter and wand consigned.

[Ganelon sets out as amabassador to Saragossa. He speaks to Blancandrin of Roland's arrogance that has spurred the war onward, and remarks that if someone killed him, peace might be had. The two plot to find a way to kill him.  
When Ganelon appears before Marsilla and offers a peace treaty, Marsilla grows agnry and tries to kill him, but Ganelon fends him off with his sword. The Saracens ae impressed and agree to listen to the embassy.  
Drawing aside into council, Blancandrin tells Marsilla of the plot against Roland, and Marsilla brings Ganelon into the council. The Saracens marvel as they talk of Charlemagne's ability, especially since he is more than two centuries old.  
Ganelon tells them Charlemagne would not be so bold if Roland were not on his side. He tells the Saracens to feign agreeing to a peace treaty, and send tributes of wealth and hostages to the Franks. As]
Franks return home, they'll have a 20,000 man rear guard as they always do, probably including Roland and Oliver. Once they are separated from the main army in the mountains, they will be vulnerable to an attack by 100,000 Saracens. Roland will be easily killed. The Saracens praise Ganelon, and reward him lavishly, and send him off with the tributes.

The Emperor now returns upon his way
And has arrived before the town of Gayne
(Count Roland took it and all its wall down-razed,
An hundred years thereafter it lay waste;)
And there the King for news of Guènes waits,
And for the tribute of the great land of Spain.
In the white dawn, at breaking of the day,
Into the camp the County Guènes came.
AOI

Early that day the Emperor leaves his bed.
Matins and mass the King has now heard said;
On the green grass he stood before his tent.
Roland was with him, brave Oliver as well,
Naimon the Duke and many another yet.
Then perjured Guènes the traitor comes to them
And starts to speak with cunning false pretence.
He tells the King: “To you (whom God defend!)
Of Saragossa the keys I here present.
I bring you also wealth to your heart’s content,
And twenty sureties: see they be closely kept.
The valiant king, Marsile, this message sends:[680-707]
The Caliph’s absence he prays you’ll not resent.
Mine own eyes saw four hundred thousand men
In hauberk armed, some having laced their helms,
And girt with swords whose hilts were richly gemmed,
Attend him forth; to the sea-shore they went.
The faith of Christ they’d keep not, nor accept,
And for this cause they from Marsilion fled.
But ere they’d sailed four leagues, maybe, or less,
Black wind and storm and tempest on them fell;
They were all drowned; they’ll ne’er be seen again.
Had he been living I would have had him fetched.
Now, as regards the Paynim King himself:
Believe me, sire, before a month is sped
He’ll follow you to France, to your own realm.
There he’ll receive the faith that you profess,
There with joined hands to you his fealty pledge,
And hold from you in fief the Spanish realm.”
Then said the King: “The name of God be blest!
Well have you done: I shall reward you well.”
Throughout the host a thousand trumpets swell,
The French strike camp, their goods on sumpters set;
Home to fair France behold them all addressed.
King Charlemayn has spoiled the Spanish borders,  
He’s taken castles, put cities to the slaughter;  
Now the King says he has ended his warfare.  
Home to fair France the Emperor turns his horses.

Pennon to lancehead Count Roland now has corded;  
High on a hillock he displays it abroad there.  
In fields all round the French set up their quarters.  
Through the wide valleys the Paynim hosts go forward,  
[All fully armed,] accoutred in their corslets,  
Their helms laced on, and their swords in the sword-belt,  
Shields on their necks, and their lances well ordered.  
High on the mountains in a thicket they’ve halted:  
Four hundred thousand they wait there for the morning;  
God! it is grievous that the French have no warning!

The day goes down, dark follows on the day.  
The Emperor sleeps, the mighty Charlemayn.  
He dreamed he stood in Sizer’s lofty gate,  
Holding in hand his ashen lance full great.  
Count Ganelon takes hold of it, and shakes,  
And with such fury he wrenches it and breaks  
That high as heaven the flinders fly away.  
Carlon sleeps on, he sleeps and does not wake.

After this dream he had another dream:  
That in his chapel at Aix in France was he;  
In his right arm a fierce bear set its teeth.  
Forth from Ardennes he saw a leopard speed,  
That with rash rage his very body seized.  
Then from the hall ran in a greyhound fleet,  
And came to Carlon by gallops and by leaps.  
From the first brute it bit the right ear clean,  
And to the leopard gives battle with great heat.  
The French all say the fight is good to see,  
But none can guess which shall the victor be.  
Carlon sleeps on; he wakes not from his sleep.

The night is past and the clear dawn is showing.  
[A thousand trumpets] are sounded for the hosting.  
The Emperor rides full lordly in his going.  
“Barons, my lords,” quoth Charlemayn, “behold now  
These lofty passes, these narrows winding closely—
Say, who shall have the rear-guard now to hold them?"
Quoth Ganelon: “I name my nephew Roland;
You have no baron who can beat him for boldness.”
When the King heard, a stern semblance he showed him:
“A fiend incarnate you are indeed”, he told him;
“Malice hath ta’en possession of you wholly!
Who then should keep the vanguard of my progress?”
Quoth Ganelon: “Ogier the Dane I vote for;
You have no baron can do it with more prowess.”

When Roland hears what he’s appointed to,
He makes reply as knighthood bids him do:
“My noble stepsire, I owe you gratitude
That I’m assigned the rearguard at your suit.
Charles, King of France, the loss shall never rue
Of steed or palfrey thereby, I warrant you,
No saddle-beast, nor hinny neither mule,
Pack-horse nor sumpter thereby he shall not lose,
Save first the sword have paid the reckoning due.”[759-73]
Quoth Ganelon: “I know it; you speak truth.”

When Roland hears that to the rearward guard
His stepsire names him, he speaks in wrath of heart:
“Ah! coward wretch, foul felon, baseborn carle,
Didst think the glove would fall from out my grasp
As did the wand from thine, before King Charles?”

“Just Emperor,” then besought Count Roland bold,
“From your right hand deliver me your bow;
No man, I swear, shall utter the reproach
That I allowed it to slip from out my hold
As did the wand that Ganelon let go.”
The Emperor sits with his head bended low,
On cheek and chin he plucks his beard for woe,
He cannot help but let the tears o’erflow.

Straightway thereon comes Naimon to the King—[774-96]
No better vassal in court did ever sit.
He says to him: “You’ve listened to all this;
The County Roland is angered to the quick;
The rear-guard now has been adjudged to him
And you’ve no baron can ever make him quit.
Give him the bow now bended in your grip,
And find good men to aid him in this shift.”
So the King gives it, and Roland seizes it.
To Roland then the King his uncle said:
“Nephew, fair sir, hear now and heed me well:
Half of my army I’ll leave you for this stead;
Keep them with you and you’ll be safe with them.”
The Count said: “No; I never will consent;
May God confound me if I shame my descent!
A thousand score I’ll keep of valiant French.
Safe through the passes go you with confidence;
Never fear man so long as I draw breath.”

Roland the Count mounts on his destrier.
Comes then to him his comrade Oliver,
And Gerin comes and brave Count Gerier,
And Othon comes and so does Berenger,
Old Anseis, and Astor, great of worth,
And Gerard too, Roussillon’s haughty earl;
And with them comes the rich Duke Gaifer.
Quoth the Archbishop: “By Heav’n, I’m with you, sirs!”
“And so am I,” Walter the Count affirms,
“I’m Roland’s man, him am I bound to serve!”
Knights twenty thousand they choose for followers.

To Walter Hum Count Roland gives command:
“A thousand French take, of our own French land,
And hold the gorges and heights on either hand;
Nor let the Emperor lose from his side one man.”
Quoth Walter: “Mine to do as you demand.”
With thousand French of France their own dear land
On gorge and hill Count Walter holds the flanks;
Come what come may he’ll never quit his stand
Till from the sheath have flashed sev’n hundred brands.
King Almeric, lord of Balferna’s strand,
That day shall give hard battle to their band.

High are the hills, the valleys dark and deep,
Grisly the rocks, and wondrous grim the steeps.
The French pass through that day with pain and grief;
The bruit of them was heard full fifteen leagues.
But when at length their fathers’ land they see,
Their own lord’s land, the land of Gascony,
Then they remember their honours and their fiefs,
Sweethearts and wives whom they are fain to greet,
Not one there is for pity doth not weep.
Charles most of all a boding sorrow feels,
His nephew’s left the Spanish gates to keep;
For very ruth he cannot choose but weep.

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All the twelve peers in Spain are left behind,
Full twenty thousand stout Frenchmen at their side;
Valiant they are, and have no fear to die.
To land of France the Emperor homeward hies.
And still his face beneath his cloak he hides.
Close at his rein the good Duke Naimon rides;
He asks the King: “What troubles thus your mind?”
“This is ill done”, quoth Charles, “to ask me why!
So much I grieve I cannot choose but sigh.
Through Ganelon fair France is ruined quite.
An angel showed me a vision in the night,
How in my hand he broke my lance outright,
He that my nephew to the rear-guard assigned.
In foreign marches abandoned, Roland bides—
God! if I lose him I shall not find his like.”

AOI

68

King Charlemayn from tears cannot refrain;
Full hundred thousand, the French grieve for his sake,
And for Count Roland are wondrously afraid.
Him has the false lord Ganelon betrayed;
Vast the reward the paynim king has paid:
Silver and gold, and cloth of silk and saye.[846-69]
Horses and mules, camels and beasts of prey.
Marsile has called the barony of Spain;
His viscounts, counts, almanzors stand arrayed,
Dukes and emirs, and youths of high estate;
Four hundred thousand he’s summoned in three days.
In Saragossa he bids his tabors play;
Mahound their idol high on the tower they raise,
And every Paynim adores and gives it praise.
Then by forced marches their army hastes away,
Through Terracerta they ride by hill and dale.
Now have they seen French gonfalons displayed.
The twelve companions who in the rear-guard wait
Mean to give battle, and none shall say them nay.

69

Marsilion’s nephew trips out before the throng,
Riding a mule which he whips with a wand;
He tells his uncle with laughter on his tongue:
“Fair sir and king, I’ve served you well and long;
Much have I suffered, much labour undergone,
Many fields fought, and many battles won!
First blow at Roland is the reward I want;
With my sharp sword I’ll split him through the seonce!
Yea, if I find good favour with Mahond,
I’ll set Spain free, unloosing of her bonds
From Gate of Spain to Durstant and beyond.[870-93]
Charles will lose heart, the French will yield anon,
You shall be quit of wars your whole life long.”
He gets the glove from King Marsilion.

Marsilion’s nephew holds the glove in his fist:
Unto his uncle thus proudly he begins:
“Fair sire and king, you’ve made me a great gift.
Find me twelve lords, the best that you can pick.
‘Gainst the twelve peers our valour for to pit.”
The first that answers is Falsaron to wit,
He was own brother unto Marsile the king:
“You and I, nephew, will gladly go to it.
In very deed this battle will we give
To Carlon’s rearward that guards his host for him:
The thing is done! by us they’ll all be killed.”

King Corsablis now springs from out the host,
Barbarian born, the magic art he knows.
Like a brave man thus valiantly he spoke:
“No coward I, no, not for all God’s gold!”

Malprimis of Brigale comes spurring bold,
He’ll run afoot swifter than steed can go;
With a loud voice before Marsile he boasts:
“I’ll bear my body with you to Roncevaux:
If I find Roland I’ll fight till he’s laid low.”

From Balaguet there cometh an Emir:[894-918]
His form is noble, his eyes are bold and clear,
When on his horse he’s mounted in career
He bears him bravely armed in his battle-gear,
And for his courage he’s famous far and near;
Were he but Christian, right knightly he’d appear.
Before Marsile he cries for all to hear:
“To Roncevaux”, saith he, “my course I’ll steer;
If I find Roland, then death shall be his weird.
And Oliver’s, and all of the Twelve Peers!
The French shall die the death in shame and tears.
King Charlemayn, the dotard old and blear,
Will soon be sick of waging warfare here!
Spain shall be ours in peace this many a year!”
The King Marsile pours thanks into his ears.
Comes an Almanzor, a lord of Moriane,  
There’s no worse villain in all the land of Spain.  
Before Marsilion his bragging boast he makes:  
“To Roncevaux I’ll lead my people straight,  
Full twenty thousand with spear and lance arrayed.  
If I meet Roland I’ll kill him, by my faith!  
No day shall dawn but Carlon shall bewail.”

And next there comes Turgis of Tortelosa;  
A count he is, and the whole city owneth;  
A right ill will to Christian men he showeth.  
Before Marsile with the rest he enrols him.  
He tells the King: “Fear not for any foeman!  
Mahound’s worth more than St Peter the Roman;  
Serve him; the field is ours and ours the trophy!  
To Roncevaux I go to meet with Roland;  
There shall he die; he shall have help of no man.  
See here my sword, how long it is and noble:  ’Gainst Durendal I’ll measure it right boldly;  
Which shall prevail you’ll not be long in knowing.  
The French shall die if they dare to oppose us;  
Carlon the old shall be grieving and groaning;  
Crown nevermore shall he wear from that moment.”

And Escremiz of Valterne is the next;  
He owns that fief, and he’s a Saracen;  
Before Marsile he shouts amid the press:  
“To Ronceval I go to stoop their crests.  
If I find Roland, there shall he lose his head,  
And Oliver, who’s captain of the rest;  
The whole Twelve Peers are all marked out for death.  
The French shall die and France shall be bereft.  
Few men of worth to Carlon shall be left.”

Next comes a Paynim, called Estorgan by name,  
Estramarin his comrade with him came;  
Foul felons both and knavish traitors they.  
Then said Marsile: “My lords, draw near, I pray;  
Through Roncevaux you mean to force your way,  
And lead my troops, and lend us your best aid.”  
And they reply: “Command, and we obey.  
Both Oliver and Roland we’ll assail.[947-74]  
Of the Twelve Peers none shall survive the fray.  
Sharp are our swords and goodly are the blades,  
All in hot blood we’ll dye them red this day;
The French shall die, and Carlon shall bewail.
A gift we’ll make you of the home of their race;
Come with us, King, and see how goes the game,
And as a gift we’ll give you Charlemayn.”

Then comes at speed Margaris of Seville,
Who holds his land as far as Cazmarin.
Ladies all love him, so beautiful he is,
She that beholds him has a smile on her lips,
Will she or nill she, she laughs for very bliss,
And there’s no Paynim his match for chivalry.
He joins the throng and cries unto the King
Loudest of all: “Never you fear a whit!
In Roncevaux this Roland I’ll go kill,
Nor Oliver shall any longer live;
All the Twelve Peers we’ll cut in little bits.
Lo! here my sword with golden pummel gilt!
Th’ Emir of Primes gave it me for a gift,
I swear I’ll dye it vermilion to the hilt.
The French shall die and France in shame shall sit.
Old greybeard Charles shall never live, I think,
One day but what he’ll rage and weep for this.
France can be ours in a year if we will;
In Saint-Denis we’ll eat and sleep our fill.”
The Paynim King makes deep salaam to him.

And last there comes Chernubles of Munigre;
His unshorn hair hangs trailing to his feet.
He for his sport can shoulder if he please
More weight than four stout sumpter-mules can heave.
He dwells in regions wherein, so ’tis believed,
Sun never shines nor springs one blade of wheat,
No rain can fall, no dew is ever seen,
There, every stone is black as black can be,
And some folk say it’s the abode of fiends.
Chernubles saith: “My sword’s girt in the sheath;
In Roncevaux red blood shall dye it deep.
Should Roland cross my path, that doughty chief,
And I not smite him, never put faith in me!
To this my blade his Durendal shall yield,
The French shall die, and France be left bereaved.”
This said, the whole Twelve Champions are convened;
One hundred thousand stout Saracens they lead.
Each one afire with zeal to do great deeds.
Beneath a pine-grove they arm them for the field.

Now are the Paynims in Sarsen hauberks dight
Whereof the most with triple mail are lined;
Good Saragossa helms they lace on tight,
Swords of Viana steel gird on their thighs;
Spears of Valence they have, and shields full fine,
Their gonfalons are scarlet, blue, and white.
They leave their mules, their palfreys leave behind,
And mount their steeds; in serried ranks they ride.
Fair was the day, the sun shone clear and bright,
No piece of harness but glittered in the light.
A thousand trumpets ring out for more delight.\[1004-31\]
Great is the noise; it reaches the French lines.
Quoth Oliver: “I think, companion mine,
We’ll need this day with Saracens to fight.”
Roland replies: “I hope to God you’re right!
Here must we stand to serve on the King’s side.
Men for their lords great hardship must abide,
Fierce heat and cold endure in every clime,
Lose for his sake, if need be, skin and hide.
Look to it now! Let each man stoutly smite!
No shameful songs be sung for our despite!
Paynims are wrong, Christians are in the right!
Ill tales of me shall no man tell, say I!”
AOI

80
Oliver’s climbed upon a hilly crest,
Looks to his right along a grassy cleft,
And sees the Paynims and how they ride addressed.
To his companion Roland he calls and says:
“I see from Spain a tumult and a press—
Many bright hauberks, and many a shining helm!
A day of wrath, they’ll make it for our French.
Ganelon knew it, false heart and traitor fell;
When to the Emperor he named us for this stead!”
Quoth Roland: “Silence, Count Oliver, my friend!
He is my stepsire, I will have no word said.”

81
Oliver’s climbed a hill above the plain,
Whence he can look on all the land of Spain,
And see how vast the Saracen array;
All those bright helms with gold and jewels gay,
And all those shields, those coats of burnished mail;[1032-58]
And all those lances from which the pennons wave;
Even their squadrons defy all estimate,
He cannot count them, their numbers are so great;
Stout as he is, he’s mightily dismayed.
He hastens down as swiftly as he may,
Comes to the French and tells them all his tale.

82
Quoth Oliver: “The Paynim strength I’ve seen;
Never on earth has such a hosting been:
A hundred thousand in van ride under shield
Their helmets laced, their hauberks all agleam
Their spears upright, with heads of shining steel.
You’ll have such battle as ne’er was fought on field.
My lords of France, God give you strength at need!
Save you stand fast, this field we cannot keep.”
The French all say: “Foul shame it were to flee!
We’re yours till death; no man of us will yield.”
AOI

83
Quoth Oliver: “Huge are the Paynim hordes,
And of our French the numbers seem but small.
Companion Roland, I pray you sound your horn,
That Charles may hear and fetch back all his force.”
Roland replies: “Madman were I and more,
And in fair France my fame would suffer scorn.
I’ll smite great strokes with Durendal my sword,
I’ll dye it red high as the hilt with gore.
This pass the Paynims reached on a luckless morn;
I swear to you death is their doom therefor.”
AOI

84
“Companion Roland, your Olifant now sound![1059-81]
King Charles will hear and turn his armies round;
He’ll succour us with all his kingly power.”
Roland replies: “May never God allow
That I should cast dishonour on my house
Or on fair France bring any ill renown!
Rather will I with Durendal strike out,
With this good sword, here on my baldrick bound;
From point to hilt you’ll see the blood run down.
Woe worth the Paynims that e’er they made this rout
I pledge my faith, we’ll smite them dead on ground.”
AOI

85
“Companion Roland, your Olifant now blow;
Charles in the passes will hear it as he goes,
Trust me, the French will all return right so.”
“Now God forbid”, Roland makes answer wroth,
“That living man should say he saw me go
Blowing of horns for any Paynim foe!
Ne’er shall my kindred be put to such reproach.
When I shall stand in this great clash of hosts
I’ll strike a thousand and then sev’n hundred strokes,
Blood-red the steel of Durendal shall flow.
Stout are the French, they will do battle bold,
These men of Spain shall die and have no hope.”
Quoth Oliver: “Herein I see no blame:
I have beheld the Saracens of Spain;
They cover all the mountains and the vales,
They spread across the hillsides and the plains;
Great is the might these foreigners display,
And ours appears a very small array.”

“I thirst the more”, quoth Roland, “for the fray.
God and His angels forbid it now, I pray,
That e’er by me fair France should be disfamed!
I’d rather die than thus be put to shame;
If the King loves us it’s for our valour’s sake.”

Roland is fierce and Oliver is wise
And both for valour may bear away the prize.
Once horsed and armed the quarrel to decide,
For dread of death the field they’ll never fly.
The counts are brave, their words are stern and high.
Now the false Paynims with wondrous fury ride.
Quoth Oliver: “Look, Roland, they’re in sight.
Charles is far off, and these are very nigh;
You would not sound your Olifant for pride;
Had we the Emperor we should have been all right.
To Gate of Spain turn now and lift your eyes,
See for yourself the rear-guard’s woeful plight.
Who fights this day will never more see fight.”
Roland replies: “Speak no such foul despite!
Curst be the breast whose heart knows cowardise!
Here in our place we’ll stand and here abide:
Buffets and blows be ours to take and strike!”

When Roland sees that battle there must be
Leopard nor lion ne’er grew so fierce as he.
He calls the French, bids Oliver give heed:
“Sir friend and comrade, such words you shall not speak!
When the King gave us the French to serve this need
These twenty thousand he chose to do the deed;
And well he knew not one would flinch or flee.
Men must endure much hardship for their liege,
And bear for him great cold and burning heat,
Suffer sharp wounds and let their bodies bleed.
Smite with your lance and I with my good steel,
My Durendal the Emperor gave to me:
And if I die, who gets it may agree
That he who bore it, a right good knight was he.”

Then to their side comes the Archbishop Turpin,
Riding his horse and up the hillside spurring.
He calls the French and preaches them a sermon:
“Barons, my lords, Charles picked us for this purpose;
We must be ready to die in our King’s service.
Christendom needs you, so help us to preserve it.
Battle you’ll have, of that you may be certain,
Here come the Paynims—your own eyes have observed them.
Now beat your breasts and ask God for His mercy:
I will absolve you and set your souls in surety.
If you should die, blest martyrdom’s your guerdon;
You’ll sit on high in Paradise eternal.”
The French alight and all kneel down in worship;
God’s shrift and blessing the Archbishop conferreth,
And for their penance he bids them all strike firmly.

The French rise up and on their feet stand close;
All of their sins are shriven and made whole,
And the Archbishop God’s blessing has bestowed.
Then on swift steeds they leap to saddlebow.
Armed with the arms prescribed by knightly code;
All are now ready into the field to go.
Count Roland said to Oliver right so:
“Sir my companion, too true the word you spoke,
That all of us by Ganelon were sold.
He’s ta’en his wage of wealth and goods and gold.
The Emperor’s vengeance I think will not be slow!
Marsile the King has bargained for our bones:
He’ll need the sword to fetch his purchase home.”

Through Gate of Spain Roland goes riding past
On Veillantif, his swiftly-running barb;
Well it becomes him to go equipped in arms,
Bravely he goes, and tosses up his lance,
High in the sky he lifts the lancehead far,
A milk-white pennon is fixed above the shaft
Whose falling fringes whip his hands on the haft.
Nobly he bears him, with open face he laughs;
And his companion behind him follows hard;
The Frenchmen all acclaim him their strong guard.
On Saracens he throws a haughty glance
But meek and mild looks on the men of France,
To whom he speaks out of a courteous heart:
“Now, my lord barons, at walking pace—advance![1165-87]
Looking for trouble these Paynims ride at large—
A fine rich booty we’ll have ere this day’s past;
Never French king beheld the like by half.”
E’en as he speaks, their battles join and charge.

AOI
Quoth Oliver: “I have no more to say:
To sound your horn for help you would not deign,
So here you are, you’ve not got Charlemayn;
Little he knows, brave heart! he’s not to blame.
Nor those with him, nowise in fault are they.
Ride forward then and do the best you may!
Barons my lords, hold firm amid the fray!
Now for God’s sake be resolute, I pray,
To strike hard blows, to give them and to take.
King Carlon’s war-cry forget not to proclaim!”
A mighty shout the Frenchmen give straightway;
Whoso had heard the cry “Mountjoy” they raise
He would remember its valiance all his days.
They charge—Lord God, was ever sight so brave?
They spur their steeds to make the greater haste,
They fall afighting—there is no other way—
The Saracens join battle undismayed;
Paynims and Franks are fighting face to face.

Now Adelroth, (he was King Marsile’s nephew),[1188-216]
Before the host comes first of all his fellows;
With evil words the French he thus addresses:
“Villainous Franks, with us you have to reckon!
You’ve been betrayed by him that should protect you,
Your king lacked wit who in the passes left you.
Fair France will lose her honour in this venture;
From Carlon’s body the right arm will be severed.”
When Roland hears him, God! but his rage is reckless!
He spurs his horse, gives full rein to his mettle,
His blow he launches with all his mightiest effort;
The shield he shatters, and the hauberk he rendeth,
He splits the breast and batters in the breast-bone,
Through the man’s back drives out the backbone bended,
And soul and all forth on the spear-point fetches;
Clean through he thrusts him, forth of the saddle wrenching,
And flings him dead a lance-length from his destrier;
Into two pieces he has broken his neckbone.
No less for that he speaks to him and tells him:
“Out on thee, churl! no lack-wit is the Emperor,
He is none such, nor loved he treason ever;
Right well he did who in the passes left us,
Neither shall France lose honour by this venture.
First blood to us! Go to it, gallant Frenchmen!
Right’s on our side, and wrong is with these wretches!”
AOI

A duke was there, he was named Falsaron,
Brother was he to King Marsilion,
Abiram’s land and Dathan’s did he own;
Under the sky was no worse villain known;
Between the eyes his brow was broad of bone,[1217-47]
A full half-foot it measured, I suppose.
His nephew’s death he bitterly bemoans;
Forth of the press he gallops out alone,
The Paynim war-cry he utters as he goes,
And on the French an evil taunt bestows:
“Fair France this day shall find her honour flown!”
Oliver’s heard him, great wrath within him grows,
Into his horse he strikes his spurs of gold,
Right baronly he rides to smite the foe.
He breaks the shield, he cleaves the hauberk close,
Clean through his breast drives lance and pennon both,
A spear’s-length flings him dead from the saddle-bow;
Looks down and sees the infidel lie low
And thus upbraids him in a right haughty tone:
“Churl, for your threats I do not care a groat!
French lords, strike on! we’ll have them all o’erthrown.”
King Carlon’s war-cry, “Mountjoy!” he shouts full bold.

A king was there, his name was Corsablis,
From a far land he came, from Barbary;
The Saracens he calls, and thus he speaks:
“Well are we placed this field of arms to keep;
For of these Franks the number is but weak,
And we may well despise the few we see.
Charles cannot come to help them in their need,
This is the day their deaths are all decreed!”
Archbishop Turpin has listened to his speech,
And hates him worse than any man that breathes.
His golden spurs he strikes into his steed,
And rides against him right valiant for the deed.
He breaks the buckler, he’s split the hauberk’s steel,
Into his breast driven the lance-head deep,[1248-74]
He spits him through, on high his body heaves,
And hurls him dead a spear’s length o’er the lea.
Earthward he looks and sees him at his feet,
But yet to chide him he none the less proceeds:
“Vile infidel, you lied between your teeth!
Charles my good lord to help us will not cease,
Nor have our French the least desire to flee.
These friends of yours stock-still we’re like to leave;
Here’s news for you—you’ll die, and there you’ll be.
Frenchmen, strike home! forget not your high breed!
This first good stroke is ours, God’s gramercy!”
He shouts “Mountjoy!” to hearten all the field.

And Gerin strikes Malprimis of Brigale;
No penny-piece the stubborn shield avails;
The crystal boss he splinters all in twain,
That half the buckler falls down upon the plain:
Through to the flesh he cleaves the hauberk-mail,
Through to the heart he drives the good spear straight;
The Paynim falls flat down with all his weight.
Then Satan comes and hales his soul away.

AOI

97

Gerier his friend on the Emir runs in,
Shatters the shield and bursts the byrny-rings,
Clean through the guts the trusty spear he swings,
Thrusts it well in, then out at back with it;
A whole spear’s length on field the body flings:
Quoth Oliver: “We’re doing well with this!”

98

Samson the Duke on the Almanzor runs:
Through gilded shield and painted flowers he thrusts;
Nought for defence avails the hauberk tough,
He splits his heart, his liver, and his lung,
And strikes him dead, weep any or weep none.
Cries the Archbishop: “This feat was knightly done!”

99

And Anseïs gives rein to his good steed,
He runs on Turgis of Tortelose at speed;
Under the boss of gold he cleaves the shield,
And of the hauberk the double mail unseams,
Into his body strikes home the head of steel,
Through to his back he drives the point out clean,
A full spear’s length he flings him dead on field.
Quoth Roland: “Lo! that was a valiant feat!”

100

And Engelier the Gascon of Bordeaux
Spurs his good steed, slacks rein and lets him go;
With Escrimiz, Valterna’s lord, he’s closed,
Off from his neck the splintered buckler broke.
The hauberk’s ventail he’s shattered with the stroke.
He splits his throat between the collar-bones,
A full spear’s length dead from the saddle throws;
Then says to him: “The devil take thy soul!”

AOI

101

And Othon strikes a Paynim, Estorgant.
Full in mid-chief he smites the shield point-blank,
So that the white splits and the scarlet cracks;
The skirt of mail he’s riven through and smashed,
Into his body the cleaving spear he rams;
From his swift steed he hurls him dead on land,
“And now”, says he, “find comfort if you can!”

102
Then Berenger drives at Estramarin,
He cleaves the shield, and the good hauberk splits,
On his stout spear the trunk of him he spits
And flings him dead ’mid thousand Sarrasins.
Of the Twelve Peers ten are already killed,
Two and no more are left of them who live;
These are Chernubles and the Count Margaris.

103
Now Margaris is a right valiant peer,
Buxom and strong, nimble and fleet and fierce.
He spurs his horse to strike at Olivere;
He splits the shield, the golden boss he sheers,
Along his ribs the glancing spear-point veers,
But by God’s grace his body is not pierced;
Nor is he thrown, though the shock breaks the spear.
Past him the Paynim is borne in full career,
Rallying his men he sounds his bugle clear.

104
Great is the battle and crowded the mellay,[1320-48]
Nor does Count Roland stint of his strokes this day;
While the shaft holds he wields his spear amain—
Fifteen great blows ere it splinters and breaks.
Then his bare brand, his Durendal, he takes;
Against Chernubles he spurs his steed in haste,
Splits through the helm with carbuncles ablaze,
Through the steel coif, and through scalp and through brain
’Twixt the two eyes he cleaves him through the face;
Through the bright byrny close-set with rings of mail,
Right through the body, through the fork and the reins,
Down through the saddle with its beaten gold plates,
Through to the horse he drives the cleaving blade,
Seeking no joint through the chine carves his way,
Flings horse and man dead on the grassy plain.
“Foul befal, felon, that e’er you sought this fray!
Mahound”, quoth he, “shall never bring you aid.
Villains like you seek victory in vain.”

105
The County Roland throughout the field goes riding;
With Durendal, good sword, he stabs and slices,
The toll he takes of Saracens is frightful.
Would you had seen him, dead man on dead man piling,
Seen the bright blood about his pathway lying!
Bloody his hauberk and both his arms with fighting,
His good horse bloody from crest to withers likewise;
And Oliver too doth never cease from striking,
And the Twelve Peers are not a whit behindhand,
And all the French are hammering and smiting;
The Paynims fall, some dead and others dying.
Quoth the Archbishop: “Right blessèd be our knighthood”;[1349-72]
He shouts “Mountjoy!” war-cry of Charles the mighty.

106
And Oliver goes riding through the press;
His spear is broken, only the shaft is left.
Against a Paynim, Malun, he rides addrest,
Smashes the shield with flowers and gold bedecked,
Both of his eyes he smites out of his head,
So that his brains around his feet are spread,
And flings the corpse amid sev’n hundred dead.
Turgis he’s slain, and slain Esturgot next,
Till to the grips the spear-shaft splits in shreds.
Roland cries out: “What are you doing, friend?
I’d give no groat for sticks in such a stead!
Here iron avails, and steel and nothing else.
Where is your sword that Hauteclaire is y-clept,
With its gold hilts and pummel crystal-gemmed?”
“I’ve had no time to draw,” Oliver said,
“I’ve been so busy with striking right and left.”

107
Dan Oliver has drawn his goodly brand,
As his friend Roland so urgently demands;
Now will he prove him a stout knight of his hands!
He smites a Paynim, Justin of Val Ferrat;
Clean through the middle the skull of him he cracks,
The saffron byrny splits, and his breast and back,
And saddle, brave with gems and golden bands,[1373-95]
And through the spine the horse in sunder hacks,
And dead on field flings all before him flat.
“I’ll call you brother,” quoth Roland, “after that!
’Tis for such strokes our Emperor loves a man.”
The shout “Mountjoy!” goes up on every hand.

108
Gerin the Count bestrides his steed Sorel,
Gerier his comrade on Passécerf is set;
Eagerly both loose rein and spur ahead
And go to strike a Paynim, Timozel,
One on the shield, the other on the chest.
Both spears at once are broken in his breast,
Flat in the fallow straightway they fling him dead—
I do not know, I never have heard tell,
Which of the two was the more swift and snell.
And Engelir, Knight of Bordeaux, he next
Slew Esperevere, that son was to Burel.
Archbishop Turpin has o’erthrown Siglorel,
The sorcerer, who’d once been down to Hell,
With Jupiter for guide, by magic spells.
Quoth Turpin then: “Ear-marked was he for death!”
Roland replies: “The churl has made an end.
Oliver, brother, such strokes delight me well!”

Fiercer and still more fierce the battle grows;[1396-422]
Both French and Paynims deal wondrous heavy strokes,
Some in attacking, and some in parrying blows.
How many spears are bloodied there and broke!
What gonfalons, what banners rent and strown!
How many French in flower of youth laid low,
Whom wives and mothers shall never more behold,
Nor those of France who wait them on the road!
King Charlemayn must weep and wail for woe;
What help in that? he cannot save his folk.
Ill did Count Guènes serve Carlon, when he rode
To Saragossa and all his people sold;
Thereby he lost life and limbs of his own
When at Aix after they judged him to the rope,
And of his kin thirty were hanged also,
Who ne’er had thought such death should be their dole.

Fierce is the battle and wondrous grim the fight.
Both Oliver and Roland boldly smite,
Thousands of strokes the stout Archbishop strikes,
The whole Twelve Peers are not a whit behind,
And the French ranks lay on with all their might.
Heaped by the hundred thousands of Paynims lie,
None can escape unless he turns and flies,
Will he or nill he, there must he leave his life.
There France must lose the noblest of her knights,
They’ll see no more their kindred and their sires,
Nor Charles, who scans the pass with anxious eyes.
Throughout all France terrific tempests rise,[1423-48]
Thunder is heard, the stormy winds blow high,
Unmeasured rain and hail fall from the sky,
While thick and fast flashes the levin bright,
And true it is the earth quakes far and wide.
Far as from Saintes to Michael-of-the-Tide,
From Besançon to Wissant Port, you’d find
There’s not a house but the walls crack and rive.
Right at high noon a darkness falls like night,
Save for the lightning there’s not a gleam of light;
None that beholds it but is dismayed for fright,
And many say: “This is the latter time,
The world is ending, and the Great Doom is nigh.”
They speak not true, they cannot read the signs:
'Tis Roland’s death calls forth this mighty cry.

111

The French have fought with valour and success;
By scores and thousands lie Paynim corpses spread,
Of hundred thousand scarce two will fight again.
Quoth the Archbishop: “Right valiant are our men,
The like of these hath no lord under heav’n.
Thus it is written in the Gestes of the French:
Our Emperor’s power was never rivalled yet.”
They search the field for their maimed and their dead,
With grief and sorrow the eyes of them are wet,
With love and pity for their kindred and friends.
Now falls upon them Marsile with all his strength.

112

The King Marsile comes riding up a gorge[1449-77]
With all his army about him in great force;
He has assembled twenty huge battle-hordes.
Such flash of helms with gems and gold adorned!
Such shields, such byrnies with burnished saffron wrought!
Sev’n hundred trumpets are sounding the assault;
Through all the country the noise of them goes forth.
“Brother,” quoth Roland, “friend Oliver, sweet lord,
It is our death false Ganelon has sworn;
The treason’s plain, it can be hid no more;
A right great vengeance the Emperor will let fall.
But we must bide a fearful pass of war.
No man has ever beheld the like before.
I shall lay on with Durendal my sword,
You, comrade, wield that great Hauteclaire of yours.
In lands how many have we those weapons borne!
Battles how many victoriously fought!
Ne’er shall base ballad be sung of them in hall!”

113

Marsile beholds his slaughtered chivalry.
He bids his trumpets and horns sound instantly
And then sets forward with his great company.
Then first rides out a Saracen, Abisme,
In all that host was none more vile than he,
With evil vice and crimes he’s dyed full deep,
In Mary’s Child, God’s Son, he’s no belief,
And black he is as melted pitch to see.
Better he loves murder and treachery
Than all the gold that is in Galicie
None ever saw him in mirth or jollity;
But bold he is and rash to a degree,[1478-504]
And for that reason he’s loved by King Marsile.
He bears a dragon to rally his *meinie*.
The good Archbishop observes him, much displeased,
He’d like to hit him on sight, that’s how he feels,
And to himself he says quite quietly:
“This Sarsen looks right heretic to me.
’Twere best by far to go and kill the beast;
I never loved cowards nor coward deeds.”

AOI

114

Th’Archbishop opens the battle up anew;
He rides a charger that from Grossayle he took
(That was a king in Denmark, whom he slew).
A steed he is swiftly-running and smooth,
*Flat in the knee and hollow in the hoof*,
Short in the thigh and ample in the croup,
Long in the flank and the back well set up,
White of his tail and yellow of his plume,
Small of his ears and his head tawny-hued.
Here is a horse no courser could outdo.
For him the Archbishop, of his valour right good,
Spurs on Abisme, and none shall stay his mood.
He rides to strike him on his target of proof
Wondrous with topaz and amethyst to boot,
With carbuncle ablaze, and beryl blue
(Emir Galafe gave it him for a boon
Whom in Val Metas a devil gave it to.)
Turpin lays on, nor spares; I tell you true,
After he hit it it was not worth a sou![1505-32]
From flank to flank he spits his body through,
And flings him dead wherever he finds room.
The French all cry: “A valiant blow and shrewd!
Right strong to save is our Archbishop’s crook!”

115

Now can the French count up the Paynim might;
They see it filling the plains from side to side.
They urge on Roland and Oliver likewise
And the Twelve Peers to flee for all their lives;
To whom straightway the Prelate speaks his mind:
“Barons, my lords, these shameful thoughts put by;
By God I charge you, hold fast and do not fly,
Lest brave men sing ill songs in your despite.
Better it were to perish in the fight.
Soon, very soon we all are marked to die,
None of us here will see to-morrow’s light;
One thing there is I promise you outright:
To you stand open the gates of Paradise,
There with the holy sweet Innocents to bide.”
His words so fill them with courage and delight
There’s none among them but shouts “Mountjoy” on high.
A Saracen, of Saragossa Town
Was there, the lord of half that city round—
Climborin namely, that traitor false and foul
Which took the oath of Ganelon the Count
And then for friendship kissed him upon the mouth
And with his helm and carbuncle endowed;
Our Fatherland he swore he’d disrenown,
And from the Emperor would snatch away the crown.[1533-61]
Now he comes riding on Barbêmouche his mount—
Fleeter was never swallow nor falcon found—
Slacks rein, spurs hard its mettle to arouse,
On Engelier the Gascon forward bounds.
Buckler nor byrny avails against him now,
Into the midriff lance-point and pennon plough,
From breast to back the shaft runs through and out,
A whole spear’s length he hurls him dead on ground.
“Fit for destruction is all this gear!” he shouts;
“Paynims, strike hard! carve your way through the rout!”
“God!” say the French, “one of our best is down!”
AOI

Count Roland calls to Oliver his friend:
“Fair sir, companion, see, Engelier is dead;
No better man had we for knightliness.”
The Count replies: “God give me fair revenge!”
In his steed’s flanks the golden spurs he sets,
He grasps Hauteclaire, whose steel is all dyed red,
He deals the Paynim a mighty stroke and dread,
Twists out the blade, down falls the Saracen;
The Adversary bears off his soul to Hell.
Then he goes on, slays Duke Alfayen next,
From Escababa he hews away the head,
And seven Arabs unhorses then pell-mell:
That lot at least will never fight again.
“My friend is angry”, the County Roland said:
“Fighter for fighter he matches me right well;
‘Tis for such strokes King Carlon loves us best!”
Aloud he cries: “Strike on, my valiant men!”
AOI

Elsewhere, behold a Paynim, Valdabron,[1562-88]
Was godfather to King Marsilion;
He owns a navy four hundred dromonds strong,
And to his service no seaman but is bond.
He captured Salem by fraud in times bygone,
And sacked the Temple of good King Solomon,
Murdering there the Patriarch by the font.
He took the oath of County Ganelon,
And sword and mangons gave him as pledge thereon.
He rides a horse that he calls Gramimond,
Never of speed was peregrine more prompt.
With the sharp spur he urges it headlong;
The great Duke Samson straightway he falls upon.
He splits the shield, he bursts the habergeon,
Drives through his body spear-head and gonfalon,
Flings him from saddle a full spear’s length along:
“Paynims!” he cries, “we’ll beat them yet! Lay on!”
“God!” say the French, “there’s a brave baron gone!”

When the Count Roland sees Samson thus laid low
Well may you guess how he is grieved of soul.
He spurs his horse and speeds to smite the foe
With Durendal, more worth than finest gold.
By might and main the Baron deals the stroke
Full on the helm that is all gemmed with gold;
The skull he splits, byrny and breast are broke,
Cloven the saddle, that is all gemmed with gold;
Through the beast’s back deep down the weapon goes;
Like it or leave it, he has destroyed them both.[1589-612]
The Paynims say: “This is a bitter blow!”
“I love you not,” quoth Roland, “by my troth;
Yours is the outrage, yours is the lying boast!”

An African there was of Afric, too,
Was called Malquiant, the son of King Malcude;
Harnessed he is in gold from head to foot,
None in the sun so glitters to the view,
He rides a horse that he calls Saut-Perdu;
No steed could rival the swiftness of its hoofs.
He strikes Anseïs in mid-shield square and true,
He shears away the scarlet and the blue,
Rips the mailed skirt of the hauberk of proof,
Into the body drives the steel and the wood.
The Count falls dead, his days have met their doom.
The French all say: “Brave lord, alack for you!”

Archbishop Turpin goes riding through the field;
Ne’er was mass sung by any tonsured priest
That of his body could do such valiant deeds!
He hails the Paynim: “God send the worst to thee!
Thou hast slain one for whom my whole heart grieves.”
Into a gallop he urges his good steed,
He strikes him hard on his Toledo shield,
And lays him dead upon the grassy green.
There was a Paynim, and Grandoyne was he called,[1613-38]
King Capuel’s son, from Cappadocia’s shores,
Mounted on Marmor, for so he names his horse,
Swifter of speed than any bird that soars.
He slacks the rain and he goes spurring forth,
And runs to strike Gerin with all his force.
From off his neck he splits the red shield shorn,
From off his body he rips the byrny torn,
Into his heart the pennon blue he’s borne,
And down he flings him dead on a rocky tor.
Gerin his comrade he smites down afterward,
Berenger next, Guy of St Antoine fall;
And then he strikes the mighty duke Astorge,
(Envers-on-Rhône and Valence called him lord),
And lays him dead; for joy the Paynims roar;
The French all say: “What loss we have to mourn!”

The County Roland grips fast his blood-red blade;
Well has he heard how the French are dismayed;
His heart grieves so, 'tis like to split in twain.
In hails the Paynim: “God send thee all His plagues!
Thou hast slain one for whom I’ll make thee pay!”
He spurs his horse that gladly runs apace;
Let win who may, they’re at it, face to face.

The Prince Grandoyne was a good knight and gallant,
Strong of his hands and valorous in battle;
Athwart him now comes Roland the great captain;
He’d never met him, but he knew him instanter.[1639-65]
By his proud aspect, and by his noble stature,
His haughty looks, and his bearing and manner.
He cannot help it, a mortal fear unmans him;
Fain would he fly, but what’s the good? he cannot.
The Count assails him with such ferocious valour
That to the nasal the whole helmet is shattered,
Cloven the nose and the teeth and the palate,
The jaz’rain hauberk and the breastbone and backbone,
Both silver bows from off the golden saddle;
Horsemam and horse clean asunder he slashes,
Lifeless he leaves them and the pieces past patching.
The men of Spain fall a-wailing for sadness:
The French all cry: “What strokes! and what a champion!”

Fierce is the battle and marvellous and great.
The Frenchmen ply their burnished spears amain.
There had you seen how many men in pain,
How many wounded and bleeding there and slain!
Heaped up pell-mell they lie, on back or face.
The Saracens cannot endure the strain;
Will they or nill they they flee across the plain,
And the French forces with all their might give chase.

126

Wondrous the battle, and it grows faster yet;
The French fight on with rage and fury fell,
They lop off wrists, hew ribs and spines to shreds,
They cleave the harness through to the living flesh;
On the green ground the blood runs clear and red.
[The Paynims say: “We cannot stand the stress.”][1666-93]
French Fatherland, be curst of Mahomet!
Your sons are bravest of all the sons of men.”
There’s none of them but cries: “Marsile to help!
Ride, ride, O King, for we are hard bested.”

127

Roland the Count calls out to Olivere:
“Fair sir, companion, confess that for this gear
Our lord Archbishop quits him like any peer;
Earth cannot match him beneath the heavens’ sphere,
Well does he know to handle lance and spear.”
The Count replies: “Let’s aid him now and here!”
At this the French lay on the lustier,
Hard are their strokes, the fight is very fierce,
And for the Christians the losses are severe.
Who then had seen Roland and Olivere
Smite with their swords and through all the press pierce!
And the Archbishop goes thrusting with his spear.
Of those they slew the numbers are writ clear
In many charters and tales of chroniclers:
More than four thousand as in the Geste appears.
Four great assaults they’ve borne with right good cheer;
Then comes a fifth, doleful and dread and drear.
All the French knighthood has fallen in career;
Sixty alone by God’s grace persevere;
These ere they die will sell their bodies dear.

128

When County Roland sees all his brave men down,
To Oliver his friend he cries aloud:
“For God’s sake, comrade, fair sir, what think you now?
See what good knights lie here upon the ground!”[1694-721]
Well may we pity this fair sweet France of ours,
Thus left so barren of all her knighthood’s flower.
Why aren’t you here, O friend and Emperour?
Oliver, brother, what way is to be found?
How send him news of what is come about?”
Oliver said: “And how should I know how?
I’d rather die than we should lose renown.”

AOI

129

“I’ll sound”, quoth Roland, “my Olifant straightway;
When Carlon hears, passing through Gate of Spain,
I pledge my word, the French will turn again.”
Quoth Oliver: “It would be foul disdain,
And to your kindred the reproach would be great:
All their lives long they’d not live down the shame.
When I desired you, why then you said me nay;
If now you do it, of me you’ll get no praise.
Blow if you will—such conduct is not brave.
Nay, but how deep in blood your arms are bathed!”
The Count replies: “I’ve struck good blows this day.”

AOI

130

Said Roland then: “Full grievous is this fight.
I’ll sound my horn, and Charles will hear the cry.”
Quoth Oliver: “‘Twould ill beseem a knight.
I asked you, comrade, and you refused, for pride.
Had Charles been here, then all would have gone right;
He’s not to blame, nor the men at his side.
Now by my beard (quoth he) if e’er mine eyes
Again behold my sister Aude the bright,
Between her arms never you think to lie.”

AOI

131

Quoth Roland: “Why so angry with me, friend?”[1722-49]
And he: “Companion, you got us in this mess.
There is wise valour, and there is recklessness:
Prudence is worth more than foolhardiness.
Through your o’erweening you have destroyed the French;
Ne’er shall we do service to Charles again.
Had you but given some heed to what I said,
My lord had come, the battle had gone well,
And King Marsile had been captured or dead.
Your prowess, Roland, is a curse on our heads.
No more from us will Charlemayn have help,
Whose like till Doomsday shall not be seen of men.
Now you will die, and fair France will be shent; Our loyal friendship is here brought to an end;
A bitter parting we’ll have ere this sun set.”

AOI

132

When the Archbishop thus hears them in dispute,
With his gold spurs he pricks his steed anew,  
Draws near to them and utters this rebuke:  
“Lord Oliver, and you, Lord Roland, too,  
Let’s have no quarrel, o’God’s name, ’twixt you two.  
It will not save us to sound the horn, that’s true;  
Nevertheless, ’twere better so to do.  
Let the King come; his vengeance will be rude;  
None shall to Spain ride home with merry news.  
After, our French will light them down on foot,  
Seek out our bodies and limbs in sunder hewn,  
Lay us on biers borne upon sumpter-mules,  
And weep for us with grief right pitiful;  
In the church-close we shall have burial due,[1750-77]  
And not be food for dogs and swine and wolves.”  
Quoth Roland, “Sir, your words are right and good.”

133

Roland has set Olifant to his lips,  
Firmly he holds it and blows it with a will.  
High are the mountains, the blast is long and shrill,  
Thirty great leagues the sound went echoing.  
King Carlon heard it and all who rode with him.  
“Lo, now, our men are fighting”, quoth the King.  
Guènes retorts: “If any man said this  
Except yourself, it were a lie, methinks.”

AOI

134

The County Roland with pain and anguish winds  
His Olifant, and blows with all his might.  
Blood from his mouth comes spurting scarlet-bright  
He’s burst the veins of his temples outright.  
From hand and horn the call goes shrilling high:  
King Carlon hears it who through the passes rides,  
Duke Naimon hears, and all the French beside.  
Quoth Charles: “I hear the horn of Roland cry!  
He’d never sound it but in the thick of fight.”  
“There is no battle”, Count Ganelon replies;  
“You’re growing old, your hair is sere and white,  
When you speak thus, you’re talking like a child.  
Full well you know Roland’s o’erweening pride;  
’Tis strange that God endures him so long time!  
Took he not Noples against your orders quite?  
The Paynims made a sally from inside,  
And there gave battle to Roland the great knight;  
So he swilled down the field—a brave device[1778-804]  
To keep the bloodstains from coming to your eyes!  
For one small hare he’ll blow from morn till night;  
Now to the Peers he’s showing-off in style.  
Who dare attack him? No man beneath the sky!  
Ride on, ride on! Why loiter here the while?
Our Fathers’ land lies distant many a mile.”

AOI

135

Count Roland’s mouth with running blood is red;
He’s burst asunder the temples of his head;
He sounds his horn in anguish and distress.
King Carlon hears, and so do all the French.
Then said the King: “This horn is long of breath.”
“‘Tis blown”, quoth Naimon, “with all a brave man’s strength;
Battle there is, and that I know full well.
He that would stay you is but a traitor fell.
To arms! let sound your battle-cry to heav’n!
Make haste to bring your gallant household help!
You hear how Roland makes desperate lament!”

136

The Emperor Charles lets sound his horns aloft.
The French light down and arm themselves anon
With helm and hauberk and gilded swords girt on;
Goodly their shields, their lances stiff and strong,
Scarlet and white and blue the gonfalons.
Straightway to horse the warrior lords have got;
Swift through the passes they spur and never stop.
Each unto other they speak and make response:
“Might we reach Roland ere he were dead and gone,
We’ld strike good strokes beside him in the throng.”[1805-29]
What use is that? They have delayed too long.

137

Vespers draws on and shining is the day;
Against the sun glitters their armed array,
Hauberk and helm flash back a mighty blaze,
So many shields their painted flowers display,
Such store of spears with gilded pennons gay!
The Emperor rides right wrathful on his way.
And all the French in anger and dismay;
There is not one but weeps for very rage;
For Roland’s sake they’re grievously afraid.
The King arrests Count Ganelon straightway;
He’s turned him over to the cooks in his train;
The master-cook he calls, Besgun by name:
“Guard me him well, as fits a man so base,
For all my house this villain has betrayed!”
Besgun takes charge, with five-score kitchen knaves,
The best and worst that serve in that estate.
They pluck the beard from off his chin and face,
With four sound thumps each gives him a good baste,
With sticks and faggots they pound him and they paste,
And round his neck they fasten a strong chain,
Right well they chain him like a bear in a cage;
Now on a pack-horse they’ve hoisted him in shame;
Till Carlon want him ’tis they will keep him safe.
AOI

138
Huge are the hills and shadowy and high,[1830-55]
Deep in the vales the living streams run by.
The trumpets sound before them and behind,
All with one voice to Olifant reply.
In wrath of heart the Emperor Carlon rides,
And all the French in sorrow and in ire;
There’s none but grieves and weeps from out his eyes;
They all pray God to safeguard Roland’s life
Till they may come to battle by his side;
Once they are with him they’ll make it a great fight.
What use is that? their prayers are empty quite,
Too long they’ve lingered, they cannot come in time.
AOI

139
King Charlemayn rides on in anger grim,
Over his byrny flows the white beard of him;
All the French barons beside him spur full swift;
There’s none of them but is with fury filled
Not to be aiding Roland the Paladin
Now that he’s fighting the Spanish Sarrasins.
He’s hurt so sore, I fear he cannot live.
God! and what men, those sixty with him still!
Better had never nor captain nor yet king.
AOI

140
Roland surveys the mountains and the fells;
How many French he sees there lying dead!
Like a good knight he makes them this lament:
“Barons, my lords, may God of His largesse
Bring all your souls to Paradise the blest,
Amid bright flowers to make their hallowed beds![1856-85]
I never saw braver or truer men.
So long you served me unceasingly and well,
So many lands conquered for Carlon’s realm!
The Emperor bred you alas! to what sad end!
O dearest land, fair nursery of the French,
By what hard hap art thou this day bereft!
Barons of France, for me you go to death,
Nought can I give you of safeguard or defence;
Now aid you God, who ne’er failed any yet!
Oliver, brother, you shall not lack my help.
Though none should slay me I’ll die of grief no less;
Sweet sir, companion, let’s go and fight afresh!”
The County Roland returns into the field
And like a warrior his Durendal he wields;
Faldron de Puy through the midriff he cleaves
With four-and-twenty besides, of great esteem.
Never on vengeance was any man so keen.
E’en as the deer before the deerhound flees
So before Roland the Paynims show their heels.
Quoth the Archbishop: “Well done, well done indeed!
Valour like this becomes a knight of breed
That bears his arms and sits a goodly steed;
Forward and fierce in battle should he be,
Else he’s not worth a single penny-piece,
Best he turn monk in monastery meek
And for our sins pray daily on his knees.”
Quoth Roland: “Strike, spare none of them,” saith he.
At this the French renew the fight with speed;
Therein the Christians endure great loss and grief.

When it is known no prisoners will be made[1886-912]
Men fight back fiercely, and stubborn is the fray;
Therefore the French grow very lions for rage.
Here comes Marsile, e’en as a baron brave,
Riding a horse, and Gaignun is its name.
Full upon Bevon he rides and spurs amain,
That held all Beaune and Dijon for domain.
The shield he shatters, and the hauberk he breaks,
And lays him dead, he need not strike again.
And Ivon next and Ivor too, his mate,
And Gerard too of Roussillon he slays.
Roland the Count, who is not far away,
Cries to the Paynim: “God damn your soul, I say!
These my companions by treason you have slain!
Ere we go hence a bitter price you’ll pay,
And you shall learn the name of my good blade!”
He rides to strike him, e’en as a baron brave;
From his sword-arm he shears the hand away.
And Jurfaret the Fair he next waylays,
Marsilion’s son, and slices off his pate.
The Paynims cry: “Mahound! Mahound to aid!
Venge us on Carlon, all you gods of our faith!
Into our land he’s sent this evil race!
Come life come death they’ll never quit the place.”
Then one to other cries: “Fly then! fly in haste!”
An hundred thousand have fled the field straightway;
They’ll not return, call after them, who may.
AOI

What help is that? Marsile has taken flight,[1913-39]
Yet there remains his uncle Marganice,
That governs Carthage, Alfrere and Garamile,
And Ethiope, a land accursed and vile.
In his command are all the Negro tribes;
Thick are their noses, their ears are very wide;
Full fifty thousand are gathered in their lines,
Boldly and fast and furiously they ride,
Yelling aloud the Paynim battle-cry.
Then Roland said: “Here are we doomed to die;
Full well I know we cannot long survive.
Fail not, for shame, right dear to sell your lives.
Lift up, my lords, your burnished blades and fight!
Come life, come death, the foe shall pay the price,
Lest we should bring fair France into despite!
When on this field Carlon my lord sets eyes
He’ll see what toll we’ve taken of their might:
Fifteen dead Paynims for each of us he’ll find;
Nor fail to bless us for this our great enterprise.”

When Roland looks on these accursed tribesmen—
As black as ink from head to foot their hides are,
With nothing white about them but their grinders—
Then said the Count: “‘Tis true beyond denial,
Right well I know it, this day shall death betide us.
I’ll to the throng; Frenchmen, fight on beside me!”
Quoth Oliver: “The devil take the hindmost!”
The French hear this and once more fall a-fighting.

When Paynims see how few the French are grown
They plume themselves, puffed up with pride and hope:
“Now to the Emperor,” they say, “his crimes come home!”
Marganice comes, riding a sorrel colt;
He spurs him hard with rowels all of gold,
And from behind deals Oliver a blow;
Deep in his back the burnished mail is broke,
That the spear’s point stands forth at his breast-bone.
He saith to him: “You’ve suffered a sore stroke;
Charlemayn sent you to the pass for your woe.
Foul wrong he did us, ’tis good he lose his boast:
I’ve well requited our loss on you alone.”

Oliver feels that he is hurt to death;
He grasps his sword Hauteclaire the keen of edge,
Smites Marganice on his high golden helm,
Shearing away the flowers and crystal gems,
Down to the teeth clean splits him through the head,
Shakes loose the blade and flings him down and dead;
Then saith: "Foul fall you, accursèd Paynim wretch!
Charles has had losses, so much I will confess:
But ne’er shall you, back to the land you left,
To dame or damsel return to boast yourself
That e’er you spoiled me to the tune of two pence,
Or made your profit of me or other men."
This done, to Roland he cries aloud for help.

Oliver feels he’s wounded mortally;[1965-88]
His thirst for vengeance can never glutted be.
Amid the press he strikes right valiantly;
He breaks asunder the spear-shaft and the shield,
Splits chines and saddles and lops off hands and feet.
Whoso had seen him hew Paynims piece from piece,
Throw one on other their bodies down in heaps,
Might well remember that flower of knightly deeds!
And Carlon’s war-cry he fails not to repeat,
But still “Mountjoy!” goes shouting loud and clear.
He calls to Roland his comrade and his peer:
“Sir, my companion, draw nigh and stand with me;
We must this day be parted to our grief.”

Oliver’s face, when Roland on him looks,
Is grey and ghastly, discoloured, wan with wounds,
His bright blood sprays his body head to foot;
Down to the ground it runs from him in pools.
“God!” says the Count, “I know not what to do!
Fair sir, companion, woe worth your mighty mood!—
Ne’er shall be seen a man to equal you.
Alas, fair France! what valiant men and true
Must thou bewail this day, cast down and doomed!
Bitter the loss the Emperor has to rue!”
So much he says, and in the saddle swoons.

See Roland now swooning in saddle laid,[1989-2013]
And Oliver that unto death is maimed;
He’s bled so much that his eyes are all glazed,
Or far or near he can see nothing straight,
Nor recognise a single living shape;
So when he comes to where his comrade waits,
On the gold helm he smites at him amain,
Down to the nasal he splits the jewelled plates,
Only his head is not touched by the blade.
Then Roland, stricken, lifts his eyes to his face,
Asking him low and mildly as he may:
“Sir, my companion, did you mean it that way?
Look, I am Roland, that loved you all my days;
You never sent me challenge or battle-gage.”
Quoth Oliver: “I cannot see you plain;
I know your voice; may God see you and save.
And I have struck you; pardon it me, I pray.”
Roland replies: “I have taken no scathe;
I pardon you, myself and in God’s name.”
Then each to other bows courteous in his place.
With such great love thus is their parting made.

150

Oliver feels the coming pangs of death;
Both of his eyes are turning in his head,
Now he is blind wholly, and wholly deaf.
He lights from horse and to his knees he gets
And makes confession aloud, and beats his breast.[2014-39]
Then clasps his hands and lifts them up to Heav’n;
In Paradise he prays God give him rest,
And France the Fair and Carlon prays Him bless,
And his companion Roland above all men.
His heart-strings crack, he stoops his knightly helm,
And sinks to earth, and lies there all his length.
Dead is the Count, his days have reached their end.
The valiant Roland weeps for him and laments,
No man on earth felt ever such distress.

151

When Roland sees his friend and comrade die,
And on the ground face down beholds him lie,
With tender words he bids him thus goodbye:
“Sir, my companion, woe worth your valiant might!
Long years and days have we lived side by side,
Ne’er didst thou wrong me nor suffer wrong of mine.
Now thou art dead I grieve to be alive.”
Having thus said, the Marquis swoons outright
On his steed’s back, that Veillantif is hight;
He’s kept from falling by the gold stirrups bright;
Go as he may, they hold him still upright.

152

Or ever Roland comes to himself again
And has recovered and rallied from his faint,
Fearful disaster his fortunes have sustained;
All of the French are lost to him and slain;
Sole, the Archbishop and Walter Hum remain.
Walter has come down from the heights again;[2040-65]
Well has he striven against the men of Spain,
His men are dead, mown down by Paynim blades;
Will he or nill he, he flees towards the vale,
And upon Roland he cries aloud for aid:
“Where art thou, where, great county, warrior brave?
While thou wast there I never was dismayed.
Walter am I, who Maëlgut o’ercame,
Nephew am I to Droön white with age;
Thou for my valour wast wont to love me aye!
My lance is shattered, my shield is split in twain,
Battered and broken is my hauberk of mail,
A spear has pierced me [through the midst of my reins;]
Death is upon me, yet dear I made them pay.”
Lo! at that word Roland hears him and wakes;
He spurs his horse and comes to him in haste.

Roland is filled with grief and anger sore;
In the thick press he now renews his war.
Of those of Spain he’s overthrown a score,
And Walter six, the Archbishop five more.
The Paynims say: “These men are worst of all!
Let none escape alive; look to it, lords!
Who fears the onset, let shame be his reward!
Who lets these go, may he be put to scorn!”
Then once again the hue and cry breaks forth;
From every side pour in the Paynim hordes.

The County Roland is mighty of his mood,[2066-93]
Walter de Hum well-famed for knightlihood,
And the Archbishop a warrior tried and proved;
Betwixt their valours there’s not a pin to choose.
In the thick press they smite the Moorish crew.
A thousand Paynims dismount to fight on foot,
And forty thousand horsemen they have, to boot,
Yet ‘gainst these three, my troth! they fear to move.
They hurl against them their lances from aloof,
Javelins, jereeds, darts, shafts and spears they loose.
In the first shock brave Walter meets his doom.
Turpin of Rheims has his shield split in two,
His helm is broken, his head has ta’en a wound,
His hauberk’s pierced, the mail-rings burst and strewn,
By four sharp spears his breast is stricken through,
Killed under him his horse rolls neck and croup;
Th’Archbishop’s down, woe worth the bitter dule.

Turpin of Rheims, finding himself o’erset,
With four sharp lance-heads stuck fast within his breast,
Quickly leaps up, brave lord, and stands erect.
He looks on Roland and runs to him and says
Only one word: “I am not beaten yet!
True man failed never while life in him was left.”
He draws Almace, his steel-bright brand keen-edged;
A thousand strokes he strikes amid the press.
Soon Charles shall see he spared no foe he met,
For all about him he’ll find four hundred men,
Some wounded, some clean through the body eleft,
And some of them made shorter by the head.[2094-119]
So tells the Geste; so he that fought there tells:
The worthy Giles, whom God with marvels blessed,
In Laön minster thus-wise the charter penned;
Who knows not this knows nought of what befel.

156

The County Roland fights bravely as he may,
But his whole body in heat and sweat is bathed,
And all his head is racked with grievous pain
From that great blast which brake his temples’ veins.
Fain would he know if Charles is bringing aid;
His Olifant he grasps, and blows full faint.
The Emperor halts, hearing the feeble strain:
“My lords,” quoth he, “this tells a woeful tale;
Roland my nephew is lost to us this day,
That call proclaims his breath is nigh to fail.
Whoso would reach him must ride with desperate haste.
Sound through the host! bid every trumpet play!”
Full sixty thousand so loud their clarions bray
The hills resound, the valleys ring again.
The Paynims hear, no lust to laugh have they:
“We’ll soon have Charles to reckon with,” they say.

157

The Paynims say: “The Emperor’s turned about;
Of those of France hark how the trumpets sound!
If Carlon comes, we shall have rack and rout,
If Roland lives, once more he’ll war us down,
We shall not keep one foot of Spanish ground.”
Straightway four hundred helmed warriors rally round.[2120-45]
The finest fighters that in the field are found;
A fearful onslaught they’ll make upon the Count;
Truly Lord Roland has got his work cut out.

158

Whenas Count Roland sees their assault begin,
Right fierce he makes him, and strong and menacing;
While life is in him he’ll never quail or quit.
He sits his horse that is named Veillantif,
Into his flanks the golden spurs he pricks
And sets upon them where most the press is thick.
The Lord Archbishop, brave Turpin, rides with him.
Paynim to paynim cries: “Comrade, go to it!
Have we not heard the Frankish trumpets ring?
Charles is returning, the great, the mighty king!”
The County Roland ne’er loved a recreant,
Nor a false heart, nor yet a braggart jack,
Nor knight that was not a good man of his hands.
He cried to Turpin, the Churchman militant,
“Sir, you’re on foot, I’m on my horse’s back;
For love of you here will I make my stand,
And side by side we’ll take both good and bad.
I’ll not desert you for any mortal man.
Go we together these Paynims to attack;
The mightiest blows are those of Durendal.”
Quoth the Archbishop: “’Twere shame our strokes to slack;
Carlon is coming, our vengeance shall not lack.”

The Paynims say: “Why were we ever born?[2146-74]
Woe worth the while! our day of doom has dawned.
Now have we lost our peerage and our lords,
The mighty Carlon comes on with all his force,
Of those of France we hear the shrilling horns,
The cry ‘Mountjoy!’ sounds fearfully abroad.
So grim of mood is Roland in his wrath
No man alive can put him to the sword.
Let fly at him, and then give up the war.”
So they let fly; spears, lances they outpour,
Darts and jereeds and feathered shafts galore.
The shield of Roland is pierced and split and scored,
The mail-rings riven, and all his hauberk torn,
Yet in his body he is not touched at all,
Though under him, with thirty wounds and more,
His Veillantif is stricken dead and falls.
The Paynims flee, abandoning the war;
Count Roland’s left amid the field, unhorsed.

In wrath and grief away the Paynims fly;
Backward to Spain with headlong haste they hie.
The County Roland cannot pursue their flight,
Veillantif’s lost, he has no steed to ride;
Will he or nill he, he must on foot abide,
He’s turned to aid Archbishop Turpin’s plight,
And from his head the gilded helm untied,
Stripped off the hauberk of subtle rings and bright,
And all to pieces has cut the bliaut fine
Wherewith to bandage his wounds that gape so wide.
Then to his breast he clasps and lifts him light
And gently lays him upon the green hill-side,[2175-99]
With fair soft speech entreating on this wise:
“Ah, noble sir, pray give me leave awhile;
These friends of ours, we loved so well in life,
We must not leave them thus lying where they died.
I will go seek them, find, and identify,
And lay them here together in your sight.”
“Go and return,” the Bishop makes reply;
“Thanks be to God, this field is yours and mine.”

162
Roland departs and through the field is gone;
Alone he searches the valleys and high rocks.
[And there he finds Ivor, and there Ivon],
Gerier and Gerin, the good companions,
[And Engelier whom Gascony begot];
And he has found Berenger and Oton,
And after finds Ansei's and Samson,
And finds Gerard the Old, of Roussillon.
He lifts them up, brave baron, one by one,
To the Archbishop he carries them anon,
And by his knees ranges them all along.
The Bishop weeps, he cannot stint thereof;
He lifts his hand and gives them benison,
And after saith: “Alack, brave champions!
May your souls rest with the all-glorious God
In Paradise, amid the rose-blossoms.
I too am dying and sorrow for my lot,
Who the great Emperor no more may look upon.”

163
Roland once more unto the field repairs,[2200-25]
And has sought out his comrade Oliver.
Close to his breast he lifts him, and with care
As best he may to the Archbishop bears
And on his shield lays with the others there;
The Bishop signs and shrives them all with prayer.
With tears renewed their sorrow is declared,
And Roland saith: “Fair fellow Oliver,
You were own son unto Duke Renier
That held the marches of the Vale of Runers.
To shatter shield or break lance anywhere,
And from their seat proud men to overbear,
And cheer the brave with words of counsel fair,
And bring the cruel to ruin and despair,
No knight on earth was valiant as you were.”

164
The County Roland, seeing his peers lie dead,
And Oliver, who was his dearest friend,
Begins to weep for ruth and tenderness;
Out of his cheeks the colour all has fled,
He cannot stand, he is so deep distressed,
He swoons to earth, he cannot help himself.
“Alas, for pity, sweet lord!” the Bishop saith.
When the Archbishop saw Roland faint and fallen,
So sad was he, he never had been more so;
He reaches out; he’s taken Roland’s horn up.
In Ronceval there runs a stream of water;
Fain would he go there and fetch a little for him.[2226-53]
With feeble steps he turns him thither, falt’ring;
He is so weak, that he cannot go forward,
For loss of blood he has no strength to call on.
Ere one might cover but a rood’s length in walking
His heart has failed him, he has fallen face-foremost;
The pangs of death have seized him with great torment.

The County Roland has rallied from his faint,
Gets to his feet, though he’s in grievous pain,
And looks about him over hill, over vale.
Beyond his comrades, upon the grass-green plain,
There he beholds the noble baron laid,
The great Archbishop, vice-gerent of God’s name.
He beats his breast with eyes devoutly raised,
With folded hands lifted to Heaven he prays
That God will give him in Paradise a place.
Turpin is dead that fought for Charlemayn;
In mighty battles, and in preaching right brave,
Still against Paynims a champion of the Faith;
Blest mote he be, the Lord God give him grace!

The County Roland sees the Archbishop lie;
He sees his bowels gush forth out of his side
And on his brow the brain laid bare to sight.
Midst of his breast where the key-bones divide,
Crosswise he lays his comely hands and white,
And thus laments him as native use requires:
“Ah, debonair, thou good and noble knight!
Now I commend thee to the great Lord of might,
Servant more willing than thee He shall not find.[2254-80]
Since the Apostles no prophet was thy like,
For to maintain the Faith, and win mankind.
May thy soul meet no hindrance in her flight!
May Heaven’s gate to her stand open wide!”

Now Roland feels that he is at death’s door;
Out of his ears the brain is running forth.
Now for his peers he prays God call them all,
And for himself St Gabriel’s aid implores;
Then in each hand he takes, lest shame befal,
His Olifant and Durendal his sword.
Far as a quarrel flies from a cross-bow drawn,  
Toward land of Spain he goes, to a wide lawn,  
And climbs a mound where grows a fair tree tall,  
And marble stones beneath it stand by four.  
Face downward there on the green grass he falls,  
And swoons away, for he is at death’s door.

169

High are the hills and very high the trees are;  
Four stones there are set there, of marble gleaming.  
The County Roland lies senseless on the greensward.  
A Saracen is there, watching him keenly;  
He has feigned death, and lies among his people,  
And has smeared blood upon his breast and features.  
Now he gets up and runs towards him fleetly;  
Strong was he, comely and of valour exceeding.  
Now in his rage and in his overweening  
He falls on Roland, his arms and body seizing;  
He saith one word: “Now Carlon’s nephew’s beaten.[2281-307]  
I’ll take his sword, to Araby I’ll reive it.”  
But as he draws it Roland comes to, and feels him.

170

Roland has felt his good sword being stol’n;  
Opens his eyes and speaks this word alone:  
“Thou’rt none of ours, in so far as I know.”  
He takes his horn, of which he kept fast hold,  
And smites the helm, which was all gemmed with gold;  
He breaks the steel and the scalp and the bone,  
And from his head batters his eyes out both,  
And dead on ground he lays the villain low;  
Then saith: “False Paynim, and how wast thou so bold,  
Foully or fairly, to seize upon me so?  
A fool he’ll think thee who hears this story told.  
Lo, now! the mouth of my Olifant’s broke;  
Fallen is all the crystal and the gold.”

171

Now Roland feels his sight grow dim and weak;  
With his last strength he struggles to his feet;  
All the red blood has faded from his cheeks.  
A grey stone stands before him at his knee:  
Ten strokes thereon he strikes, with rage and grief;  
It grides, but yet nor breaks nor chips the steel.  
“Ah!” cries the Count, “St Mary succour me!  
Alack the day, Durendal, good and keen!  
Now I am dying, I cannot fend for thee.  
How many battles I’ve won with you in field!  
With you I’ve conquered so many goodly fiefs  
That Carlon holds, the lord with the white beard![2308-35]  
Let none e’er wield you that from the foe would flee—  
You that were wielded so long by a good liege!
The like of you blest France shall never see.”

172

Count Roland smites the sardin stone amain.
The steel grides loud, but neither breaks nor bates.
Now when he sees that it will nowise break
Thus to himself he maketh his complaint:
“Ah, Durendal! so bright, so brave, so gay!
How dost thou glitter and shine in the sun’s rays!
When Charles was keeping the vales of Moriane,
God by an angel sent to him and ordained
He should bestow thee on some count-capitayne.
On me he girt thee, the noble Charlemayn.
With this I won him Anjou and all Bretayn,
With this I won him Poitou, and conquered Maine;
With this I won him Normandy’s fair terrain,
And with it won Provence and Acquitaine,
And Lombardy and all the land Romayne,
Bavaria too, and the whole Flemish state,
And Burgundy and all Apulia gained;
Constantinople in the King’s hand I laid;
In Saxony he speaks and is obeyed;
With this I won Scotland, [Ireland and Wales,]
And England, where he set up his domain;
What lands and countries I’ve conquered by its aid,
For Charles to keep whose beard is white as may!
Now am I grieved and troubled for my blade;
Should Paynims get it, ’twere worse than all death’s pains.[2336-63]
Dear God forbid it should put France to shame!”

173

Count Roland smites upon the marble stone;
I cannot tell you how he hewed it and smote;
Yet the blade breaks not nor splinters, though it groans;
Upward to heaven it rebounds from the blow.
When the Count sees it never will be broke,
Then to himself right softly he makes moan:
“Ah, Durendal, fair, hallowed, and devote,
What store of relics lie in thy hilt of gold!
St Peter’s tooth, St Basil’s blood, it holds,
Hair of my lord St Denis, there enclosed,
Likewise a piece of Blessed Mary’s robe;
To Paynim hands ’twere sin to let you go;
You should be served by Christian men alone,
Ne’er may you fall to any coward soul!
Many wide lands I conquered by your strokes
For Charles to keep whose beard is white as snow,
Whereby right rich and mighty is his throne.”

174

Now Roland feels death press upon him hard;
It’s creeping down from his head to his heart.
Under a pine-tree he hastens him apart,
There stretches him face down on the green grass,
And lays beneath him his sword and Olifant.
He’s turned his head to where the Paynims are,
And this he doth for the French and for Charles,
Since fain is he that they should say, brave heart,
That he has died a conquerer at the last.
He beats his breast full many a time and fast,[2364-89]
Gives, with his glove, his sins into God’s charge.

AOI

175

Now Roland feels his time is at an end;
On the steep hill-side, toward Spain he’s turned his head,
And with one hand he beats upon his breast;
Saith: “Mea culpa; Thy mercy, Lord, I beg
For all the sins, both the great and the less,
That e’er I did since first I drew my breath
Unto this day when I’m struck down by death.”
His right-hand glove he unto God extends;
Angels from Heaven now to his side descend.

AOI

176

The County Roland lay down beneath a pine;
To land of Spain he’s turned him as he lies,
And many things begins to call to mind:
All the broad lands he conquered in his time,
And fairest France, and the men of his line,
And Charles his lord, who bred him from a child;
He cannot help but weep for them and sigh.
Yet of himself he is mindful betimes;
He beats his breast and on God’s mercy cries:
“Father most true, in whom there is no lie,
Who didst from death St Lazarus make to rise,
And bring out Daniel safe from the lions’ might,
Save Thou my soul from danger and despite
Of all the sins I did in all my life.”
His right-hand glove he’s tendered unto Christ,
And from his hand Gabriel accepts the sign.[2390-415]
Straightway his head upon his arm declines;
With folded hands he makes an end and dies.
God sent to him His Angel Cherubine,
And great St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide;
St Gabriel too was with them at his side;
The County’s soul they bear to Paradise.

177

Roland is dead, in Heaven God hath his soul.
The Emperor Charles rides in to Roncevaux.
No way there is therein, nor any road,
No path, no yard, no foot of naked mould
But there some French or Paynim corpse lies strown.
Charles cries: “Where are you, fair nephew? Out, harò!
Where’s the Archbishop? is Oliver laid low?
Where are Gerin, Gerier his playfellow,
And Berenger, and the good Count Othone?
Ivor and Ives, so well I loved them both?
Where’s Engelier, the Gascon great of note?
Samson the Duke, and Anseïs the Bold?
And where is Gerard of Roussillon the Old?
Where the Twelve Peers I left to guard the host?”
What use to cry? all’s still as any stone.

“God!” says the King, “how bitter my reproach,
That I was absent when they struck the first blow!”

He plucks his beard right angerly and wroth;
Barons and knights all weep and make their moan,
Full twenty thousand swoon to the ground for woe;
Naimon the Duke is grieved with all his soul.

178

There is no baron nor knight in all the train
That does not weep most piteously for pain;
Brothers and sons and nephews they bewail
For their liege-lords and friends they make complaint;
Many of them fall to the ground and faint.

Great wisdom then Naimon the Duke displays,
For to the Emperor he is the first to say:
“Look there ahead, perchance two leagues away,
Those clouds of dust, the highway in a haze—
See how great hordes of Paynims flee apace!
Ride, my lord, ride! avenge this dolorous fray!”

“Alas!” quoth Charles, “what an advance they’ve gained!
Truly you counsel what right and honour claim;
Fair France’s flower they’ve reft from me this day.”

He summons Othon and Geboïn to aid,
Tibbald of Rheims and County Milon brave:
“Guard you the field, guard all the hills and vales;
As the dead lie, so let them lie, I say;
Let no lion touch them nor any beast of prey,
Nor any squire touch them, nor any knave,
I charge you, none—no hand on them be laid,
Till to this field, please God, we come again.”
And they reply with love and reverence great:
“Most dearest lord, just Emperor, we obey.”
Of their meinie a thousand knights they name.

AOI

179

The Emperor bids the trumpets sound to war;
With his whole army the valiant king sets forth;
Hard on the trail they chase, with one accord,
The men of Spain whose backs are turned far off.
When the King sees the dusk begin to fall,
In a green meadow he lights down on the sward,
Kneels on the ground and prays to God Our Lord
For love of him to hold back the sun's course,
Prolong the day and bid the dark withdraw.
Straightway an angel with whom he wont to talk
Comes, with this summons, in answer to his call:
“Ride, Carlon, ride; the light shall not come short!
The flower of France is fallen; God knows all;
Thou shalt have vengeance upon the heathen horde.”
When this he hears, the Emperor gets to horse.

For Charlemayn God wrought a wondrous token:
The sun stood still in the mid-heaven holden.
The Paynims flee, the French pursue them closely.
They overtake them in Vale of Tenebrosa.
Toward Saragossa they drive and beat them broken,
With mighty strokes they slay them in their going,
Cut their retreat off by the highways and roadways.
The River Ebro confronts them swiftly-flowing
And very deep and most fearfully swollen;
There is no barge, neither lighter nor dromond.
In desperation their Termagant invoking,
The Paynims plunge, but their gods take no notice.
Those that are armed in heavy helm and hauberk
Sink to the bottom in numbers past all noting.
Others drift downstream upon the current floating;
Happiest is he who promptly gets his throatful,
They are all drowned in a welter most woeful:
The French cry: “Luckless the day you looked on Roland!”

When Charles sees all the Paynims dead past doubt,
Some of them slain and the greater part drowned,
On whose rich spoils his chivalry can count,
The noble King from his charger dismounts
And gives God thanks, kneeling upon the ground.
When he arises he finds the sun gone down.
The Emperor says: “’Tis time to camp, I trow;
To Ronceval too late to turn back now,
Because our horses are jaded and tired out;
Unloose the saddles, take the bits from their mouths,
Let them go graze these meadows all around.”
The French reply: “Sire, your advice is sound.”

The Emperor now has his encampment set;
In open country afoot are all the French;
They’ve freed their horses from saddle and from belt,
The golden bridles they’ve loosed from off their heads
And let them run where grass grows thick and fresh:
That is as much as they can do for them.
Whoso is weary has made the earth his bed;
And for that night they post no sentinels.

183

In a green meadow the Emperor Charles is laid,[2496-522]
Beside his head his mighty spear is placed,
He’ll not, this night, put off his war-array;
He’s clad in hauberk of shining saffron mail,
Hath on his head his gold-gemmed helmet laced,
And, girt about him, Joyeuse, his peerless blade,
That changes colour full thirty times a day.
You know the lance—for oft we’ve heard the tale—
Which pierced Our Lord when He on cross was slain:
Carlon possesses the lancehead, God be praised!
In the gold pummel he’s had it shrined and cased,
And for to honour such favour and such grace
This sword of his is called Joyeuse by name.
Barons of France can scarce forget that same,
For then ‘Mountjoy’, their battle-cry, was made;
Wherefore no nation can stand before their face.

184

The night is clear and the moon shining bright;
Charles lies awake and weeps for Roland’s plight,
For Oliver he weeps with all his might,
Weeps his Twelve Peers, his French folk left behind
In Roncevaux, slain bloodily in fight.
He cannot help but mourn for them and sigh,
And pray God bring their souls to Paradise.
The King is weary, for grief weighs on his eyes;
He can no more, he sleeps after a while,
And all the French sleep in the field likewise.
There’s not a horse has strength to stand upright;
If they want grass they crop it as they lie.[2523-49]
He that has suffered learns many things in life.

185

Carlon is sleeping as one worn out with grief.
St Gabriel comes, sent from his heavenly seat
To guard the Emperor, by God’s express decree.
Watch at his head all night the Angel keeps,
And shows to him, in likeness of a dream,
A battle new, which he will have to meet;
By grievous portents the meaning is revealed.
Looking to heaven stands Carlon, so it seems;
There he beholds great gales and tempests beat,
Levin and hail and fearful storms and sleet,
And fire and flame kindled, falling in sheets
All of a sudden upon his host a-field;
Burning the lances of ash and apple-beam,
E’en the gold bosses burning upon the shields,
Riving in sunder the shafts of the sharp spears,
Splitting the hauberks and the helmets of steel;
In great distress he sees his chivalry.
Then to devour them come bears, and leopards keen,
Worms, wyverns, dragons, and devils from the deep,
And thirty thousand griffins along with these,
That on the French come pouncing all and each.
The French cry, “Help! O Charlemayn, make speed!”
Anguish of heart and pity the King feels;
Fain would he hasten, but fresh woes intervene.
A mighty lion out of a forest leaps,
Haughty and fierce and terrible to see;
His royal body it would attack and seize;
They clasp each other and grapple, man to beast,
Nor can he tell who’s top and who’s beneath.
The Emperor slumbers, he wakes not from his sleep.

186

After this vision the Emperor dreamed again:
That on a dais he stood, in France, at Aix,
Leading a bear bound with a double chain;
And from Ardennes thirty more bears there came,
Each one of which spoke in a human way.
“Sire, give him back to us,” they seemed to say;
“For in your hand he ought not to remain;
He is our kinsman and we must give him aid.”
Out of the palace he sees a greyhound race,
Sees it attack the biggest bear apace;
On the green grass beyond them all, straightway
The King beholds a wondrous fierce affray,
But cannot tell which one will win the day.
These things God’s Angel to the good King displays.
Carlon sleeps on till the bright morning breaks.

187

Marsile has fled to Saragossa town.
Beneath an olive in the shade he dismounts,
Resigns his sword, his helm, his byrny brown,
On the green grass lies miserably down;
His right hand’s gone and he must do without;
For pain and loss of blood he falls in swound.
Before him comes Queen Bramimond his spouse,
Wails and laments and utters dismal sounds.
By twenty thousand his followers stand around;
They curse fair France and Carlon they denounce.
Apollyon’s grotto they make for in a rout,
With ugly insults they threaten him and shout:
“Aha! vile god, why must thou shame us now?
Why let disaster befall this king of ours?
To faithful servants a generous lord art thou!”
They snatch away his sceptre and his crown,
By his hands hang him upon a column bound,
And with thick cudgels belabour him and pound;
Then with their feet trample him on the ground.
Termagant gets his carbuncle torn out;
Into a ditch they boot away Mahound
For pigs and dogs to mangle and befoul.

188

The King Marsile recovers him from fainting;
He bids them bear him into his vaulted chamber
That in bright colours is all inscribed and painted.
And there his wife, Queen Bramimond, bewails him:
She tears her hair and cries: “Ah! wretched lady!”
And at each word loudly laments her, saying:
“Ah, Saragossa! desolate thou remainest
or this great king that was thy lord and safeguard!
Truly, our gods have acted very basely[2600-29]
Who in the battle this day forsook and failed him.
And the Emir will show himself a craven
Not to give battle unto this race courageous
Who are so reckless, they hold their lives as playthings.
Yea, and this Emperor of theirs, this ancient greybeard,
Is so o’erweening and carries him so bravely,
He’ll never flee if war is in the waging.
Alas for pity that there is none to slay him!”

194

Quoth Baligant: “To horse, my lords! Ride on!
Take one the glove, the other take the wand.”
“Dear sir, we will”, the pair make answer prompt.
To Saragossa they ride and come anon.
They pass ten gates, four bridges pass across,
And thread the streets wherein the burghers lodge.
And when at last they reach the city’s top,
Before the palace they hear loud cries and long.
Here many paynims are gathered in a throng
Wailing and howling in accents woebegone
For Termagant and for Mahound, their gods,
And for Apollyon, who unto them are lost.
Each cries: “Woe’s me! what now will be our lot?
Fearful disaster is fall’n on us headlong!
Lo! we have lost our King Marsilion,
Roland the Count has cut his right hand off;
And Jurfaret the Fair, he too is gone.
Today all Spain will lie beneath their rod!”
Down light the envoys the terrace steps upon.
Beneath an olive they leave their horses waiting:
Two Saracens to hold the reins have hastened.
Then, each one holding his fellow by the raiment,
The envoys enter, the lofty palace scaling.
When they are come into the vaulted chamber
Friendly they proffer ill-omened salutation:
“Now may Mahound, that hath us in his safeguard,
And Lord Apollyon, and Termagant, with favour
Protect the King, and to the Queen be gracious!”
Quoth Bramimond: “Why, there’s a foolish saying!
These gods of ours are miserable traitors.
They have worked wonders at Roncevaux, the caitiffs!
They let our knights be slaughtered there unaided.
As for my lord, they’ve utterly betrayed him;
His right hand’s gone, there’s not a doit remaining;
’Twas smitten off by Roland, the Count makeless.
Now Charlemayn has all Spain for the taking.
And what of me, forlorn and wretched lady?
Woe worth the day! Why is there none to slay me?”

Quoth Clarien: “Lady, bridle your tongue awhile.
From Baligant the Paynim we’ve arrived.
Help for Marsile he says he will provide;
His glove and wand he sends you for a sign.
On Ebro now four thousand vessels ride,
Barges and boats and racing galleys light
And dromonds, more than I can count, beside.
Our great Emir is rich, unmatched for might;
To France he’ll go, Charlemayn there to find,
And make him yield, or slay him else outright.”

Quoth Bramimond: “As far as France? fie, fie!
We’ve Franks a-plenty nearer by many a mile.
These sev’n years past they’ve been here all the time.
The Emperor Charles is stout and full of fight.
Flee from the field? not he; he’d rather die.
The best king living he rates but as a child;
Charles has no fear of any man alive.”

“Have done, have done,” then said the King Marsile;
And to the envoys: “To me, sirs, pray you speak.
I’m at death’s door, as you may plainly see.
No son, no daughter, no heir have I to leave;
One son I had and he was killed yestre’en.
Ask the Emir to come and visit me;
On land of Spain a right good claim has he;
If he will have it, to him I yield it free;
Let him defend it against these Frankish thieves.
With Charlemayn I’ll tell him how to deal,
And in a month he’ll beat him to his knees.
Of Saragossa go, carry him the keys,
To have and hold, if he will mark my rede.”
“Sir,” they reply, “your words are wise indeed.”

AOI

198

Then said Marsile: “The Emperor of the Franks
Has slain my vassals and wasted all my lands,
My cities too he has destroyed and sacked.
He lay last night upon the Ebro’s bank;
Not sev’n leagues off, I reckon, is his camp.
Bid the Emir his utmost power dispatch;
By you I charge him to march to the attack.”[2761-89]
The city’s keys he puts into their hands.
Then the two envoys obsequious bowed their backs,
Bade him farewell, and took the homeward track.

199

The messengers upon their horses get.
Forth of the city fast as they may they press;
To the Emir they come in much distress;
Of Saragossa the keys to him present.
Quoth Baligant: “What news have you to tell?
Where is the King, Marsile, for whom I sent?”
Clarién answers: “He is wounded to death.
Yesterday Charles towards the passes went;
To make return to France was his intent;
And in his rear a noble guard he set:
The County Roland, his nephew, there he left,
And Oliver, and all the Peers, all twelve.
With them in arms were twenty thousand French.
The valiant King, Marsile, upon them fell,
And in the field he and Count Roland met;
There such a blow by Durendal was dealt,
Marsile’s right hand was from his body cleft.
Also his son, whom well he loved, is dead,
And slain are all the barons whom he led.
Endure he could not, but from the battle fled.
Carlon pursued him for many a long stretch.
Now the King prays that you will bring him help,
And unto you bequeaths the Spanish realm.”
Now Baligant must needs bethink himself;
With rage and grief he’s almost off his head.
AOI

200

“My Lord Emir,” quoth Clarién again,[2790-818]
“In Roncevaux was battle yesterday.
Roland is dead, Count Oliver is slain,
And the Twelve Peers beloved of Charlemayn;
By twenty thousand the French lie dead on plain.
Clean from his body Marsile’s right hand is razed;
Right furiously the Emperor pressed the chase.
There’s not a knight in all this land remains
But has been killed, or drowned in Ebro’s wave.
Upon the bank the French their camp have made:
If you strike now, they lie so near this place
That they will find it full hard to get away.”
Baligant hears: right haughty is his face,
And in his heart joyous he is and gay;
Up from his throne he leaps and stands full straight.
He cries aloud: “Come, barons, no delay!
Out of the ships! to horse! and ride in haste!
Unless by flight old Charlemayn escape,
The King Marsile shall be avenged this day,
And head for hand I’ll give him in exchange.”

201
Out of the ships the Arab Paynims move;
Straightway they’ve mounted their horses and their mules,
And forth they rode; what better could they do?
Then the Emir, who stirred this warlike brew,
Summoned Gemalfin, a minion of his crew,
Saying: “I give thee command of all my troops.”
Then mounts his steed whose coat is brown of hue,
And as his escort he takes with him four dukes.
To Saragossa his journey he pursued,
And on a terrace lit down, of marble hewn;[2819-44]
To hold his stirrup four counts together stoop.
He climbs the steps under the palace roof;
The Emir stirs this warlike brew,
She cries to him: “Woe’s me! the dreadful news!
My lord is dying a shameful death undue!”
She falls before him, he lifts her up anew;
Into the chamber they come, in doleful mood.

AOI

202
When King Marsile sees the Emir come in,
At once he summons two Spanish Sarrasins:
“Lend me your arms, raise me that I may sit.”
In his left hand one of his gloves he grips.
Then saith Marsile: “My Lord Emir and King,
See! this whole country [into your hand I give,]
And Saragossa and all its fiefs herewith.
Myself I’ve lost, my people, and my kin.”
And he replies: “I’m deeply grieved for this.
I must not stay a long time parleying;
Charles will get moving, right well I know he will,
Nevertheless, I take your glove and gift.”
Weeping he turns, such grief his bosom fills,
Descends the steps, and so the palace quits.
He gets to horse and joins his men forthwith;
He overtakes them all, he spurs so swift,
And rides ahead, shouting aloud by fits:
“Paynims, come on! e’en now they fly, methinks!”

AOI

203

At crack of dawn, when daylight first draws on,[2845-69]
The Emperor Charles wakes from his sleep anon.
His watching angel, St Gabriel, sent from God,
Lifts up his hand and signs him with the cross.
The King ungirds, and takes his armour off,
And the whole host likewise their harness doff.
They get to horse and briskly ride along
Through the wide plains and up the roadways long.
They go to see the great and wondrous loss
At Roncevaux, there where the battle was.

AOI

204

To Roncevaux comes Carlon by and by.
He sees the dead, and tears come to his eyes.
He tells the French: “Slowly, sirs, pray you ride;
I would go first, alone, with none beside,
For I would fain my nephew’s body find.
Yonder at Aix, one festal day, was I,
And all about me stood valiant men of mine,
Boasting of battles and of their fiercest fights.
Roland said something which now I call to mind:
That should he come in foreign lands to die,
Beyond them all, footmen or peers, he’d lie,
And have his face turned to the enemy;
Fighting he’d fall, and finish victor-like.”
Before the rest a staff’s cast or thereby
The Emperor goes and to a hill-top climbs.

205

As the King goes his nephew for to seek,[2870-95]
How many flowers he finds upon the lea
Red with the blood of all our chivalry!
He feels such pity he cannot choose but weep.
And now he reaches a place beneath two trees:
There, on three stones, Count Roland’s strokes he sees,
And sees his nephew stretched on the grassy green.
It is no wonder if Carlon’s woe is keen:
Straight he dismounts and runs there on his feet,
Between his hands he clasps the baron’s cheeks,
And swoons upon him, he is so wrung with grief.

206

From out his swoon the Emperor’s raised his head.
Naimon the Duke and County Acelon then,
Geoffrey d’Anjou, Henry his brother next,
Lift the King up against a pine-tree’s stem.
He looks to earth and sees his nephew dead,
And very softly thus utters his lament:
“God show thee mercy, Count Roland, my dear friend!
So great a knight as thou was ne’er seen yet,
To undertake great wars and win them well.
Alas! my glory is sinking to its end!”
King Carlon swoons, he cannot help himself.

Carlon the King out of his swoon revives.
Four barons hold him between their hands upright.
He looks to earth and sees his nephew lie.
Fair is his body, but all his hue is white.
His upturned eyes are shadowy with night.[2896-920]
By faith and love Charles mourns him on this wise:
“Roland, my friend, God have thy soul on high
With the bright Hallows in flowers of Paradise!
Thy wretched lord sent thee to Spain to die!
Never shall day bring comfort to my eyes.
How fast must dwindle my joy now and my might!
None shall I have to keep my honour bright!
Methinks I’ve not one friend left under sky;
Kinsmen I have, but none that is thy like.”
He tears his hair with both hands for despite.
By hundred thousand the French for sorrow sigh;
There’s none of them but utters grievous cries.

“Roland, my friend to France I go again.
When I’m at Laon within my own domain
Many will come of alien realm and race
Asking: ‘Where’s he, the great Count Capitayne?’
And I must tell them that he lies dead in Spain.
All my life long in sorrow must I reign.
Nor any day cease grieving and complaint.

Roland, my friend, heart valiant, goodly youth,
When I’m at Aix, beneath my chapel roof,
Many will come, and they will ask for news.
Then must I tell them the strange and heavy truth:
‘Dead is my nephew that all my realms subdued.’
Then will the Saxons rise up against my rule,[2921-48]
Hungarians, Bulgars and many a hostile brood,
From Rome, Palermo, Apulia to boot,
The Afric bands, the Californian crew—
Then will my troubles and toils begin anew.
Where is the might that now shall lead my troops,
Since he is dead that always brought us through?  
Alas, fair France, how desolate are you!  
I am so wretched, would I had perished too.”
He tears his beard that is so white of hue,
Tears with both hands his white hair by the roots;
And of the French an hundred thousand swoon.

210
“Roland, my friend, God bring thee to His rest,  
And set thy soul in Paradise the blest!  
He that slew thee hath ruined France as well.  
So great my grief, I would that I were dead,  
Grief for my household, thus slain in my defence!  
Now grant me God that lay on Mary's breast  
That ere my foot in Sizer pass be set,  
Out of my body my spirit may be reft  
And placed with theirs, along with them to dwell,  
And under earth my flesh beside their flesh!”
He weeps for woe, his silver beard he rends.
Then saith Duke Naimon: “Charles is in great distress.”
AOI

211
Geoffrey d’Anjou then spake, “Lord Emperor,  
Pray you be calm and sorrow not so sore.  
Have the field searched for all our men and lords  
Whom those of Spain to death in battle brought,  
And in one grave let them be buried all.”[2949-73]
The King replies: “I will; go sound your horn!”
AOI

212
Geoffrey d’Anjou has made his trumpet sound.  
By Carlon’s orders the French straightway dismount.  
When the dead bodies of all their friends are found,  
In one great trench they lay them underground.  
Bishops and abbots throughout the host abound,  
Canons and monks, and priests with shaven crowns;  
So in God’s name they shrive and sign them now.  
Thy kindle myrrh and incense in thick clouds  
And cense them all with lavish hand all round;  
Then with great honour they raise the burial-mound;  
So there they leave them; what else were in their power?
AOI

213
Charles has had Roland prepared for burial-rites,  
With Bishop Turpin and Oliver besides.  
He’s had their bodies opened before his eyes,  
Had their hearts wrapped in silken tissue fine,  
And placed within an urn of marble white.
The barons’ bodies they then take up and wind
Straitly in shrouds made of the roebuck’s hide,
Having first washed them with spices and with wine.
The King calls Tibbald and Gebuin to his side,
Othon the Marquis and Count Milon likewise:
“On three wains place them, and you must be their guides.”
O’er each they throw a rich pall Galazine......

FOOTNOTES

[1] A page, recently rediscovered, from the Codex Emiliense 39 attests the existence, at or shortly before the date of the Chanson de Roland, of a Roland-legend, analogous to, but independent of, the Chanson (see Revista de Filologia Española, 1953, pp. 1-94).
[2] The ceremonial beard and the exterior marks of great age linger on for a long time in literature as the conventional expression of paternal authority. We do wrong to enter into realistic calculations about the respective ages of Cordelia and Lear, Juliet and Old Capulet; the “aged father”, like the aged king, is a semantic device, which may be used either to inspire reverence, or, in the customary comic reversal of order, to make a mock of reverence.
[3] The situation is made very clear in the Geste called the Chanson de Willame. Here, the cowardly Count Esturmi flees before the battle begins, and his followers, showing an excellent spirit, call on Count Vivian to lead them. Vivian replies that he will gladly do so, but that he sees one great objection:
“You’re not my vassals, and I am not your lord;
Should you desert me you would not be forsworn.”
Esturmi’s vassals see the force of this, and at once regularise the position by taking a personal oath to follow him loyally “as long as you shall live”.
[4] Note that he does not die by any Paynim hand—his person is too sacred—but as a result of his own superhuman exertions.
[5] Compare the structure of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, which, in the same way, is the story of a murder, duly and correctly followed by a vengeance.
[7] Looked on thus, as a whole, it has a much greater theme than that of the Iliad. This does not mean that it is a greater poem; it is not, by a long way. In style and technique it is primitive, and has nothing to compare with Homer’s music and accomplishment. But in depicting, as both poems do, a struggle between two civilisations, the Christian poet is much more conscious of a serious purpose, and the mainspring of the action is something more important than the recapture of a wife or a quarrel about booty. In virtue of this greater seriousness and self-awareness, the Song of Roland, though “primitive” in form, is entitled to take rank with “secondary” epic, and to be compared (from this point of view only) with Virgil and Milton rather than Homer. (For the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” epic, see C. S. Lewis: A Preface to Paradise Lost.)
[8] God! how sad is the sound of the horn in the heart of the woods!
A. de Vigny
[9] The rite of homage, by the hands and the kiss, is still performed at the Coronation of an English sovereign.
[10] Witnesses were usually chosen as young as possible in order that they might survive the longer to give their testimony in case of subsequent dispute. The place of the buffet was sometimes taken by a small gift of some kind, or, more drastically, by forcible immersion in cold water.
[11] If you unhorsed your opponent without falling yourself, it was sometimes prudent as well as chivalrous to dismount also, lest he should kill or disable your mount. This situation does not occur in the Roland, but in the Geste of the Couronnement de Louis, the hero, Guillaume Court-nez, is particularly praised for his valour in that, when contending on foot against a mounted adversary, he refrains from attacking the horse. To do so would
be the obvious way of lessening the odds against him, but he would consider it unknighthly behaviour—and besides, he wants the horse himself, having lost his own!

[12] A feminine ending is one in which the stressed syllable which carries the assonance is followed by an unaccented e (Charlé, Francéd); a masculine ending is one in which it is not so followed (gant, Rollánt).

[13] Sometimes the scribe omits them, probably by an oversight. Sometimes he puts them in the wrong place; I have silently tidied up the latter anomaly.

LINENOTES

L. 8 Apollyon (Apollo)—see Introduction, p. 20, and cf. L. 1392.
L. 31 mewed hawks—hawks which have got over their moult, and are consequently in good condition.
L. 34 soldiers—these are the mercenaries, who received their pay (solda) directly from the King in cash, as distinct from the feudal vassalage, who were maintained by their respective lords (see Introduction, p. 31 sq). Many of them were knights-errant, without territorial attachment, who wandered about offering their services to whoever would employ them.
L. 36 Aix—Aix-la-Chapelle was the imperial city of Charlemagne, who rebuilt its palace and chapel and granted it many special privileges. He was reputed to have been born there and certainly died and was buried there in 814.
L. 108 fere—companion.
L. 114 eglantier—wild-rose bush.
L. 152 St Michael of Peril-by-the-Tide— (“St M. in periculo maris”). The name was originally given to the monastery built on the great island rock called Mont St Michel, off the coast of Normandy. Later it came to be applied to the Archangel himself, “St Michel del Peril”.
L. 154 baths—the curative mineral springs for which Aix is still celebrated, and which were held to be of miraculous origin.
L. 161 sergeants—the word “sergeant”, meaning primarily “servant”, was applied generally to almost any man, under the rank of knight, who exercised any kind of office in a lord’s household or on his estate. In military use, it denoted a tenant doing military service, especially one who was in attendance on a knight in the field. The “sergeant” marched and fought on horseback, but was more lightly armed than the “chevalier”.
L. 170 Ogier the Dane—this semi-historical hero boasts a Chanson de Geste devoted to his exploits, and figures in many others.
L. 171 Richard the Old—his historical prototype is Richard I of Normandy, who lived (943-996) later than Charlemagne’s time, but has been attracted into the Carolingian cycle by the natural tendency of epic to accumulate famous names regardless of chronology.
L. 205 rede—counsel.
L. 247 the glove and wand— (see Introduction, p. 32).
L. 253 Sarsen—Saracen.
L. 340 absolved him and signed— i.e. pronounced the absolution over him, making the sign of the cross. Some commentators have seen here a relic of the very ancient popular conception of the priest-emperor, preserved in the legend of Prester John. But there is, I think, nothing in the line which necessarily ascribes sacerdotal status to Charlemagne, however sacred his person and function. What is probably intended is the prayer of absolution, frequently called simply “the Absolution” (as in the Book of Common Prayer) which can be pronounced by, for example, an abbas, or indeed any other lay person. It would be some such formula as “The Lord bless you and keep you, deliver you from all your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.”
L. 348 eme—uncle.
L. 373 the tribute of the isle—The annual tribute known as “Peter’s Pence”, paid by England to the See of Rome, was of Anglo-Saxon origin, and instituted in the eighth or ninth century, though not in consequence of political or military pressure by Charlemagne.
L. 456 thole—endure.
L. 583 Sizer Gate: Port de Sizer, or Sizre (the spelling varies)—this is the pass now called the Col de Cize, which cuts through the Pyrenees on the road running from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port by way of Roncevaux to
Pampeluna, and forms the “Gate of Spain”.

L. 600 Our fathers’ land—Tere Majur (terram majorum): the land of one’s ancestors, the Fatherland—i.e. France. The phrase is often put into the mouths even of Saracen speakers, as though it were a proper name. (Some editors translate it simply “the Great Land”, terram majorem).

L. 610 a volume—the Koran? (see Introduction, p. 20).

L. 621 mangons—the mangon is a Saracen gold coin.

L. 637 owches—brooches? (see Note, p. 205).

L. 641 poke—pouch (see Note, p. 205).

L. 679 twenty sureties—this is the last we hear of the hostages, whose ultimate fate is not mentioned.

LL. 706-707—The scribe has perhaps omitted a line or two here, mentioning where Charlemagne and his army have got to. We learn from laisse 58 that they have reached the entrance to the pass, at the foot of the Pyrenees.

LL. 727 sqq. a fierce bear, etc.: the bear is presumably Ganelon, as in laisse 186; the leopard, Marsilion; the greyhound, Roland.

L. 748 who then should keep the vanguard?—i.e. in Roland’s place, since he usually takes command there with the other peers (see LL. 547-8, 560-1).

L. 765 the wand—the mention of the wand, here and in L. 770, seems to be a lapse of memory on the poet’s part. Actually (LL. 331-333) it was the glove that Ganelon let fall.

L. 767. your bow—the use of a bow as the token of an appointment does not seem to be very usual, nor is it clear why Charlemagne should have one in his hand, since the bow was not reckoned as a “noble” weapon, except for use in hunting. Later MSS substitute, or add, the more customary glove or standard.

L. 797 Gerard of Roussillon—not Roussillon in the Pyrenees, but a hill in Burgundy (now Mont Lassois), near the Abbey of Pothières, which was founded, together with the Abbey of Vézelay by the historical Gerard. His exploits are celebrated in the Chanson de Geste which bears his name.

L. 801 man—i.e. vassal.

L. 812. The engagement between Almeric and Walter Hum is not described in the poem; its results are mentioned in laisse 152.

L. 839 marches—the frontier region of a province; the province itself.

L. 846 saye—a fine cloth of silk and wool.

L. 856 Terracerta—Tere Certaine—possibly Cerdagne, the region about Catalonia.

L. 860 Marsilion’s nephew—his name, as we learn in L. 1188, is Adelroth.

L. 866 first blow at Roland (le colp de Roland)—the privilege of striking the first blow in the battle was much sought after. In L. 3200 we find Malpramis, the son of the Emir Baligant, similarly demanding of his father the honour (le colp) in the battle with Charlemagne. The commander-in-chief bestows the honour by handing over his glove in token (L. 873).

L. 888 A few lines seem to have been omitted here, completing Corsablis’ speech of defiance.

L. 902 weird—doom.

L. 973 Saint-Denis—a town near Paris with a famous abbey, founded by Dagobert in 626, the burial-place of the Kings of France.

L. 1059 Olifant—the word (which is a form of “elephant”) means (a) ivory, (b) a horn made of ivory, and is used specifically, almost as a proper name, to denote Roland’s horn, made of an elephant’s tusk, and adorned with gold and jewels about the rim.

L. 1181 Mountjoy—mountjoy (montjoie) was (according to Littré) a mound or cairn of stones set up to mark the site of a victory. The old French war-cry, “Montjoie St-Denis!” or, briefly, “Montjoie!” derived from the cairn set up at Saint-Denis on the site of the saint’s martyrdom (his spiritual victory). Others derive “Montjoie” from the Hill of Rama, called “Mons Gaudii,” from which pilgrims obtained their first view of Jerusalem.

L. 1308 the Twelve Peers—i.e. the Saracen Peers enumerated in LL. 878-990.

L. 1363 y-clept—named.

L. 1367 Dan (Dominus)—lord.

L. 1372 saffron—burnished with a yellow varnish made from bismuth oxide.

L. 1387 snell—speedy.
LL. 1388-1389—these two lines have been telescoped in the text, and are thus emended by most editors.

L. 1392. Jupiter—like Apollo, the classical Jove has been demoted to the status of demon.

L. 1409 to the rope—so in L. 3932, but in the event, a much more horrible death is meted out to Ganelon (LL. 3963 sqq).

L. 1443 The Gestes of the French—the chronicle, to which the poet from time to time refers, and from which he claims to derive his information.

L. 1480 meinie—household.

LL. 1491-1495—with this classic enumeration of the good points of a horse compare Shakespeare, Venus and Adonis 295-298. The two descriptions have much in common, except that the mediaeval writer attaches much more importance to colour.

L. 1553 the Adversary—i.e. Satan.

L. 1564 dromond(s)—a large and very swift mediaeval sailing-ship, used both for war and commerce.

L. 1647 jazerain—a kind of chain-mail made in Algiers (Al-Djezair).

L. 1734 shent—put to shame.

L. 1931 emprise—enterprise, feat of arms.

L. 2002 challenge or battle-gage—Roland wonders whether Oliver is still angry with him, but cannot believe that he would bear arms against him without having sent him a formal challenge, accompanied by the usual token of defiance (see below, Note to LL. 3845 sqq).

L. 2031 marquis—the title means “lord of the marches” (see note on L. 839). Roland was Lord of the Marches of Brittany.

L. 2082 dule—grief.

L. 2096 the worthy Giles—St Giles, who had a hermitage in Provence, and became the hero of many legends.

L. 2268 marble stones—probably posts such as were used to mark a frontier.

L. 2282 reive—steal away.

L. 2331—the text is corrupt; but either Ireland or Wales is certainly intended, and possibly both.

LL. 2390-91 the sign—The glove is offered and accepted in token of Roland’s surrender to God of the life which he holds as a fief from Him. Compare Marsilion’s surrender to Baligant of the fief of Spain (LL. 2830-2838).

L. 2393 Cherubine—“Cherubin” seems to be used by the poet as the name of an individual angel.

L. 2432 Othon—not, of course, the Othon who was one of the Twelve Peers killed in the battle, but Othon the Marquis, one of Charlemayn’s barons, mentioned again in LL. 2971, 3057.

L. 2510 Mountjoy—this derivation, which has no foundation in fact, is probably due to the poet’s own ingenuity. See note on L. 1181.

LL. 2530-2553 a battle new, etc.—This passage, which bears no detailed relation to the events which it foreshadows, and may be imitated from a classical source, refers to the battle with the oriental Paynims (the strange beasts) and the single combat between Thierry (the greyhound) and Pinabel (the biggest bear).

L. 2543 worms—a general term for any kind of reptilian monsters.

LL. 2555-2567 the Emperor dreamed again—this vision foretells the trial of Ganelon (the bear), the intervention of his kinsmen (the other bears), and the single combat between Thierry (the greyhound) and Pinabel (the biggest bear).

L. 2572 brown—burnished.

LL. 2587-8 I have ventured to transpose these two lines, so as to provide a more plausible function for the “column”. I think the picture is that of a criminal tied by the hands to a column and flogged, as in many illustrations of the scourging of Christ.

L. 2633 carbuncles—the carbuncle was credited with much magical power, and was confidently believed to shine by its own light. In folk-lore and fairy-tale we frequently find enchanted palaces “lit by a single carbuncle,” as for instance the under-water palace of Fata Morgana in Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato (whose hero, incidentally, is Count Roland himself, much changed and romanticised), or the underground palace of the King of Elfland in the English tale of Childe Rowland (the knight who “to the Dark Tower came”; no relation of Charlemagne’s Roland, so far as I know).
L. 2657 lithe—hearken.
L. 2720 makeless—peerless.
L. 2910 Laon—this city was the royal seat of the later Carolingian monarchs, and as such known to the poet. He has here committed an anachronism in making it the seat of Charlemagne, who (as elsewhere he states quite correctly) had his chief residence at Aix-la-Chapelle.
L. 2973 Galazine—of oriental material (from Galata, near Constantinople; or perhaps from Galatia or from Galazza, now Lajozzo, near Alexandretta).