Linguistics 103
Language Structure and Verbal Art

Essay 1
due Wednesday October 28th

This assignment involves comparing translations of portions of the *Song of Roland*. The passages for analysis are divided into three parts (A, B and C) as below:

A. laisses 1-27 / lines 1-365 [365 lines]

B. laisses 28-66 / lines 366-825 [460 lines]

C. (i) ‘Oliver vs. Roland’: laisses 79-96 / lines 996-1268
   (ii) ‘Roland’s lament’: laisses 140-41 / lines 1851-1885
   (iii) ‘The death of Roland’: laisses 168-179 / lines 2259-2456 total = [425 lines]

Together these comprise about one-third of the whole epic. Note that part C is composed of three subsections (‘Oliver vs. Roland’, ‘Roland’s lament’ and ‘The death of Roland’).

You will be reading three different translations of each of the three sections:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dorothy Sayers 1957</td>
<td>Patricia Terry 1965</td>
<td>Charles Scott Moncrieff 1906</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charles Hubert Sisson 1983</td>
<td>Laura Moore Wright 1960</td>
<td>John O’Hagan 1880</td>
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These translations range in time from 1880 (O’Hagan) to 1990 (Burgess) and represent the full range of translators’ reactions to the original.

The entire Moncrieff translation is available on-line through links on the course home page. The Old French original — as well as images of the actual Oxford manuscript — are also available on-line through links on the course home page, if you are curious to look at them.

For summaries of the plot there are numerous on-line resources, including:


http://www.timelessmyths.com/arthurian/roland.html

I am also providing you with the first 21 pages of the introduction to Owen’s translation (OwenIntro.pdf).
Note that Owen does not number the laisses, so the laisse numbers have been pencilled in for you. O’Hagan’s laisse numbers are not the same as the others’, because he includes some extra laisses which are not present in the Oxford manuscript, which forms the basis of all modern editions. (O’Hagan based his translation on the edition of Léon Gautier, who attempted to reconstruct a ‘complete’ version of the epic by adding material missing in the Oxford manuscript from other, later, manuscripts. Most contemporary scholars consider this to be inappropriate.) I have pencilled in the conventional laisse numbers for you; O’Hagan’s laisse numbers are printed in Roman numerals and can be ignored.

As we did in comparing translations of the first three cantos of the *Inferno*, in this essay you should:

(1) Discuss the structural properties (meter, rhyme or assonance) which each translator has chosen and compare these to the structural properties of the epic French decasyllable as discussed in class. Give specific examples to support your observations.

(2) Evaluate the stylistic choices the translators have made. Consider, for example, the presence or absence of syntactic inversion and complexity, and of archaic sentence structure or word choices. Again, include specific examples.

(3) Discuss how ‘successful’ the various translations are, bearing in mind that ‘success’ can be understood only with respect to a particular set of expectations. For example, you might prefer a more ‘readable’ translation. If so, you need to make explicit what makes one translation more readable than another. Or, you may prefer a translation that mimics in some way the sound of the original; or one that adheres to traditional structures of English (as opposed to Old French) poetry; or one with an ‘elevated’ tone or style; or you may find such a style awkward or artificial. Feel free to comment on any aspect of the translation which strikes you as relevant, but do not engage in empty generalizations: always discuss specific cases to illustrate or motivate your arguments.

Your essay should be about 8 pages in length, and no more than 10. You will have to be succinct, since there are 9 translations to consider. Not every translation needs to be given equal attention, but some attention should be given to all of them.