

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

The landmark *chanson de geste* of the medieval canon, the *Song of Roland* appeared in its extant form in the late eleventh century. Along with its inclusion of contemporary chivalric culture, the epic draws from the Greco-Roman tradition of war epics, especially Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid*. Most notably, the systems of honor within each of these epics (Homeric *timê* and *kleos* and Vergilian *pietas*) can be traced in the *Song of Roland*. Throughout the epic, the reputation of a warrior and physical representations of honor that comprise Homeric honor systems are rejected in favor of the Vergilian system of honor through *pietas*, performing one's duties to one's subordinates, peers, superiors, and religion. *Timê* and *kleos* are cast in a decidedly negative light, adhered to by the enemy "pagnims" and integral to the downfall of both the traitor Ganelon and the hero Roland. Meanwhile, *pietas* is the force that drives the Franks' chivalry.

Though its depictions of chivalry are often cited as exemplary of medieval attitudes, points of tension arise in the *Song of Roland* at the sections of the narrative which should most strongly display medieval values. One of the most striking of these tensions arises near the end of the epic in the trial of Ganelon, the French baron who conspired with the pagnim king, Marsilion, to orchestrate the ambush of Charlemagne's rearguard and the death of Roland. Ganelon's crimes against the Franks and his emperor are plainly apparent: he has acted with desire for *kleos* and *timê* rather than with Vergilian *pietas*. Perhaps more importantly, Charlemagne makes it clear that if the barons do not indict Ganelon, they will be setting themselves against their emperor. However, despite this condemning information, the barons sitting in judgment are split on the matter and cannot come to a decision. At the moment that Christian and French justice, closely aligned with *pietas*, should shine victorious, it falls flat.

The course of the trial is further disrupted by Ganelon's kinsman Pinabel, who issues a challenge to any men who vote to condemn Ganelon, declaring that "If any Frenchman should sentence you to swing, / . . . With my bright brand I'll give the lie to him!" (*Song of Roland* lines 3789-91). This challenge recalls the duels of the *Iliad*: a conflict involving a large group of people can be distilled to a conflict between two men who are not necessarily the original aggrieved parties. However, the trial is being determined by a council, and Pinabel's individual challenge should not affect the Franks' *pietas*-driven process of justice. Far from dismissing Pinabel's declaration, however, the barons immediately shift to operate in the individualistic system he sets in motion: out of fear of potentially dueling Pinabel (3804), they decide to abandon the trial (3798-9) and ask the king to pardon Ganelon (3800-1). When faced with his challenge, the barons switch from their communal system of *pietas* to an individual, Homeric system based in the *kleos* and *timê* of duels.

Ultimately, Ganelon's sentence is determined not by Charlemagne's appointed council, but by a duel between two council members—an unsettling instance of violence among Franks after the epic's previous emphasis on Frankish community. The explanation for this tension lies both in the cultural context of the *chanson* and the classical systems of honor that appear in the epic. In this paper, I argue that, although the *Song of Roland* consistently privileges Vergilian communal honor over Homeric individual and physical honor, the Frankish and Vergilian system of honor ultimately fails in the trial of Ganelon. It is replaced with a Homeric method of *timê* and *kleos*, suggesting the Franks' similarity to their pagan enemies and underlining an inherent tension in the chivalric system of the French Middle Ages.

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