

Excerpt from *The Song of Roland*, translated by Jessie Crosland (Cambridge, ON: In Parentheses Publications Old French Series, 1999), 20–27.

Introduction: *The Song of Roland* is an epic poem that tells the fictional story of the hero Roland, a chivalrous young aristocrat who died fighting Muslim invaders at the Battle of Rocenvaux Pass in 778, during the reign of Charlemagne (Charles I), the king of the Franks. Was composed (based on early oral tradition) during the later half of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth. In this excerpt, the Muslim king Marsilie has gathered an army to fight the French at Rocenvaux in the northern Iberian peninsula. This passage begins by describing some of the warriors of the Muslim army before moving to the beginning of the battle. All of the figures described are fictional, as is the poem's characterization of Muslims and of Islam.]

73. There was an *almaçour* [man of high rank, "prince"] there from Moriane; no more felon in all the land of Spain than he. He has made his boast before Marsilie: "I will lead my company to Roncevaux, twenty thousand warriors with shields and lances. If I find Roland I swear that he is a dead man. Never a day will pass but Charles weeps for him."

74. Then up steps Turgis of Tortelosa; he is a count and the city belongs to him. He wishes to bring ruin upon the Christians and he ranges himself with the others before Marsilie; and thus he spoke to the King: "In no wise be dismayed. Mahomet is worth more than Saint Peter of Rome. If you serve him the glory of the battle will be ours. I will go and join Roland in Roncevaux and no man shall protect him from death. Look at my sword which is good and long: I will measure it with Durendal and you will have abundant means of hearing which is the better. The French will die if they try their strength against us; Charles the aged will have shame and dishonour, and never again on earth will he wear a crown."

75. Then Escremiz of Valterne came forward in his turn. He is a Saracen and the land of Valterne belongs to him. He cries out in the press before Marsilie: "I will go to Roncevaux to bring down their pride. If I find Roland he will not be quit with his head, nor Oliver either who captains the others. All the twelve peers are doomed to perish. The French will die and France will be deprived of them and Charles will have a dearth of good vassals."...

77. Then, Margariz of Seville came running up. He holds the land as far as Casmarina. He is much beloved of the ladies for his beauty; not one of them sees him but she beams upon him and cannot refrain from smiling when she looks at him. No other heathen is his match for courage. He came in the crowd and cried out above all the

others, saying to the King: "Be not dismayed! I will go and kill Roland at Roncevaux—nor shall Oliver escape with his life. The twelve peers have remained behind for martyrdom. You see my sword—its hilt is of gold: the emir of Primes sent it to me. I swear to you that it will be dyed with crimson blood. The French will die and France will be dishonoured, and Charles the aged and hoary-bearded will never pass a day without grief and anger. Before a year has passed we shall have seized France and we shall be able to lie in the city of Saint Denis." The heathen king bowed low before him.

78. Then in his turn comes Chernuble of Munigre. His hair sweeps the very ground, and he can carry a greater weight for sport, when he so desires, than four mules saddled as beasts of burden. In that land, so it is said, from which he comes, the sun never shines and the wheat cannot grow, rain does not fall nor does dew rest upon the earth, and there is not a stone there but is completely black. Some say that devils live there. Thus spake Chernuble: "I have girded my good sword. I will stain it vermilion in Roncevaux. Never trust me again if I find Roland in my path and do not attack him; and I will vanquish Durendal with my own sword. The French will die and France will be deprived of them." At these words the twelve peers gather together and they will take with them a hundred thousand Saracens such as will rush forward in their zeal for battle. They go to arm themselves beneath a pine grove.

79. The heathen arm themselves with their Saracen hauberks, most of which are of triple thickness. They lace their good helmets of Saragossa and they gird their swords of Viennese steel. They have noble shields and Valencian lances, and battle standards of white and blue and red. They leave their mules and their palfreys; they mount their battle steeds and ride in serried ranks. The day was fair and the sun shone brightly and they have not a piece of armor that does not reflect its rays. A thousand trumpets sound to make the scene yet more beautiful.

The noise is great and the Frenchmen hear it. Said Oliver: "Sir comrade, I feel sure that we shall have battle with the Saracens." Roland replies: "And may God grant it! For one's lord one ought to suffer hardship and endure both great heat and great cold, and lose one's skin and one's hair. Now let each see that he strikes hard blows, that an evil song never be sung about us! The heathens are in the wrong and the Christians in the right. Never shall a bad example come from me."

80. Oliver is mounted on a hillock and he looks towards the right through a grassy valley and sees the heathen army approaching. He calls Roland his comrade: "I see such a commotion coming from the direction of Spain, so many bright hauberks and shining helmets! This army will bring much anguish upon our Frenchmen. Ganelon

knew it—the felon, the traitor, who chose us out before the emperor.”¹ “Be silent, Oliver,” count Roland replies; “he is my stepfather, I do not wish you to say a word about it.”

81. Oliver has mounted on a hillock and he can clearly see the kingdom of Spain and the Saracens who are assembled in such numbers. Their helmets, which are set with gold, glisten, their shields too and their embroidered hauberks, their lances and their folded pennons. He cannot even count their formations, for there are so many that one cannot number them. He is much disturbed in mind as he looks at them; as quickly as possible he descends the hill and comes to the Frenchmen and tells them all.

82. Said Oliver: “I have seen the heathen; never has any man on earth seen a greater number of them. There are a hundred thousand of them in front of us, with shields and laced helmets, and clad in shining hauberks; their polished lances glitter as they hold the hafts erect. You will have a battle such as there never was before. Sir Frenchmen, may you have strength from God! Stand firm, that we be not vanquished!” The Frenchmen say: “Cursed be he who flees! Never will one of us fail you for fear of death.”

83. Said Oliver: “The heathen are in great force, and it seems to me there are very few of our Frenchmen! Comrade Roland, sound your horn; Charles will hear it and the army will return.” Roland replies: “I should act like a madman! I should lose my renown, in sweet France. I will strike hard blows with Durendal without delay; the blade will be stained with blood right up to the golden hilt. To their misfortune the felon heathen came to the passes; I warrant you that they are all appointed to death.”

84. “Comrade Roland, sound your horn; Charles will hear it and will turn the army back. The king with all his barons will come to our aid.” Roland replies: “May it not please God that my kinsfolk be blamed on my account, nor that sweet France fall into disrepute! Rather will I strike vigorously with Durendal, the good sword which I have girded to my side. You will see the blade all covered with blood. The treacherous heathen have come together to their hurt; I warrant you, they are all delivered up to death.”

85. “Comrade Roland, sound your horn; Charles will hear it as he crosses the passes and I warrant you the French will turn back.” “May it not please God,” replies Roland, “that it should be said by any living man that I ever sounded my horn on account of the

¹ Ganelon, Roland’s stepfather and a French baron, betrayed the French army to the Muslims. At the end of the poem, his champion in trial-by-combat is defeated, and Ganelon is drawn and quartered. His name was associated with treachery and treason in chivalric literature.

heathen. Never shall my kinsfolk be reproached on this account. When I am in the thick of the battle, I shall strike a thousand and seven hundred blows and you will see the steel of Durendal stained with blood. The French are strong and they will strike valiantly; the men of Spain will have no protection from death.”

86. Said Oliver: “I know of no reproach in this. I myself have seen the Saracens of Spain: the valleys and the mountains are covered with them, the open country and all the plains. Great are the armies of this foreign people and we have but a very small company.” Roland replies: “My desire grows greater on that account. May it not please God nor His angels that France ever lose her worth on my account! I would rather die than be overtaken by dishonour. The better we strike the more the emperor will love us.”

87. Roland is valiant and Oliver is wise. Both of them have marvelous courage. When once they are mounted and armed they will never avoid the battle for fear of death. They are noble counts and their words are bold. The felon heathen are riding fiercely. Said Oliver: “Roland, look in front of you now. The heathen are close to us, but Charles is far away. You did not deign to sound your horn; if the king were here we should take no harm. Look up towards the Spanish passes; you can see, the rearguard is in a sad plight. He who fights in the rearguard to-day will never fight in another one.” Roland replies: “Speak not so rashly! Cursed be the heart which quakes within the breast! We will make a firm stand on the spot, and we shall be the ones to strike and to attack.”

88. When Roland sees that the battle will take place he becomes fiercer than a lion or a leopard. He calls aloud to the French, and he summons Oliver: “Sir comrade, friend, say no such thing! The emperor who left the French with us put ten thousand men on one side amongst whom he knew there was not a single coward. For one’s lord one ought to suffer great hardships and be able to endure excessive cold or heat—yea, one ought to be ready to lose one’s blood and one’s flesh. Strike with thy lance and I will strike with Durendal, my good sword that the king gave me. If I die on the battlefield, he who has it after me will be able to say that it belonged to a noble vassal.”

89. Elsewhere in the field is the archbishop Turpin. He spurs his horse and mounts a bare spot of high ground; he calls the Frenchmen to him and these are the words he spake: “Sir barons, Charles has left us here; it is fitting that we should die for our king. Help to maintain the Christian faith! You will have battle, you are quite certain of it for with your own eyes you see the Saracens. Confess your sins and pray God for His mercy. I will absolve you for the salvation of your souls. If you die you will be holy martyrs; you will have seats in greater paradise.” The Frenchmen dismount and kneel on the ground; the archbishop has blessed them in God’s name and he bids them

strike hard as penance for their sins.

90. The Frenchmen rise to their feet, absolved and quit of their sins; the archbishop has blessed them on God's behalf and they have mounted again on their swift steeds. They are armed in knightly fashion and fully equipped for battle. Count Roland calls Oliver "Sir comrade, you were right when you said that Ganelon had betrayed us all. He has taken gold and possessions and money. The emperor ought to avenge us. King Marsilie has bargained for us, but he will have to pay the price by the sword."

91. Roland is crossing the Spanish passes, mounted on Veillantif his swift courser. He carries his arms which become him well, and, as he goes, the baron brandishes his lance and turns the point upwards, with its white ensign affixed to the tip; the fringe falls down as far as his hands. His form is noble and his face is gay and smiling. His companion is riding close behind him, and the men of France acclaim him as their protector. He looks fiercely towards the Saracens, but very humbly and gently towards the French and he addresses them courteously: "Sir barons, softly, hold back your speed! These heathen are in quest of a great martyrdom, and this very day we shall have a fair and noble booty. No king of France ever had one so costly." As he spoke these words the two armies came together.

92. Said Oliver: "I have no desire to speak. You did not deign to sound your horn and now you have no help from Charles. He knows not a word about it, so the baron is not to blame, and the brave ones over there, they are not blameworthy. Charge now with all your strength, sir barons, and hold the field! I pray you, for God's sake, be determined to strike hard blows, both to give and take! And we must not forget the battle-cry of Charles." At these words the French all shouted, and anyone who heard the cry of "Montjoie" then would have the remembrance of great valour. Then they charge—God! with what fury! They spur to the utmost for the greater speed; and thus they go to the attack, for what else could they do? And the Saracens do not shrink from them, so there are the two armies, the French and the heathen, joined in battle.

93. The nephew of Marsilie—Aelroth by name—rides first in advance of the army. And as he rides he says evil words of our Frenchmen: "Ye felon French, to-day you shall joust with us. The one who should have protected you has betrayed you and the king was mad to leave you behind in the passes. To-day sweet France will lose her reputation and Charlemaine will lose the right arm from his body." When Roland heard this, God! how angry he was! He spurs his horse and puts it to the gallop and strikes at the heathen to the utmost of his force. He breaks his shield and tears open his hauberk, he cuts open his breast and breaks all his bones and cleaves him to the chine. He makes an exit for the soul with his lance. He has driven it in deeply and made the

heathen's body totter and the length of his haft he has hurled him dead from his horse. He has broken his neck in two halves; but he cannot refrain from speaking to him: "Begone, son of a slave! Charles is by no means mad, nor did he ever tolerate treason. He acted like a brave man when he left us at the passes. Sweet France will not lose her reputation to-day. Strike, Frenchmen, the first blow is ours! The right is on our side and these felons are in the wrong."

94. There was a duke there Falsaron by name—and he was king Marsilie's brother. He ruled the land of Dathan and Abiron and there is no viler traitor beneath the sky. So wide was the space between his two eyes that one might measure a good half foot. He is filled with grief when he sees his nephew dead; he advances out of the crowd and puts his horse to the gallop shouting the heathen battle-cry. Most insulting is he towards the French: "To-day fair France will lose her honour," he cries. Oliver hears him and he is very angry; he urges on his horse with his golden spurs and rides like a baron to strike him. He breaks his shield and rends his hauberk, he drives the flaps of his ensign right into his body and the length of his haft he hurls him from his saddle. Then he looks down and sees the villain lying on the ground, and says proudly to him: "I care not for your threats, son of a slave! Strike, Frenchmen, for we shall easily conquer them!" And he shouts "Montjoie," the battle-cry of Charles.

95. There is a king there, Corsablix by name, from Barbary a distant land. He called to the rest of the Saracens: "We can well sustain this battle for there are very few Frenchmen, and we need have only contempt for those who are here. Not one of them will ever have any protection from Charles; this is the day on which they must die." Archbishop Turpin heard him distinctly, and there is no man beneath the sky for whom his hatred could be greater. He pricks his horse with the spurs of fine gold and rides to strike him with all his force. He breaks his shield and tears his hauberk to pieces and drives his great lance right through the body. He has his lance firmly in his grasp and he shakes the dead man on it; then the length of his haft he hurls him on to the path. He looks down and sees the felon lying on the ground and he will not refrain from addressing him: "Heathen, son of a slave," says he, "you have lied! Charles, my master, is our protection at all times. Our men of France have no desire to flee until all your companions remain on this spot. I tell you this news, you will have to suffer death. Strike men of France! Let no one forget himself. This first blow is ours, God be thanked! And he cries Montjoie so as to hold the field.

96. And Gerin strikes Malprimis of Brigal. His good shield is not worth a farthing to him; the buckle of crystal is broken and half of it falls to the ground; the heathen's hauberk is rent as far as the flesh and Gerin's good sword has entered into his body. The heathen falls down all of a heap and Satan carries away his soul.