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### The Chanson de geste

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## The *chanson de geste*

FINN E. SINCLAIR

The *chanson de geste* represents the first manifestation of a French literary tradition, with its oldest extant written text dating from around 1098. This is the *Chanson de Roland*, preserved in the Oxford Manuscript Digby 23. These *chansons*, and the *Chanson de Roland* in particular, have been the focus of critical attention from the nineteenth century onwards, as theories of their origins, the means of their composition and dissemination, their relation to history, and their function as ideological and literary models have been repeatedly constructed and deconstructed. Whether we take the view expressed by Gaston Paris in the late nineteenth century and see the *chansons de geste* as works of the collective imagination that grew and evolved as part of a nascent national consciousness (traditionalism), or whether we espouse the view of Joseph Bédier, who in the early years of the twentieth century suggested that the *chansons de geste* were consciously and spontaneously created by individual poets (individualism), seems to matter relatively little nowadays. The essential point to note here is that epic texts, by their very nature as texts spanning the oral/literary divide, were subject to *mouvance* – that is, to reinvention, renewal and rewriting. Even if they were composed as integral poems, their subsequent dissemination through singing and performance, and through repeated copying over the years, produced living texts, open to transformation and regeneration in response to their changing context.

Despite this openness to reinvention, there is an essential coherence to the *chanson de geste* as a genre: the content and form of the majority of Old French and Occitan epics have much in common. Content focuses predominantly on conflict, either between the Christian and his pagan other, or between the king and his barons. The genre has thus often been viewed as masculine in focus, a poetic celebration of heroic deeds (*chanson de geste* means ‘song of deeds’). Yet, as we shall see below, this is not exactly the case, as women play

The *chanson de geste*

an integral and important role in the genre, even if this is at times simply to provide a foil against which the male protagonists may be defined. As for the formal shape of the poems, this is stylistically formulaic, ‘composed from a public fund of pre-existent narrative schemes, motifs, and a stock of adaptable hemistichs or “formulae”’.<sup>1</sup> The poems were composed in decasyllabic *laissez* (stanzas of irregular length), although towards the end of the twelfth century the popular alexandrine line (twelve syllables) was sometimes used instead. The earliest poems were assonanced, rather than rhymed. *Chansons de geste* were often grouped in ‘cycles’, which brought together a range of tales that either focused on a particular hero and his lineage, as in the case of Guillaume d’Orange (*Cycle de Guillaume d’Orange*), or on a particular theme. The two main themed cycles are the *Cycle du roi*, which includes the *Chanson de Roland* and poems featuring Charlemagne; and the *Cycle des barons révoltés*, the most famous of which is *Raoul de Cambrai*.

Both content (the semantic) and form (the syntactic) serve to define a genre, although there is inevitably a range of variations among a genre’s individual works. Definition by genre helps to give context to a particular text and points to the way in which it may be read and interpreted. The semantic and syntactic markers of the *chanson de geste* indicate its oral origins, with repetition, intertextual borrowing, and allusion being key elements in both areas. The fact that a text may be classed as a *chanson de geste* places it within a matrix of similar texts that dialogue with each other and which can be seen as responding to a particular cultural desire or need. Two recent studies are especially illuminating in their discussion of the way in which genres arise in response to cultural tensions, and how these tensions are then played out in the literary forum. Simon Gaunt suggests that different genres may simultaneously present different types of imaginary resolution to historical and cultural problems, while Sarah Kay focuses on the dialogic relationship between the *chansons de geste* and the romance.<sup>2</sup> Each of these genres, suggests Kay, illuminates the ‘political unconscious’ of the other, as their narratives are bound by assumptions about ‘the personal and the social, the licit and the illicit, the ethical and the unethical, the representable and the unrepresentable’.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); see in particular the introduction. Kay, *Chansons de Geste*.

<sup>3</sup> Kay, *Chansons de Geste*, p. 5.

FINN E. SINCLAIR

## History and memory

Epics are not historical documents, but works of literature that nonetheless testify to certain modes of thought prevalent at a particular point in time. They both disseminate and help to shape an ideological social narrative. Although the *chansons de geste* can be seen as tied into a certain cultural and historical context, the narrative and chronological space in which the action of many epics unfolds is not that of the eleventh, twelfth, or thirteenth centuries, when the majority of these tales were transcribed. Instead, they look backwards to the ‘Golden Age’ of Charlemagne and to the somewhat less gilded era of his son Louis. The *Chanson de Roland*, often seen as the French ‘national epic’, and as a symbol of French collective identity, commemorates events that took place in 778, when the rearguard of Charlemagne’s army was massacred in the Pyrenees during their return to France from Spain. Various accounts written in the ninth century testify to the historical reality of this event, but none gives a clear indication of what actually occurred, nor of who was involved. Roland himself is mentioned briefly by Einhard in his *Vita Caroli magni* (*Life of Charlemagne*), written around 830, but he is obviously not viewed as a major protagonist. It is only in the Oxford *Roland* that the eponymous character becomes the focus of a heroic tale that weaves together the feudal, the ‘nationalistic’ and the religious to create a commemorative narrative that transcends history.

Eugene Vance suggests that the *Chanson de Roland* is ‘as much a drama of memory as it is a memory of a historical drama’.<sup>4</sup> Memory and history interlink, as a historical event and the collective memory of this event are reshaped and renewed to produce a narrative of desire in poetic form. Rather than serving as the commemoration of Charlemagne’s military loss at the pass of Roncevaux in 778, the *Roland* commemorates its composition as an ideological myth. The *chanson* reflects the era of the First Crusade (1098), with the primary conflict of the text being between Christians and Saracens. If the Crusades were a form of geographic territorialisation, the *chanson de geste* can be seen as a textual and linguistic one. The cultural impetus outwards, towards conquest and colonisation, had as its corollary the creation of a nascent sense of nationhood in which the notion of coherent identity played a key role. The *chanson de geste* was the first literary form to be widely composed in the vernacular, the use of French, rather than Latin, creating a space for the exploration

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Vance, *Merveilous Signs: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 57.

### The *chanson de geste*

and establishment of Frankish or 'French' identity. In the historical, cultural context, the idea of a unified Christian community was problematic, as the linguistic and cultural diversity within different regions of Europe, and indeed within the boundaries of what we now call 'France', produced a multiplicity of Christian 'selves'. The Christian body represented in the *Chanson de Roland* is that of the Franks – a term which here designates the armies of Charlemagne, but which nonetheless appears amorphous, as sections of the army retain a strong regional identity.<sup>5</sup> The Frankish community is imaginary rather than real, tied together ideologically, rather than geographically, by the poem's nostalgic evocation of 'la douce France'. 'France' as we know it now did not exist as a coherent geographical entity in the early Middle Ages, but was generally used to refer to the Île-de-France, the area ruled directly by the monarchy. The poem, however, creates and perpetuates a vision of geographical, cultural, and religious unity across all regions, which is shored up by its composition in the French language and by the existence of the text itself as an act of collective memorialisation.

### Self and other

In the *Chanson de Roland*, as in many other epics that pit the Christian against his pagan other, Western Christian identity is partly defined in relation to difference. The ethnic, cultural, and religious difference of the Saracen helps to shape the parameters of the Western self, providing a repository for all that the Christian is not, or at least is not according to the genre's idealised vision of Western collective identity. Although the text affords a privileged space for the construction of an ideal, the depiction of the Christian and his pagan other does not function as a straightforward binary opposition. In a manner that foreshadows the instability of constructs of racial and ethnic otherness revealed by modern postcolonial theory, the boundaries between the two are blurred, as the representation of the pagan shifts to underscore either his similarity or his difference.

Cultural and religious otherness is not a monologic, unvarying construct in the *chanson de geste*, although two predominant tropes can be discerned: the other as alien and threatening, and the other as recognisable and open to assimilation. Both of these appear in the *Chanson de Roland*, as the Saracen is constructed either as mirror to the Christian, or as his stark opposite. Christianity provides the model for the depiction of the Moslem religion,

<sup>5</sup> *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. I. Short (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), *laissez* 218–25.

FINN E. SINCLAIR

with its anomalous trinity of Mahomet, Tervagant and Apollyon; Marsile, the Saracen king, is practically Charlemagne's double in the early court scenes, and the Western chivalric system operates in both realms. Yet throughout the battle scenes the radical difference between Christian and non-Christian is clear, from Roland's unequivocal statement: 'Païen unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit' (line 1015) ('The pagans are in the wrong and the Christians in the right'), to the symbolic depiction of the opposing foreigners as darkly sub-human: 'Cil d'Ociant i braient e henissent, / E cil d'Arguille si cume chen gâtissent' (lines 3526–7) ('Those from Ociant bray and whinny, while those from Arguille yap like dogs'). This type of split depiction presents the Saracen world as one open to a colonisation that functions not only through physical conquest but also through literary appropriation. The mediating gaze of the Western text appropriates, redefines and rewrites the image of the non-Christian in a way that either assimilates it to the hegemonic Christian norm or allocates it to a space that lies beyond, and which is ultimately undefinable. The instability of the image of the other impacts, however, on the definition of the Christian self. Without a clear-cut model of opposition, the Western self-image is inevitably partial and fragmented, open to a similar shift and play.

The discontinuities and slippages inherent in the Western vision of the East appear in the shifting perspective of the *Roland* and in the narratives of difference explored by other epic texts. Religion provides a fundamental source of otherness in Crusade narratives, yet it is not the sole point of cultural difference recognised and explored by *chansons de geste*. The *Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople* (early twelfth century) describes a fictional journey taken by Charlemagne and his knights. The principal focus of the narrative lies on Charlemagne's exploits in the city of Constantinople; the Frankish army is thus read against the Christian world of the Greeks, rather than against that of a culture more immediately perceived as alien, such as that of the Saracens. Yet despite this apparent similarity, the text reveals a fundamental ambivalence in its depiction of a people at once same and yet unavoidably other. This reflects the Western attitude towards Greek Orthodoxy in the twelfth century, when the Greeks were perceived as Christian heretics. Constantinople becomes a liminal space in which Frankish identity is both destabilised and reaffirmed through the encounter with a foreign world that must be negotiated, but which cannot truly be either rationalised or categorised. The physical riches and moral worth of Constantinople present an alternative vision of the world that contrasts with the lack inherent in the Frankish community. Measured against the Byzantine king Hugo, Charlemagne is not slow to recognise his

### The *chanson de geste*

own inferiority: 'Karle vit le palais e la richesce grant; / La sue manantise ne priset mie un guant' (lines 363–4) ('Charles saw the palace and the splendour of it. He held his own possessions as not worth a jot').<sup>6</sup> The superiority of Charlemagne and his entourage is finally affirmed, but this only takes place with the help of God, and is continuously undercut by the narrative's tongue-in-cheek tone.

### Gender and difference

Ethnic, cultural and religious differences were significant in shaping a sense of cultural identity in early medieval France. In the *chanson de geste*, this cultural identity appears, however, predominantly masculine in focus. Much has been written on the male homosocial networks of both medieval feudal society and its literary reflection: Gaunt sees the ethical system of the *chanson de geste* as 'exclusively masculine', yet, as Kay points out: 'Men are the architects of social structure, women the mortar used to hold it together.'<sup>7</sup> In the epic, the narrative focus often lies on a masculine duo – Roland and Olivier in the *Chanson de Roland*, Ami and Amile in the poem of that name (c. 1200), Raoul and Bernier in *Raoul de Cambrai* (c. 1200) – yet this core masculine relationship is open to the influence of the text's female characters, who may play either a supportive or a subversive role in relation to it. Although women may be minor characters in the *chanson de geste*, they are integral to its narrative structure and its imaginary community, and thus significant to the genre's exploration and creation of social and cultural identity.

Female alterity was recognised and affirmed by medieval society in general – in religious, medical, didactic and literary discourses – but in the *chanson de geste* this difference functions in a similar way to that of the foreign other. Women can either be assimilated to a text's ethical discourse (Aude in the *Roland*, Belissant in *Ami et Amile*), or opposed to it, breaking apart the masculine relationships that structure feudal society (Lubias in *Ami* is a clear example of this). If Western Christian identity can be mapped against its external, foreign other, masculine identity finds a figure of internal difference in its feminine other. Yet neither the external nor the internal representative of difference provides a clear and unambiguous image against which medieval masculinity may be defined.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople*, ed. P. Aebischer (Geneva: Droz, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Gaunt, *Gender and Genre*, p. 22; Kay, *The Chansons de Geste*, p. 15.

FINN E. SINCLAIR

Those women who are doubly other – both female and Saracen – often function as the site of a discourse of assimilation, as the Saraceness converts to Christianity, changes her name, and marries into Western Christian society. Bramimonde is wife to the pagan king Marsile in the *Chanson de Roland*, but following the defeat of the Saracen army she is taken back to France, where she converts and is baptised 'Juliane'. This is a conversion through love, not for a new husband, but for the Christian religion itself and for the society that upholds it. Bramimonde's absorption into Western Christian society marks its religious and ethical supremacy, and the failing of Saracen religious and military power. The Saracen queen functions as a forceful critic of her native regime prior to her conversion, but is silenced by her transfer to the Christian context: from being a source of disruption, she becomes a symbolic possession conquered by right, rather than might.

This assimilation of Saracen women into Christian society is not always seamless, however. In the *chansons de geste*, a feature of female portrayal in general is women's ability to voice criticism of the masculine social order (Christian as well as Saracen) – a power that has the potential to destabilise the gender balance and undercut the genre's ideological framework. In the *Prise d'Orange* (late twelfth/early thirteenth century), Guillaume d'Orange conquers the city of Orange, which is held by the Saracens. In so doing, Guillaume gains land, wealth and wife, 'commodities' often inexorably linked in the epic. Orable is originally wife to a Saracen emir, but converts to Christianity, marries Guillaume instead, and changes her name to Guiborc, a shift that separates her linguistically from the otherness of a foreign city, Orange, and allies her metonymically with her new husband, Guillaume. As in the case of Bramimonde, Guiborc's assimilation to Western society implicitly underscores the 'rightness' of Christianity when measured against the inherent 'lack' of other religions and shores up the ethical system of the *chanson de geste*. Guillaume d'Orange's status as an epic hero is affirmed by his conquest and by Guiborc's evident wifely worth as supporter of her husband and of the system he represents. However, in the *Chanson de Guillaume* (late eleventh/early twelfth century; reworked as *Aliscans* [1150–1200]) Guiborc's zeal paradoxically undercuts Guillaume's heroic depiction, as she becomes more dedicated to sustaining inter-religious warfare and upholding the epic ideal than her husband. The definition of epic masculinity is destabilised through the blurring of gender boundaries; ethnic and religious difference may be subsumed into Western Christian identity, yet gender difference proves more complex and potentially subversive in relation to the epic masculine norm.



The *chanson de geste*

Conflict and resolution

As mentioned above, the impetus of many *chansons de geste* is outwards, towards Crusade and conquest, but the *Prise d'Orange* points to a further source of conflict – that between the king and his barons. Guillaume's conquest of Orange resolves an internal problem: King Louis fails to compensate his faithful knight for services rendered, so Guillaume is forced to seek lands and wealth elsewhere. The theme of the failure of the feudal system, which should theoretically provide a framework of reciprocal duty and allegiance between king, knights and vassals, is taken up by later epics, in particular those of the *Cycle des barons révoltés*.

By the early thirteenth century, the power of the French monarchy had increased, and a strong power base had been consolidated in the area around the Île-de-France. This was in direct contrast to the situation a hundred years earlier, when the French king wielded less power and influence than some of his dukes (especially those of Aquitaine and Normandy). As the power of the monarch increased (notably that of Philippe-Auguste, who ruled 1180–1223), that of his knights and the lesser nobility waned. The epic's shift towards depicting an inverse power relationship, with a weak king and powerful, authoritative barons, can be seen as an attempt to mediate social reality and to fulfil a perceived lack. The epic's nostalgia for an imaginary 'Golden Age' also comes into play here, linking past and present in an idealised vision of homosocial loyalty and comradeship between knights. The text provides an imaginary space for the exploration of issues of power and conflict, yet the notion of a shared ideology structuring male–male relationships is revealed as inherently flawed, as is the feudal system that theoretically provided their frame.

Kay sees a shift in the epic's focus from an external enemy to an internal one by the 1160s and 1170s and she reads this as a response to the internal problems of feudal society.<sup>8</sup> Even in the earlier *Chanson de Roland*, however, the traitor Ganelon appears a greater threat to Roland than the Saracens. Roland may be killed in conflict with the pagan army, but he is brought to his death by the machinations and disloyalty of his stepfather, who becomes the archetypal villain who spawns a whole lineage of traitors that appear in later *chansons de geste*. Like the figure of the weak and vacillating king, that of the traitor signals the failing of the feudal order, in imaginary as well as historical terms.

<sup>8</sup> Kay, *Chansons de Geste*, p. 234.

FINN E. SINCLAIR

Different *chansons* struggle in different ways with the problem of the fragmentation of the feudal and epic ideal. In *Ami et Amile*, which forms part of the *Cycle du roi*, the narrative revolves around the physical and moral sameness of the two companions. Their identical appearance functions as a metaphor for the ideal of masculine companionship and loyalty; Ami and Amile's oneness is, however, broken apart by women (the subversive female other) and by the traitor Hardré (of Ganelon's lineage). Masculine unity cannot function in the context of the real, social world, which is plagued by difference. It can only be restored through God's intervention and maintained through the companions' retreat to a monastery. The model of masculine bonding constructed by the *chanson* is inherently imaginary and is increasingly recognised as such by the text.

*Raoul de Cambrai* explores the problem quite differently. Raoul is the epitome of the 'baron in revolt' and the poem has been described as the bloodiest and most murderous of *chansons de geste*, the one that marks the disintegration of the epic ideal. The two companions here are Raoul and Bernier, but there is an original disparity between them, as Bernier is vassal to Raoul and is illegitimate. There is little sense of masculine unity even at the beginning of this poem, and the feudal bonds between Raoul and Bernier become increasingly strained until Raoul's unpardonable violence against Bernier's mother (whom he burns alive in her nunnery) breaks all allegiance between them. The narrative is long and complex, but it is significant that the original seed of discord is sown by King Louis (son of Charlemagne and traditionally depicted as weak in the epic). Louis fails to fulfil his duties as monarch: on the death of Raoul's father, Louis gives away the lands that should have been inherited by his son. He promises Raoul the first alternative parcel of land that becomes available, but again this leads to a disinheritance, as the death of Bernier's grandfather sees possession of his fief disputed between Bernier's father and uncles on one side and Raoul on the other. The concentrated violence and conflict of *Raoul de Cambrai* springs from this misuse of regal power. The text reveals the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century preoccupation with the changing structure of feudal society, but in this case it provides no imaginary solution, only a fearsome destruction of the bounded world of both text and society.

### Epic diasporas

The *chanson de geste* has traditionally been viewed as an early medieval genre, yet epics continued to be produced until the fourteenth century. This is not

The *chanson de geste*

to say, however, that the genre did not change and evolve. Texts tended to become longer and more complex during the thirteenth century, with a greater space allocated to love interest and the marvellous. The traditional notion of an increasing romance influence on the epic has been questioned by Kay, but narrative content certainly diversified away from a general focus on Crusade and conflict. *Chansons* such as *Florence de Rome* (early thirteenth century), *Parise la Duchesse* (c. 1225–50), and *Berte aus grans pies* (c. 1274–8) mark a shift towards depicting female characters and their role in society. The *Crusade Cycle*, which originated at the end of the twelfth century with poems focusing (not surprisingly) on Crusade – *La Chanson d’Antioche*, *Les Chétifs*, and *La Conquête de Jérusalem* – saw the later addition of texts reworking the legend of the mythical Swan Knight and extending the genealogy of the crusading hero Godefroy de Bouillon.

The *chanson de geste* may have originated in northern France, but there are a few Occitan and hybrid Franco-Occitan examples of the genre, which testify to its social and ideological relevance in the south. *Daurel et Beton* (c. 1150–68) and *Girart de Roussillon* (c. 1150s), composed in a mixture of Occitan and Old French, are important texts which share the syntactic and semantic features of Old French epics while reflecting their southern context. The chronological and geographical reach of the *chanson de geste* reveals it to be a vibrant literary form open to shift and change in response to the social realities and the collective imaginary of the French Middle Ages.