

Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art
Introduction to the Song of Roland

Sample passage in Old French with word stresses marked

‘Seignórs baróns,’ dist l’emperédre Chárles, 180
sirs barons said the emperor Charles

‘Li reis Marsílies m’at tramís ses messáges;
The king Marsile me has sent his messages

De son aveír me voelt donér grant másse,
Of his possessions me wants to-give large quantity

Ors e leóns e véltres chadenábles,
Bears and lions & hounds coupled

Set cenx chameíls e mil hostórs mudábles,
7 100 camels & 1000 falcons moulted

Quátre cenx muls chargiéz de-l or d’Arábie, 185
Four 100 mules loaded with gold of-Arabia

Avoéc icó plus de cinquánte chárre:
With this more than 50 carts

Mais il me mándet qued en Fránce m’en álge,
But he me asks that to France me-away go

Il me siurát ad Ais a mon estáge,
He me will-follow to Aix to my home

Si recevrát la nóstre lei plus sálve,
Then will-accept our law most holy

Chrestíens iert, de mei tendrát se márches; 190
Christian will-be from me will-hold his marches

Mais jo ne sai quels en est sis coráges.’
But I not know what of-this is his heart

Díent Franceís: ‘Il nos i cóvient guárde!’ AOI.
Say Frenchmen: It us there is-suitable caution ??

Li quens Rodlânz se jut desóz un pin 2375
 Envérs Espáigne en at tornét son vis;
 De plusórs chóses a remembrér lui prist:
 De tánte tére cóme li ber conquíst,
 De dólce Fránce, des hómes des son lign,
 De Charlemágne son seignór ki-l nodrít: 2380
 Ne poét mudér n'en plort e ne sospírt,
 Mais lui medísme ne voelt méttre en oblít:
 Claímet sa cólpe si priét Deu mercít:
 'Veíre patérne, ki ónques ne mentís,
 Saint Lazarón de mort resurrexís, 2385
 E Daniél des leóns guaresís:
 Guarís de mei l'ánme de toz perílz,
 Por les pecchiéz qued en ma víde fis.'
 Son déstre guant a Deu en poroffrít,
 Sainz Gabriél de sa main li at pris. 2390
 Desór son braz teneít lo chief enclín,
 Joíntes ses mains est aléz a sa fin.
 Deu i tramíst son áng[e]le Cherubín
 E saint Michiél de la Mer de-l Péríl,
 Ensémb'l'od els sainz Gabriél i vint: 2395
 L'ánme de-l cónte pórtent en paredís.

Prose Translation
Rene Hague 1937

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‘Lord barons,’ said the emperor Charles, ‘king Marsilun has sent his messengers to me. He wills to give me a great mass of his having, bears and lions and coupled hounds, seven hundred camels and a thousand hawks which have passed their moulting, four hundred mules loaded with gold from Arabia; and with this more than fifty carts. But his word to me is that I go to France. He will follow me to Aix, to my house, and he will take our most safe law. He will be Christian, will hold his marches of me. But I do not know what is his heart in this.’ The French say, ‘We need to have care of that.’ AOI.

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Count Roland lay under a pine tree. He has turned his face towards Spain. He began to bring many things into his mind; the many countries which the baron overcame, sweet France, the men of his line, and Charlemagne this lord who nourished him; and he cannot hold himself from weeping and sighing. But he will not be forgetful of himself. He confesses his sin and prays to God for mercy. ‘True father who have never lied, who raised Lazarus from the dead and saved Daniel from the lions, save my soul from every danger of the sins I did in my life.’ He raised his right glove to God, and St Gabriel has taken it from his hand. He held his head bowed on his arm, he joined his hands, and he has gone to his end. God sent his angel Cherubim and St Michael of the Peril, and with the St Gabriel came to him. They take the soul of the count to Paradise.

French epic decasyllable

x = position which may contain a stressed or a stressless syllable

S = position which *must* contain a stressed syllable

| = caesura (*obligatory* boundary between words)

(.) = optional syllable

Epic decasyllable pattern

x x x S (.) | x x x x x S (.)

Each line is divided into *half-lines* by the *caesura*.

Caesura: obligatory word break occurring in the middle of the line.

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The king Marsile me has sent his messages

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Of his possessions me wants to-give large quantity

Ors e leóns | e véltres chadenábles,
Bears and lions & hounds coupled

Note that unlike typical English meter, but *like* the Italian Endecasillabo, the position of the stressed syllables prior to the half-line-final stress is *unrestricted*.

Unlike the Endecasillabo, there is an obligatory stress on the fourth syllable *and* an optional extrametrical syllable after it, followed by an *obligatory* word-boundary (caesura).

dist l'emperédre Chárles x x x X x X .

plus de cinquánte chárre x x x X x X .

e véltres chadenábles x X x x x X .

des hómes de son lign x X x x x X

m'at tramís ses meságes x x X x x X .

son seignór kil nodrít x x X x x X

pórtent en paradís X x x x x X

l'ánme de toz perílz X x x x x X

Stanza and rhyme structure

Contiguous lines form groups called **lays** or **laissez**

The last line in each **laisse** has **end-asonance**

Assonance: matching vowel sounds

End-asonance: the vowel which must match is the final stressed syllable of the line

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De plusórs chóses || a remembrér lui prist:
De tánte tére || cóme li ber conquíst,
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L'ánme de·l cónte || pórtent en paredís.