

Paradise XVIII

Anonymous author (eleventh century)
Song of Roland

La Chanson de Roland is the oldest major work of French literature and one of the best-known examples of a *chanson de geste*. The song narrates the events surrounding the Battle of Roncesvalles (778), in which the rearguard of Charlemagne's retreating Franks, escorting a rich collection of booty gathered during a failed campaign in Spain, was attacked and defeated by the Basques. Roland died in the battle against the Saracens, delaying to blow the horn to summon help from the rest of Charlemagne's army.

The Song of Roland

I

Charles the King, our Lord and Sovereign,
Full seven years hath sojourned in Spain,
Conquered the land, and won the western main,
Now no fortress against him doth remain,
No city walls are left for him to gain, 5
Save Sarraguce, that sits on high mountain.
Marsile its King, who feareth not God's name,
Mahumet's man, he invokes Apollin's aid,
Nor wards off ills that shall to him attain.
AOI.

II

King Marsilies he lay at Sarraguce, 10
Went he his way into an orchard cool;
There on a throne he sate, of marble blue,
Round him his men, full twenty thousand, stood.
Called he forth then his counts, also his dukes: 15
"My Lords, give ear to our impending doom:
That Emperour, Charles of France the Douce,
Into this land is come, us to confuse.
I have no host in battle him to prove,
Nor have I strength his forces to undo. 20
Counsel me then, ye that are wise and true;
Can ye ward off this present death and dule?"
What word to say no pagan of them knew,
Save Blancandrin, of th' Castle of Val Funde.

III

Blancandrins was a pagan very wise,
In vassalage he was a gallant knight, 25

First in prowess, he stood his lord beside.
 And thus he spoke: "Do not yourself affright!
 Yield to Carlun, that is so big with pride,
 Faithful service, his friend and his ally;
 Lions and bears and hounds for him provide, 30
 Thousand mewed hawks, sev'n hundred camelry;
 Silver and gold, four hundred mules load high;
 Fifty wagons his wrights will need supply,
 Till with that wealth he pays his soldiery.
 War hath he waged in Spain too long a time, 35
 To Aix, in France, homeward he will him hie.
 Follow him there before Saint Michael's tide,
 You shall receive and hold the Christian rite;
 Stand honour bound, and do him fealty.
 Send hostages, should he demand surety, 40
 Ten or a score, our loyal oath to bind;
 Send him our sons, the first-born of our wives; --
 An he be slain, I'll surely furnish mine.
 Better by far they go, though doomed to die,
 Than that we lose honour and dignity, 45
 And be ourselves brought down to beggary."
 AOI.

IV

Says Blancandrins: "By my right hand, I say,
 And by this beard, that in the wind doth sway,
 The Frankish host you'll see them all away;
 Franks will retire to France their own terrain. 50
 When they are gone, to each his fair domain,
 In his Chapelle at Aix will Charles stay,
 High festival will hold for Saint Michael.
 Time will go by, and pass the appointed day;
 Tidings of us no Frank will hear or say. 55
 Proud is that King, and cruel his courage;
 From th' hostage he'll slice their heads away.
 Better by far their heads be shorn away,
 Than that ourselves lose this clear land of Spain,
 Than that ourselves do suffer grief and pain." 60
 "That is well said. So be it." the pagans say.

V

The council ends, and that King Marsilie
 Calleth aside Clarun of Balaguee,
 Estramarin and Eudropin his peer,
 And Priamun and Guarlan of the beard, 65
 And Machiner and his uncle Mahee,
 With Jouner, Malbien from over sea,
 And Blancandrins, good reason to decree:
 Ten hath he called, were first in felony.

"Gentle Barons, to Charlemagne go ye; 70
He is in siege of Cordres the city.
In your right hands bear olive-branches green
Which signify Peace and Humility.
If you by craft contrive to set me free,
Silver and gold, you'll have your fill of me, 75
Manors and fiefs, I'll give you all your need."
"We have enough," the pagans straight agree.
AOI.

VI

King Marsilies, his council finishing,
Says to his men: "Go now, my lords, to him, 80
Olive-branches in your right hands bearing;
Bid ye for me that Charlemagne, the King,
In his God's name to shew me his mercy;
Ere this new moon wanes, I shall be with him;
One thousand men shall be my following;
I will receive the rite of christening, 85
Will be his man, my love and faith swearing;
Hostages too, he'll have, if so he will."
Says Blancandrins: "Much good will come of this."
AOI.

(Translated by Charles Scott Moncrief)