

# *The Song of Roland*

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND NOTES BY  
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## The Song of Roland

I  
Charles the king, our great emperor,  
Has been in Spain for seven long years,  
And conquered that proud land as far as the sea.  
There is no castle which can resist him,  
No wall or city left to be destroyed, 5  
Except for Saragossa, which stands upon a mountain.  
It is held by King Marsile, who does not love God;  
He serves Muhammad and calls upon Apollo.  
He cannot prevent disaster from overtaking him. AOL.

2  
King Marsile was in Saragossa; 10  
He went into a garden, beneath the shade,  
And reclines upon a slab of bluish marble  
With more than twenty thousand men around him.  
He summons both his dukes and his counts:  
'Hear, lords, what misfortune weighs upon us; 15  
The emperor Charles from the fair land of France  
Has come to this country to destroy us.  
I have no army to match his in battle,  
Nor sufficient men to break his army down.  
Give me counsel as my wise men, 20  
And protect me from both death and shame.'  
There is no pagan who utters a single word in reply,  
Except for Blancandrin from Castel de Valfunde.

THE SONG OF ROLAND

3

- Blancandrin was one of the wisest of the pagans,  
 25 A most valiant and worthy knight.  
 He was a man of great worth, helpful to his lord,  
 And he said to the king: 'Now do not be dismayed;  
 Offer Charles, the arrogant and cruel,  
 Faithful service and very great friendship.  
 30 Promise him bears and lions and dogs,  
 Seven hundred camels and a thousand moulted hawks,  
 Four hundred mules laden with gold and silver,  
 Fifty carts to carry it all away.  
 With this he will be able to pay his mercenaries well;  
 35 He has waged war long enough in this land,  
 The time is ripe for his return to Aix in France.  
 Tell him you will follow him there at Michaelmas  
 And receive the Christian faith;  
 You will be his vassal in honour and in all your goods.  
 40 If he asks for hostages, send him some,  
 Either ten or twenty, as a mark of good faith.  
 Let us send him the sons of our wives;  
 Even if it means his death, I shall send him mine.  
 Far better for them to lose their heads there  
 45 Than for us to lose our honour and our jurisdiction\*  
 And be reduced to begging.' AOI.

4

- Blancandrin said: 'By this right hand of mine,  
 And by the beard which flutters against my chest,  
 You will soon see the Frankish host disband.  
 50 The Franks will return to France, their land;  
 When each man is in his own domain,  
 Charles will be in Aix, in his chapel;  
 At Michaelmas he will hold a great festival.  
 The day will arrive and the allotted time will pass;  
 55 He will hear no word or news from us.  
 The king is cruel, his temperament fierce;  
 He will have our hostages beheaded.

30

THE SONG OF ROLAND

Far better for them to lose their heads there  
 Then for us to lose the fair and beautiful land of Spain  
 Or suffer misfortunes and privations.' 60  
 The pagans say: 'There is truth in this.'

5

King Marsile had finished his council  
 And he called Clarin of Balaguer,  
 Estamarin and Eudropin his peer  
 And Priamon and Guarlan the bearded, 65  
 Machiner and his uncle Matthew  
 And Jouner and Malbien of Outremer  
 And Blancandrin to serve as spokesman.  
 He summoned ten of his most treacherous men:  
 'Lord barons, you will go to Charlemagne; 70  
 He is besieging the city of Cordoba.  
 You will bear olive branches in your hands,  
 Signifying peace and humility.  
 If, by your skill, you can bring me peace,  
 I shall give you gold and silver in abundance, 75  
 Lands and fiefs, as many as you desire.'  
 The pagans say: 'This is a generous offer.' AOI.

6

King Marsile had finished his council.  
 He said to his men: 'Lords, go now;  
 You will bear olive branches in your hands 80  
 And on my behalf speak to King Charlemagne,  
 Asking him, by his God, to have mercy on me.  
 He will not see the end of this first month  
 Without my following him with a thousand vassals.  
 I shall receive the Christian faith 85  
 And become his vassal in love and faith;  
 If he asks for hostages, he will receive some.'  
 Blancandrin said: 'You will have an excellent pact.' AOI.

31

Marsile had ten white mules brought forward  
 90 Which had been given to him by the King of Suatilie;  
 The bridles are of gold, the saddles trimmed with silver.  
 Those who carried the message mounted on their horses,  
 Bearing olive branches in their hands.  
 They came to Charles who holds France in his power;  
 95 There is nothing he can do to avoid deceit.

AOI.

The emperor is happy and joyful;  
 He has taken Cordoba and shattered its walls,  
 And demolished its towers with his catapults;  
 His knights have captured great booty,  
 100 Gold, silver and costly arms.  
 No pagan was left within the city  
 Who had not been slain or made a Christian.  
 The emperor is in a spacious garden;  
 With him are Roland and Oliver,  
 105 Samson the Duke and Anseis the fierce,  
 Geoffrey of Anjou, the king's standard bearer,  
 And Gerin and Gerer were there too.  
 Many others were with them;  
 There are fifteen thousand from the fair land of France.  
 110 The knights are seated on white silk brocade,  
 Amusing themselves by playing backgammon  
 And the wiser and older men play chess,  
 Whilst the agile young warriors practise fencing.  
 Beneath a pine tree, beside a wild briar bush,  
 115 There stands a chair of state, made from pure gold;  
 There sits the king who holds the fair land of France.  
 His beard is white and his hair hoary,  
 His stature is noble, his countenance fierce;  
 If anyone seeks him, there is no need to point him out.  
 120 The messengers got down from their horses  
 And greeted him with love and good will.

Blancandrin was the first to speak,  
 Saying to the king: 'May God protect you,  
 The Glorious One we must all adore.  
 King Marsile the valiant sends you this message: 125  
 He has long sought the faith which brings salvation  
 And wishes to give you a large portion of his wealth,  
 Bears and lions and chained hounds,  
 Seven hundred camels and a thousand moulted hawks,  
 Four hundred mules laden with gold and silver, 130  
 Fifty carts for you to carry it all away.  
 You will have enough gold bezants  
 To pay your mercenaries well.  
 You have been in this country a long time;  
 You should return to Aix in France. 135  
 There, my lord says, he will follow you.'  
 The emperor stretches out his hands towards God;  
 He lowers his head and begins to think. AOI.

The emperor kept his head bowed;  
 He was not a man for hasty words. 140  
 His habit is to speak at leisure;  
 When he looks up, his countenance was fierce.  
 He said to the messengers: 'You have spoken well;  
 King Marsile is my sworn enemy:  
 In these words you have spoken here 145  
 To what extent can I place my confidence?'  
 'He offers you hostages,' said the Saracen,  
 'You will have ten or fifteen or twenty.  
 Even if it means his death, I shall send a son of mine,  
 And you will not have, I think, a nobler boy. 150  
 When you are in your royal palace,  
 At the great festival of Saint Michael of the Peril,  
 My Lord says he will follow you there.  
 In your baths, which God made for you there,  
 It is his wish to become a Christian.' 155  
 Charles replies: 'He may yet be saved.' AOI.

## II

The evening was fair and the sun was bright;  
 Charles has the ten mules stabled.  
 In the spacious garden the king has a tent pitched  
 160 And in it he lodged the ten messengers;  
 Twelve servants attended to all their needs.  
 They remain that night until the break of day;  
 The emperor arose early in the morning  
 And heard mass and matins.  
 165 Then the king went over to a pine tree;  
 He summons his barons to conclude his council.  
 He wishes to be guided entirely by the men of France. AOI.

## 12

The emperor goes over to a pine tree;  
 He summons his barons to conclude his council,  
 170 Duke Ogier and Archbishop Turpin,  
 Richard the Old and his nephew Henry,  
 And the valiant Count Acelin of Gascony,  
 Tedbald of Reims and his cousin Milon,  
 And Gerer and Gerin were there too,  
 175 Along with them came Count Roland  
 And Oliver, the valiant and the noble.  
 There are more than a thousand Franks from France;  
 Ganelon came, who committed the act of treason.  
 Now begins the council which turned to grief. AOI.

## 13

180 'My lord barons,' said the emperor Charles,  
 'King Marsile has sent me his messengers.  
 He wishes to give me a great portion of his wealth,  
 Bears and lions and trained hounds,  
 Seven hundred camels and a thousand moulted hawks,  
 185 Four hundred mules laden with Arabian gold,  
 And besides this more than fifty carts.  
 But he tells me I should return to France;

He will follow me to Aix, my home,  
 Where he will receive our most holy faith.  
 He will become a Christian, and hold his lands from me; 190  
 But I do not know what his true thoughts are.'  
 The Franks say: 'We must be on our guard.' AOI.

## 14

The emperor had finished speaking.  
 Count Roland, who is not in agreement,  
 Rises to his feet, and spoke against the pact. 195  
 He said to the king: 'Believe Marsile and you will regret it.  
 We came to Spain seven long years ago;  
 I have conquered for you Noples and Commibles  
 And taken Valterne and the land of Pine,  
 And Balaguer, Tudela and Sezile. 200  
 King Marsile committed a most treacherous act;  
 He sent fifteen of his pagans,  
 Each bearing an olive branch.  
 They addressed you with these very same words;  
 You sought advice from your Franks 205  
 And they counselled you in somewhat reckless fashion.  
 You sent two of your counts to the pagans,  
 One was Basan, the other Basile.  
 He took their heads on the hills beneath Haltile.  
 Wage war, as you set out to do, 210  
 Take your assembled troops to Saragossa;  
 Lay siege to the city as long as you live,  
 And avenge those whom the traitor put to death.' AOI.

## 15

The emperor kept his head bowed;  
 He stroked his beard and smoothed his moustache. 215  
 He replied neither for nor against his nephew;  
 The Franks stay quiet, except for Ganelon.  
 He rises to his feet and came before Charles,  
 Beginning his speech with great ferocity.

- 220 He said to the king: 'Trust a fool and you will regret it,  
Whether myself or another, except to your advantage.  
When King Marsile sends you word  
That with his hands clasped in yours he will become your vassal  
And hold all Spain from you as a gift,  
225 And then receive the faith we hold,  
He who advises that we should reject this pact,  
Does not care, lord, what sort of death we die.  
Arrogant advice should not prosper;  
Let us avoid fools and heed the wise.'

AOI.

## 16

- 230 It was Naimes who next came forward;  
There was no better vassal in the court than he.  
He said to the king: 'You have heard these words;  
Count Ganelon has made this reply to you.  
There is sense in it, if it be properly understood;  
235 King Marsile is defeated in war.  
You have taken all his castles;  
With your catapults you have shattered his walls,  
Burned his cities and conquered his men.  
When he asks you to have mercy on him,  
240 It would be a sin to proceed . . .  
Since he wishes to reassure you with hostages,  
This great war should not continue.'  
The Franks say: 'The duke has spoken well.'

AOI.

## 17

- 'My lord barons, whom shall we send  
245 To King Marsile in Saragossa?'  
Duke Naimes replies: 'I shall go, with your consent.  
Hand me the glove and the staff.'  
The king answers: 'You are a wise man;  
By this beard and this moustache of mine,  
250 You will not go so far from me this year.  
Sit down, since no one calls you forth.'

## 18

- 'My lord barons, whom can we send  
To the Saracen who holds Saragossa?'  
Roland replies: 'I am prepared to go.'  
'You certainly will not,' said Count Oliver, 255  
'Your temperament is most hostile and fierce,  
I am afraid you might pick a quarrel.  
If the king wishes, I am prepared to go.'  
The king answers: 'Be silent, both of you;  
Neither you nor he will set foot there. 260  
By this white beard of mine which you see,  
The twelve peers are not to be nominated.'  
The Franks stay quiet, well and truly silenced.

## 19

- Turpin of Reims then rose from the ranks  
And said to the king: 'Let your Franks be. 265  
You have been in this country for seven years;  
They have endured many troubles and toils.  
Give me, lord, the staff and the glove  
And I shall go to the Spanish Saracen  
To see what lies behind his outward show.' 270  
The emperor responds angrily:  
'Go and be seated on that white silk cloth;  
Do not say another word, unless I bid you to.'

AOI.

## 20

- 'Noble knights,' said the Emperor Charles,  
'Choose someone for me from my domain 275  
To carry my message to Marsile.'  
Roland said: 'It will be Ganelon, my stepfather.'  
The Franks say: 'He can do this well;  
If he is not chosen, no wiser man will be sent.'  
Count Ganelon was deeply distressed; 280  
He throws down his great marten fur from his shoulders  
And stood there in his tunic of silk.

- His eyes flashed, his face was very fierce.  
 His body was noble, his torso broad;  
 285 So handsome was he that all his peers gaze at him.  
 He said to Roland: 'You fool, why are you so angry?  
 Everyone knows that I am your stepfather  
 And yet you have named me to go to Marsile.  
 If God grants that I return from there,  
 290 I shall stir up against you such a great feud  
 That it will last for the rest of your life.'  
 Roland replies: 'I hear arrogant and foolish words;  
 Everyone knows that I fear no threats.  
 But it must be a wise man who delivers the message.  
 295 If the king desires it, I am ready to perform the task for you.'

21

- Ganelon replies: 'You will not go in my place;  
 You are not my vassal and I am not your lord.  
 Charles orders me to carry out his mission.  
 I shall go to Marsile in Saragossa;  
 300 I shall perform this somewhat reckless act,  
 Before giving vent to my great wrath.\*  
 When Roland heard him, he began to laugh. AOI.

22

- When Ganelon sees that Roland is now laughing at him,  
 He is so distressed that he almost bursts with rage;  
 305 He very nearly goes out of his mind.  
 He says to the count: 'I can no longer love you;  
 You have nominated me falsely.  
 Rightful emperor, see me standing here before you;  
 I wish to fulfil your command.'

23

- 'I well know that I must go to Saragossa;  
 310 Whoever goes there cannot hope to return.  
 Moreover, I have your sister as my wife AOI.

38

- And by her I have a son, there could be no finer boy.  
 His name is Baldwin,' he says, 'and he will become a valiant man.  
 To him I bequeath my honours and my lands; 315  
 Take care of him, I shall never set eyes on him again.'  
 Charles replies: 'You are very soft-hearted;  
 You must go, since it is my command.'

24

- The king said: 'Ganelon, stand forth; AOI.  
 Take the staff and the glove. 320  
 You have heard, the Franks have nominated you.'  
 'Lord,' said Ganelon, 'this is all Roland's doing;  
 As long as I live, I shall have no love for him,  
 Nor Oliver, since he is his companion,  
 Nor the twelve peers, because they love him so. 325  
 I challenge them here, lord, in your presence.'  
 The king said: 'You are of very evil disposition;  
 You will certainly go, since it is my command.'  
 'I can go, but without protection: AOI.  
 Basile had none, nor his brother Basan.' 330

25

- The emperor holds out his right glove to him,  
 But Count Ganelon would rather not have been there;  
 When he should have received it, it fell to the ground.  
 The Franks say: 'God, what can this mean?  
 From this mission great misfortune will befall us.' 335  
 'Lords,' said Ganelon, 'you will hear more of this.'

26

- 'Lord,' said Ganelon, 'give me leave;  
 Since I must go, there is no reason to delay.'  
 The king said: 'In Jesus's name and mine.'  
 With his right hand he absolved him and blessed him; 340  
 Then he handed him the staff and the letter.

39

- Count Ganelon goes to his lodging.  
 He begins to put on his armour,  
 The finest at his disposal.
- 345 Spurs of gold are fixed upon his feet,  
 At his side he girds his sword, Murgleis,  
 And he mounted his warhorse, Tachebrun;  
 The stirrup was held for him by his uncle Guinemer.  
 You would have seen so many knights weep there,
- 350 All of them saying: 'How sad you came here, lord!  
 You have spent a long time in the king's court  
 And been recognized by all as a noble vassal;  
 He who proposed that you should go  
 Will not be supported or protected by Charlemagne.
- 355 Count Roland ought not to have thought of this,  
 Because you are descended from a most noble family.'  
 Then they say: 'Lord, take us with you.'  
 Ganelon replies: 'May God forbid!  
 It is better that I alone die than so many good knights.
- 360 You will return, lords, to the fair land of France;  
 Offer greetings to my wife on my behalf  
 And to Pinabel, my friend and my peer,  
 And Baldwin, whom you know to be my son.  
 Help him and regard him as your lord.'
- 365 He begins his journey and set off on his way. AOI.

- Ganelon rides over to a tall olive tree,  
 He joined the Saracen messengers.  
 But Blancandrin is waiting for him impatiently;  
 With great skill they address each other.
- 370 Blancandrin said: 'Charles is a marvellous man  
 Who conquered Apulia and all Calabria;  
 He crossed the salty sea to England  
 And won the poll-tax for Rome's own use.\*  
 What does he want from us here in our land?'
- 375 Ganelon replies: 'Such is his nature;  
 There will never be any man to equal him.' AOI.

- Blancandrin said: 'The Franks are most noble men;  
 Great harm is being done by those dukes and counts  
 Who give such advice to their lord.  
 They destroy and torment him and others too.' 380
- Ganelon replies: 'In truth I know of no one  
 Except Roland who will yet be shamed by this.  
 Yesterday morning the emperor was sitting in the shade;  
 His nephew came up to him, clad in his coat of mail;  
 He had been on a forage near Carcassonne. 385
- In his hand he held a red apple:  
 "Here, my lord," said Roland to his uncle,  
 "I offer you the crowns of each and every king."  
 His arrogance ought to be his downfall;  
 For every day he takes risks with his life. 390
- If anyone killed him, we should then all have peace.' AOI.

- Blancandrin said: 'Roland is a dangerous man  
 Who wants to make everyone surrender  
 And who lays claim to every land.  
 Through which men does he expect to do so much?' 395
- Ganelon replies: 'Through the Franks;  
 They love him so much they will not fail him.  
 So much gold and silver does he bestow on them.  
 Mules and war-horses, silks and arms.  
 The emperor himself is constantly in his thoughts;\* 400
- For him he will conquer the lands from here to the Orient.' AOI.

- Ganelon and Blancandrin rode on,  
 Until each finally pledged his word  
 To try to bring about the death of Roland.  
 On they rode over track and path 405
- Until in Saragossa they dismount beneath a yew tree.  
 A chair of state stood in a pine tree's shade,