About the *Song of Roland*

Some scholars believe that French literature begins with the *Chanson de Roland*, or *Song of Roland* . This poem about a great warrior is by far the best known of all medieval epics. Despite its popularity, scholars cannot determine exactly when it was written or who wrote it. The manuscript at Oxford University, England, dates from the decades after a.d.  1100 and is written in the Norman dialect of Old French. The original poem, however, is much older.

**Tales of a Great King**

The *Song of Roland* treats one of the great themes of medieval heroic literature: the deeds surrounding Charlemagne and his court. Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, was king of the Franks from 768 to 814 and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 800 to 814. Because Charlemagne ruled France about 300 years before the *Song of Roland* was composed, there is a great distance between the poem and the events it narrates.

The poem transforms a rather minor historical event. In 778, Charlemagne intervened in a dispute in Spain between two rival Moorish rulers. The Moors were Muslims from northwest Africa who invaded Spain in the eighth century. While returning to France through the Pyrenees , Charlemagne’s rear guard, led by his nephew Roland, was attacked in the valley of Roncesvalles by a band of Basques To a man, the rear guard perished.

**Fiction Not Fact**

The author of the *Song of Roland* takes considerable poetic license with the historical facts. Most significantly, the Basques become Moors, a more contemporary and meaningful foe for a twelfth-century audience. Charlemagne, thirty-six years old at the time of the massacre at Roncesvalles, is transformed into a miraculous two-hundred-year-old figure. Because Roland is the victim of a treacherous betrayal, his demise is narrated far more dramatically than history could ever have witnessed.

 



**Background**

After seven years of war between the French Christians and the Spanish Muslims, or Saracens, a single Muslim stronghold remains—the city of Saragossa, which is ruled by King Marsile. Certain of his own defeat, Marsile sends a message to King Charlemagne saying that he will convert to Christianity and become Charlemagne’s vassal if the French will leave Spain. (Once Charlemagne is gone, however, Marsile intends to break his promises.) Roland, Charlemagne’s greatest knight, suggests that his stepfather, Ganelon, serve as the emissary to Marsile to discuss the offer. Ganelon perceives this nomination for the perilous mission as a thinly veiled attempt at his murder. He accepts the mission but then plots with Marsile to defeat the French by ambushing Charlemagne’s rear guard, which Ganelon knows will be led by Roland.

Ganelon returns to Charlemagne with assurances of Marsile’s good faith, and they organize the departure from Spain. As Ganelon promised, Roland is chosen to lead the rear guard, which also includes the Twelve Peers—Charlemagne’s most beloved vassals—the Archbishop Turpin, and Oliver, Roland’s best friend. All told, the French rear guard constitutes a force of 20,000 men, but at the pass of Roncevalles, the rear guard meets a Saracen force numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Oliver begs Roland to blow his horn, the Olifant, to call back Charlemagne’s main army, but Roland refuses, saying,

“I’d be a fool to do it.

I would lose my good name all through sweet France.

I will strike now, I’ll strike with Durendal,

the blade will be bloody to the gold from striking!

These pagan traitors came to these passes doomed!

I promise you, they are marked men, they’ll die.”

This excerpt begins as Roland, Oliver, and the rest of the French rear guard face the massive Saracen army.

**110**

 The battle is fearful and full of grief.

 Oliver and Roland strike like good men,

 the Archbishop, more than a thousand blows,

 and the Twelve Peers do not hang back, they strike!

 the French fight side by side, all as one man.

 The pagans die by hundreds, by thousands:

 whoever does not flee finds no refuge from death,

 like it or not, there he ends all his days.

 And there the men of France lose their greatest arms;

 they will not see their fathers, their kin again,

 or Charlemagne, who looks for them in the passes.

 Tremendous torment now comes forth in France,

 a mighty whirlwind, tempests of wind and thunder,

 rains and hailstones, great and immeasurable,

 bolts of lightning hurtling and hurtling down:

 it is, in truth, a trembling of the earth.

 From Saint Michael-in-Peril to the Saints,

 from Besançon to the port of Wissant,**1**

 there is no house whose veil of walls does not crumble.

 A great darkness at noon falls on the land,

 there is no light but when the heavens crack.

 No man sees this who is not terrified,

 and many say: “The Last Day! Judgment Day!



 The end! The end of the world is upon us!”

 They do not know, they do not speak the truth:

 it is the worldwide grief for the death of Roland.

**130**

 And Roland says: “We are in a rough battle.

 I’ll sound the olifant,**2**Charles will hear it.”

 Said Oliver: “No good **vassal** would do it.When I urged it, friend, you did not think it right.

 If Charles were here, we’d come out with no losses.

 Those men down there—no blame can fall on them.”

 Oliver said: “Now by this beard of mine,

 If I can see my noble sister, Aude,**3**

 once more, you will never lie in her arms!” aoi. **4**



**131**

 And Roland said: “Why are you angry at me?”

 Oliver answers: “Companion, it is your doing.

 I will tell you what makes a vassal good: it is judgment, it is never madness;

 restraint is worth more than the raw nerve of a fool.

 Frenchmen are dead because of your wildness.

 And what service will Charles ever have from us?

 If you had trusted me, my lord would be here,

 we would have fought this battle through to the end,

 Marsilion would be dead, or our prisoner.

 Roland, your **prowess** —had we never seen it!

 And now, dear friend, we’ve seen the last of it.

 No more aid from us now for Charlemagne,

 a man without equal till Judgment Day,

 you will die here, and your death will shame France.

 We kept faith, you and I, we were companions;

 and everything we were will end today.

 We part before evening, and it will be hard.” aoi.



**132**

 Turpin the Archbishop hears their bitter words,

 digs hard into his horse with golden spurs

 and rides to them; begins to set them right:

 “You, Lord Roland, and you, Lord Oliver,

 I beg you in God’s name do not quarrel.

 To sound the horn could not help us now, true,

 but still it is far better that you do it:

 let the King come, he can avenge us then—

 these men of Spain must not go home **exulting** !

 Our French will come, they’ll get down on their feet,

 and find us here—we’ll be dead, cut to pieces.

 They will lift us into coffins on the backs of mules,

 and weep for us, in rage and pain and grief,

 and bury us in the courts of churches;

 and we will not be eaten by wolves or pigs or dogs.”

 Roland replies, “Lord, you have spoken well.” aoi.

**133**

 Roland has put the olifant to his mouth,

 he sets it well, sounds it with all his strength.

 The hills are high, and that voice ranges far,

 they heard it echo thirty great leagues away.

 King Charles heard it, and all his faithful men.

 And the King says: “Our men are in a battle.”

 And Ganelon disputed him and said:

 “Had someone else said that, I’d call him liar!” aoi.

**134**

 And now the mighty effort of Roland the Count:

 he sounds his olifant; his pain is great,

 and from his mouth the bright blood comes leaping out,

 and the temple bursts in his forehead.

 That horn, in Roland’s hands, has a mighty voice:

 King Charles hears it drawing through the passes.

 Naimon heard it, the Franks listen to it.

 And the King said: “I hear Count Roland’s horn;

 he’d never sound it unless he had a battle.”

 Says Ganelon: “Now no more talk of battles!

 You are old now, your hair is white as snow,

 the things you say make you sound like a child.

 You know Roland and that wild pride of his—

 what a wonder God has suffered it so long!

 Remember? he took Noples without your command:

 the Saracens rode out, to break the siege;

 they fought with him, the great vassal Roland.

 Afterward he used the streams to wash the blood

 from the meadows: so that nothing would show.

 He blasts his horn all day to catch a rabbit,

 he’s strutting now before his peers and bragging—

 who under heaven would dare meet him on the field?

 So now: ride on! Why do you keep on stopping?

 The Land of Fathers lies far ahead of us.” aoi.



**135**

 The blood leaping from Count Roland’s mouth,

 the temple broken with effort in his forehead,

 he sounds his horn in great travail and pain.

 King Charles heard it, and his French listen hard.

 And the King said: “That horn has a long breath!”

 Naimon answers: “It is a baron’s breath.

 There is a battle there, I know there is.

 *He* betrayed him! and now asks you to fail him!

 Put on your armor! Lord, shout your battle cry,

 and save the noble barons of your house!

 You hear Roland’s call. He is in trouble.”



**136**

 The Emperor commanded the horns to sound,

 the French dismount, and they put on their armor:

 their hauberks, their helmets, their gold-dressed swords,

 their handsome shields; and take up their great lances,

 the gonfalons of white and red and blue.

 The barons of that host mount their war horses

 and spur them hard the whole length of the pass;

 and every man of them says to the other:

 “If only we find Roland before he’s killed,

 we’ll stand with him, and then we’ll do some fighting!”

 What does it matter what they say? They are too late.

**138**

 High are the hills, and tenebrous,**5**and vast, aoi.

 the valleys deep, the raging waters swift;

 to the rear, to the front, the trumpets sound:

 they answer the lone voice of the olifant.

 The Emperor rides on, rides on in fury,

 the men of France in grief and indignation.

 There is no man who does not weep and wail,

 and they pray God: protect the life of Roland

 till they come, one great host, into the field

 and fight at Roland’s side like true men all.

 What does it matter what they pray? It does no good.

 They are too late, they cannot come in time. aoi.



**156**

 Roland the Count fights well and with great skill,

 but he is hot, his body soaked with sweat;

 has a great wound in his head, and much pain,

 his temple broken because he blew the horn.

 But he must know whether King Charles will come;

 draws out the olifant, sounds it, so feebly.

 The Emperor drew to a halt, listened.

 “Seigneurs,” he said, “it goes badly for us—

 My nephew Roland falls from our ranks today.

 I hear it in the horn’s voice: he hasn’t long.

 Let every man who wants to be with Roland

 ride fast! Sound trumpets! Every trumpet in this host!”

 Sixty thousand, on these words, sound, so high

 the mountains sound, and the valleys resound.

 The pagans hear: it is no joke to them;

 cry to each other: “We’re getting Charles on us!”



**160**

 Say the pagans: “We were all born unlucky!

 The evil day that dawned for us today!

 We have lost our lords and peers, and now comes Charles—

 that Charlemagne!—with his great host. Those trumpets!

 that shrill sound on us—the trumpets of the French!

 And the loud roar of that Munjoie! This Roland

 is a wild man, he is too great a fighter—

 What man of flesh and blood can ever hope

 to bring him down? Let us cast at him, and leave him there.”



 And so they did: arrows, wigars, darts,

 lances and spears, javelots dressed with feathers;

 struck Roland’s shield, pierced it, broke it to pieces,

 ripped his hauberk, shattered its rings of mail,

 but never touched his body, never his flesh.

 They wounded Veillantif in thirty places,

 struck him dead, from afar, under the Count.

 The pagans flee, they leave the field to him.

 Roland the Count stood alone, on his feet.**6**aoi.

**161**

 The pagans flee, in bitterness and rage,

 strain every nerve running headlong toward Spain,

 and Count Roland has no way to chase them,

 he has lost Veillantif, his battle horse;

 he has no choice, left alone there on foot.

 He went to the aid of Archbishop Turpin,

 unlaced the gold-dressed helmet, raised it from his head,

 lifted away his bright, light coat of mail,

 cut his under tunic into some lengths,

 stilled his great wounds with thrusting on the strips;

 then held him in his arms, against his chest,

 and laid him down, gently, on the green grass;

 and softly now Roland entreated him:

 “My noble lord, I beg you, give me leave:

 our companions, whom we have loved so dearly,

 are all dead now, we must not abandon them.

 I want to look for them, know them once more,

 and set them in ranks, side by side, before you.”

 Said the Archbishop: “Go then, go and come back.

 The field is ours, thanks be to God, yours and mine.”

**168**

 Now Roland feels that death is very near.

 His brain comes spilling out through his two ears;

 prays to God for his peers: let them be called;

 and for himself, to the angel Gabriel;

 took the olifant: there must be no reproach!

 took Durendal his sword in his other hand,

 and farther than a crossbow’s farthest shot

 he walks toward Spain, into a fallow land,**7**

 and climbs a hill: there beneath two fine trees

 stand four great blocks of stone, all are of marble;

 and he fell back, to earth, on the green grass,

 has fainted there, for death is very near.

**169**

 High are the hills, and high, high are the trees;

 there stand four blocks of stone, gleaming of marble.

 Count Roland falls fainting on the green grass,

 and is watched, all this time, by a Saracen:

 who has feigned death and lies now with the others,

 has smeared blood on his face and on his body;

 and quickly now gets to his feet and runs—

 a handsome man, strong, brave, and so crazed with pride

 that he does something mad and dies for it:

 laid hands on Roland, and on the arms of Roland,

 and cried: “Conquered! Charles’s nephew conquered!

 I’ll carry this sword home to Arabia!”

 As he draws it, the Count begins to come round.

**170**

 Now Roland feels: *someone taking his sword!*

 opened his eyes, and had one word for him:

 “I don’t know you, you aren’t one of ours”;

 grasps that olifant that he will never lose,

 strikes on the helm beset with gems in gold,

 shatters the steel, and the head, and the bones,

 sent his two eyes flying out of his head,

 dumped him over stretched out at his feet dead;

 and said: “You nobody! how could you dare

 lay hands on me—rightly or wrongly: how?

 Who’ll hear of this and not call you a fool?

 Ah! the bell-mouth of the olifant is smashed,

 the crystal and the gold fallen away.”



**171**

 Now Roland the Count feels: his sight is gone;

 gets on his feet, draws on his final strength,

 the color on his face lost now for good.

 Before him stands a rock; and on that dark rock

 in rage and bitterness he strikes ten blows:

 the steel blade grates, it will not break, it stands unmarked.

 “Ah!” said the Count, “Blessed Mary, your help!

 Ah Durendal, good sword, your unlucky day,

 for I am lost and cannot keep you in my care.

 The battles I have won, fighting with you,

 the mighty lands that holding you I conquered,

 that Charles rules now, our King, whose beard is white!

 Now you fall to another: it must not be a man who’d run before another man!

 For a long while a good vassal held you:

 there’ll never be the like in France’s holy land.”



**173**

 Roland the Count strikes down on a dark rock,

 and the rock breaks, breaks more than I can tell,

 and the blade grates, but Durendal will not break,

 the sword leaped up, rebounded toward the sky.

 The Count, when he sees that sword will not be broken,

 softly, in his own presence, speaks the lament:

 “Ah Durendal, beautiful, and most sacred,

 the holy relics in this golden pommel!

 Saint Peter’s tooth and blood of Saint Basile,

 a lock of hair of my lord Saint Denis,

 and a fragment of blessed Mary’s robe:**8**

 your power must not fall to the pagans,

 you must be served by Christian warriors.

 May no coward ever come to hold you!

 It was with you I conquered those great lands

 that Charles has in his keeping, whose beard is white,

 the Emperor’s lands, that make him rich and strong.”



**174**

 Now Roland feels: death coming over him,

 death descending from his temples to his heart.

 He came running underneath a pine tree

 and there stretched out, face down, on the green grass,

 lays beneath him his sword and the olifant.

 He turned his head toward the Saracen hosts,

 and this is why: with all his heart he wants

 King Charles the Great and all his men to say,

 he died, that noble Count, a conqueror;

 makes confession, beats his breast often, so feebly,

 offers his glove, for all his sins, to God. aoi.

**176**

 Count Roland lay stretched out beneath a pine;

 he turned his face toward the land of Spain,

 began to remember many things now:

 how many lands, brave man, he had conquered;

 and he remembered: sweet France, the men of his line,

 remembered Charles, his lord, who fostered him:

 cannot keep, remembering, from weeping, sighing;

 but would not be unmindful of himself:

 he confesses his sins, prays God for mercy:

 “Loyal Father, you who never failed us,

 who resurrected Saint Lazarus from the dead,

 and saved your servant Daniel from the lions:**9**

 now save the soul of me from every peril

 for the sins I committed while I still lived.”

 Then he held out his right glove to his Lord:**10**

 Saint Gabriel took the glove from his hand.

 He held his head bowed down upon his arm,

 he is gone, his two hands joined, to his end.

 Then God sent him his angel Cherubin

 and Saint Michael, angel of the sea’s Peril;

 and with these two there came Saint Gabriel:

 they bear Count Roland’s soul to Paradise.



**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**If you could speak to Roland as he heads into battle, what advice would you give him?

**2. (a) Recall:**In the second line of stanza 130, what does Roland say he will now do?**(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:**Why does he decide to take this action?

**3. (a) Recall:**According to Oliver, what makes one a good vassal?**(b)Interpret:**According to Oliver, why would Roland not be considered a good vassal?

**4. (a) Recall:**In stanza 171, as he tries to destroy his sword, how does Roland describe himself?**(b) Interpret:**How does Roland seem to feel about the service he has rendered to Charlemagne?**(c) Analyze:**In what ways does this stanza suggest that Roland is undergoing an internal struggle about his own life and identity?

**5. Analyze:**What truth about himself, if any, do you think Roland faces as he lies dying? Explain your answer.

**6. Evaluate:**Would Roland be considered a hero in today’s world? Explain your answer.

**Quick Review**

**Medieval epics** are long works that were originally performed in dramatic theatricals to present the exploits of larger-than-life heroes.

The **epic hero** is a person of extraordinary abilities who embodies a people’s core beliefs and values.

A **heroic flaw** is a character defect that may lead to the failure, suffering, or death of the hero.

To **recognize feudal values** as you read, identify those details of a literary work that reveal the values underlying the economic, political, and social system of medieval Europe.

Literary Analysis

**Medieval Epic**

**1. Medieval epics** favored adventure over factual accuracy. **(a)** How might this emphasis have aided a storyteller? **(b)** How might this emphasis have affected a people’s sense of its own history?

**2.**Which elements in the following passage suggest that the *Song of Roland*was first performed as an entertainment for live audiences?

The French dismount, and they put on their armor: / their hauberks, their helmets, their gold-dressed swords, / their handsome shields; and take up their great lances, / the gonfalons of white and red and blue . . .

**3. (a)**(a) In what ways do you think these stories might have inspired their audiences?**(b)**(b) In what ways might these stories have been viewed as cautionary tales? Explain.

Comparing Literary Works

**4.**Use a chart like the one shown to identify details that reveal specific elements of each **epic hero’s** character.



**5. (a)**(a) Identify three examples of Siegfried’s thoughtlessness about other people.**(b)**(b) What is Siegfrieds **heroic flaw?**

**6. (a)**(a) Why does Roland not call for help?**(b)**(b) What is his heroic flaw?

Reading Strategy

**Recognizing Feudal Values**

**7.**Loyalty was one of the most esteemed **feudal values,** and betrayal was one of the most serious violations. Does Roland betray Charlemagne by his actions? Explain.

**8. (a)**(a) In what ways does Siegfried express respect for Gunther?**(b)**(b) In what ways does Roland express respect for Charlemagne?

Extend Understanding

**9. Social Studies Connection:** Which elements of these epic works provide insight into the conditions of life during the Middle Ages?