The Song of Roland

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

The author of *The Song of Roland* is unknown, but the poem has traditionally been attributed to a figure named "Turoldus" because of a name which appears at the end of the Bodleian Library's Old French manuscript of the poem. However, scholars have never conclusively identified this individual, and indeed there's no reason to assume that he is the author.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Charlemagne, or Charles the Great (748–814), was King of the Franks and Lombards and, as of 800, Emperor of the Romans, uniting much of Western and Central Europe under his rule and founding the Carolingian Empire. The poem's setting is the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, which took place on August 15, 778, in the Pyrenees Mountains between present-day France and Spain. Although the battle really took place, its depiction in *The Song of Roland* is heavily fictionalized. For instance, the attackers who ambushed Charlemagne's rear guard in the battle were actually Basques—seeking revenge after Charlemagne attacked their capital of Pamplona—not Spanish Muslims. Charlemagne believed that the Basque tribes were in alliance with the Muslims and wished to quell potential opposition. Basque warriors attacked the rearguard as they moved through the Roncevaux Pass. Though the Franks, including the historical Roland, were slaughtered, their bold resistance did allow Charlemagne and most of his army to get through the Pyrenees safely. This battle was later romanticized to become the more straightforward Christian-Muslim conflict depicted in *The Song of Roland*. The existence of a Frankish military commander named Roland is attested by Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* (written in the 800s), but other details, such as his blood relation to Charlemagne, seem to be inventions of the poet. Depending on their views of the precise date of the poem's composition, scholars speculate that *The Song of Roland* may have been popular during The First Crusade (an effort, called for by Pope Urban II in 1095, to retake the Christian Holy Land through military force), or (if composed later) it might reflect events of the Crusade itself.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Song of Roland is one of the earliest examples of the genre called the *chanson de geste*—narrative poems celebrating heroic deeds, which flourished especially in the 12th and 13th centuries and were sung or recited. Another major work from this genre is *The Poem of the Cid*, a Castilian epic poem which was written about a century after *The Song of Roland*; like *Roland*, it recounts battle between Christian and Muslim forces (in this case, during Christian forces' reconquest of the Iberian peninsula), and *Roland* is believed to be a literary influence on it. *The Nibelungenlied*, which tells a story of intrigue in the court of Burgundy, is an example of medieval German epic poetry. Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516), an Italian epic poem, develops *The Song of Roland*'s setting and characters in romantic and fantastical directions. *Roland* also serves as a plot element in Graham Greene's *The Confidential Agent*, a 1939 thriller in which a scholar of medieval literature becomes a secret agent, offering commentary on the epic poem throughout.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Song of Roland (La Chanson de Roland)
- **When Written:** Between 1040 and 1115
- **Where Written:** France
- **Literary Period:** Medieval
- **Genre:** Epic Poem
- **Setting:** Spain (Al-Andalus) and the Roncevaux Pass, on the border of Spain and France
- **Climax:** Count Roland dies; Emperor Charlemayn and the rest of France mourn him.
- **Antagonist:** Count Ganelon (Guènes); Blancandrin; The Paynims/Saracens
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Foundational Poem. Though *The Song of Roland* was written centuries after the battle it portrays, and its precise dating is uncertain, it is still the oldest surviving work of French literature.

Fabled Sword. Much regional lore surrounds Roland's legendary sword, Durendal. For example, a gap in the Pyrenees Mountains, "Roland's Breach," is said to have been created when Roland struck his sword on the rocks in an attempt to destroy it.

PLOT SUMMARY

The French Emperor Charlemayn has occupied Spain for seven years. So far, however, he has not conquered the city of Saragossa, an outpost of Islam (which the poet categorizes as a form of paganism) that's ruled by King Marsilion. Marsilion, for

his part, fears that he can't conquer Charlemayn. Marsilion's advisor, Blancandrin, suggests that he send an envoy promising eventual submission to Charlemayn and conversion to Christianity. Marsilion agrees. Marsilion's messengers find Charlemayn celebrating a recent victory at Cordova. The deliberative Charlemayn broods over Marsilion's offer, not sure if the pagan king can be trusted. His trusted barons concur that the pagans are probably plotting something. The only exception is Count Roland, Charlemayn's nephew, who argues for war. Roland's stepfather, Count Ganelon, urges Charlemayn not to trust Roland. Charlemayn agrees to accept the envoys' offer and sends Ganelon as messenger at Roland's suggestion. Roland's nomination of Ganelon infuriates Ganelon, and on his way to Saragossa, he plots with Blancandrin to kill his stepson. When Ganelon meets King Marsilion, he persuades the king to launch an ambush of the rear-guard of Charlemayn's retreating army, which Ganelon knows will contain Roland.

When Ganelon returns to Charlemayn's camp, he persuades the emperor to return home to France, and that Marsilion will soon journey to Aix to pledge himself as Charlemayn's vassal. Satisfied, Charlemayn departs with his army, but he has troubling dreams of treachery. Despite his foreboding, he appoints Roland to the rear-guard which will stay at Roncevaux Pass to protect the army's homeward retreat.

When the rear-guard hears the Saracens approaching, Roland's best friend, Oliver, urges him to blow his Olifant (a massive horn) to summon help from Charlemayn, but Roland pridefully refuses. Archbishop Turpin exhorts the men to fight for Christendom, and at first, it looks as if they will easily prevail over their enemies. However, as more and more French peers are felled by Paynims (pagans), the tide turns against them. When Roland decides to blow the Olifant after all, Oliver blames him for waiting too long. Turpin urges him to do it anyway. When Roland finally sounds the horn, Ganelon tries to dissuade Charlemayn from riding to the rescue, revealing himself as a traitor.

After Oliver is fatally stabbed, he and Roland reconcile as Oliver dies. Soon, Roland, Turpin, and Walter Hum are the only remaining Franks. After Walter dies and Charlemayn's approach is evident, the Paynims flee, leaving Roland free to gather the bodies of the many slain. Turpin dies after blessing the dead. Roland realizes that he, too, is dying, so he walks toward Spain with his Olifant and his faithful **sword**, Durendal. Unable to destroy Durendal's blade, Roland dies with the sword tucked underneath him in the hope that no pagan will steal it and tarnish its honor.

When Charlemayn finds that his men have been slaughtered, he grieves sorely and prays for the sun to stand still so that he can pursue the Saracens back to Saragossa. God grants this, and he succeeds in driving them back. While Charlemayn is sleeping that night, however, Baligant, emir of Babylon, arrives in Saragossa with a massive navy. He makes an agreement with Marsilion—who is dying from a wound that Roland inflicted upon him—to conquer Charlemayn in exchange for the land of Spain.

The next morning, Charlemayn returns to Roncevaux Pass and grieves passionately over Roland's remains. Before he can depart for France with Roland's body, however, he is stopped by Baligant's envoys. Despite Charlemayn's sorrow, he promptly accepts Baligant's challenge and accordingly musters his army.

Baligant, with a huge host of Paynims from various lands, faces Charlemayn's army. Though the combat is close and bloody, the Paynims are gradually outmatched. After Charlemayn kills Baligant's son Malpramis, Baligant is determined to kill Charlemayn personally. Baligant refuses to convert to Christianity and yield to Charlemayn, so, after he lightly wounds the emperor, Charlemayn kills him. The remaining Paynims flee.

Charlemayn's army occupies Saragossa, where they destroy all non-Christian houses of worship and force 100,000 people to be baptized. The next day, Charlemayn journeys back to France, taking Marsilion's widow, Queen Bramimond, with him. He then summons all his vassals to Aix for Ganelon's trial. Ganelon continues to insist upon his innocence—he claims he took vengeance against Roland, but was not treasonous. The trial is inconclusive until a baron named Thierry demands Ganelon's death and faces Ganelon's friend and champion Pinabel in single combat. After Pinabel is killed, Ganelon is brutally executed, along with 30 of his kinsmen who supported him.

Queen Bramimond becomes convinced of the truth of Christianity and is baptized, taking the new name Juliana. That night, before Charlemayn can finally rest, he is summoned by the angel Gabriel to fight Paynims in another city, and he laments his wearisome life of continual combat.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles – Charlemagne, spelled "Charlemayn" in Sayers's text, is also frequently called "Carlon" or "Charles" throughout the poem. He is the emperor of the Franks, or French, whose capital is at Aix. Charlemayn is described as having white hair, a silver beard, and an unmistakably noble, austere appearance. Even his pagan enemies fear his tireless valor on the battlefield. Charlemayn is brooding and deliberative, reluctant to act without the advice of his trusted French advisors. He is also portrayed as a semi-divine figure; he is over 200 years old, has prophetic dreams, and is frequently advised by the angel Gabriel. At the same time, he expresses his emotions without restraint, weeping freely over fallen men. As a warrior, a pious Christian, and an emotional figure, Charlemayn is presented as the ideal French

king. At the beginning of the poem, Charlemayn has occupied Spain for seven years. When he is approached by envoys from King Marsilion in the pagan city of Saragossa, he sends his brother-in-law, Ganelon, as a messenger accepting terms of peace. Despite forebodings of treachery, Charlemayn leaves a rear-guard, including his beloved nephew, Roland, to guard the Roncevaux Pass while the rest of the Franks retreat homeward. After the rear-guard is slaughtered in an ambush plotted by Marsilion and Ganelon, Charlemayn turns back and pursues the Paynims (pagans) back to Saragossa. Before he can return to France, he faces Baligant in combat and slays him. After this victory, Charlemayn finally takes over Saragossa and converts the region to Christianity. Charlemayn grants Ganelon a trial for his treason, but finally oversees his death sentence. Charlemayn remains untiring in his ongoing call to fight pagans, but the strife of battle is a great source of grief for him.

Count Roland – Roland, a mighty baron of France, is Charlemayn's nephew and Ganelon's stepson. He is the bravest of knights, but also reckless and rash. At the beginning of the poem, he favors ongoing war, and his nomination of Ganelon as an envoy to the Spanish pagans sets off a treacherous chain of events which results in his own death. He is also prideful on the battlefield and overconfident in his own strength, refusing to call for help when his best friend, Oliver, prudently advises it. When Roland belatedly calls for help as part of Charlemayn's army's rear-guard, he and Oliver are briefly estranged over Roland's foolishness, but they reconcile before Oliver dies. Roland fatally maims King Marsilion, among countless other Saracens, in the Battle of Roncevaux Pass and he remains upright in the battle until the very end. In fact, he is killed by the brain-damaging blast with which he finally blows his horn for help, not by another warrior's sword. After the Saracens retreat, he faithfully gathers the bodies of his fallen comrades. Roland dies facing Spain, his beloved **sword**, Durendal, tucked protectively beneath him—the embodiment of a conquering Christian knight. Charlemayn grieves deeply over Roland and fights to avenge him.

Count Ganelon (Guènes) – Count Ganelon is also called Guènes in the poem. He is married to Charlemayn's sister and is therefore Roland's stepfather. He also has a son named Baldwin. Ganelon is a treacherous and seemingly insecure figure who mistrusts and envies his powerful stepson. When Charlemayn sends Ganelon to Saragossa as a messenger on Roland's suggestion, Ganelon angrily plots with Blancandrin to betray and kill Roland, claiming that the young knight is prideful and has it coming. In Saragossa, he further convinces King Marsilion to ambush the rear-guard of Charlemayn's army, knowing this will mean Roland's probable death. Ganelon's treachery is proven when he tries to dissuade Charlemayn from riding to the rear-guard's rescue. He is later brutally executed when the death of his friend and champion, Pinabel, is regarded as proof of his guilt.

King Marsilion – Marsilion, the king of pagan/"Paynim" (Saracen) Spain, is also called "Marsile" throughout the poem. He reigns at Saragossa with his wife, Queen Bramimond. He is a rash, hot-tempered king. Instead of submitting to Frankish Christian rule, he is persuaded by Ganelon and his trusted advisor, Blancandrin, to ambush the rear-guard of Charlemayn's retreating army. Roland chops off Marsilion's arm at Roncevaux Pass, taking him out of the fight. Marsilion then grants Baligant all of Spain in exchange for the emir's revenge on Charlemayn. After Marsilion learns of Baligant's death, he dies of grief.

Baligant – Baligant is the emir of Babylon, whose help Marsilion requested seven years earlier. After Charlemayn chases the Saracens back to Saragossa, Baligant finally arrives with his massive navy to face Charlemayn on the dying Marsilion's behalf. Marsilion grants Baligant the kingdom of Spain in return. Though Baligant is portrayed as a respectable ruler and even resembles Charlemayn in certain respects—he has a flowing beard and is deliberative, wise, and even pious in his own way—he is ultimately slain by Charlemayn, allowing the emperor to decisively conquer Spain at last.

Oliver – Oliver is Roland's most faithful friend and a fellow knight. He is among those appointed to the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass alongside Roland. He is prudent and wise, advising Roland to blow his horn for help when the Saracens first attack. Though he and Roland argue over the latter's foolishness, they reconcile before Oliver's death in battle. He receives his death-blow from Marganice.

Archbishop Turpin of Rheims – Archbishop Turpin is a warrior-bishop. Along with Roland and Oliver, he is appointed to the rear-guard which holds the Roncevaux Pass. He exhorts the men to fight for Christendom, and he is an unstinting soldier himself, killing many. He fights to the bitter end, striking down 400 Saracens even after being unhorsed and stabbed four times. He finally dies after the Saracens have fled, while trying to get water for Roland.

Blancandrin – Besides being a mighty knight, Blancandrin is described as the wisest among the pagans and is a trusted advisor to King Marsilion. Blancandrin suggests and leads the envoy to Charlemayn, lying that Marsilion will convert to Christianity and submit to Charlemayn's rule. He also plots with Ganelon to betray Roland.

Pinabel – Pinabel is Ganelon's friend, a fierce and articulate warrior, whom Ganelon summons to his own defense at his trial. Pinabel promises that if Ganelon is sentenced to death by anyone, Pinabel will face that man in single combat. When Thierry demands Ganelon's execution, Pinabel fights him and is finally slain.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Queen Bramimonda (Bramimond) – Queen Bramimonda is

King Marsilion's wife and the queen of Saracen Spain. After Charlemayn conquers Saragossa, she accompanies him back to Aix and ultimately converts to Christianity. She is baptized and rechristened Juliana.

Duke Naimon – Naimon is Charlemayn's wisest vassal; he counsels peace at the beginning of the poem when Roland favors war. Naimon faithfully supports and comforts Charlemayn throughout the ensuing battles. With Count Jozeran, he also helps marshal Charlemayn's 10 columns before the battle with Baligant. He kills Baligant's son Malpramis.

Count Walter Hum – Along with Roland, Oliver, and Archbishop Turpin, Count Walter Hum is appointed to the rear-guard which holds the Roncevaux Pass. He is one of the last three men standing at the Pass before Charlemayn arrives.

Thierry – Thierry is Geoffrey of Anjou's brother. When most of the Franks decide to let Ganelon off, intimidated by Pinabel, Thierry demands that justice be done and slays Pinabel.

Adelroth – Adelroth is King Marsilion's nephew. He requests and is granted the honor of striking the first blow in the ambush of the Franks, but he is swiftly killed by Roland.

Valdabron – Marsilion's godfather and a particularly vicious Saracen who's committed sacrilege in Jerusalem.

Duke Samson – A member of the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass, killed by Valdabron.

Aude – Oliver's sister who is engaged to Roland. After the battle, she learns that Roland has been killed and promptly dies of grief.

Jurfaret – Marsilion's son, whom Roland beheads in battle.

Marganice – Marsilion's uncle, who commands a column of African soldiers in the Saracen army. He gives Oliver his death-blow and is then promptly beheaded by Oliver in return.

Clarifant – Emir Baligant's envoy to King Marsilion.

Clarien – Emir Baligant's envoy to King Marsilion.

Geoffrey d'Anjou – One of Charlemayn's trusted barons. He initiates the mass burial of Franks killed at Roncevaux Pass.

Rabel – A knight who, after Roland's death, occupies Roland's spot at the battle against Baligant.

Guinemant – A knight who, after Oliver's death, occupies Oliver's spot at the battle against Baligant.

Count Jozeran – Count Jozeran, along with Duke Naimon, helps marshal the 10 French columns before the battle with Baligant.

Ogier the Dane – An especially valiant baron at the battle against Baligant. He knocks the latter from his horse, allowing Charlemayn to take him down in single combat.

Malpramis – Baligant's son, who requests the honor of striking the first blow in battle against Charlemayn's army. He is slain by Duke Naimon.

Gerin – A member of the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass.

Gerier – A member of the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass.

Engelier – A member of the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass.

Berenger – A member of the rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass.

THEMES

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CHRISTIANITY VS. PAGANISM

The Song of Roland is a heavily fictionalized poetic account of the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, a conflict between French and Spanish forces at Roncevaux, France in 778. As such, one of the poem's most noticeable characteristics is the stark distinction between Christian and "pagan" (archaically, "paynim" in Sayers's translation). To grasp the anonymous poet's outlook, it is vital to understand that, at the time *The Song of Roland* was written (in the late 1000s or early 1100s), few in a French context would have had religious categories other than "Christian" and "pagan." For instance, there was little understanding of Islam (the dominant religion in Spain at the time) as a distinct religion; thus, it would most often have been categorized as simply non-Christian, or pagan. Accordingly, the poet doesn't seem to have an accurate awareness of Islam (or any other religion), instead portraying it as an inarticulate blend of "pagan" elements. By presenting Spain's religion as a mix of unsophisticated, ineffectual, and threatening beliefs, the poet argues that Christianity, by contrast, is a civilized and rightfully victorious force.

The Islam of Spain is portrayed as a vaguely understood, unsophisticated, yet nevertheless threatening "pagan" religion. First of all, it is portrayed as an idol-worshipping religion. When the army of King Marsile (the Muslim king of Saragossa, Spain) rides out toward France from Spain, they pause to worship first: "Mahound their idol high on the tower they raise, / And every Paynim adores and gives it praise." "Mahound" is a medieval variant of the name of Islam's prophet, Muhammad; here, the use of the name also inaccurately characterizes Muhammad as a god, conflating Spanish Muslims with other so-called pagan religions. The "paynim" army even contains sorcerers. France's Archbishop Turpin engages in combat with "Siglorel, / The sorcerer, who'd once been down to Hell, / With Jupiter for guide, by magic spells." This unintelligible mix of religious elements—blending Islam with dark sorcery and ancient Roman myth (Jupiter was king of the Roman

gods)—further classifies the people of Spain as belonging to an undifferentiated religious "other," which is portrayed as diabolical and threatening to Christians. After King Marsile is felled in battle, his followers back in Spain turn on their god(s) in rage: "By twenty thousand [Marsile's] followers stand around; / […] With ugly insults they threaten […] and shout: / 'Aha! vile god, why must thou shame us now?' / […] Into a ditch they boot away Mahound / For pigs and dogs to mangle and befoul." Again, Islam is associated with a vague, unsophisticated paganism, whose deity is here suggested to be useless and worthy only of disgrace (and whose followers are quick to reject their god).

Christianity, by contrast, is portrayed as the pinnacle of civilization and as rightfully dominant over "pagan" Spain. For example, truly civilized knighthood is considered to be inherently Christian. The poet describes a noble and famously courageous emir (a Muslim ruler) as follows: "And for his courage he's famous far and near; / Were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear." And, later, when a different emir, the fearsome Baligant, rides out to fight Charlemayn (King of the Franks and Lombards), the poet concludes several lines of praise by saying, "His valour proved in battle o'er and o'er; / Were he but Christian, God! what a warrior!" In other words, these emirs possess many of the best qualities of a medieval warrior, yet their lack of Christianity makes them deficient knights.

The French cause is also characterized as inherently Christian. When the French are preparing to face the Spanish in battle, Archbishop Turpin addresses the troops in a sermon: "Christendom needs you, / so help us to preserve it. / […] 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." That is, the war against the pagans is an effort to preserve Christendom, and participating in that effort—especially dying in it—is worthy of absolution from sins and reward in heaven. Charlemayn, as Emperor of the Franks, embodies not just France but Christendom, which is portrayed as justly dominant. When Charlemayn and King Marsile's successor, Emir Baligant, meet in a climactic showdown, the poet makes clear that "Nothing at all can ever end their strife / Till one confess he's wrong, the other right." He means that the French and Spanish war is a zero-sum encounter: it can only end when one side is religiously dominant. Further, Charlemayn tells Baligant that he must "confess the Faith by God revealed, / Take Christendom, and thy fast friend I'll be." Thus, the price of survival is renunciation of Baligant's pagan faith and embrace of the Christendom that Charlemayn represents.

In the end, however, Baligant and Spain are defeated, and Spain's capital, Saragossa, is Christianized: "Some thousand French search the whole town, to spy / Synagogues out and mosques and heathen shrines […] / The Bishops next the water sanctify; / Then to the font the Paynim folk they drive." In other words, anything categorized as "paynim"—whether it is practiced in a synagogue, mosque, or shrine—is searched out for destruction, and its practitioners forcibly baptized. Notably, forced baptism was actually forbidden by the Catholic Church at this time; but these events, even if not historically accurate, reflect the poet's perception that there are only two religious categories—Christian and pagan—and that only Christianity can ultimately prevail.

THE IDEAL KING

Although Charlemayn's nephew Count Roland is the hero of the epic poem, Charlemayn (King of the Franks and later Roman Emperor) is by far its overshadowing figure. The Emperor Charlemayn alone can finally win the Battle of Roncevaux Pass against Spain, and after Roland's heroic fighting and eventual death, Charlemayn moves into the center of the action as a grief-stricken, yet unfailingly composed, holy, and finally triumphant king, bringing the poem's action to a climax. Though the poem is an obviously exaggerated portrayal of events at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, it is not a careless one—the poet intentionally highlights and exaggerates particular elements in order to depict Charlemayn as a larger-than-life, idealized ruler. By portraying Charlemayn as a universally admired and even godlike figure, the poet argues that he represents the highest aspirations of the French people, and an idealized history of chivalry and conquest that *The Song of Roland*'s audience should proudly emulate.

Charlemayn is admired even by his enemies, and he is portrayed as a better king than his Spanish counterpart, King Marsile. When Charlemayn's treacherous brother-in-law, Ganelon, goes to Spain to plot with the pagans against Charlemayn, a pagan says, "I marvel in my mind / At Charlemayn whose head is old and white. / Two hundred years, I know, have passed him by. / […] When will he weary of going forth to fight?" Ganelon replies that this will never happen, because "Charles is secure, he fears no man alive." Charlemayn is portrayed as a godlike figure who, despite his great age, will never tire of warfare because of his fearlessness. In contrast to Spain's King Marsile, Charlemayn is portrayed as deliberative, sober, and receptive to advice: "With lifted hands to God the Emperor sues; / Then bows his head and so begins to brood. / […] He was a man not hasty in reply, / But wont to speak only when well advised." He listens carefully to the news brought to him by Marsile's envoys, and he holds off on acting until following day—after attending Mass, he "calls his barons to council […] / By French advice whate'er he does is done." In other words, though fierce and undefeated in battle, Charlemayn is not reckless—he still seeks advice and deliberates before acting. Marsile, by contrast, is portrayed as

rash. When Ganelon tells him that he must submit to Charlemayn, "Marsile was quite distraught; / He held a dart with golden feathers wrought, / And would have struck [Ganelon], but he was overborne" by "the wiser Paynims." Marsile is easily stirred to violence and has to be restrained by his underlings, unlike his slower-acting counterpart, Charlemayn, who solicits his men's advice.

In addition to being a highly competent warrior and ruler, Charlemayn models the emotion, courage, and Christian piety that the poem advocates as the proper mode of behavior. First, Charlemayn models how to express grief and honor the dead. When he finds Roland's dead body, "King Carlon swoons, he cannot help himself," and afterward must be held up by four of his barons. Then "he tears his hair with both hands for despite. / By hundred thousand the French for sorrow sigh." After further words of lament, he cries, "'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, / [...] And of the French an hundred thousand swoon." Throughout this section of the poem, Charlemayn's extreme emotions are never criticized. In fact, the French join their king in "sighing" and "swooning." Charlemayn's behavior sets the pattern for socially-acceptable grieving. And yet, in spite of his grief, Charlemayn is first into battle. "The Emperor's first in arming for the field / [...] [He] goes a-gallop for all his men to see, / Calling on God and [St. Peter]." Thus, just as Charlemayn's grief spurred thousands to tears, his courage prompts his warriors to arms, too: "Throughout the field the French dismount straightway, / An hundred thousand and more put on their mail."

Additionally, Charlemayn's Christian piety is displayed in his public prayer and even in his outfitting for battle. "From off his horse the Emperor now descends; / On the green grass he kneels with bended head / [...] 'Father most true, this day my cause defend!...'" Also, his lance, Joyeuse, is not just any weapon: "You know the lance—for oft we've heard the tale— / Which pierced Our Lord when He on cross was slain: / [Charlemayn] possesses the lancehead, God be praised!" Not only is Charlemayn's humble reliance on God portrayed as admirable, but he supposedly fights with a weapon that was used during the redemptive death of Christ, suggesting that he's a redemptive figure himself.

Written some three centuries after the historical Charlemayn, the poet's portrayal is clearly meant to be wildly exaggerated, and his French audience would have interpreted it as such. Yet the audience was meant to enjoy this portrait of the Emperor as one who is both eminently human (his emotions are unrestrained) and superhuman, even godlike (he's ancient, unfailingly brave, and associated with Christ). Such a portrayal would have bolstered later medieval French self-identity and pride, and it also offered a picture of the idealized French ruler.

LOYALTY, HONOR, AND CHIVALRY

Though Charlemayn's nephew Roland is the unambiguous hero of *The Song of Roland*, Roland is not a one-dimensional character—unlike Charlemayn, he is flawed. For example, Roland is characterized as hotheaded from the beginning. When, early in the poem, Charlemayn and the French are cautious about the intentions of King Marsile (who has recently killed some Frenchmen and now makes peaceful overtures to Charlemayn), Roland "fiercely disagrees" and jumps to his feet, declaring that "Foolish advice [the French] gave to you indeed [...] Spend all your life, if need be, in the siege." Through pride, Roland also makes a fateful mistake during battle against King Marsile's troops, endangering his comrades' lives. On the other hand, Roland is unendingly loyal to his friends, protective of his honor, and finally sacrifices his own life for his cause (defending himself and his men against an ambush by the Spanish Muslims) during the Battle of Roncevaux Pass. By portraying Roland as a flawed yet unfailingly loyal and beloved figure, the poet suggests that although a chivalrous knight may be susceptible to rashness and pride, his character is most truly revealed by his loyalty unto death.

Although Roland is brave, as a chivalrous man should be, his bravery crosses the line into rashness at times. When Roland and his best friend, Oliver, find themselves beset by the enemy at the rear of Charlemayn's army, Oliver urges Roland to blow the "Olifant" (his ivory horn) in order to summon help from those at the front. Roland refuses: "'Now God forbid', Roland makes answer wroth, / That living man should say he saw me go / Blowing of horns for any Paynim foe!" In other words, Roland won't concede that he needs help against mere pagans—such a concession cuts against his sense of honor. A little later, when Oliver rebukes his friend's pride, Roland repeats, "Speak no such foul despite! / Curst be the breast whose heart knows cowardice!" This situation ends up setting the scene for Roland's death (and Oliver's, too). Roland, then, is far from a perfect figure, and his prideful actions have consequences. When Roland decides to finally sound the Olifant—at which point many French comrades lie dead around him—Oliver reproaches his friend even more harshly: "Companion, you got us in this mess. / There is wise valour, and there is recklessness: / Prudence is worth more than foolhardiness." In other words, Roland's bravery would have been more admirable if it had been tempered by greater wisdom and restraint—or at least the humility to heed Oliver's.

Despite Roland's stubbornness and recklessness, the poet still upholds him as the epitome of knightly loyalty and honor. For example, after Marsile's army is driven back toward Spain, Roland faithfully gathers the fallen corpses of beloved comrades, searching the field to locate them by name: "These friends of ours, we loved so well in life, / We must not leave them lying where they died. / I will go seek them, find, and

identify." Roland is a faithful companion in arms, even beyond death. This scene also suggests that he takes responsibility for not doing more to ensure his comrades' survival earlier—even if this humility is displayed too late, it's another aspect of knightly honor. Roland's faithfulness to his lord and uncle, Charlemayn, is also illustrated by his faithfulness to his **sword**, Durendal. When, later in the battle, Roland realizes he is on the verge of death, he mourns over his sword, lest it fall into the pagans' hands and its honor be stained in use against the French. This is because Charlemayn gave Durendal to Roland, and with Durendal, Roland won many victories on Charlemayn's behalf: "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." Durendal is a symbolic extension of Roland's own honor, and as a true knight, Roland is concerned with leaving an honorable legacy after his death by keeping his sword untainted by his enemies.

The treatment of Roland's death further reinforces the poet's opinion of him as a champion. When Roland finally lays down to die, the very arrangement of his body indicates that he is a conquering, Christian warrior: "He's turned his head to where the Paynims are, / And this he doth for the French and for Charles, / […] His right-hand **glove** he unto God extends; / Angels from Heaven now to his side descend." Roland is simultaneously a war hero and an exemplar of piety—a combination that epitomized medieval chivalry. Finally, when Charlemayn comes upon Roland's body and emotionally mourns him—leading the entire army in a shared outpouring of grief—the scene reinforces Roland's status not merely as the Emperor's beloved nephew, but as a warrior whose like will not be seen again. Charlemayn exclaims, "'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!'" Roland, then, was not just the greatest of knights, but one whose loss detracts from the glory of the most noble figure in the poem: Charlemayn.

TREACHERY VS. CHIVALRY

The Song of Roland opens with treachery, as Spain's King Marsile debates with his barons about entrapping Charlemayn by pretending to convert to Christianity and outwardly submitting to the Emperor's rule ("They'll trap [Charlemayn] somehow, for it is fated so"). But Marsile and his Muslim subjects are regarded as treacherous by virtue of their pagan status as non-Christians; their plot is not the key betrayal of the story. Of greater interest to the poet is the surprising treachery of Ganelon, who is married to Charlemayn's sister and is Charlemayn's nephew Roland's stepfather. Ganelon, so closely bound to the Emperor, is assumed to be trustworthy. The poem is not straightforward about Ganelon's motivations, which are merely hinted at over the course of the poem. However, by emphasizing the corrupt aspects of Ganelon's temperament, the poet argues that treachery, as an expression of a self-serving, disloyal character, is the opposite of chivalry and must be punished accordingly.

Throughout the poem, treachery is linked to a jealous, disloyal, and self-serving character—the opposite of those chivalrous characteristics displayed by others, like Roland. When Ganelon arrives in pagan Saragossa, Spain—dispatched there by Charlemayn on an errand he resents—he wastes no time in beginning to plot with Blancandrin, King Marsile's wise counselor, to persuade Marsile to join with Ganelon in committing treachery against the French. He does so by spinning a story about Roland, claiming that Roland once returned from battle with a choice prize for his uncle Charlemayn: "Roland in hand a golden apple nursed / And showed his uncle, saying, 'Take it, fair sir; / The crowns I give you of all the kings on earth.' / One day his pride will undo him for sure, / […] If one should slay him some peace might be preserved." It's not clear whether the story about the apple is based in reality—yet, either way, it appears that Ganelon is prompted to seek revenge out of envy of his stepson's bond with and loyalty to Charlemayn. Ganelon doesn't hesitate to use this excuse to incite others to attack his stepson. Ganelon also has no qualms about plotting with a foreign army to undo Roland, even at cost to Ganelon's own people. Drawing on his knowledge of Charlemayn's military strategy, he tells King Marsile that Roland will be placed in the rear guard of Charlemayn's retreating army, giving the Spanish army a clear opportunity to attack and kill Roland (and inevitably other Frenchmen, too). Ganelon even goes this far: "Upon the relics of his good **sword** Murgleys / He sware the treason and sware his faith away." Swords were sometimes embossed with religious relics during the medieval period when the poem takes place, so Ganelon's oath upon his sword neatly symbolizes a twofold betrayal: of his emperor and his faith (which, after all, would be seen as a single strand of loyalty, in the medieval context).

Even if the poet does not clearly state the grievances that led Ganelon to commit treason, he finally makes it unambiguously clear that Ganelon is not to be trusted—that his character is corrupt in comparison with the noble Charlemayn and Roland. When, beset by the Spanish army, Roland finally blows his horn for assistance, Ganelon actively tries to dissuade the alarmed Charlemayn from action: "'There is no battle […] / 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.'" He assures Charlemayn that Roland is frightened by no more than "one small hare" and is merely making a dramatic scene in order to show off before other knights. This is a shocking response, not only because it's a bald lie that further endangers Roland, but because it's a blatant insult of Emperor Charlemayn—not praising his age and

wisdom as everyone else in the poem does, but implying that he's becoming senile. This suggests that treachery isn't just an isolated act, according to the poet—it is itself an indication of a rotten character that even rejects the loyalties of a chivalric culture.

At the end of the poem, after Roland has died and Spain has conclusively submitted to Charlemayn, the Emperor finally takes the time to deal with Ganelon (whose treachery was revealed when Roland's peril came to light). Though Charlemayn is once again portrayed as noble in his willingness to hear arguments for and against Ganelon, he ultimately sentences not only Ganelon himself, but his supporters and descendants, to a traitor's death. This order shows what an offense treachery was thought to be during this time: as a disruptor of the chivalric order, the one who commits it deserves to have his name and posterity erased. As an officer remarks before the executions take place, "Treason destroys itself and others too."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GLOVES

In the poem's medieval context, giving a token such as a glove symbolizes the delegation of authority for the giver, and the acceptance of a task for the receiver. In the poem, gloves feature most prominently. For example, Charlemayn bestows his glove on Ganelon when he sends Ganelon to Saragossa as an envoy—but when Ganelon drops the glove in the dust, the poet frames the moment as a symbolic indication that Ganelon cannot be trusted with the authority that's been invested in him. When Roland dies on the battlefield, he extends his gloved hand heavenward as though indicating that he has now fulfilled his duty to God. When Pinabel vows to fight Thierry on Ganelon's behalf, he hands Charlemayn his glove as a sign of this challenge. For the knights in the poem, gloves represent taking on responsibility entrusted by authority figures.

SWORDS

In the poem's medieval context, swords are more than just weapons—they symbolize a knight's reputation and honor on the battlefield. For example, when Roland knows he is dying, he tries to destroy his beloved sword, Durendal, because its hilt contains precious Christian relics. Roland believes that Durendal will be desecrated if it falls into pagan hands—and his own honor as a knight will thus be destroyed with it. Along similar lines, Ganelon's oath on his sword, Murgleys, to betray Roland is an indication of just how corrupt his character is, further solidifying knights' swords as representations of their honor and true character.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Song of Roland* published in 1957.

Laisses 1–15 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: King Marsilion, Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

When King Marsilion sends envoys to the Franks with the goal of tricking them into withdrawing from occupied Spain by pledging Spain's loyalty and conversion, Emperor Charlemayn welcomes them with generous hospitality. Charlemayn's readiness to lodge the envoys handsomely, even though they represent his enemies and their motives are unclear to him, shows Charlemayn's noble generosity of spirit. This generosity—a mark of his chivalry—is intended to contrast with the treachery of the Spanish contingent, which the reader is aware of from the poem's opening scenes. In addition to Charlemayn's hospitality, two further signs of his kingly excellence are included in this quote. First, he attends Mass before responding to the envoys' proposal, illustrating his exemplary piety. Second, he gathers his noblemen to advise him before making a decision, suggesting that a good French king solicits his people's advice rather than acting arbitrarily. Both these characteristics contrast with the "paganism" and rashness the poet attributes to King Marsile, and establishes Charlemayn as an honorable and admirable leader by contrast.

Laisses 16–31 Quotes

"There's none," quoth Guènes, "who merits such ill words,
Save only Roland, for whom 'twill be the worse.
But now, the Emperor in the cool shade conversed;
Up came his nephew all in his byrny girt,
Fresh with his booty from Carcassone returned.
Roland in hand a golden apple nursed
And showed his uncle, saying, 'Take it, fair sir;
The crowns I give you of all the kings on earth.'
One day his pride will undo him for sure,
Danger of death day by day he incurs,
If one should slay him some peace might be preserved."

Related Characters: Count Ganelon (Guènes) (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles, Blancandrin, King Marsilion, Count Roland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Ganelon's (or Guènes's, as the poet sometimes names him) journey toward King Marsilion's court in Spain, accompanied by Marsilion's wise vassal, Blancandrin. Blancandrin has just criticized the French, but Ganelon responds that only his stepson, Roland, deserves such condemnation. He proceeds to tell a story, the intent of which seems to be to justify his own hostility toward Roland—that Roland, fresh from battle ("byrny" is an archaic term for a coat of mail), offered his uncle Charlemayn a golden apple symbolizing Roland's ability to conquer "all the kings on earth" and give them to the Emperor. This story certainly does suggest pride on Roland's part, though the poem doesn't otherwise establish the truth of Ganelon's tale—is it just an excuse for Ganelon's desire to seek revenge on his stepson? The poet leaves the audience guessing.

Regardless, Ganelon's story demonstrates that Roland thinks highly of his own military prowess, and that Ganelon himself certainly resents Roland's abilities and intimacy with Charlemayn—details that can be confirmed elsewhere in the story. This introduces Ganelon's jealousy of his stepson and foreshadows Ganelon's treachery in the ongoing conflict between the two men. Further, Ganelon's estimation draws Roland's integrity into question—at this point it reminds to be seen whether Roland really is an honorable knight able to conquer vast swaths of land, or whether his alleged self-professed prowess is just a marker of arrogance.

Laisses 32–52 Quotes

The Paynim said: "I marvel in my mind
At Charlemayn whose head is old and white.
Two hundred years, I know, have passed him by.
In lands so many he's conquered far and wide,
Lance-thrusts so many he's taken in the strife,
Rich kings so many brought to a beggar's plight—
When will he weary of going forth to fight?"
"Never", said Guènes, "while Roland sees the light;
'Twixt east and west his valour has no like,
Oliver too, his friend, is a brave knight;
And the twelve Peers, in whom the King delights,
With twenty thousand Frenchmen to vanward ride:
Charles is secure, he fears no man alive."

Related Characters: Count Ganelon (Guènes), King Marsilion (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles, Count Roland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the Spanish King Marsilion's court, where the vengeful Ganelon lays the groundwork for betraying Roland, Charlemayn, and the rest of the Franks. The "Paynim" (pagan) referenced is King Marsile, whose marveling at Charlemayn shows how much respect the Emperor commands even among his enemies. The claim that Charlemayn is over 200 years old, but has not yet lost the energy or appetite for war, further aligns with the poet's portrayal of Charlemayn as a larger-than-life, practically divine figure—an idealized king whose style of leadership is worthy of replication.

Meanwhile, Ganelon's reply to Marsilion shows that he already has treachery in mind: he knows how much Charlemayn's military strategy relies on Roland, Oliver, and Charlemayn's Twelve Peers. He appears to be intentionally harping on this fact, as if to reassure himself that even the fearless Charlemayn might have his weaknesses. This exchange is repeated three times in the poem with slightly different wording and emphases, which builds anticipation for Ganelon's coming treachery.

Laisses 53–78 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Count Roland, Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

The Song of Roland is not characterized by vivid imagery, so this quote represents an unusually picturesque moment in the poem—and an emotionally affecting one at that. The French are retreating from their seven-year occupation of Spain, returning home with the protection of a rear-guard led by Count Roland. As the army passes through the towering Pyrenees Mountains, their emotions are mixed—they grieve for the men who are left behind, yet as they enter familiar territory, they rejoice in finally coming home to their lands and loved ones.

Charlemayn, however, suffers a sense of foreboding, as an angel revealed to him the full scope of Ganelon's betrayal and its ominous implications for both Roland and France as a whole. Thus, the quote displays some of the most piercing emotional realism in the poem, and it also introduces Charlemayn's quickness to show emotion despite his deliberative style of leadership and warfare—a duality that will be characteristic of him throughout. In the poet's view, Charlemayn's tendency to weep and mourn does not detract from his kingliness—rather, it enhances it and shows his people the proper way to govern their emotions, too.

Laisses 79–103 Quotes

❝ "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."

Related Characters: Count Roland, Oliver (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Guarding the Frankish army's retreat in at Roncevaux Pass, Roland, Oliver, and the rest of the rear-guard find themselves overrun by the treacherous Saracens. Oliver therefore encourages Roland to blow his Olifant—a jeweled horn made from an elephant's tusk—to warn Charlemayn and summon the main part of the army back to assist them. But Roland steadfastly refuses, seeing this as a cowardly act of betrayal and an unacceptable concession to their enemies. He also declares his highly optimistic prediction for the coming clash—he's certain that, armed with his trusty Durendal and backed by the French, Spain can be readily defeated.

Roland's refusal to call for help in this moment comes back to haunt him later, as the rear-guard is outnumbered and destroyed by the Saracens, and Charlemayn comes too late. Although Ganelon's characterization of Roland's arrogance is certainty overblown, here Roland does demonstrate how remaining steadfast and trying to appear as chivalrous as possible can backfire, as his reluctance to sound the Olifant results in most of his men being slain. Medieval audiences listening to the poem being sung or recited would likely have known the outcome of this historical battle, so these lines heighten the sense of impending tragedy. But even as Roland brings about his eventual downfall, his heroism isn't in doubt—as the poem continues, his willingness to stand firm unto death characterizes him more than his momentary

rashness and pride.

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!"

Related Characters: Count Roland, Oliver (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This quote provides an interesting contrast between the heroic Roland and his best friend, Oliver. It also further heightens the poem's drama and highlights outstanding elements of Roland's character in contrast with other knights. While both Roland and Oliver are extraordinarily brave, the poet suggests that there is more to being a well-rounded, chivalrous knight than courage alone. Both are clearly flawed despite their competence in battle: Oliver foresaw the likely outcome if Roland did not summon Charlemayn for help, yet he didn't summon help himself; Roland is unfailingly fierce in battle, yet he doesn't share or heed his friend's wisdom. Without stating it outright, the poet suggests that disaster might have been avoided if *both* wisdom and ferocity had carried the day. Intriguingly, then, he presents Roland as a flawed hero. Looking ahead to the Paynims' coming slaughter of the Franks, including Roland's own death, this treatment of Roland's character suggests that, while Roland is nearly unmatched in his chivalrous courage, he is also a very human and flawed hero in contrast with the poem's semi-divine characterization of Charlemayn. Roland makes a tragic, prideful miscalculation in waiting to sound the Olifant and call for help, yet the poet still sees him as worthy of celebration.

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 comes 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.

Related Characters: Archbishop Turpin of Rheims (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

The Franks' Archbishop Turpin is a uniquely militant clergyman. During the Saracens' assault on the French, the poet presents him as second only to Roland and Oliver in his might on the battlefield. In this quote, Turpin stirs up his comrades' courage before the assault begins in earnest. While his statement is more of a pep talk than a proper "sermon"—a term the poet appears to use in a tongue-in-cheek manner—it categorizes the coming battle as a thoroughly religious event and suggests that the French cause is an inherently religious one. By fighting the Saracens, he says, the Franks are not just defending Charlemayn's army, or France, for that matter—they are defending "Christendom" as a whole. And, when the Franks engage in said battle with penitent hearts and sincere loyalty, they will have the assurance of dying as "martyrs" and can therefore look forward to immediate entrance into heaven. Though the precise dating of *The Song of Roland* remains uncertain, Turpin's "sermon" evokes the attitudes to religious war and martyrdom that prevailed around the time of Western Christianity's holy land crusades, the first of which (in the 1090s) occurred in the same era from which *Roland*'s earliest surviving manuscripts originated.

Laisses 128–137 Quotes

Quoth Roland: "Why so angry with me, friend?"
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. […]
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."

Related Characters: Oliver, Count Roland (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue between Roland and Oliver is one of the poem's most meaningful exchanges. Roland has finally decided to sound his Olifant to call for help, having ignored Oliver's earlier urging to do just that. Now, Oliver is angry with Roland for failing to summon Charlemayn's help sooner—it's Roland's fault that the Franks are being overrun, and now his stubbornness results in "a curse on [the Franks'] heads." France will be "shent" (shamed) because of Roland's failure to act prudently in order to preserve his own chivalry. Oliver's damning words, as well as his claim that their friendship is over, allow the poet to show just how lofty the demands of chivalry are. Brazen courage isn't sufficient, especially if it backfires (as it does here) and deprives one's lord of one's service in the future. This explains why Oliver is so furious—to him, Roland's foolhardiness is an affront to Charlemayn and thus to the Franks as a whole. However, his prediction that their friendship is at an end doesn't hold true, as they reconcile just before Oliver's death.

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 […]
Now to the Peers he's showing-off in style. […]
Ride on, ride on! Why loiter here the while?"

Related Characters: Count Ganelon (Guènes), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles (speaker), Count Roland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

When Roland sounds the Olifant at last, Charlemayn immediately suspects that his rear-guard faces imminent danger—he's close with his nephew and knows that Roland would never sound the horn unless the need was urgent. However, Ganelon's response is shocking, revealing more of his dishonest character and thus underscoring his treachery in contrast with Charlemayn and Roland's strict code of honor. Whereas other characters often reference Charlemayn's age (he is supposedly over 200 years old), they typically do so with great respect; this time, however, Ganelon implies that Charlemayn is growing senile, or is at least handling the situation ineptly. Such a response would be seen as completely out of bounds according to the traditional codes of chivalry, signaling to the audience (if there was any doubt) that Ganelon is a heartless traitor. Because the poet earlier revealed Ganelon's desire to harm Roland, his urging to "ride on" instead of helping his stepson further confirms his treacherous intent. Thus if the audience had any doubt about Ganelon's character, this moment confirms it, and Charlemayn quickly discerns the truth as well, having Ganelon arrested for eventual trial.

Laisses 138–167 Quotes

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."

Related Characters: Count Roland, Oliver (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

After Oliver receives his death-blow from the pagan warrior Marganice, he is blinded and, in a last frenzy of swordplay, unintentionally strikes Roland. Roland is unharmed, but his gentle reproach of his friend is one of the most affecting moments in the poem. By implication, the rebuke also applies to Oliver's earlier rejection of Roland's friendship—in other words, does Oliver really want to leave things like this between them? Their mutual pardoning shows that Roland not only forgives Oliver for grazing him unwittingly, but that Oliver pardons Roland for his stubbornness in not blowing the Olifant earlier in the battle. The pair's "bows courteous" show that knightly chivalry, deeply instilled in both of them, is more important than personal differences and will prevail to the very end of their friendship. Though Oliver initially saw Roland's rash behavior as a breach of chivalry, their mutual forgiveness and loving farewell suggest that kindness and loyalty in friendship are the highest mark of chivalry after all.

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!

Related Characters: Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles, Count Roland, Archbishop Turpin of Rheims

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Roland's discovery of the valiant Archbishop Turpin's body. Turpin one of the last Franks to survive Spain's ambush, and "vice-gerent" is a term referring to someone who exercises delegated authority on behalf of another—in this case, God. Thus, the quote provides a fitting summary of Turpin's character—he is both clergyman and warrior, and the poet sees no conflict between these two roles. In fact, Turpin's preaching is described as "brave" just as his fighting on the battlefield—and his preaching and fighting are viewed as being part of the same effort against the Paynims (i.e., the Paynims must either be converted or killed). Finally, it's worth noting that, although there was indeed a historical bishop *Tilpin* of Rheims who lived around the time of the real Charlemagne ("Turpin" seems to be a corruption of the name), there's no historical evidence that this man played any role in the Battle of Roncevaux Pass. With that in mind, Turpin's character seems to serve the purpose of embodying the poet's views of Christianity as a superior religion that should prevail over others, and the French cause as divine in nature.

Laisses 168–186 Quotes

"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."

Related Characters: Count Roland (speaker), Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

This quote provides a good summary of the way swords are viewed in *The Song of Roland*—especially the legendary swords of idealized figures like Count Roland. The hilt of Roland's sword, Durendal, contains relics, or tiny remnants of the bodies or effects of religious figures. (St. Peter was believed to have been the first pope of the Catholic Church; St. Basil was a prominent fourth-century theologian; and St. Denis, a third-century martyr, is the Patron Saint of France.) This underscores the point that, in the poet's medieval context, swords were wielded not simply as instruments of political or military might, but were also understood to symbolically represent—and strike blows on behalf of—Christendom. This is also why Roland, at death's door, is so distressed by the thought of his sword being seized and wielded by a non-Christian enemy. The use of Durendal *against* Christians and on behalf of the Paynims, in his view,

would be a kind of desecration of his sword and, by extension, of the Christian God.

Laisses 203–226 Quotes

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. [...]
"Roland, my friend, God have thy soul on high
With the bright Hallows in flowers of Paradise!
They 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!" [...]
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.

Related Characters: Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles (speaker), Count Roland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

When Charlemayn finally rides back to the Roncevaux Pass in response to his nephew Roland sounding the Olifant for help, he soon discovers Roland's fallen body. Charlemayn is so distraught that he collapses multiple times, and when he finally revives this time, it takes four men to hold him up. Part of Charlemayn's grief is due to the fact that he was responsible for placing his nephew in the rear-guard at the Pass. Even more notably, he sees Roland's death as tarnishing his own honor. This shows both the depth of Charlemayn's affection for his nephew and the depth of the ties between vassal and lord; even a lord as mighty as Charlemayn loses something when a beloved vassal dies. Another significant detail in this section is the sheer magnitude of Charlemayn's grief. The poet doesn't hold back from depicting the godlike Charlemayn's anguish—he faints, weeps, and pulls out his hair. This suggests that such displays of emotion weren't thought to detract from a king's reputation—rather, such kingly grief was to be emulated, as shown by the echoing sighs of the "hundred thousand" watching Frenchmen.

Laisses 265–291 Quotes

Some thousand French search the whole town, to spy
Synagogues out and mosques and heathen shrines.
With heavy hammers and with mallets of iron
They smash the idols, the images they smite,
Make a clean sweep of mummeries and lies,
For Charles fears God and still to serve him strives.
The Bishops next the water sanctify;
Then to the font the Paynim folk they drive.
Should Carlon's orders by any be defied
The man is hanged or slain or burned with fire.

Related Characters: Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon / Charles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After the Franks defeat the Saracens and chase them back to Saragossa, they waste no time laying claim to the whole city. Since the battle was not just a conflict between France and Spain, but equally a clash between Christian and pagan, the takeover involves a Christianizing of the city. Thus part of the occupation involves immediate destruction of anything pagan—synagogues, mosques, and shrines. This detail further demonstrates that the poet doesn't make any strong differentiation between non-Christian religions—they are all simply classified as "Paynim" and thus subject to destruction. The next step for the occupiers is to make Saragossa properly Christian, by baptizing its people whether they desire it or not. Although the Catholic Church historically frowned on forcible conversions and tended not to recognize their validity, such things did occur—in fact, this episode might reflect the historical Charlemagne's efforts to forcibly baptize pagan Saxons in the late 700s; those who resisted baptism could face death, according to Charlemagne's law codes.

"Lodged captive here I have a noble dame.
Sermon and story on her heart have prevailed
God to believe and Christendom to take;
Therefore baptize her that her soul may be saved." [...]
Great the assembly about the Baths at Aix;
There they baptize Bramimond, Queen of Spain,
And Juliana they've chosen for her name;
Christian is she, informed in the True Way.

Related Characters: Emperor Charlemayn / Carlon /

Charles (speaker), Queen Bramimonda (Bramimond)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Though Charlemayn oversaw the forced conversion of Saragossa's pagans, there was one notable exception—the Queen Bramimond. While there's no historical proof of such a queen's existence, nor does she have a particularly prominent role in the poem, her conversion to Christianity makes a key point about Charlemayn's conquest. The fact that she comes to personally embrace Christian belief, submit to baptism in French waters, and take a Christian name represents just how total Charlemayn's victory over the pagans has been. The most prominent surviving pagan in the story (one who was staunchly anti-Christian at the beginning of the conflict) doesn't require force—she's persuaded by "sermon and story" to change her faith and key aspects of her identity. In the poet's eyes, this provides conclusive proof of the justice of Charlemayn's victory and of the validity of the Christian faith. The poet intentionally includes these details at the very end of the poem, showing that the "uncivilized" Paynims have been decisively civilized, and suggesting that all is now as it should be.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LAISSES 1–15

For seven years, Emperor Charlemayn has been in Spain. He has conquered the whole country, except for the mountain city of Saragossa, which is held by Marsilion, who serves "Mahound" and prays to "Apollyon." Marsilion will not escape the coming ruin.

Saragossa (Zaragoza) was the capital of the Upper March of al-Andalus, the culturally Muslim territory of the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. Marsilion, however, is described as being vaguely pagan instead of clearly Muslim—"Mahound" is a corruption of Muhammad's name, and "Apollyon" seems to refer to the Greek god Apollo.

In Saragossa, Marsilion lies on a marble dais in a shady orchard; 20,000 vassals surround him. Marsilion tells his vassals that none of his forces are capable of defeating Charlemayn, the Emperor of France, and asks for their advice. Only wise Blancandrin speaks up. He advises Marsilion to promise Charlemayn his loyalty and to send him lavish gifts if the Franks will return to France. Marsilion should claim that at Michaelmas, he will send to Charlemayn's court at Aix, swearing fealty, converting to Christianity, and providing hostages. Even when Marsilion fails to show up at Aix and the hostages are duly beheaded, Blancandrin explains, this would be better than the loss of honor and territory.

Even the pagan king is depicted as already knowing that he can't defeat Charlemayn—reinforcing the image of the Frankish emperor as the ultimate king. The pagans' behavior is also portrayed as treacherous from the very beginning, a characterization that will persist throughout the poem. Aix-la-Chapelle (now Aachen, Germany) was the historical Charlemagne's imperial capital.

At this, King Marsile ends the discussion and sends Blancandrin, along with several other barons, to approach Charlemayn at Cordova, where he is currently laying siege. They should arrive with olive branches in hand, signifying peace; Marsile will pay them all handsomely for this. The men agree, setting out on snow-white mules saddled with silver and bridled with gold.

Marsile is portrayed as a king who doesn't hesitate to behave deceitfully in order to get what he wants—a characterization that will be contrasted with Charlemayn's. His men's loyalty is also partially motivated by money. The men's diplomatic and noble appearance belies their wicked intent.

At Cordova, Emperor Charlemayn is happy: he has overtaken the city, and all the pagans have been killed or converted to Christianity. He sits in an orchard surrounded by Roland, Oliver, and 15,000 of his men, who play chess or engage in sport while Charlemayn looks on from his throne. When Marsilion's messengers arrive, they instantly recognize Charlemayn because of his white hair and noble, austere presence. Blancandrin approaches and relays Marsilion's offer. Upon hearing it, Charlemayn "bows his head and so begins to brood."

Charlemayn's happiness over the Christianization of Cordova foreshadows his later treatment of Saragossa. Charlemayn's kingly presence is such that even strangers can identify him immediately. The first hint of Charlemayn's internal character is that he doesn't act rashly, unlike Marsilion—he "broods" over the new turn of events.

Because Charlemayn is "not hasty in reply" and prefers to wait for advice, he doesn't speak for a long time. Finally, he tells the messengers that Marsilion is still his enemy. Blancandrin promises hostages, including his own son, and adds that Marsilion will follow later and be baptized in Aix's miraculous springs. The Emperor lodges the envoys for the night and, after Mass the next morning, gathers his barons in council, since "by French advice what'er he does is done."

Charlemayn's slowness to speak indicates a deliberative, thoughtful character, again contrasting with Marsilion. He also extends hospitality to the envoys, even though he hasn't made up his mind yet, showing that he's generous (a mark of chivalry). Additionally, Charlemayn's attendance at Mass indicates his piety. He is an ideal French king because he values the input of his own people.

Charlemayn, Roland, Oliver, and Ganelon, "that wrought the treachery," are among those gathered beneath a pine tree. Charlemayn explains the envoys' offer and adds that he isn't sure of Marsile's true purpose. The French agree that it's best to stay on their guard—everyone except for Count Roland, that is, who suddenly springs to his feet.

The poet isn't concerned about giving away plot details; Ganelon is revealed as a traitor before he even acts, showing that the poet is more concerned about how the treachery unfolds. Roland, meanwhile, shows his recklessness right away.

Roland tells Charlemayn he should never trust Marsilion. He reminds Charlemayn of a past treacherous deed: Marsile sent 15 men to sue for peace, then beheaded two men whom Charlemayn had sent back to him in a friendly pledge. Charlemayn should keep waging war in revenge, Roland argues, no matter what the cost.

As it turns out, even though Roland is rash and hot-tempered, his read of Marsilion's character is accurate. Because Marsilion has behaved treacherously in the past, the poet suggests, he can never be trusted again.

Charlemayn strokes his beard in silence. Then Guènes interjects, "full of pride." He warns Charlemayn not to trust "a brawling fellow" and that the wise, not the reckless, should be heeded.

Though Ganelon objects to Roland's recklessness, he displays his own flaws as well; the poet suggests from the beginning that Ganelon's reactions to Roland conceal his own hostile motives.

LAISSES 16–31

At the council meeting, Naimon speaks up and agrees with Ganelon's rejection of Roland's view. Marsilion has been effectively vanquished, and it's time to end the war. The gathered barons concur. Naimon offers to go to Saragossa as envoy, but Charlemayn refuses to spare his wisest vassal. He also declines to send Roland, Oliver, or any of his Twelve Peers (his favored barons). Then Roland suggests sending Ganelon, who is his stepfather. Furious, Ganelon tells Roland that if he ever returns from this errand, he'll never stop seeking vengeance on Roland. In the meantime, he will "vent [his] rage" in Marsile's court. Hearing this, Roland just laughs.

At first, it looks as if Marsilion's treacherous plan will prevail, as Charlemayn's court decides to accept the offer of appeasement. However, Roland's rashness complicates this. It's not clear why his nomination of Ganelon angers his stepfather so much, but there is obviously bad blood between the two men, and it will have consequences for all of France—suggesting that a treacherous character like Ganelon will stop at nothing to get its own way.

Ganelon fumes that Roland has spitefully singled him out, but that he will obey Charlemayn's orders. Charlemayn duly bestows "the **glove** and wand" upon Ganelon, chiding his anger. But before Ganelon can accept the glove, it falls into the dust. The watching Franks are alarmed by this bad omen. Charlemayn makes the sign of the cross over Ganelon and dismisses him.

The handing over of a token—in this case, the glove and wand—to formalize an appointment to a task and signify one's deputized authority was a medieval custom. In this scene, the dropped glove is a symbolic representation of Ganelon's bad faith. Meanwhile, Charlemayn's gesture of the cross shows that he embodies a kind of priestly authority over his people as emperor.

Ganelon gathers his **sword**, Murgleys, his steed, and the rest of his things. Many knights weep as they bid him farewell, blaming Roland for unfairly naming him for this task. Ganelon just tells them to greet his wife, his son Baldwin, and his friend Pinabel. Then he sets off, soon catching up with the pagan envoys.

Swords symbolized a warrior's fighting prowess and reputation during the Middle Ages, and key characters in the poem name their weapons just as they name their horses.

Ganelon and Blancandrin chat about Charlemayn and Roland. Ganelon tells a story about Roland, claiming that his stepson returned from battle with a golden apple in hand, which he presented to Charlemayn as a symbol that he would give his uncle "the crowns […] of all the kings on earth." He predicts that, one day, Roland's pride will be his undoing, and that if someone would kill Roland, there might be peace.

Ganelon doesn't waste any time dropping hints to the envoys from Saragossa. The "golden apple" story suggests that Roland is arrogant—but perhaps even more than that, it suggests that Ganelon envies his stepson's intimacy and influence with the emperor.

Blancandrin agrees that Roland sounds like a villain who presumes to conquer and control others. Ganelon says that Roland holds power because he gives gifts of silver, gold, and lands to the Franks and to Charlemayn, assuring their love for him. As Ganelon and Blancandrin journey, they mutually pledge to find a way to kill Roland. When they arrive in Saragossa, they find King Marsilion sitting on a throne under a pine, with 20,000 Saracens surrounding him, waiting for news.

Ganelon's hints have their desired effect, as Blancandrin agrees with Ganelon about betraying Roland, whom Ganelon implies buys the loyalty of his peers. Ganelon's readiness to betray Roland out of jealousy further shows the corruption of his character.

LAISSES 32–52

Blancandrin leads Ganelon before King Marsilion and greets the king in the name of "Mahound" and "Apollyon." He reports the outcome of their mission and introduces Ganelon. Ganelon addresses Marsilion "with great cunning," telling the king that he must convert to Christianity and become Charlemayn's vassal, or else face doom in Charlemayn's court at Aix. At this, Marsilion is so enraged that he nearly hurls a golden dart at Ganelon, but others stop him.

Ganelon's treachery grows—spurred by his hatred of Roland, he already appears to have a plot in mind, and he unhesitatingly puts it in motion in a foreign court. Marsilion's rash and wantonly violent character contrasts with Charlemayn's deliberation and slowness to act, associating the former with paganism and the latter with Christendom.

Ganelon, seeing Marsilion's anger, grasps his sword, but "the wiser Paynims" persuade their king to sit down and listen. Ganelon tells Marsilion that, under Charlemayn, he will share the rule of Spain with Roland, a worthy partner. He hands Marsilion a letter from Charlemayn which lays out these terms, and also demands Marsilion's uncle, the caliph, as a hostage. Blancandrin tells the angry king that Ganelon will plot with them against Charlemayn. Marsilion apologizes to Ganelon for his rashness and offers his friendship.

The term "Paynim" is an archaic form of "pagan," suggesting that the poet simply views the Spanish Muslims as non-Christian, and not as having a belief system worthy of its own distinction. In contrast to the self-regulated Charlemayn, Marsilion has to be carefully managed by his men, further establishing the distinction between the two leaders. Ganelon brings Roland's name into his plot, showing how serious he is about betraying his stepson. Marsilion's offer of friendship, and Ganelon's acceptance, confirms this.

Marsilion and Ganelon discuss Charlemayn. Marsile wonders when the ancient king—who's more than 200 years old—will tire of war. Ganelon explains that this will never happen; supported by Roland, Oliver, and his beloved Twelve Peers, Charlemayn is fearless, and his courage and appetite for battle won't falter. They repeat this basic exchange three times.

Charlemayn is portrayed as an ancient, larger-than-life, almost divine figure. When the poet repeats scenes like this one (with slightly different dialogue each time), he reinforces universal admiration for Charlemayn's valor.

Marsilion proposes going into battle against Charlemayn. Ganelon replies that the losses would be too great—he has a better idea. He suggests that Marsilion send a heap of treasure and 20 hostages to persuade Charlemayn to turn back to France; Charlemayn will leave Roland and Oliver in his rear-guard. If these knights are killed, Ganelon explains, Charlemayn will have no heart to continue fighting.

Ganelon reveals his plan more fully: they should follow Marsilion's original proposal, sweetening the deal with gifts, in order to convince Charlemayn that Marsilion is no threat—then plot an ambush. Familiar with Charlemayn's likely strategy, Ganelon knows that an ambush will kill some of Charlemayn's most treasured knights.

Ganelon explains that Marsilion must send 100,000 of his army to engage Charlemayn's rear-guard at the Roncevaux Pass through the Pyrenees, near the border between France and Spain. The losses will be heavy, but once Roland is killed, Charlemayn will have lost his right-hand man, and his power will dwindle. Marsilion likes what he hears and asks Ganelon to take an oath to betray Roland. Ganelon does, swearing on the relics of his **sword**, Murgleys.

Because swords were a valued symbol of a knight's reputation, Ganelon's willingness to swear betrayal on his sword is meant to suggest his rotten character to the audience, since they know he's being dishonest. Ganelon's betrayal is twofold—besides killing Roland, the plan is meant to diminish Charlemayn's might.

Marsilion commands that a "volume […] / Of Termagant's and of Mahomet's law" be brought, and on this he swears to fight Roland. Then several pagans approach Ganelon with gifts—a **sword** and helm—in exchange for his help against Roland. Queen Bramimonda also gives Ganelon rich jewelry for his wife. Marsilion's treasurer has prepared 700 camels laden with precious metals and hostages, and the king promises additional riches to Ganelon, if he follows through on his promises. Ganelon begins his journey back to France.

A book of "Mahomet's law"—presumably a Qur'an—suggests some knowledge of Islam on the poet's part, but the addition of "Termagant" (an imaginary deity which medieval Christians sometimes claimed that Muslims worshiped) shows the poet's lack of knowledge (or concern) for accurate theological details.

LAISSES 53–78

Meanwhile, Emperor Charlemayn waits for Ganelon's return. After attending Mass, he stands with Roland, Oliver, and many dukes, while Ganelon addresses him "with cunning false pretence." Ganelon hands him the keys to Saragossa and presents the treasure and hostages. He claims that Marsile's uncle, the caliph, refused to accept Christianity and abandoned Marsile, then was drowned in a storm at sea. However, Ganelon claims, Marsile will soon arrive in France to pledge his fealty to Charlemayn. Charlemayn's men strike camp and prepare to journey home.

Charlemayn's pious churchgoing is intended to contrast with Marsilion's "idol" worship. Ganelon deceitfully gives Charlemayn the impression that Marsile is in a weakened position and therefore eager to come under Charlemayn's protection. Charlemayn takes the bait, and it looks, at this point, as though Ganelon's treachery will prevail.

Charlemayn's army proceeds to the border of France, high in the Pyrenees mountains. As they halt for the night, the pagan army secretly draws near, weapons ready, waiting for the morning. Meanwhile, Charlemayn falls asleep and dreams. In his first dream, he dreams that Ganelon seizes and breaks his lance. Next, he dreams that wild animals threaten him at home in Aix.

Translator Dorothy Sayers's footnote suggests that the wild animals—a bear, a leopard, and a greyhound—symbolize Ganelon, Marsilion, and Roland respectively. Both these dreams foretell imminent danger, and their prophetic nature also reinforces the portrayal of Charlemayn as a semi-divine king.

The next morning, Charlemayn inquires who should compose the rearguard which will hold the mountain passes. Ganelon speaks up, nominating Roland for this task, which angers Charlemayn. But before Charlemayn can appoint someone else, Roland speaks up and claims the job, "as knighthood bids him do." He asks for Charlemayn's bow as a token of this task, promising he won't let it slip, as Ganelon did the **glove**. Though Charlemayn sheds tears, he grants the bow, at Naimon's urging. At first, Charlemayn offers Roland half of his army in support, but Roland refuses to keep more than 20,000 men with him. Among these are Oliver, Archbishop Turpin, Count Walter Hum, and their knights.

Ganelon's nomination of Roland pointedly echoes Roland's recommendation of Ganelon for the mission to Saragossa, and it builds dramatic tension, since Ganelon's plot has already been revealed to the audience. Roland's bold chivalry compels him to accept the role, even if he suspects that his stepfather is being unfair—but he can't resist adding a dig about the dropped glove, suggesting that he really doesn't respect Ganelon. Recklessly, and fatefully, Roland accepts little support.

The rest of the French army passes through grim heights and deep valleys, grieving. Charlemayn especially feels foreboding and weeps over his nephew, Roland, left behind at the pass. When Naimon asks why his lord weeps, Charlemayn explains his dream of Ganelon the night before, and dreads the thought of losing Roland.

Charlemayn is an emotional king—this is the first of several times in the poem that he will weep openly, suggesting that this is a trait the poet considers to be especially kingly. His nightmares carry over into a prophetic sense of what's likely to happen.

Meanwhile, in Saragossa, King Marsilion has gathered his barons—400,000 of them. "Mahound, their idol" is raised on a tower, and the pagans worship him before riding north in pursuit of the Franks. Marsilion's nephew, Adelroth, asks for the privilege of striking the first blow at Roland, and Marsilion grants this, giving his **glove** as a pledge. He also gathers twelve Champions to join him in opposing Charlemayn's Twelve Peers.

Again, Islam is associated with idol worship, further aligning the religion with paganism. The preparations in Marsilion's court somewhat parallel those in Charlemayn's, as they both involve the granting of a token and the assembling of favored warriors. All of these preparations suggest that the military encounter will not be a quick or easy one.

One of the men who hurries to join the march to Roncevaux is an unnamed emir, noble and courageous, who, "were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear." Another, Turgis, holds "a right ill will to Christian men" and tells Marsile, "Mahound's worth more than St. Peter the Roman." Each of these men, and others, vow to kill Roland and leave Charlemayn bereft and powerless—France, they swear, will soon be theirs.

In the poet's mind, knightly chivalry goes hand in hand with Christianity—that is, one can't be a true knight without being Christian. These knights are markedly anti-Christian, with Turgis provocatively claiming that "Mahound," the idol, can beat St. Peter.

LAISSES 79–103

In the French rear-guard, Roland and Oliver hear the Saracen trumpets blaring. Roland urges his men to be courageous, reminding them, "Paynims are wrong, Christians are in the right!" When Oliver, spying the Saracen army from a distance, decries Ganelon's treachery, Roland won't let him speak ill of his stepfather. Oliver warns the French that the "Paynim hordes" vastly outnumber them, and he advises Roland to sound his horn so that Charlemayn will hear and help. Roland, however, refuses.

The Saracen ambush approaches. The poet's view of the conflict, as expressed by Roland, is simplistic, yet it shows that Frankish identity was understood to be irreducibly religious. Oliver shows himself to be wiser than his companion, sizing up the Franks' difficult position, but Roland thinks in terms of an exaggerated chivalry and declines even a reasonable call for support.

Oliver presses Roland to sound his Olifant, but Roland swears again that he won't bring shame on France by calling for help against pagans, and that his **sword**, Durendal, will soon be red with his enemies' blood. Oliver urges him a third time, but Roland again refuses. Oliver sees no shame in calling for aid, describing again the Saracens' vaster army, but Roland would "rather die than thus be put to shame."

The term Olifant is a form of "elephant"—Roland's horn is made from an elephant's tusk. Roland puts full faith in his sword, however (and thus in his abilities as a knight), and feels that conceding to Oliver would tarnish his sense of chivalry. Again, the repetition of these events is the poet's way of highlighting their significance.

Roland and Oliver are both brave, but "Roland is fierce and Oliver is wise." Oliver tells Roland that if only he had summoned Charlemayn for help against the onrushing pagans, things would have been all right, but they're going to die. Roland decries such "cowardice." He adds that men must be willing to serve their liege in such dire circumstances, even unto death.

With doom looming over the men, the poet implies that both ferocity and wisdom are needed in order to embody a balanced sense of chivalry. For Roland, however, chivalry ultimately means steadfast loyalty above all—even in the face of terrible odds.

Archbishop Turpin rides up the hill and addresses the Franks with a "sermon," telling them, "Christendom needs you, so help us to preserve it." He promises to absolve them of their sins, and that if they die in battle, they'll be martyrs bound for Paradise. The French kneel in prayer, and Turpin grants them absolution; their penance is to fight fiercely.

The battle is described as not only in defense of Charlemayn or even France, but of Christendom altogether. This suggests that the poet sees this event as symbolic of conflict between Christians and Muslims in general—a major issue at the time of writing (the early Crusades).

As the French prepare for battle, Roland admits that Oliver was right—Ganelon has betrayed them and must be avenged by Charlemayn. Roland rides through the Roncevaux Pass on Veillantif, his swift horse, laughing as he goes and looking haughtily at the Saracens. With trepidation, Oliver urges the rest to be brave. All the Franks give a war-cry, "Mountjoy," and charge into battle. Soon they're face-to-face with the Saracens.

The origin of the old French war-cry, "Mountjoy," is uncertain. According to Sayers, some scholars believe it comes from the term for a mound of stones set up to mark a victory. Meanwhile, the contrast between Roland and Oliver is again made apparent—Roland goes laughing into battle, while Oliver, more perceptive and cautious, hangs back.

Adelroth, Marsile's nephew, is at the forefront of the pagan army, just as he hoped. He taunts the French that Charlemayn lacked the wisdom to protect them and that his power will be broken. Roland, enraged, thrusts his lance through Adelroth, who immediately falls dead from his horse. Roland celebrates that France has drawn the first blood and that "Right's on our side."

Roland, easily provoked as usual, is characteristically rash—a pattern of behavior that potentially suggests trouble during battle. He also doesn't venture beyond a surface level in his interpretation of events, further highlighting his rashness in contrast to the careful Oliver.


Roland likewise kills Marsilion's brother, Falsaron, and Turpin slays Corsablis, a king from Barbary. They deliver mocking insults over each corpse. Franks Gerin and Gerier slay pagans as well, prompting Oliver to boast, "We're doing well with this!" Other knights, like Engelier and Berenger, also kill pagan soldiers violently, garnering praise from Roland and Turpin for their knightly valor. Before long, only two of the Saracens' Twelve Peers remain alive.

At this point, it looks as if circumstances are decidedly in the Franks' favor, and the knights' boastful jests seem to be justified for now. It's clear from Roland and Turpin's reactions that such domination in battle is synonymous with heroic knighthood.


LAISSES 104–127

Roland strikes so aggressively with his lance that it soon shatters. He then takes up his **sword**, Durendal, and stabs one of the remaining Peers through the brain and body, even killing his horse. Soon both Roland and his horse are bloody from the fray. Oliver kills freely as well, so busy striking with his broken spear that he doesn't have time to draw with his sword, Hauteclaire. He finally does, though, and Roland praises Oliver with the encouragement that Charlemayn loves such strokes. The Franks continue to shout, "Mountjoy!"

Roland and Oliver are exemplary knights—they strike until their weapons are broken and their bodies are bloodied, taking joy in the conquest—all for the honor of their lord, Charlemayn. Their greatest motivation, even more than killing the enemy, is pleasing the emperor.

Amid the fray, Archbishop Turpin kills Siglorel, a "sorcerer, / who'd once been down to Hell," with Jupiter for his guide.

The Roman god Jupiter, like the Greek Apollo (Apollyon) earlier, is here portrayed as a kind of demon, not a deity—further highlighting the poet's confusion of religious categories and rejection of any non-Christian belief system.

Though the Franks wreak destruction on the pagans, a grievous number of the French lie dead, also. The poet remarks that Ganelon served Charlemayn poorly by betraying him, but that, later, he justly lost his own life, along with many of his kin, at Aix. For the moment, Charlemayn "scans the pass with anxious eyes."

Though the Franks are bringing honor to France with their work on the battlefield, the poet also wants to stress the fact that Ganelon's treacherous actions have come at a great cost. To that end, he also doesn't hesitate to preview Ganelon's coming downfall.

Meanwhile, all of France is buffeted by thunderstorms, wind, hail, and even earthquakes. At noon, total darkness falls. Many people fear it's the end of the world, not knowing that, in fact, these signs are caused by Roland's impending death.

The poet also gives away the fact that Roland is soon to fall. The use of apocalyptic imagery helps underscore the poem's portrayal of Roland as an ideally chivalrous knight whose death will be disastrous for France.

As the weeping French search the field for their dead, Marsile rides through the gorge, preparing to strike with his men. The whole country fills with the mighty sound of their trumpets. Roland tells Oliver that Ganelon's treason is plain, and it will be repaid by Charlemayn, but for now, they must bravely wield Durendal and Hauteclaire. A notoriously vicious Saracen rides forward, prompting Archbishop Turpin to muse that the man "looks right heretic to me." When Turpin strikes him down, the Franks cry, "Right strong to save is our Archbishop's crook!"

Turpin's remark about the Saracen's appearance indicates that one's character and one's religion are understood to be intimately connected—to the extent that "heresy" is visible. Turpin's "crook" (the shepherd's crook, a traditional symbol of a bishop) is actually his sword—a clever conflation that points, once again, to Turpin's role as both bishop and warrior.


Some of the French urge Roland, Oliver, and the Peers to flee for their lives, but Archbishop Turpin tells them to be strong, and that it would be better to die than retreat. He promises the men that, even if they die, the gates of heaven stand open for them. When Engelier, one of the bravest knights, is struck down, Oliver kills his slayer in revenge and then goes on an angry spree, as Roland watches in approval.

Again, the warriors' defense of France is cast in terms of martyrdom: faithfulness unto death in battle, especially against pagans, is a sure path to heaven.


A pagan named Valdabron, Marsilion's godfather, had captured Jerusalem, sacked Solomon's Temple, and murdered a patriarch. He strikes down France's Duke Samson, grieving the Franks and spurring Roland to kill both Valdabron and his horse with Durendal. The French suffer further setbacks with the deaths of Gerin and Berenger, but Roland swiftly destroys their killer, Prince Grandoyne of Cappadocia. The frightened Saracens begin to break, and the French pursue them with fury; the ground is red with blood.

As if in contrast with the piety of the Frankish knights, the poet lists Valdabron's anti-Christian "credentials"—all egregiously sacrilegious. The faithful knights appear to be turning the tide against the pagan ambush—but not for long, given Roland's imminent death.


LAISSES 128–137

At this point, only 60 French knights remain alive. Seeing this, Roland grieves and wonders why Charlemayn hasn't come to help them. He decides to sound his Olifant, summoning Charlemayn and his troops to turn around. Oliver, however, discourages him, saying it would be cowardly to do this now, especially after Roland initially refused out of pride. In fact, if Roland blows the horn, Oliver warns, he will never marry Oliver's sister, Aude.

Even Roland recognizes that there's little hope left for the Franks. Oliver's reasoning for opposing Roland's sounding of the Olifant isn't clear, but he apparently regards it an unchivalrous disgrace to call for help at this point, when the battle is nearly lost.

When Roland asks why Oliver is angry, Oliver says that the current predicament is all Roland's fault—he's been reckless and foolhardy instead of wise and prudent, destroying French forces in the process. If Roland had blown the Olifant when Oliver first suggested it, then Charlemayn would have ridden to their aid, and all would have been well. He says that their friendship, too, is at an end.

Though he is wiser than his friend, Oliver, too, can hold a grudge. He blames Roland for doing the most unchivalrous thing of all—endangering his own men through pride and foolishness.

Overhearing their quarrel, Archbishop Turpin intervenes, urging the men to set their differences aside—while it's true that sounding the horn won't save them now, it's still better to call for help. So Roland blasts the Olifant, its sound echoing through the mountains. He blows so hard, in fact, that he bursts the veins in his temples, and blood spurts out of his mouth. Charlemayn, hearing the horn, is immediately concerned. But Ganelon quickly tries to dissuade the emperor, saying that Charlemayn is growing old, and anyway, he knows that Roland is prideful and probably just showing off for the other knights.

Always focused on the bigger picture, Turpin intervenes with a pragmatic suggestion. Roland's fervency in blowing the Olifant effectively hinders him for the rest of the battle, perhaps a note of poetic justice. At the same time, Ganelon's true character comes through as he lies to and insults Charlemayn.


As the Olifant continues to sound, Naimon observes its urgency and warns Charlemayn that there must indeed be a battle—Ganelon's diversion is traitorous. Charlemayn agrees, and the French gird themselves and gallop back through the mountain passes to help. But, the poet notes, "What use is that? They have delayed too long."

The wise Naimon advises Charlemayn aptly, and they finally turn back—but the poet tells his audience that it's no use. Again, his technique is not focused on events being a surprise (since his audience probably knows the historical outcome, anyway), but on playing up the drama in the events unfolding.

As evening draws on, Charlemayn is wrathful: he orders his cooks to arrest and guard the traitor, Ganelon. The master-cook does so, and 100 "kitchen knaves" beat Ganelon and chain him on a pack-horse's back until it's time for Charlemayn to deal with him.

The fact that Ganelon is left to the cooks' supervision could perhaps suggest that nobody else is left to deal with him, but it might also be a way of implying how useless the traitor is, since people with relatively low social status and power are left in charge of him.

LAISSES 138–167

Back at the battle, Roland sorrowfully surveys the fallen Franks and grieves the deaths of so many faithful knights, as well as the fate of those who are currently rushing to his aid. He enters the field again with his **sword**, Durendal, bent on revenge. Archbishop Turpin approves, remarking that unless a knight is fierce in battle, it's better for him to become a monk.

Turpin's remark is ironic, since he manages to be both clergyman and fierce warrior himself. It's clear that although the Christian faith is paramount to the French, knighthood and fighting nobly is also incredibly important.

It becomes known that no prisoners will be taken, and the battle is waged all the more fiercely. Marsile himself rides into the fray and slays several French knights. Roland, irate, warns Marsile that he will soon become acquainted with his **sword**. Accordingly, he slices off Marsile's sword-arm and then beheads Marsile's son Jurfaret. At this, the Paynims cry to Mahound for help and begin to flee back toward Spain. However, Marsile's uncle Marganice stays behind, commanding a massive army of African soldiers. Knowing death is near, Roland shouts encouragement to the remaining French, telling them that when Charlemayn arrives, he should see that the French have fought honorably.

If no prisoners will be taken, then the warriors have nothing left to lose. Roland himself disables King Marsile, which prompts many Saracens to retreat, since their lord has been taken out of the action. By contrast, Roland thinks it's most honorable to remain in the fray for as long as one possibly can.

Marganice stabs Oliver through the back with his spear. Feeling that he's about to die, Oliver promptly chops off Marganice's head and then calls to Roland for help. Oliver keeps calling "Mountjoy!" and killing Saracens. When Roland sees his gray-faced, bleeding friend, he laments until he swoons in his saddle. Having nearly bled to death, Oliver is blind, so when he reaches Roland, he strikes at him with his sword, though he doesn't give him a mortal wound. When Roland identifies himself and gently rebukes his friend, Oliver asks his pardon. The two bow courteously to each other. Oliver gets off his horse, makes his confession, and prays for France, Charlemayn, and Roland. Then he collapses and dies. Roland bids his friend goodbye and again swoons in his saddle from grief.

Though Oliver has disapproved of Roland's actions during the battle, it doesn't stop him from acquitting himself faithfully until the very end, and seeking out Roland when death is near. The two share a touching reconciliation marked by chivalrous courtesy, having set aside their quarrel, and Oliver's pious death exemplifies the behavior of a Christian knight.

When Roland recovers, he sees that all the French, except for Archbishop Turpin and Walter Hum, have died. At Walter's urging, Roland begins fighting again, alongside the other two men. Though alarmed by the three men's prowess, more Saracens pour into the fray. Roland is undeterred, even though it's thousands of Saracens against three Franks. Walter soon dies, and the Archbishop's horse is slain underneath him. Even after Turpin has been stabbed with four lances, he still runs to Roland's side and strikes down 400 enemies with his sword.

The height of chivalrous virtue is to keep fighting even when there's no hope left, because loyalty to one's lord and one's comrades demands this. Turpin's ability to embody this is second only to Roland's—his legendary stabbing spree is fantastical, but it suggests that not only can a clergyman fight well, but that he is to be unflinching in his defense of the Church.

Roland fights on, but he's fading quickly. With his remaining strength he blows the Olifant again. When Charlemayn hears the feeble sound, he knows Roland must be dying. His men blow their trumpets in response, and the Saracens know they'll soon be facing the Emperor himself. Four hundred of the stoutest pagan warriors make a fresh assault on Roland, Turpin supporting him. Even though they know that Charlemayn is now on his way, the two resolve to strike all the more fiercely.

The precise cause of Roland's death isn't made clear, but his trumpeting for help seems to have exhausted him even more than the combat, showing how faithfully he cares for his men's wellbeing. He also demonstrates his desire to go down fighting.

The pagans make a last assault on Roland, whose armor is shredded and whose horse Veillantif is killed, yet whose body remains unharmed. The pagans finally flee back to Spain, and Roland, unhorsed, can't pursue them. Instead he bandages Archbishop Turpin's wounds and then decides to find and identify the bodies of his fallen comrades. He walks through the heights and valleys, finds each dead knight, and carries each man's remains back to the Archbishop, who weeps and blesses them.

Though Roland has successfully helped drive off the Saracens, he doesn't pause to triumph over them. Instead, he cares for his fallen comrades—showing that he is chivalrous to the very end.

After Roland finds Oliver's body, he weeps tenderly and swoons once more. Turpin picks up Roland's olifant and tries to walk to a nearby river to fetch some water for him, but he is too weak, and he soon collapses in his death-throes. When Roland regains consciousness, he sees Turpin's body and prays for the mighty Archbishop's repose in Paradise.

Turpin's last act is a gesture of mercy toward Roland, perhaps a reminder that despite his bloodlust, he was a faithful priest above all.


LAISSES 168–186

Roland's brains are running out of his ears, and he knows he'll be dead soon. Taking his Olifant and Durendal the **sword**, he walks toward Spain. He climbs a mound and falls down underneath a tall tree with four marble stones nearby. Nearby, one Saracen is still alive, having faked his death. Now the Saracen runs toward Roland and begins to seize Durendal—but this is enough to awaken Roland once more. He strikes the Saracen with his Olifant until the enemy is dead.

Roland approaches his death with composure befitting a chivalrous knight, yet still has enough presence of mind to destroy a final enemy. This emphasizes his immense bravery and strength, establishing Roland as an almost larger-than-life figure similar to Charlemayn.

Roland's sight is beginning to dim. With his remaining strength, he gets up and begins striking Durendal against a nearby stone. To his distress, the **sword** remains intact. He reflects that Charlemayn once owned Durendal, and then had been commanded by an angel to bestow the sword on Roland. Roland had then used the sword to win many lands for Charlemayn: the territories of Europe, Scotland, England, and even distant Constantinople. Now Roland grieves lest Durendal fall into pagan hands.

Now that Roland has dealt with all his enemies, a final problem plagues him. He tries to render Durendal useless to pagan hands, because the sword is a symbolic extension of both himself and Charlemayn. The weapon would, in his Roland's, be disgraced if taken up by a foe. Durendal is directly linked to the growth of the Carolingian Empire, symbolizing much more than this one battle.


Again and again Roland strikes Durendal against a stone, but to no avail. At last he mourns over the many relics embedded in the **sword**'s golden hilt—it's unfitting, he says, for such a sword to fall into non-Christian hands.

The sword also contains remnants of saints' bodies and garments, making it both figuratively and literally a Christian sword. Roland fears that pagan use of Durendal would be a desecration.

Feeling death's approach, Roland lies face-down under a pine, with Durendal and the Olifant underneath him. He turns his heard in the direction of Spain, "for the French and for Charles," wanting them to say that he "died a conqueror at the last." He begs for God's mercy on his sins and extends his right-hand **glove** toward heaven. Angels descend to him. As he waits for death, Roland thinks about the lands he's conquered, about France, and about his upbringing by his uncle Charlemayn. But his last thoughts are a prayer to God, and as Roland dies, God sends archangels to bear Roland's soul to Paradise.

Roland's death typifies the fate of a victorious knight—he dies both a "conqueror" (not looking away from his enemies) and a penitent Christian. He dies protecting his sacred sword; his glove reaches heavenward, perhaps symbolizing his willing surrender to God. His last thoughts are of his earthly lord and of God.

As Roland's soul goes to heaven, Charlemayn reaches Roncevaux, making his way through heaps of French and Saracen corpses and calling the names of his beloved barons. Getting no response, he plucks his beard in wrath, and "full twenty thousand swoon to the ground for woe." Looking ahead, Naimon spots the fleeing pagans and urges Charlemayn to avenge his men. Charlemayn sets some of his men to guard the field of the dead and then rides in pursuit of the retreating Saracens. As night begins to fall, he prays that God would cause the sun to stand still so that he can continue the chase. An angel "with whom he was wont to talk" immediately grants this request and urges him onward.

The swooning Franks suggest that Charlemayn's expressions of grief trigger a nearly automatic reaction in his followers—showing the bond between lord and vassals as well as Charlemayn's heavily idealized, essentially godlike role. The story of the sun standing still may be a reference to a biblical story in the book of Joshua, in which Joshua prays that the sun will stand still until the Israelites take vengeance on the enemy Amorites. The emperor even converses regularly with an angel—he's the epitome of a Christian leader.

Because the sun stands still, the French successfully overtake the fleeing Paynims and drive them back toward Saragossa. Many, weighted down by heavy armor, drown in the River Ebro. Charlemayn gives thanks to God for this victory, and since the sun is now going down, the French make camp instead of going back to Roncevaux. Charlemayn settles down for sleep, still fully clad in armor. Beside him rests his **sword**, Joyeuse, which contains the same lance which pierced Christ on the cross. Charlemayn weeps until he falls asleep, thinking of the fallen Roland, Oliver, and Twelve Peers.

With miraculous intervention, Charlemayn has at last led the Franks to a decisive victory. After all the previous details of Charlemayn's exceptional piety and close connection with heavenly things, it is hardly surprising that his sword contains a portion of the lance used at the crucifixion. Like Roland, Charlemayn does not revel in victory, but weeps for his fallen men, again showing the prominence of grief in an ideal king's character.

While Charlemayn sleeps, the archangel Gabriel guards him and grants him a dream—a vision of a battle yet to come. In the dream, strange beasts attack the French, but before Charlemayn can answer their cries for help, he's attacked by a fierce lion. In a second dream, Charlemayn dreams that he is at Aix, holding a bear by a chain. Talking bears come from the forest and beg Charlemayn to release their kinsman. A greyhound runs out of the palace and fights with the biggest talking bear. In his dreams, the outcomes of these fights are not revealed. Charlemayn sleeps on through the night.

The strange beasts symbolize the Paynims, emphasizing their foreignness and ferocity in Christian eyes. In particular, the lion symbolizes Baligant, whom Charlemayn will battle later. The chained bear at Aix symbolizes Ganelon's fate, the other bears his kinsmen, and the greyhound and bear represent the coming fight between Thierry and Ganelon's friend, Pinabel.

LAISSES 187–202

In Saragossa, the maimed Marsilion gets off his horse and swoons. His wife, Queen Bramimond, laments his state. Marsilion's followers curse their god, Apollyon, for shaming them, beating and trampling the idol. They even kick Mahound into a ditch "for pigs and dogs to mangle and befoul." After Marsile is carried to his chamber, Queen Bramimond continues to lament that Charlemayn is so courageous, and that there's no one left who will face him.

With this passage, the poet suggests that the Saracens' gods are false and of no use to their followers. Because pigs and dogs are both considered to be unclean animals in Islam, it seems likely that the poet intends a particular insult with those details ("Mahound," again, is a corruption of the name Muhammad).

When Charlemayn first occupied Spain seven years ago, Marsile sent letters to Baligant of Babylon, an ancient emir, requesting his aid against the French, or else Marsile would convert and make peace with Charlemayn. Because of the great distance, the emir has been delayed in his response, but now he has assembled a massive navy at Alexandria. Now the navy sets out for Spain, sailing through the night and arriving at Saragossa the following morning. Baligant declares that he will go to France and not stop fighting Charlemayn until he submits. He sends two envoys, Clarifant and Clarien, to give Marsilion this news, carrying a **glove** and wand in token.

Just as it appears that Charlemayn's victory is complete, the emir Baligant fulfills Marsilion's old request for help with impeccable timing, heightening the drama once again and giving Charlemayn a chance for additional heroism—he faces not just Spain, but the vast reaches of the pagan empire.

Clarifant and Clarien ride into Saragossa. Outside Marsilion's palace they find people mourning the loss of their gods and the impending death of their king. When the envoys enter Marsile's chamber, Bramimond greets them with the wretched news of what happened at Roncevaux and wishes someone would slay her. Clarien assures her that Baligant has come to find and conquer Charlemayn, but the queen is skeptical that anyone can make the fearless emperor yield.

In Saragossa, society is in disarray—both their political and religious world has been overturned, and Charlemayn appears to be unconquerable. The messengers from Babylon introduce fresh hope.

Marsile speaks up and says that he will give Spain to Baligant—as he has no living heir—and advise him on how to conquer Charlemayn. He gives the envoys the keys to Saragossa and tells them where Charlemayn is camped. Clarifant and Clarien ride back to Baligant and report on everything that occurred in battle yesterday, including Marsilion getting his hand chopped off by Roland, and relay Marsile's plea for help. Hearing all this, Baligant summons his men from the ships and onto horses so that Baligant can be avenged without delay. Baligant himself rides to Marsile's palace, where Bramimonda informs him that the king is near death.

Baligant's entrance into the story suggests the arrival of a much bigger player. Whereas Marsilion was felled by Roland—who was, after all, a mere baron—the impending showdown between emir and emperor represents an even more obvious clash of civilizations.

When Baligant enters, Marsile has two aides help him sit upright, and he offers his **glove** to Baligant to symbolize granting him his whole kingdom. Baligant accepts the glove and leaves the palace, weeping. He shouts to his men to hurry before Charlemayn and his camp have a chance to return to France.

With the transfer of the glove, the leadership of the Saracens officially passes from the dying Marsilion to Baligant. Like Charlemayn, Baligant is free with his emotions, perhaps signifying that he is a more worthy opponent of Charlemayn that Marsilion was.

LAISSES 203–226

At dawn, Charlemayn wakes up and is blessed by the angel Gabriel. Then he and his men ride to Roncevaux to see the aftermath of yesterday's battle. Tearfully, Charlemayn requests time alone with Roland's remains. He recalls Roland saying recently that he would end up dying in foreign lands, with his face turned toward the enemy. When he approaches the mound with the trees and marble stones, he sees Roland lying there in that very position and runs to embrace him, swooning with grief.

The angel's blessing reaffirms Charlemayn's holiness as a king. Charlemayn's determination to grieve Roland demonstrates his fatherly affection and his own faithfulness to the chivalrous bond between lord and vassal.

When Naimon and others raise Charlemayn from his swoon, he softly laments, saying that "my glory is sinking to its end," and helplessly swoons once more. When he revives, four barons hold him upright. He continues to grieve for having sent Roland to Spain to die, and mourns that no friend or kinsman could "keep [his] honor bright" the way Roland did. As he tears his hair out, a hundred thousand French sigh with sorrow.

Even Charlemayn—that greatest of kings—feels that his glory is tarnished by the loss of Roland. His lament illustrates both Roland's greatness as a knight and Charlemayn's own capacity for passionate grief. He leads the French people in grieving Roland, showing that such emotion befits a king and is noble in its own right.

Charlemayn continues his lament. He predicts that without Roland, many hostile peoples will rise up against him. France is now desolate, and Charlemayn wishes that he, too, had perished in the battle. As Charlemayn tears at his beard, all the French swoon as one. Finally, Geoffrey d'Anjou speaks up, suggesting that all the fallen Franks be buried. Once this is done, all the bishops, monks, and priests among the crowd conduct a funeral service. Only Roland, Turpin, and Oliver are not buried here; Charlemayn oversees the washing and wrapping of their bodies to be carried home to France.

As the Paynims predicted early in the story, Charlemayn is devastated by this loss, seemingly having lost the appetite for further war. What they seem not to have bargained upon was the power of the chivalrous bond—Charlemayn's loyal men are there to support him in his incapacity. The Christian burial of the slain also begins the process of strengthening him anew.

Just before Charlemayn can set off for home, the pagan vanguard approaches. The envoys ride ahead to give Charlemayn the Emir Baligant's challenge. Charlemayn thinks only momentarily of his grief before loudly calling the French to arms. He is the first to get into his armor, grasp Joyeuse, and jump on his horse, Tencendur. He calls upon God and St. Peter for aid. When he sees the French arrayed in their shining mail and holding splendid weapons, he says that such men will worthily avenge Roland. He appoints two knights named Rabel and Guinemant in place of Roland and Oliver.

The Paynims also underestimated Charlemayn's resilience. He doesn't hesitate a moment to answer Baligant's challenge and is even the first to prepare for fresh combat, showing that he's indeed the most untiring of kings. To a certain extent, even Roland and Oliver are replaceable—like them, any good knight can and should aspire to fight faithfully beside his brothers.

Duke Naimon and Count Jozeran marshal the remaining French. The columns of warriors are not just Franks: there are "stout Bavarian men," led by Ogier the Dane; Germans, Normans, men of Brittany; lord of Auvergne and Poitou; Flemings and Frisians; men of Lorraine and Burgundians; and lords of France, with whom rides Charlemayn. There are 10 columns in total.

The detailed list of nationalities marshaled under Charlemayn is intentional—besides showing the wide range of support which the emperor commands, it sets up the coming battle as a clash of civilizations.

Emperor Charlemayn gets off his horse and prays. He asks God to defend his cause today, just as He saved Jonah from the whale and spared Daniel from the lions' den. He prays that if it's God's will, Roland will be avenged by the end of this day. Then he leaps back into the saddle, looking noble and confident. As the French prepare to ride forth, the Olifant can be heard among the trumpets; this brings the French to tears.

Charlemayn's prayer implicitly categorizes him among the biblical figures he names, showing his special relationship to God (and, in turn, France's favored status before God).

LAISSES 227–240

All the French ride along with their beards flowing freely, in imitation of Charlemayn. They ride through the mountain passes and into the Spanish frontier. Meanwhile, scouts return to Baligant and report Charlemayn's stubbornness and his men's determination to fight. Baligant admits that the Emperor is brave, and he readies his own men to fight.

The French army's imitation makes them appear like an army of Charlemayns riding forth to confront the pagans. Charlemayn commands even the pagan emir's respect.

Baligant, too, dresses himself in armor adorned with costly gems, and he carries his **sword**, Précieuse—named in imitation of Charlemayn's Joyeuse—and his spear, Maltet. He mounts his horse, looking fresh and formidable ("Were he but Christian, God! what a warrior!"). He rides off, vaulting a dyke, and drawing applause from the admiring Paynims—they're sure Charlemayn will regret choosing to fight.

Baligant's dress, special sword, and nimble horsemanship make him, in effect, a Paynim version of Charlemayn, further heightening the tension of the coming showdown. Again, the poet remarks that if only the man were Christian, he'd be a warrior—but without this belief system, he lacks an essential ingredient of chivalry.

The Emir Baligant has a white beard, and besides his bravery in battle, he is "in council a man discreet and sage." His son, Malpramis, is also a praiseworthy knight. Baligant assures Malpramis that without Roland, Charlemayn's army lacks the strength to beat back the pagan onslaught. Nevertheless, the French are valiant knights. Malpramis asks for the honor of striking the first blow in battle, and Baligant grants this, along with the gift of portions of his own lands, should he be successful on the field.

Baligant's parallels to Charlemayn persist—he has a comparable beard and a similar restraint in council, making him different from the less formidable, more reckless Marsilion. Like Marsilion's nephew Adelroth earlier, Malpramis asks for the favor of proving his valor by facing the enemy first.

Baligant's men make up a formidable army—30 columns made up of men from wide-ranging lands, including Nubia, Armenia, Jericho, and many others. Baligant takes an oath on the bones of Mahound, swearing that "the great dolt" Charlemayn will lose his crown today. Columns of soldiers from Canaan, Turkey, Persia, Bulgaria, and many other lands are also mustered. Some of the columns contain "repulsive scamps," "giants," and peoples "who have no love of God."

Like the list of peoples represented under Charlemayn, this list of pagan lands shows the extent of Baligant's domain and also anticipates the sense of a clash of civilizations. In contrast to the list of Charlemayn's peoples, these lands are characterized by exotic and even subhuman figures, portraying the Paynims as strange and unholy in comparison to the French.

Before them all, Baligant rides with a dragon-standard and "the flag of Termagant and of Mahound." As the Paynims pray before their gods, the French taunt them that they'll soon die, and they commit Charlemayn to God's protection. Baligant, "a prudent man […] and wise," keeps three reserves of men for himself and sends the rest of his lords ahead.

Baligant's Paynim identity as well as the Christians' hostility to it, is reinforced just before the battle. Baligant's prudence again suggests that he'll be a more formidable foe that his more reckless predecessor, Marsile.

The French and Paynim armies now face one another in open country, with nowhere to hide. Baligant orders his men forward, and they all call upon Précieuse. In response, the French cry, "Mountjoy!" and the Olifant sounds. On the plain, the armor and jewels of both armies glitter brightly. Baligant predicts a battle of unprecedented ferocity, but as he rides out before his men, his only speech is, "Paynims, come on! I'm off to fight the foe."

The clash between Christian and pagan is imminent. Both armies have their valiant leader and their war cry—even though they're opposing civilizations, they're also portrayed as similar bodies, expressing familiar loyalties to each other. A degree of chivalry is recognizable among both sides.

Seeing the approaching pagans, Charlemayn speaks encouragingly to his men, saying that the Paynims are "a craven folk and mean" whose "false gods" won't help them. The French shouldn't be discouraged by their vast numbers, Charlemayn goes on. His horse, Tencendur, gives four leaps, delighting and spurring on the men. The French charge.

Charlemayn ultimately sees the Paynims as beatable because *they are Paynims. Given that Charlemayn is portrayed as wise and noble throughout the poem, his attitude toward Paynims seems to reflect the poet's own view that non-Christians are inherently inferior, regardless of how equal the two groups are on other fronts.*

LAISSES 241–264

Count Rabel kills a Persian king, prompting the French to say that God is on their side; Guinemanz likewise fells a Lycian king. Meanwhile, Malpramis piles up corpses as he searches the field for Charlemayn. Seeing this, Baligant urges the first of the Paynims to his aid, and "grievous grows the strife," like no war seen before. Soon both sides' columns are all engaged in the fight, and the field is strewn with shattered armor and sprinkled with blood. To spur his men to fight all the harder against the Christians, Baligant promises them beautiful women and lands.

The battle quickly grows fierce and costly. It's notable that Baligant seeks to reinforce his men's loyalty by promising special rewards; the poet suggests that the French don't need to resort to such tactics, because their loyalty to Charlemayn is from the heart.

Emperor Charlemayn speaks to his own men, saying that he loves and trusts them—they've conquered so many lands, and he is in their debt. The 20,000 men surrounding Charlemayn readily pledge their faith to him, whatever the cost. When Duke Naimon sees Malpramis wreaking havoc, he makes his way to Baligant's son and cleaves him through the chest, killing him. Baligant's brother, Canabeus, sees this and charges over, stunning the Duke with a blow; but Naimon manages to hang onto his horse's neck, giving Charlemayn time to ride to his rescue and kill the pagan. He grieves to see Naimon gravely injured and gently urges the bleeding man to ride at his side.

Again, Charlemayn displays the humility to voice appreciation and love for his men, showing that the ideal king isn't arrogant and doesn't need to distribute gifts in order to command loyalty. Charlemayn's tenderness is also evident, as he takes the time to comfort and support his wounded friend in the midst of the fray.

The two armies continue to battle fiercely, neither side giving way, and the French sustaining great losses. In the midst of the grim fight, Baligant calls upon his gods—Mahound, Apollyon, and Termagant—and promises to make images of them in gold if they'll grant him victory. Just then he gets the news that Malpramis and Canabeus are dead, and that Charlemayn is responsible.

The poet's strange mingling of Islamic, Greek, and fictitious elements again shows his disregard for accuracy about the Paynim religion. In any case, his point seems to be that the enemy's gods are failing them.

The grief-stricken emir asks Jangleu of Outremer for advice—can the Pagans win? Jangleu tells him he's as good as dead—his gods can't save him today. But he should fight on, and his men will back him. At this, Baligant lets his beard flow forth freely so that his identity can't be mistaken. He blows his trumpet, and he and his men charge the French with fresh fervor.

The poet shows Baligant displaying a degree of chivalry himself—even though he's lost hope that victory is possible, it's still worth fighting to the bitter end. The Paynim army is a worthy opponent in this sense, and therefore not a total caricature.

Charlemayn, in response, fights bravely, along with Naimon, Geoffrey d'Anjou, and Ogier the Dane. The latter spurs his horse and sends Baligant crashing to the ground, causing the Emir to feel frightened for the first time. The pagans falter momentarily, then both armies renew the fight. As twilight falls, shouts of "Précieuse!" and "Mountjoy!" are heard everywhere. At last, Charlemayn and Baligant meet in the field and unhorse each other at the same time. However, both are unharmed, and they jump to their feet for the final showdown.

The conflict narrows, with the two main combatants finally encountering each other face to face. So far, they appear to be fairly evenly matched despite the poet's overwhelmingly unsympathetic portrayal of the Paynims.

Charlemayn and Baligant, equally brave, brandish their swords, sparks flying off their shields and helmets as they fight. "Nothing at all," the poet remarks, "can ever end their strife / Till one confess he's wrong, the other right." Baligant tries to reason with Charlemayn, saying that if only Charlemayn will repent of seizing pagan lands, he can become the Emir's liege. Charlemayn replies that making peace with a Paynim would be treachery. Rather, Baligant must confess the Christian faith, and then they can be friends. Baligant retorts, "Thy sermon's but ill preached."

The poet puts things simply: the battle is a clash between Christian and pagan, and the outcome rests on whomever is "right" from a religious standpoint. There can be no compromise between their respective viewpoints, and neither is willing to yield. This is not an accurate reflection of historical realities, as even Charlemayn allied with neighboring Saracens sometimes—but, dramatically, it works.

Then, Baligant strikes such a blow that Charlemayn's helmet splits, and a hand-sized piece of flesh is shorn off; the bone is visible beneath. Charlemayn reels. At this, however, the angel Gabriel hurries down and asks, "What [...] art thou about, great King?" Charlemayn's strength and confidence are instantly renewed. He drives his blade into Baligant and splits his skull, shouting, "Mountjoy!" Naimon brings Charlemayn's horse, and the remaining Paynims flee at once; "the French have gained the day."

The audience would likely have gasped at Baligant striking the first blow and actually injuring Charlemayn. It shows that Charlemayn is human after all—yet the important thing is that he has divine backing, as the angel's appearance shows. The remaining Paynims don't stick around to keep fighting; once their lord is lost, they are released from their bonds to him.

As Paynims flee, the French pursue them, avenging their woes and chasing them all the way to Saragossa. From her tower, Queen Bramimonda, surrounded by her Paynim clerics, sees the armies approaching and cries to Mahound for help, knowing the Emir has fallen. Marsilion immediately dies from grief.

The French have won, once and for all. The Paynim gods have been shown to be ineffectual, and their civilization, consequently, stands no chance. This outcome emphasizes the poet's conviction that other belief systems, and the civilizations that follow them, don't stand a chance against Christianity.

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Charlemayn's war is over: all the Paynims are dead or have fled. He levels the gates of Saragossa and takes over the city. Queen Bramimond surrenders. That night, the French search out "synagogues [...] mosques and heathen shrines," smashing idols and images. The bishops sanctify the water and force the Paynims to be baptized; if any of them refuse, they are killed. At least 100,000 are converted in this way, except for the Queen—Charlemayn desires to convert her "by love to Christ."

Part of Charlemayn's takeover of Saragossa includes Christianizing the city—destroying any remnants of Paynim religions and giving people the visible marker of Christian allegiance. Historically, Charlemagne did engage in conversion practices of this kind, especially among the pagan Saxons.

The next day, Charlemayn places 1,000 knights to guard Saragossa, and his army joyfully heads homeward, taking Bramimond with them. When they pass through Bordeaux, they leave the Olifant on a saint's altar, as a relic for pilgrims. The bodies of Roland, Oliver, and Archbishop Turpin are laid to rest in St. Romayne's at Blaye. Charlemayn continues on his way, not stopping until he reaches Aix. As soon as he arrives, he sends letters to all the judges throughout his domains—it's time for Ganelon to stand trial.

Charlemayn's victory is quickly established, and he is ready to return to Aix at last, taking the Saracen queen as a trophy of sorts. The installation of the Olifant as a relic and the burial of heroes signals that the events of the past few days are already passing into enduring legend. However, Charlemayn's business hasn't yet been fully resolved.

When the Emperor enters his hall, he is greeted by the fair Aude. She asks Charlemayn what has become of Roland, who promised to marry her. Charlemayn weeps as he informs Aude that Roland is dead. He offers his son and heir, Louis, in Roland's place. Aude refuses, however—she falls at Charlemayn's feet and dies instantly from grief. Charlemayn has her body entombed in a convent.

Aude (Oliver's sister, briefly mentioned earlier when Roland and Oliver argued) displays her own kind of chivalrous loyalty by dying when she learns that her hero is no more, much like vassals would abandon a fight when their lord was struck down.

Before the palace in Aix, Ganelon is tied to a stake and beaten. Meanwhile, all Charlemayn's vassals gather for the solemn feast of St. Sylvester. Charlemayn explains Ganelon's betrayal to the assembled men. Ganelon defends himself, claiming that Roland "had wronged me in wealth and in estate," and that he's therefore not guilty of treason. The Franks decide this calls for debate.

Ganelon still tries to justify his actions, though he doesn't make clear exactly how Roland wronged him. However, the Franks refrain from carrying out summary justice on the spot, which mirrors Charlemayn's own cautiousness and suggests that a deliberative trial is the correct way to deal with such an issue.

Standing before Charlemayn, Ganelon looks strangely noble. He continues to insist that he has served the Emperor faithfully and that Roland plotted his death. Ganelon may have taken vengeance, but it was not treasonous, he claims. As the Franks continue to debate, Ganelon gathers 30 of his kinsmen, led by his valiant, articulate friend, Pinabel. He urges Pinabel to get him out of this predicament. Pinabel promises that if any Frenchman sentences Ganelon to death, Pinabel will fight him in single combat.

Ganelon's marshaling of supporters suggests that he doesn't really have a defensible case, but that his kinsmen's loyalty—particularly Pinabel's—can intimidate those who seek to end his life.

Fearing Pinabel, the gathered vassals discuss the situation in soft voices. They decide that it's best to let Ganelon go free, as long as he serves Charlemayn faithfully from now on. After all, Roland can never be brought back. And who wants to fight Pinabel? Everyone agrees except for Lord Geoffrey's brother, Thierry. When the majority report their decision to Charlemayn, he calls them traitors.

Ganelon's tactic appears to be working—Pinabel effectively intimidates most of the French into silence. Thierry exemplifies courage and loyalty to Roland in the face of such a threat.


As Charlemayn broods over the judges' cowardice, Thierry speaks up. He argues that even if Roland did treat Ganelon badly, betraying Roland was still an act of treachery, and Ganelon acted falsely toward the emperor. He sentences Ganelon to hang. If anyone disputes this, Thierry is ready to fight them. Pinabel then gives Charlemayn his **glove** and vows to fight Thierry. Thierry gives his glove as well, and the two men wait for horses and arms so that the combat can commence.

Pinabel and Thierry are following the etiquette of single combat. Pinabel has thrown down the gauntlet (offering his glove), and Thierry has accepted the challenge. Again, gloves symbolize the willingness of knights to courageously take on a challenge.


To prepare for combat, Pinabel and Thierry make confession and attend mass. Then they return to Charlemayn, don their armor, and arm themselves. Knights weep as they watch. On a vast plain below Aix, the combatants spur their horses and finally meet. Quickly both are unhorsed, then begin to fight on foot. The French onlookers are excited, and Charlemayn prays that God will resolve the conflict. Pinabel calls upon Thierry to yield, and Thierry does likewise, but both refuse. They fight on, and after Pinabel lightly wounds Thierry, Thierry finally gives him his death-blow. As Pinabel falls, the French declare that "God's might is manifest."

This single combat is a kind of replaying in miniature of the fight that's just ensued between Charlemayn and Baligant. In both instances, there's a clear right and wrong—chivalry versus treachery—and only one can prevail. Here, only God can adjudicate between the two, suggesting that Christianity is even more important to French society than knighthood.

Charlemayn embraces Thierry and wipes the blood from his face. They return to Aix with joy, while Ganelon's death-sentence is prepared. Charlemayn asks his vassals what he should do with the 30 vassals who pledged themselves to Ganelon. All agree that Ganelon's kinsmen should be hanged; "treason destroys itself and others too."

It is not the usual medieval practice for all of a treasonous man's kinsmen to be killed—it seems, then, that Ganelon's kinsmen are considered to be complicit in some way. This drives home the poet's maxim that treachery has far-reaching consequences.

The French agree that Ganelon should die by torture. He is bound by hands and feet to four "high-mettled stallions" who are then urged to chase a loose mare. Ganelon's limbs are wrenched from their sockets, and he quickly dies. Vengeance has been taken.

To further reinforce the horror of treason, the poet offers a vivid and gruesome end to the whole matter. Ganelon's betrayal is repaid.

Now Charlemayn summons his bishops. He tells them that Bramimond has now been persuaded of the truth of Christianity and must be baptized. Everyone assembles at Aix's baths, and Bramimond is rechristened Juliana.

Though Charlemayn imposed baptism on the Paynim population of Saragossa, Bramimond purportedly changes views of her own accord and transfers her allegiance accordingly, even changing her name to reflect her new status. Perhaps the persuasion of a queen is viewed as conclusive proof of the truth of Charlemayn's faith.

That night, the contented emperor goes to his chamber, but no sooner is he in bed than Gabriel comes with a message—Charlemayn is needed to help King Vivien of Elbira, whose city has been besieged by Paynim tribes. Charlemayn has "small heart" for further combat, and with tears, he laments, "how weary is my life!"

No sooner has Charlemayn reconquered the Paynims than he is called upon to do it again. This conclusion to the poem suggests that the threat of pagan encroachment was seen as constant during the Middle Ages, and that Charlemayn, as the ultimate Christian king, was the only one equal to the task of subduing them.


HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Song of Roland*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jan 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "*The Song of Roland*." LitCharts LLC, January 17, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-song-of-roland.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Song of Roland* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Anonymous. The Song of Roland. Penguin. 1957.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Anonymous. The Song of Roland. New York: Penguin. 1957.