

from the *Song of Roland*

translated by Frederick Goldin

1

Charles the King, our Emperor, the Great,
has been in Spain for seven full years,
has conquered the high land down to the sea.
There is no castle that stands against him now,
5 no wall, no citadel left to break down—
except Saragossa, high on a mountain.
King Marsilion holds it, who does not love God,
who serves Mahumet and prays to Apollin.¹
He cannot save himself: his ruin will find him there. AOI.²

13

10 “Barons, my lords,” said Charles the Emperor,
“King Marsilion has sent me messengers,
wants to give me a great mass of his wealth,
bears and lions and hunting dogs on chains,
seven hundred camels, a thousand molting³ hawks,
15 four hundred mules packed with gold of Araby,
and with all that, more than fifty great carts;
but also asks that I go back to France:
he’ll follow me to Aix,⁴ my residence,
and take our faith, the one redeeming faith,
20 become a Christian, hold his march lands⁵ from me.
But what lies in his heart? I do not know.”
And the French say: “We must be on our guard!” AOI.

1. **Mahumet . . . Apollin:** The prophet Mohammed (A.D. 570–632), the founder of Islam, and a god whose name, Apollin, derives from the Greek god Apollo. The point is that, from the perspective of the author, Marsilion does not follow the true Christian faith. He and his men are referred to as pagans or Saracens.

2. **AOI:** These three mysterious letters appear at certain moments throughout the text, 180 times in all. No one has ever adequately explained them, though every reader feels their effect.

3. **molting:** Shedding their feathers.

4. **Aix (eks):** A city in southeastern France.

5. **march lands:** A frontier province or territory.

Historical Context: The *Song of Roland* begins with Charlemagne supposedly on pilgrimage to the holy places in Spain. He decided to take Spain away from the Moors, who invaded Spain in A.D. 711 and at this time controlled most of the country.

Cultural Context: In this poem the Moors, who are Islamic, are constantly confused with pre-Christian pagans who count Apollo in their pantheon of gods. Mahumet is another name for Mohammed, the founder of Islam. The meaning of AOI at the end of a line is in dispute. However, some scholars feel that it was a type of formulaic device that signaled a stop.

The Emperor has told them what was proposed.
 Roland the Count will never assent to that,
 25 gets to his feet, comes forth to speak against it;
 says to the King: "Trust Marsilion—and suffer!
 We came to Spain seven long years ago,
 I won Noples for you, I won Commibles,
 I took Valterne and all the land of Pine,
 30 and Balaguer and Tudela and Seville.
 And then this king, Marsilion, played the traitor:
 he sent you men, fifteen of his pagans—
 and sure enough, each held an olive branch;
 and they recited just these same words to you.
 35 You took counsel with all your men of France;
 they counseled you to a bit of madness:
 you sent two Counts across to the Pagans,
 one was Basan, the other was Basile.
 On the hills below Haltille, he took their heads.
 40 They were your men. Fight the war you came to fight!
 Lead the army you summoned on to Saragossa!
 Lay siege to it all the rest of your life!
 Avenge the men that this criminal murdered!" AOL.

Historical Context: The poet's knowledge of Spanish geography is not very good. Balaguer and Tudela are in the northeast near the Pyrenees. Seville, however, is in southern Spain, nowhere near these cities and well within Moorish control.

The Emperor held his head bowed down with this,
 45 and stroked his beard, and smoothed his mustache down,
 and speaks no word, good or bad, to his nephew.
 The French keep still, all except Ganelon:
 he gets to his feet and comes before King Charles,
 how fierce he is as he begins his speech;
 50 said to the King: "Believe a fool—me or
 another—and suffer! Protect your interest!
 When Marsilion the King sends you his word,
 that he will join his hands and be your man,⁶
 and hold all Spain as a gift from your hands
 55 and then receive the faith that we uphold—
 whoever urges that we refuse this peace,
 that man does not care, Lord, what death we die.
 That wild man's counsel must not win the day here—
 let us leave fools, let us hold with wise men!" AOL.

Cultural Context: Feudalism was the economic, political, and social system of medieval Europe. Land, worked by serfs who were bound to it, was held by vassals. Overlords gave vassals rights to the land in exchange for military service. A baron was a tenant of the king or of any high-ranking lord. Ganelon's counsel, although laced with treachery, is a good example of the interaction of the barons with their king, a necessary component of feudal society.

6. **he will join his hands . . . man:** Part of the gesture by which a vassal swore allegiance to a lord; the lord enclosed the joined hands of his vassal with his own hands.

- 60 “My noble knights,” said the Emperor Charles,
 choose me one man: a baron from my march,⁷
 to bring my message to King Marsilion.”
 And Roland said: “Ganelon, my stepfather.”
 The French respond: “Why, that’s the very man!
 65 Pass this man by and you won’t send a wiser.”
 And hearing this Count Ganelon began to choke,
 pulls from his neck the great furs of marten
 and stands there now, in his silken tunic,
 eyes full of lights, the look on him of fury,
 70 he has the body, the great chest of a lord;
 stood there so fair, all his peers gazed on him;
 said to Roland: “Madman, what makes you rave?
 Every man knows I am your stepfather,
 yet you named me to go to Marsilion.
 75 Now if God grants that I come back from there,
 you will have trouble: I’ll start a feud with you,
 it will go on till the end of your life.”
 Roland replies: “What wild words—all that blustering!
 Every man knows that threats don’t worry me.
 80 But we need a wise man to bring the message:
 if the King wills, I’ll gladly go in your place.”

Literary Context:
 Roland’s exchange with Ganelon shows how the poem can be read as a blood-feud between a stepson and his stepfather. Blood-feud is a common theme in French epic poetry.

Literary Context:
 Roland’s rejoinder to Ganelon is one of the great ironic moments in the poem. Roland’s tone is one of superiority laced with bitterness.

21

- Ganelon answers: “You will not go for me. AOL.
 You’re not my man, and I am not your lord.
 Charles commands me to perform this service:
 85 I’ll go to Marsilion in Saragossa.

7. a **baron . . . march**: Charlemagne wants them to choose a baron from an outlying region and not one of the Twelve Peers, the circle of his dearest men.



**GOLD SARCOPHAGUS
 OF CHARLEMAGNE**

And I tell you, I'll play a few wild tricks
before I cool the anger in me now."
When he heard that, Roland began to laugh. AOI.

27

Count Ganelon goes away to his camp.
90 He chooses, with great care, his battle-gear,
picks the most precious arms that he can find.
The spurs he fastened on were golden spurs;
he girds his sword, Murgleis, upon his side;
he has mounted Tachebrun, his battle horse,
95 his uncle, Guinemer, held the stirrup.
And there you would have seen brave men in tears,
his men, who say: "Baron, what bad luck for you!
All your long years in the court of the King,
always proclaimed a great and noble vassal!
100 Whoever it was doomed you to go down there—
Charlemagne himself will not protect that man.
Roland the Count should not have thought of this—
and you the living issue of a mighty line!"
And then they say: "Lord, take us there with you!"
105 Ganelon answers: "May the Lord God forbid!
It is better that I alone should die
than so many good men and noble knights.
You will be going back, Lords, to sweet France:
go to my wife and greet her in my name,
and Pinabel, my dear friend and peer,
110 and Baldwin, my son, whom you all know:
give him your aid, and hold him as your lord."
And he starts down the road; he is on his way. AOI.

Literary Context: Notice how skillfully the storyteller sets up the conflict. Ganelon must go along with the plan to be able to carry out his treachery. His betrayal, however, is purely personal. Ganelon loves his "sweet France"; it is Roland whom he hates, although the reason for the hatred is never explained.

Historical Context: The events in this poem take place in A.D. 778. However, the poet takes liberties with history and includes events that did not happen until almost three hundred years later—the poet's own time, not Charlemagne's. England is included as a French tributary because the poem was written shortly after the Norman conquest of England in A.D. 1066.

28

Ganelon rides to a tall olive tree,
there he has joined the pagan messengers.
115 And here is Blancandrin,⁸ who slows down for him:
with what great art they speak to one another.
Said Blancandrin: "An amazing man, Charles!
conquered Apulia, conquered all of Calabria,⁹
crossed the salt sea on his way into England,

8. **Blancandrin:** An envoy from King Marsilion.

9. **Apulia** (ə pyōl' yə) . . . **Calabria** (kə lā' brē ə): Regions in southeastern Italy.

120 won its tribute, got Peter's pence¹⁰ for Rome:
what does he want from us here in our march?"
Ganelon answers: "That is the heart in him.
There'll never be a man the like of him." AOI.

30

Said Blancandrin: "A wild man, this Roland!
125 wants to make every nation beg for his mercy
and claims a right to every land on earth!
But what men support him, if that is his aim?"
Ganelon answers: "Why, Lord, the men of France.
They love him so, they will never fail him.
130 He gives them gifts, masses of gold and silver,
mules, battle horses, brocaded silks, supplies.
And it is all as the Emperor desires:
he'll win the lands from here to the Orient." AOI.

Cultural Context: It is necessary for a feudal lord to share the booty with his men. This would maintain their loyalty and morale.

31

Ganelon and Blancandrin rode on until
135 each pledged his faith to the other and swore
they'd find a way to have Count Roland killed.
They rode along the paths and ways until,
in Saragossa, they dismount beneath a yew.
There was a throne in the shade of a pine,
140 covered with silk from Alexandria.
There sat the king who held the land of Spain,
and around him twenty thousand Saracens.
There is no man who speaks or breathes a word,
poised for the news that all would like to hear.
145 Now here they are: Ganelon and Blancandrin.

Literary Context: Again, we see the poet's talent at generating irony. Ganelon's mentioning of Roland is infused with bitterness.

36

Now Ganelon drew closer to the King
and said to him: "You are wrong to get angry,
for Charles, who rules all France, sends you this word:
you are to take the Christian people's faith;
150 he will give you one half of Spain in fief,¹¹
the other half goes to his nephew: Roland—
quite a partner you will be getting there!

Cultural Context: Ganelon and Blancandrin swear an oath to each other. The feudal code must be observed even in plotting treachery.

10. **Peter's pence:** A tribute of one penny per house "for the use of Saint Peter," that is, for the Pope in Rome.

11. **in fief** (fēf): Held from a lord in return for service.

Literary Context:
Ganelon's description of what will happen to Marsilion if he rejects the peace is horrifying given that Marsilion is a king and therefore Charlemagne's peer.

If you refuse, if you reject this peace,
he will come and lay siege to Saragossa;
155 you will be taken by force, put into chains,
and brought straight on to Aix, the capital.
No saddle horse, no war horse for you then,
no he-mule, no she-mule for you to ride:
you will be thrown on some miserable dray;
160 you will be tried, and you will lose your head.
Our Emperor sends you this letter."
He put the letter in the pagan's right fist.

37

Marsilion turned white; he was enraged;
he breaks the seal, he's knocked away the wax,
165 runs through the letter, sees what is written there:
"Charles sends me word, this king who rules in France:
I'm to think of his anger and his grief—
he means Basan and his brother Basile,
I took their heads in the hills below Haltille;
170 if I want to redeem the life of my body,
I must send him my uncle: the Algalife.¹²
And otherwise he'll have no love for me."
Then his son came and spoke to Marsilion,
said to the King: "Ganelon has spoken madness.
175 He crossed the line, he has no right to live.
Give him to me, I will do justice on him."
When he heard that, Ganelon brandished his sword;
he runs to the pine, set his back against the trunk.

38

Literary Context: We see here why it was important for Ganelon and Blancandrin to swear an oath to each other. It is this "deceit with honor" that saves Ganelon from the Moors.

King Marsilion went forth into the orchard,
180 he takes with him the greatest of his men;
Blancandrin came, that gray-haired counselor,
and Jurfaleu, Marsilion's son and heir,
the Algalife, uncle and faithful friend.
Said Blancandrin: "Lord, call the Frenchman back.
185 He swore to me to keep faith with our cause."
And the King said: "Go, bring him back here, then."
He took Ganelon's right hand by the fingers,
leads him into the orchard before the King.
And there they plotted that criminal treason. AOI.

12. **Algalife:** Caliph, an Islamic leader.

- 190 Said Marsilion: “My dear Lord Ganelon,
that was foolish, what I just did to you,
I showed my anger, even tried to strike you.
Here’s a pledge of good faith, these sable furs,
the gold alone worth over five hundred pounds:
195 I’ll make it all up before tomorrow night.”
Ganelon answers: “I will not refuse it.
May it please God to reward you for it.” AOI.

Cultural Context:
Keeping with feudal custom, King Marsilion offers Ganelon reparation for having offended him and doubting his embassy.

- Said the pagan: “Truly, how I must marvel
at Charlemagne, who is so gray and white—
200 over two hundred years, from what I hear;
gone through so many lands a conqueror,
and borne so many blows from strong sharp spears,
killed and conquered so many mighty kings:
when will he lose the heart for making war?”
205 “Never,” said Ganelon, “while one man lives: Roland!
no man like him from here to the Orient!
There’s his companion, Oliver, a brave man.
And the Twelve Peers, whom Charles holds very dear,
form the vanguard, with twenty thousand Franks.
210 Charles is secure, he fears no man alive.” AOI.

- “Dear Lord Ganelon,” said Marsilion the King,
“What must I do to kill Roland the Count?”
Ganelon answers: “Now I can tell you that.
The King will be at Cize,¹³ in the great passes,
215 he will have placed his rear-guard at his back:
there’ll be his nephew, Count Roland, that great man,
and Oliver, in whom he puts such faith,
and twenty thousand Franks in their company.
Now send one hundred thousand of your pagans
220 against the French—let them give the first battle.
The French army will be hit hard and shaken.
I must tell you: your men will be martyred.
Give them a second battle, then, like the first.
One will get him, Roland will not escape.

Literary Context: The structure of the description of Charlemagne’s rear guard is almost identical in this *laisse* and in *laisse* 41. Such symmetry is common throughout the poem.

13. **Cize:** A pass through the Pyrenees mountains!

**HISTORICAL MIRROR: SCENES
FROM LIFE OF CHARLEMAGNE**
V. de Beauvais
Musée Conde, Chantilly, France



Historical Context:
Marsilion displays remarkable religious tolerance in this passage. The Spanish Moors were far more tolerant of other religions than were the Christians. Under Moorish domination, Christians, Jews, and Muslims usually lived harmoniously.

225 Then you'll have done a deed, a noble deed,
and no more war for the rest of your life!" AOI.

52

Marsilion took Ganelon by the shoulder
and said to him: "You're a brave man, a wise man.
Now by that faith you think will save your soul,
230 take care you do not turn your heart from us.
I will give you a great mass of my wealth,
ten mules weighed down with fine Arabian gold;
and come each year, I'll do the same again.
Now you take these, the keys to this vast city:
235 present King Charles with all of its great treasure;
then get me Roland picked for the rear-guard.
Let me find him in some defile or pass,
I will fight him, a battle to the death."
Ganelon answers: "It's high time that I go."
240 Now he is mounted, and he is on his way. AOI.

54

The Emperor rose early in the morning,
the King of France, and has heard mass and matins.¹⁴
On the green grass he stood before his tent.
Roland was there, and Oliver, brave man,
245 Naimon the Duke, and many other knights.
Ganelon came, the traitor, the foresworn.

14. **matins** (mat'ins): Morning prayers.

With what great cunning he commences his speech;
 said to the King: “May the Lord God save you!
 Here I bring you the keys to Saragossa.
 250 And I bring you great treasure from that city,
 and twenty hostages, have them well guarded.
 And good King Marsilion sends you this word:
 Do not blame him concerning the Algalife:
 I saw it all myself, with my own eyes:
 four hundred thousand men, and all in arms,
 255 their hauberks on, some with their helms¹⁵ laced on,
 swords on their belts, the hilts enameled gold.
 who went with him to the edge of the sea.
 They are in flight: it is the Christian faith—
 they do not want it, they will not keep its law.
 260 They had not sailed four full leagues¹⁶ out to sea
 when a high wind, a tempest swept them up.
 They were all drowned; you will never see them;
 if he were still alive, I’d have brought him.
 As for the pagan King, Lord, believe this:
 265 before you see one month from this day pass,
 he’ll follow you to the Kingdom of France
 and take the faith—he will take your faith, Lord,
 and join his hands and become your vassal.
 He will hold Spain as a fief from your hand.”
 270 Then the King said: “May God be thanked for this.
 You have done well, you will be well rewarded.”
 Throughout the host they sound a thousand trumpets.
 The French break camp, strap their gear on their pack-horses.
 They take the road to the sweet land of France. AOI.

56

275 The day goes by; now the darkness of night.
 Charlemagne sleeps, the mighty Emperor.
 He dreamt he was at Cize, in the great passes,
 and in his fists held his great ashen lance.
 Count Ganelon tore it away from him
 280 and brandished it, shook it with such fury
 the splinters of the shaft fly up toward heaven.
 Charlemagne sleeps, his dream does not wake him.

15. **hauberks** (hó’ bærks) . . . **helms**: Chain mail armor and helmets, respectively.

16. **four full leagues**: About twelve nautical miles.

Literary Context: Ganelon’s speech is truly cunning. It is a wonderful fiction and easily persuades Charlemagne. Like many good liars, Ganelon convinces Charlemagne by telling him what he wants to hear. In this epic poem, Charlemagne is often easily deceived, perhaps the result of his not being able to imagine that anyone would betray him.

Cultural Context: The feudal customs are vividly displayed in Ganelon’s speech. The joining of hands was the ceremony by which one lord became another’s vassal. A vassal was a person who held land from and pledged fealty, or loyalty, to an overlord in return for his protection.

Historical Context: At the time of the actual events of the *Song of Roland*, Charlemagne had not yet been crowned emperor.

Literary Context: Charlemagne believes these prophetic dreams are sent from God. Charlemagne has another dream right before Roland’s death. Belief in the prophetic power of dreams was common during the Middle Ages.

- The day goes by, and the bright dawn arises.
Throughout that host. . . .¹⁷
- 285 The Emperor rides forth with such fierce pride.
“Barons, my lords,” said the Emperor Charles,
“look at those passes, at those narrow defiles—
pick me a man to command the rear-guard.”
Ganelon answers: “Roland, here, my stepson.
- 290 You have no baron as great and brave as Roland.”
When he hears that, the King stares at him in fury;
and said to him: “You are the living devil,
a mad dog—the murderous rage in you!
And who will precede me, in the vanguard?”
- 295 Ganelon answers, “Why, Ogier of Denmark,¹⁸
you have no baron who could lead it so well.”

Literary Context: Roland's tone here is extremely ironic. Roland senses Ganelon's betrayal. His use of the term “stepfather” resounds with bitterness.

- Roland the Count, when he heard himself named,
knew what to say, and spoke as a knight must speak:
“Lord Stepfather, I have to cherish you!
- 300 You have had the rear-guard assigned to me.
Charles will not lose, this great King who rules France,
I swear it now, one palfrey, one war horse—
while I'm alive and know what's happening—
one he-mule, one she-mule that he might ride,
Charles will not lose one sumpter,¹⁹ not one pack horse
305 that has not first been bought and paid for with swords.”
Ganelon answers: “You speak the truth, I know.” AOI.

Historical Context: Almansur, the “victorious one,” was the name of a fierce Arab warrior who sacked Barcelona in A.D. 985. His name was feared by the Spanish Christians. The poet uses the word *almacur* to refer to any fierce Arab knight.

- King Charles the Great cannot keep from weeping.
A hundred thousand Franks feel pity for him;
and for Roland, an amazing fear.
- 310 Ganelon the criminal has betrayed him;
got gifts for it from the pagan king,
gold and silver, cloths of silk, gold brocade,
mules and horses and camels and lions.
- 315 Marsilion sends for the barons of Spain,
counts and viscounts and dukes and *almacurs*,

17. **host . . .**: The second part of the line is unintelligible in the manuscript.

18. **Ogier** (ō' jī er) **of Denmark**: One of Charlemagne's best-known knights.

19. **sumpter** (sump' tər): A pack animal.

and the emirs,²⁰ and the sons of great lords:
 four hundred thousand assembled in three days.
 In Saragossa he has them beat the drums,
 they raise Mahumet upon the highest tower:
 320 no pagan now who does not worship him
 and adore him. Then they ride, racing each other,
 search through the land, the valleys, the mountains;
 and then they saw the banners of the French.
 The rear-guard of the Twelve Companions
 325 will not fail now, they'll give the pagans battle.

20. *almaçurs* (ál mǝ surz') . . . *emirs* (e mirz'): Titled

Reader's Response *This section of the Song of Roland ends as the Christians and the Saracens prepare to do battle. At this point in the tale, what predictions do you make about what will happen next?*

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

1. In Canto 13, what motivates Charlemagne to list the tribute that Marsilion is planning to send him?
2. Why do you think Roland nominates Ganelon to bear Charlemagne's message to the Moors?
3. Analyze Roland and Ganelon's exchange in Canto 20. (a) Who wins this verbal joust? (b) Why?
4. When Roland is appointed to the rear guard by Ganelon, his first words are: "Lord Stepfather, I have to cherish you." Why do you think he says this?
5. (a) After Ganelon delivers his message, what does Marsilion's son mean when he says, "Give him to me, I will do justice on him"? (b) Why does Marsilion change his mind about Ganelon?

Applying

6. Imagine telling this story from the Saracen point of view. (a) How would it be different? (b) How would it be the same? (c) What accounts for the similarities and differences?
7. The poet of the *Song of Roland* takes a minor historical incident and in a way blows it out of proportion. He can do this because 300 years separate the event from his public. The distortion of historical facts is a common occurrence, especially in film and fiction. Truth is often passed over for what makes a good story. What historical events can you think of that were not accurately depicted in a movie you have seen or a novel you have read?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Theme

The **theme** of a work of literature is the insight it gives into life. The *Song of Roland* may be considered an epic dealing with the theme of betrayal. Within the confines of medieval society, betrayal of one's lord or vassal was considered the greatest violation of the feudal code. What further darkens the *Song of Roland* is the fact that all this betrayal occurs in one family. First Roland betrays his stepfather by recommending his embassy to the pagans. Then Ganelon betrays his stepson by appointing him to the rear guard.

1. What is the poet's attitude to this treachery?
2. Can we blame Ganelon for ultimately plotting Roland's demise? Support your answer.
3. How does the poet guarantee Roland's status as hero and Ganelon's as villain?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Understanding Tone

The structure of the *Song of Roland* may be interpreted as a series of persuasive speeches interspersed by narrative interludes. Critical to these speeches is the tone the author establishes for each character in the work. For example, Charlemagne's tone is almost always solemn and measured.

1. Analyze Charlemagne's diction in *laisse* 13. (a) What elements make this passage solemn? (b) How is Charlemagne's speech measured?
2. Analyze *laisse*s 20 and 21. How does their tone differ from that in *laisse* 13?

from the **Song of Roland**

translated by Frederick Goldin

80

Oliver climbs to the top of a hill,
looks to his right, across a grassy vale,
sees the pagan army on its way there;
and called down to Roland, his companion:
5 “That way, toward Spain: the uproar I see
coming!
All their hauberks, all blazing, helmets like flames!
It will be a bitter thing for our French.
Ganelon knew, that criminal, that traitor,
when he marked us out before the Emperor.”
10 “Be still, Oliver,” Roland the Count replies.
“He is my stepfather—my stepfather.
I won’t have you speak one word against him.”

81

Oliver has gone up upon a hill,
sees clearly now: the kingdom of Spain,
and the Saracens assembled in such numbers:
15 helmets blazing, bedecked with gems in gold,
those shields of theirs, those hauberks sewn with
brass,
and all their spears, the gonfalons¹ affixed;
cannot begin to count their battle corps,
there are too many, he cannot take their number.
20 And he is deeply troubled by what he sees.
He made his way quickly down from the hill,
came to the French, told them all he had seen.

82

Said Oliver: “I saw the Saracens,
no man no earth ever saw more of them—
one hundred thousand, with their shields, up in
25 front,
helmets laced on, hauberks blazing on them,
the shafts straight up, the iron heads like flames—
you’ll get a battle, nothing like it before.

1. **gonfalons** (gän’ fə länz’): Battle flags.

My lords, my French, may God give you the
strength.

30 Hold your ground now! Let them not defeat us!”
And the French say: “God hate the man who runs!
We may die here, but no man will fail you.” AOI.

83

Said Oliver: “The pagan force is great;
from what I see, our French here are too few.
Roland, my companion, sound your horn then,
35 Charles will hear it, the army will come back.”
Roland replies: “I’d be a fool to do it.
I would lose my good name all through sweet
France.
40 I will strike now, I’ll strike with Durendal,²
the blade will be bloody to the gold from striking!
These pagan traitors came to these passes
doomed!
I promise you, they are marked men, they’ll die.”
AOI.

87

Roland is good, and Oliver is wise,
both these vassals men of amazing courage:
45 once they are armed and mounted on their horses,
they will not run, though they die for it, from
battle.
Good men, these Counts, and their words full of
spirit.
Traitor pagans are riding up in fury.
Said Oliver: “Roland, look—the first ones,
50 on top of us—and Charles is far away.
You did not think it right to sound your olifant:³
if the King were here, we’d come out without
losses.

2. **Durendal** (dü ren däl’): Roland’s sword, whose name most likely means “enduring.”

3. **olifant**: Roland’s horn, whose name derives from “elephant” because it was carved from a tusk.



HISTORY OF EMPERORS: THE BATTLE OF RONCESVALLES. DEATH OF ROLAND
French illuminated manuscript

Now look up there, toward the passes of Aspre—
 you can see the rear-guard: it will suffer.
 55 No man in that detail will be in another.”
 Roland replies: “Don’t speak such foolishness—
 shame on the heart gone coward in the chest.
 We’ll hold our ground, we’ll stand firm— we’re
 the ones!
 We’ll fight with spears, we’ll fight them hand to
 hand!” AOI.

89

60 And now there comes the Archbishop Turpin.⁴
 He spurs his horse, goes up into a mountain,
 summons the French; and he preached them a
 sermon:
 “Barons, my lords, Charles left us in this place.
 We know our duty: to die like good men for our
 King.
 65 Fight to defend the holy Christian faith.
 Now you will have a battle, you know it now,
 you see the Saracens with your own eyes.
 Confess your sins, pray to the Lord for mercy.
 I will absolve you all, to save your souls.
 70 If you die here, you will stand up holy martyrs,
 you will have seats in highest Paradise.”
 The French dismount, cast themselves on the
 ground;
 the Archbishop blesses them in God’s name.
 He commands them to do one penance: strike.

4. **Archbishop Turpin:** The archbishop of Rheims (*raɪms*), a city in northeastern France.

91

75 Roland went forth into the Spanish passes
 on Veillantif,⁵ his good swift-running horse.
 He bears his arms—how they become this man!—
 grips his lance now, hefting it, working it,
 now swings the iron point up toward the sky,
 80 the gonfalon all white laced on above—
 the golden streamers beat down upon his hands:
 a noble’s body, the face aglow and smiling.
 Close behind him his good companion follows;
 the men of France hail him: their protector!
 85 He looks wildly toward the Saracens,
 and humbly and gently to the men of France;
 and spoke a word to them, in all courtesy:
 “Barons, my lords, easy now, keep at a walk.
 These pagans are searching for martyrdom.
 90 We’ll get good spoils before this day is over,
 no king of France ever got such treasure!”
 And with these words, the hosts are at each other:
 AOI.

93

Marsilion’s nephew is named Aëlroth.
 He rides in front, at the head of the army,
 95 comes on shouting insults against our French:
 “French criminals, today you fight our men.
 One man should have saved you: he betrayed you.
 A fool, your King, to leave you in these passes.
 This is the day sweet France will lose its name,
 100 and Charlemagne the right arm of his body.”

5. **Veillantif** (*vā yān tēf*): The name of Roland’s horse means “wide awake.”

When he hears that—God!—Roland is outraged!
 He spurs his horse, gives Veillantif its head.
 The Count comes on to strike with all his might,
 smashes his shield, breaks his hauberk apart,
 and drives: rips through his chest, shatters the
 105 bones,
 knocks the whole backbone out of his back,
 casts out the soul of Aëlroth with his lance;
 which he thrusts deep, makes the whole body
 shake,
 throws him down dead, lance straight out,⁶ from
 his horse;
 110 he has broken his neck; broken it in two.
 There is something, he says, he must tell him:
 “Clown! Nobody! Now you know Charles is no
 fool,
 he never was the man to love treason.
 It took his valor to leave us in these passes!
 115 France will not lose its name, sweet France! today.
 Brave men of France, strike hard! The first blow is
 ours!
 We’re in the right, and these swine in the wrong!”
 AOI.

105

Roland the Count comes riding through the field,
 holds Durendal, that sword! it carves its way!
 and brings terrible slaughter down on the
 120 pagans.
 To have seen him cast one man dead on another,
 the bright red blood pouring out on the ground,
 his hauberk, his two arms, running with blood,
 his good horse—neck and shoulders running with
 blood!
 125 And Oliver does not linger, he strikes!
 and the Twelve Peers, no man could reproach them;
 and the brave French, they fight with lance and
 sword.
 The pagans die, some simply faint away!
 Said the Archbishop: “Bless our band of brave men!”
 130 Munjoie!⁷ he shouts—the war cry of King Charles.
 AOI.

6. **lance straight out:** The lance is held, not thrown, and used to knock the enemy from his horse. To throw one’s weapons is savage and ignoble.

7. **Munjoie!** (mun zhwa’): Mount joy! The origin of this war-cry is not known for certain.

The battle is fearful and full of grief.
 Oliver and Roland strike like good men,
 the Archbishop, more than a thousand blows,
 and the Twelve Peers do not hang back, they
 strike!
 135 the French fight side by side, all as one man.
 The pagans die by hundreds, by thousands:
 whoever does not flee finds no refuge from death,
 like it or not, there he ends all his days.
 And there the men of France lose their greatest
 arms;
 140 they will not see their fathers, their kin again,
 or Charlemagne, who looks for them in the passes.
 Tremendous torment now comes forth in France,
 a mighty whirlwind, tempests of wind and
 thunder,
 rains and hailstones, great and immeasurable,
 145 bolts of lightning hurtling and hurtling down:
 it is, in truth, a trembling of the earth.
 From Saint Michael-in-Peril to the Saints,
 from Besançon to the port of Wissant,⁸
 there is no house whose veil of walls does not
 crumble.
 150 A great darkness at noon falls on the land,
 there is no light but when the heavens crack.
 No man sees this who is not terrified,
 and many say: “The Last Day! Judgment Day!
 155 The end! The end of the world is upon us!”
 They do not know, they do not speak the truth:
 it is the worldwide grief for the death of Roland.

130

And Roland says: “We are in a rough battle.
 I’ll sound the olifant, Charles will hear it.”
 Said Oliver: “No good vassal would do it.
 160 When I urged it, friend, you did not think it right.
 If Charles were here, we’d come out with no
 losses.
 Those men down there—no blame can fall on
 them.”
 Oliver said: “Now by this beard of mine,

8. **Saint Michael-in-Peril . . . Saints . . . Besançon** (bə zän sōn’) . . . **Wissant** (wə sän’): Four points marking out tenth-century France.

If I can see my noble sister, Aude,⁹
165 once more, you will never lie in her arms!" AOI.

131

And Roland said: "Why are you angry at me?"
Oliver answers: "Companion, it is your doing.
I will tell you what makes a vassal good:
it is judgment, it is never madness;
restraint is worth more than the raw nerve of a
fool.
170 Frenchmen are dead because of your wildness.
And what service will Charles ever have from us?
If you had trusted me, my lord would be here,
we would have fought this battle through to the
end,
Marsilion would be dead, or our prisoner.
175 Roland, your prowess—had we never seen it!
And now, dear friend, we've seen the last of it.
No more aid from us now for Charlemagne,
a man without equal till Judgment Day,
you will die here, and your death will shame
France.
We kept faith, you and I, we were companions;
and everything we were will end today.
180 We part before evening, and it will be hard." AOI.

132

Turpin the Archbishop hears their bitter words,
digs hard into his horse with golden spurs
and rides to them; begins to set them right:
"You, Lord Roland, and you, Lord Oliver,
185 I beg you in God's name do not quarrel.
To sound the horn could not help us now, true,
but still it is far better that you do it:
let the King come, he can avenge us then—
these men of Spain must not go home exulting!
Our French will come, they'll get down on their
190 feet,
and find us here—we'll be dead, cut to pieces.
They will lift us into coffins on the backs of
mules,
and weep for us, in rage and pain and grief,
and bury us in the courts of churches;
195 and we will not be eaten by wolves or pigs or dogs."
Roland replies, "Lord, you have spoken well." AOI.

9. **Aude** (ō' də): Roland's intended bride.

133

Roland has put the olifant to his mouth,
he sets it well, sounds it with all his strength.
The hills are high, and that voice ranges far,
200 they heard it echo thirty great leagues away.
King Charles heard it, and all his faithful men.
And the King says: "Our men are in a battle."
And Ganelon disputed him and said:
"Had someone else said that, I'd call him liar!" AOI.

134

205 And now the mighty effort of Roland the Count:
he sounds his olifant; his pain is great,
and from his mouth the bright blood comes
leaping out,
and the temple bursts in his forehead.
That horn, in Roland's hands, has a mighty voice:
210 King Charles hears it drawing through the passes.
Naimon heard it, the Franks listen to it.
And the King said: "I hear Count Roland's horn;
he'd never sound it unless he had a battle."
Says Ganelon: "Now no more talk of battles!
215 You are old now, your hair is white as snow,
the things you say make you sound like a child.
You know Roland and that wild pride of his—
what a wonder God has suffered it so long!
Remember? he took Noples without your command:
220 the Saracens rode out, to break the siege;
they fought with him, the great vassal Roland.
Afterward he used the streams to wash the blood
from the meadows: so that nothing would show.
He blasts his horn all day to catch a rabbit,
225 he's strutting now before his peers and bragging—
who under heaven would dare meet him on the
field?
So now: ride on! Why do you keep on stopping?
The Land of Fathers lies far ahead of us." AOI.

135

The blood leaping from Count Roland's mouth,
230 the temple broken with effort in his forehead,
he sounds his horn in great travail and pain.
King Charles heard it, and his French listen hard.
And the King said: "That horn has a long breath!"
Naimon answers: "It is a baron's breath."
235 There is a battle there, I know there is.

He betrayed him! and now asks you to fail him!
Put on your armor! Lord, shout your battle cry,
and save the noble barons of your house!
You hear Roland's call. He is in trouble."

136

- 240 The Emperor commanded the horns to sound,
the French dismount, and they put on their armor:
their hauberks, their helmets, their gold-dressed
swords,
their handsome shields; and take up their great
lances,
the ganfalons of white and red and blue.
245 The barons of that host mount their war horses
and spur them hard the whole length of the pass;
and every man of them says to the other:
"If only we find Roland before he's killed,
we'll stand with him, and then we'll do some
fighting!"
250 What does it matter what they say? They are too late.

138

- High are the hills, and tenebrous,¹⁰ and vast, AOI.
the valleys deep, the raging waters swift;
to the rear, to the front, the trumpets sound:
they answer the lone voice of the olifant.
255 The Emperor rides on, rides on in fury,
the men of France in grief and indignation.
There is no man who does not weep and wail,
and they pray God: protect the life of Roland
till they come, one great host, into the field
260 and fight at Roland's side like true men all.
What does it matter what they pray? It does no
good.
They are too late, they cannot come in time. AOI.

156

- Roland the Count fights well and with great skill,
but he is hot, his body soaked with sweat;
265 has a great wound in his head, had much pain,
his temple broken because he blew the horn.
But he must know whether King Charles will
come;

10. **tenebrous** (ten' ə brəs) *adj.*: Dark, gloomy.

- draws out the olifant, sounds it, so feebly.
The Emperor drew to a halt, listened.
270 "Seigneurs," he said, "it all goes badly for us—
My nephew Roland falls from our ranks today.
I hear it in the horn's voice: he hasn't long.
Let every man who wants to be with Roland
ride fast! Sound trumpets! Every trumpet in this
host!"
275 Sixty thousand, on these words, sound, so high
the mountains sound, and the valleys resound.
The pagans hear: it is no joke to them;
cry to each other: "We're getting Charles on us!"

160

- Say the pagans: "We were all born unlucky!
280 The evil day that dawned for us today!
We have lost our lords and peers, and now comes
Charles—
that Charlemagne!—with his great host. Those
trumpets!
that shrill sound on us—the trumpets of the
French!
And the loud roar of that Munjoie! This Roland
285 is a wild man, he is too great a fighter—
What man of flesh and blood can ever hope
to bring him down? Let us cast at him, and leave
him there."
And so they did: arrows, wigars, darts,
lances and spears, javelots dressed with feathers;
struck Roland's shield, pierced it, broke it to
290 pieces,
ripped his hauberk, shattered its rings of mail,
but never touched his body, never his flesh.
They wounded Veillantif in thirty places,
struck him dead, from afar, under the Count.
The pagans flee, they leave the field to him.
295 Roland the Count stood alone, on his feet.¹¹

161

The pagans flee, in bitterness and rage,
strain every nerve running headlong toward Spain,
and Count Roland has no way to chase them,

11. **The pagans flee . . . feet**: This respite granted to Roland and Turpin after the pagans have fled and before these heroes die is an act of overwhelming grace and the sign of the two men's blessedness.

he has lost Veillantif, his battle horse;
 300 he has no choice, left alone there on foot.
 He went to the aid of Archbishop Turpin,
 unlaced the gold-dressed helmet, raised it from his
 head,
 lifted away his bright, light coat of mail,
 305 cut his under tunic into some lengths,
 stilled his great wounds with thrusting on the strips;
 then held him in his arms, against his chest,
 and laid him down, gently, on the green grass;
 and softly now Roland entreated him:
 310 "My noble lord, I beg you, give me leave:
 our companions, whom we have loved so dearly,
 are all dead now, we must not abandon them.
 I want to look for them, know them once more,
 and set them in ranks, side by side, before you."
 315 Said the Archbishop: "Go then, go and come back.
 The field is ours, thanks be to God, yours and
 mine."

168

Now Roland feels that death is very near.
 His brain comes spilling out through his two ears;
 prays to God for his peers: let them be called;
 320 and for himself, to the angel Gabriel;
 took the olifant: there must be no reproach!
 took Durendal his sword in his other hand,
 and farther than a crossbow's farthest shot
 he walks toward Spain, into a fallow land,¹²
 325 and climbs a hill: there beneath two fine trees
 stand four great blocks of stone, all are of marble;
 and he fell back, to earth, on the green grass,
 has fainted there, for death is very near.

169

High are the hills, and high, high are the trees;
 there stand four blocks of stone, gleaming of
 330 marble.
 Count Roland falls fainting on the green grass,
 and is watched, all this time, by a Saracen:
 who has feigned death and lies now with the
 others,

12. **fallow land:** Land plowed but not seeded for one or more growing seasons.

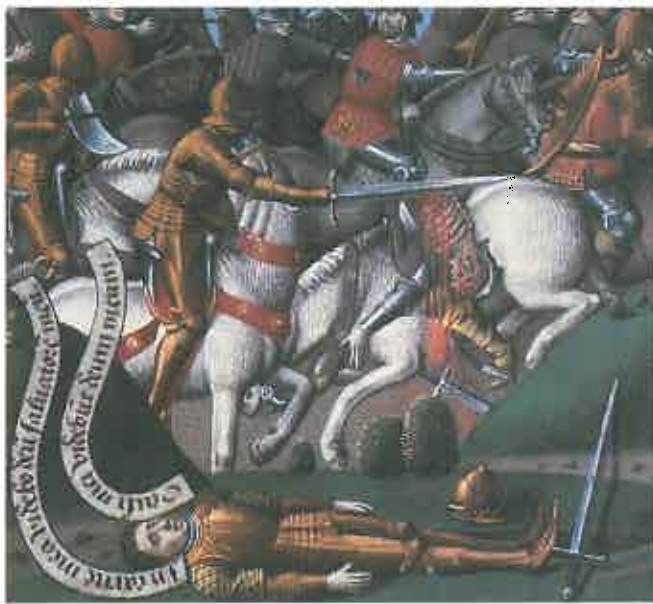
has smeared blood on his face and on his body;
 335 and quickly now gets to his feet and runs—
 a handsome man, strong, brave, and so crazed
 with pride
 that he does something mad and dies for it:
 laid hands on Roland, and on the arms of Roland,
 and cried: "Conquered! Charles's nephew
 conquered!
 340 I'll carry this sword home to Arabia!"
 As he draws it, the Count begins to come
 round.

170

Now Roland feels: *someone taking his sword!*
 opened his eyes, and had one word for him:
 "I don't know you, you aren't one of ours";
 345 grasps that olifant that he will never lose,
 strikes on the helm beset with gems in gold,
 shatters the steel, and the head, and the bones,
 sent his two eyes flying out of his head,
 dumped him over stretched out at his feet dead;
 350 and said: "You nobody! how could you dare
 lay hands on me—rightly or wrongly: how?
 Who'll hear of this and not call you a fool?
 Ah! the bell-mouth of the olifant is smashed,
 the crystal and the gold fallen away."

171

Now Roland the Count feels: his sight is gone;
 gets on his feet, draws on his final strength,
 the color on his face lost now for good.
 Before him stands a rock; and on that dark rock
 in rage and bitterness he strikes ten blows:
 the steel blade grates, it will not break, it stands
 360 unmarked.
 "Ah!" said the Count, "Blessed Mary, your help!
 Ah Durendal, good sword, your unlucky day,
 for I am lost and cannot keep you in my care.
 The battles I have won, fighting with you,
 365 the mighty lands that holding you I conquered,
 that Charles rules now, our King, whose beard is
 white!
 Now you fall to another: it must not be
 a man who'd run before another man!
 For a long while a good vassal held you:
 there'll never be the like in France's holy land."



SCENE SHOWING
THE DEATH OF ROLAND
V. de Beauvais, fifteenth-
century manuscript
Musée Condé, Chantilly, France

173

370 Roland the Count strikes down on a dark rock,
and the rock breaks, breaks more than I can tell,
and the blade grates, but Durendal will not break,
the sword leaped up, rebounded toward the sky,
The Count, when he sees that sword will not be
broken,
375 softly, in his own presence, speaks the lament:
“Ah Durendal, beautiful, and most sacred,
the holy relics in this golden pommel!
Saint Peter’s tooth and blood of Saint Basile,
a lock of hair of my lord Saint Denis,
380 and a fragment of blessed Mary’s robe:¹³
your power must not fall to the pagans,
you must be served by Christian warriors.
May no coward ever come to hold you!
It was with you I conquered those great lands
that Charles has in his keeping, whose beard is
385 white,
the Emperor’s lands, that make him rich and
strong.”

174

Now Roland feels: death coming over him,
death descending from his temples to his heart.

13. **Saint Peter’s tooth . . . Mary’s robe:** Such relics—remains of holy men and women—were thought to have miraculous power.

He came running underneath a pine tree
and there stretched out, face down, on the green
390 grass,
lays beneath him his sword and the olifant.
He turned his head toward the Saracen hosts,
and this is why: with all his heart he wants
King Charles the Great and all his men to say,
395 he died, that noble Count, a conqueror;
makes confession, beats his breast often, so feebly,
offers his glove, for all his sins, to God. AOI.

176

Count Roland lay stretched out beneath a pine;
he turned his face toward the land of Spain,
400 began to remember many things now:
how many lands, brave man, he had conquered;
and he remembered: sweet France, the men of his
line,
remembered Charles, his lord, who fostered him:
cannot keep, remembering, from weeping, sighing;
405 but would not be unmindful of himself:
he confesses his sins, prays God for mercy:
“Loyal Father, you who never failed us,
who resurrected Saint Lazarus from the dead,¹⁴

14. **Saint Lazarus . . . Daniel from the lions:** A reference to two famous miracles described in the Bible (Luke 16:19–31 and Daniel 6:16–23, respectively).

and saved your servant Daniel from the lions:
 410 now save the soul of me from every peril
 for the sins I committed while I still lived.”
 Then he held out his right glove to his Lord:¹⁵
 Saint Gabriel took the glove from his hand.
 He held his head bowed down upon his arm,
 415 he is gone, his two hands joined, to his end.
 Then God sent him his angel Cherubin
 and Saint Michael, angel of the sea’s Peril;
 and with these two there came Saint Gabriel:
 they bear Count Roland’s soul to Paradise.

177

420 Roland is dead, God has his soul in heaven.
 The Emperor rides into Rencesvals;¹⁶
 there is no passage there, there is no track,
 no empty ground, not an elle,¹⁷ not one foot,
 that does not bear French dead or pagan dead.
 King Charles cries out: “Dear Nephew, where are
 425 you?
 Where is the Archbishop? Count Oliver?
 Where is Gerin, his companion Gerer?
 Where is Otun, where is Count Berenger,
 Yves and Yvoire, men I have loved so dearly?
 430 What has become of Engeler the Gascon,
 Sansun the Duke, and Anseïs, that fighter?
 Where is Gerard the Old of Roussillon,
 and the Twelve Peers, whom I left in these passes?”
 And so forth—what’s the difference? No one
 answered.
 435 “God!” said the King, “how much I must regret
 I was not here when the battle began”;
 pulls his great beard, a man in grief and rage.
 His brave knights weep, their eyes are filled with
 tears,
 twenty thousand fall fainting to the ground;
 440 Duke Naimon feels the great pity of it.

180

God made great miracles for Charlemagne,
 for on that day in heaven the sun stood still.
 The pagans flee, the Franks keep at their heels,

15. **he held out . . . to his Lord:** A ritual act of resignation to a feudal lord.

16. **Rencesvals:** The old form of Roncevaux (rôns vō’), the pass in the Pyrenees mountains where Roland was ambushed.

17. **elle** (el): A unit of measure equal to an arm’s length, or about forty-five inches.

catch up with them in the Vale Tenebrous,
 445 chase them on spurring hard to Saragossa,
 and always killing them, striking with fury;
 cut off their paths, the widest roads away:
 the waters of the Ebro¹⁸ lie before them,
 very deep, an amazing sight, and swift;
 and there is no boat, no barge, no dromond,¹⁹
 450 no galley.
 They call on Tervagant, one of their gods.
 Then they jump in, but no god is with them:
 those in full armor, the ones who weigh the most,
 sank down, and they were many, to the bottom;
 455 the others float downstream: the luckiest ones,
 who fare best in those waters, have drunk so much,
 they all drown there, struggling, it is amazing.
 The French cry out: “Curse the day you saw
 Roland!” AOI.

King Marsilion loses his right hand in the battle with Charlemagne but escapes to Saragossa and enlists the aid of Balignant, another pagan. Charlemagne, however, kills Balignant in combat and defeats his army. Then, after capturing Saragossa, the emperor returns home.

270

The Emperor has come home again to Aix.
 460 In iron chains, the traitor Ganelon
 stands before the palace, within the city.
 He has been bound, and by serfs, to a stake;
 they tie his hands with deerhide straps and thongs,
 and beat him hard, with butcher’s hooks, with
 clubs—
 465 for what better reward has this man earned?
 There he stands, in pain and rage, awaiting his
 trial.

Pinabel, one of Ganelon’s kinsmen, threatens to kill anyone who recommends that Ganelon be hanged. The emperor’s advisers then suggest freeing Ganelon, a piece of advice that enrages Charlemagne. At this point, however, Tierri volunteers to fight Pinabel. When Tierri wins, against all odds, the French agree that Ganelon must die.

18. **Saragossa** (sar ə gäs’ ə) . . . **Ebro** (ā’ brô): The city of Saragossa in northeastern Spain is on the Ebro River.

19. **dromond** (drom’ ənd): A fast sailing galley.

Bavarians and Alemans returned,
 and Poitevins, and Bretons, and Normans,
 and all agreed, the Franks before the others,
 470 Ganelon must die, and in amazing pain.
 Four war horses are led out and brought forward;
 then they attach his two feet, his two hands.
 These battle horses are swift and spirited,
 four sergeants come and drive them on ahead
 475 toward a river in the midst of a field.

Ganelon is brought to terrible perdition,
 all his mighty sinews are pulled to pieces,
 and the limbs of his body burst apart;
 on the green grass flows that bright and famous blood.
 480 Ganelon died a traitor's and recreant's²⁰ death.
 Now when one man betrays another, it is not right
 that he should live to boast of it.

20. **recreant's** (rek' rē ənts): Coward's.

Reader's Response *Think of a time when you, like Roland, were reluctant to ask for help as Roland is during the attack. What part did pride play in your hesitancy? Do you now regret not turning to someone for help?*

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Clarifying

1. (a) At the start of this selection, why does Olivier reproach Roland? (b) How is the dispute settled?
2. Explain the fate of the person who attempts to steal Roland's sword.

Interpreting

3. Explain Archbishop Turpin's role in the battle.
4. Consider the following line: "Roland is good, and Olivier is wise." (a) Explain the distinction the poet makes. (b) Is this distinction of value?
5. (a) Describe Roland's relationship to his sword. (b) Why do you think this relationship is important?

Applying

6. Ganelon has been labeled a traitor. (a) Tell whether Ganelon fits your definition of a traitor. (b) Discuss with your classmates situations in which Ganelon might be labeled very differently.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding the Hero

Roland is a flawed and imperfect hero whose imperfections have severe consequences for those around him. Roland is brave and is prepared to sacri-

fice himself for the greater good. His flaw, however, lies in his obsession with his own personal glory rather than with the safety of his companions and his "sweet France." This is nowhere better seen than in *laisse* 131 where Olivier confronts Roland with his own folly and describes the ideal feudal hero: "I will tell you what makes a vassal good: it is judgment, it is never madness." Like a hero of classical tragedy, Roland's flaw is his pride. But in a medieval epic, this pride must be seen in the added dimension of feudal society. The hero must answer to something larger and more important than himself.

Discuss the evolution of Roland and Olivier's friendship throughout the poem.

1. What is Olivier's literary function?
2. In what ways is Olivier the ideal epic hero?
3. In what ways is he not?

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing About Values

Think about the system of values that is described in the poem. What motivates Roland and his companions to behave as they do? Write an essay in which you describe the values espoused in the *Song of Roland*. Support your ideas with quotes. As you revise your work, make sure your argument proceeds in a logical fashion.