

The Wrath of Achilles and the Trial of Ganelon: The Epic Tradition in the *Song of Roland*

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Abstract

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1. The *Song of Roland* is an embellished retelling of the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, in which the rearguard of Charlemagne's army was ambushed and killed. The poem has been noted for its portrayal and praise of chivalry, and for exemplifying the genre of *chanson de geste* ("song of deeds").
 - a. An aside on terminology for *païen* ("pagan"):
 - i. I have chosen to maintain Sayers's English rendering of *païen* as "paynim" in order to strike a balance between the author's treatment of Islam as simply another form of paganism, and the clear beginnings of medieval Islamophobia in the *geste*.
2. The *Song of Roland*, as a war epic, draws on Greco-Roman epics and their systems of honor.
 - a. Homeric system of honor (best exemplified in the *Iliad*):
 - i. *Timê*: the trophies that display a warrior's honor in the eyes of others
 - ii. *Kleos*: the reputation and legacy of a hero
 - iii. Both emphasize the individual, resulting in a narrative focus on one-on-one combat.
 - b. Vergilian system of honor (best exemplified in the *Aeneid*):

- i. *Pietas*: performing one's duties toward others
 - ii. Results in a communal focus
- 3. **The *Song of Roland* privileges Vergilian communal honor over Homeric individual honor, associating the former with Charlemagne's kingdom and the latter with the enemy paynims. However, this communal, *pietas*-based system of honor is abandoned in the epic for an individual, Homeric system, signaling the inherent instability and inevitable crumbling of the chivalric system.**
- 4. An aside on the *Iliad* and the Middle Ages:
 - a. Although the *Iliad* and many other Greek texts were not extant in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, my argument presupposes that through various adaptations, the author of the *Song of Roland* and received a cultural memory of the Homeric values of *timê* and *kleos*.
- 5. The *Song of Roland* holds *pietas* up as the proper system of gaining honor, associating it with the mutual loyalty required by chivalry. The Homeric values of *timê* and *kleos* are both portrayed negatively.
 - a. Desire for *timê* is associated with the enemy paynims
 - b. Concern for *kleos* drives the conflict between Ganelon and Roland
 - i. Ganelon betrays Roland and the rearguard because he feels that Roland has insulted his honor and sullied his reputation
 - ii. Roland dooms the rearguard by refusing to call for aid when they are ambushed, in order that his glory might be greater

6. Charlemagne's list of charges against Ganelon at the trial's beginning correspond to classical systems of honor:
- a. Ganelon “went with me and my host to Spain” (*Song of Roland* 3751).
 - i. Charlemagne invokes *pietas*, reiterating that Ganelon’s purpose in journeying to Spain was to follow and serve his lord.
 - b. “By twenty thousand he’s had my Frenchmen slain” (3752).
 - i. Rather than promote *pietas*, Ganelon has caused the deaths of thousands of his countrymen, violating his duty to his peers, his lord, and his state.
 - c. “All the Twelve Peers for money he betrayed” (3756).
 - i. The emperor accuses Ganelon of being motivated by desire for *timê* rather than *pietas*.
 - d. Ganelon has “. . . hated [his] brothers . . . brooded alone / over troves of gold [he] gained and never put aside / some share for [his] own kin. . . marched to the flag / of civil war and never shrank from breaking [his] pledge / to [his] lords and masters” (*Aeneid* 6.702-9).
 - i. “Hic quibus inuisi fratres . . . qui divitiis soli incubuere repertis nec partem posuere suis . . . quique arma secuti impia nec veriti dominorum fallere dextras” (*Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6* 6.608-13).
7. The trial is interrupted when Ganelon's kinsman Pinabel claims that he will duel any council member who votes to condemn Ganelon. Out of fear of this challenge, the council declares Ganelon innocent.

- a. Although the threat of one-on-one combat should hold no weight in a communal, pietas-driven system of justice, the council immediately shifts to operate in this individualistic, Homeric system.
- 8. This disjunction is resolved not by a restoration of communal justice, but by an agent of Charlemagne operating within the individualistic, Homeric system that Pinabel set into motion.
 - a. One of the barons on the council, Thierry, declares that he votes to condemn Ganelon and challenges Pinabel to a duel. After Thierry kills Pinabel, the council immediately reverses its decision and condemns Ganelon.
 - i. “God’s might is manifest! / Justice demands the rope for [Ganelon’s] neck” (*Song of Roland* 3931-2).
 - ii. Thierry’s victory determines the council’s verdict. Just as in the *Iliad*, a communal conflict is solved by violence between two individuals.
- 9. *Song of Roland* presents an inherently unstable chivalric society in which desire for trophies and glory can disrupt communal duty, and in which this rupture can only be mended by further engaging in Homeric, individual systems of honor. Through an analysis of the classical war epic tradition, the *Song of Roland* foreshadows of the fracturing of chivalry.

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