Analysis of the Song of Roland

By Zach Eckels

This paper was written for Dr. Thomas Sosnowski’s History of Civilization I. It examines the traits of ‘the hero’ characterized in “The Song of Roland” and what was the most important character trait during the era that it was written.

On Saturday, August 15, 778, French forces led by Count Roland were defeated at the legendary battle at Roncesvalles Pass. Roland and the twenty-thousand soldiers under his command were acting as the rear guard to protect the king, Charlemagne, and the rest of the French army. The battle took place in a high mountain pass located on the border of France and Spain. The rear guard of Charlemagne’s army was ambushed as they travelled through the pass; in the violence that ensued, Roland was killed and the rest of the French forces in the pass were defeated. The story of this epic battle was passed down orally for hundreds of years until it was finally recorded in the Song of Roland. This text portrays an exaggerated account of the battle at Roncesvalles Pass; although it is exaggerated, the tale still gives valuable insight to the culture and values of ancient Europe.

The Song of Roland was written approximately during the 11th century, around the time of the first crusade. Religious influence from this time period is evident throughout the text as it shows the conflict between the Christian and Muslim realms. Both realms have a common trait; they rely heavily on a feudal system of social organization. Analyzing the hierarchical structure of this system shows what character traits are prized, as well as the importance that lord and vassal relationships play in the social hierarchy of societies in ancient Europe.

In the feudal system described by the text, God is placed at the top of the hierarchy. The king, Charlemagne, is just beneath God. Charlemagne is depicted as God's primary vassal and he is seen as a direct representation of God himself, nearly perfect. Beneath him, all of the other lord and vassal relationships are positioned according to the authority of each person in the hierarchy. The success of the members of this system is dependent on their loyalty to their lord; thus loyalty is among the most prized character traits of the characters in this story.

Along with this, a breach in the loyalty of one member of the hierarchy severely limits the chance of success of the subsequent levels of vassals. God is depicted as the ultimate authority in the feudal hierarchy and Charlemagne's success in battle, and his success as a ruler, is dependent upon his loyalty to God. Beneath Charlemagne, the success of his people depends on their loyalty to the king. If a king fails to submit to God, he is punished for breaching his duty to be a loyal vassal to his lord, which results in punishment for all of the people beneath him. Submission to a higher authority, or lord, is the single most important aspect of life for people of this era.

They must first submit to those above them, then submit to their king, and most importantly submit to God. Failure to submit to these authorities result in severe punishment, and in many cases the
punishment is death. Much of the Song of Roland deals with these relationships between lords and vassals and how these relationships are the foundation of the feudal society.

There are many examples of these relationships throughout the text. God is the ultimate lord over the people. As the supreme authority, he has the power to reward or punish based solely on the degree of loyalty displayed by his followers. Roland is a prime example of this concept. He dedicated his life to serving his lord, Charlemagne, and measured his success in life by how well Charlemagne loved him. When Olivier warned that the Saracens were preparing to attack the rear guard, Roland had a chance to sound the Oliphant to inform Charlemagne of the impending battle so that the main French army would return and inevitably defeat the Saracen army with minimal casualties to the French. Out of pride and arrogance, Roland refused to sound the horn. He claimed that he would embarrass France; he said that he would "much prefer to die than come to shame; for fighting well, the Emperor will love us." (Harrison 87 1091-1092) During this battle, Roland makes several references to his duty to fight bravely in order to please his king and die as a martyr.

By the end of the battle, Roland is killed in action. Even though he made a grave mistake by allowing his pride to get in the way of reason which prevented him from sounding the Oliphant, God overlooks this sin and he is rewarded for his loyalty when angels descend from heaven and raise his soul from earth into heaven. His honorable death as a martyr is a direct reward of his loyalty to his lord, Charlemagne. Also, Roland's sword, Durendal, contains several Christian relics. By keeping these relics in the hilt of his sword, it is symbolic of his loyalty to not only Charlemagne, who represents God, but to God himself. Due to this show of loyalty, Roland has been rewarded with countless victories in battle and nearly unmatched strength and skill.

Ganelon, his companion Pinabel, and his thirty other companions are another example of this concept. In this case, the text illustrates an example of the punishments that occur when a vassal does not maintain his loyalty to his lord. Ganelon, Roland's step father, grew to resent Roland's success as a warrior, his relationship with the king, and his fame among the people. Roland was essentially everything that Ganelon wanted to be. When Roland nominated Ganelon to be the messenger to the Saracens, Ganelon vowed that he would have his revenge and kill Roland. In order to take his revenge, Ganelon plotted with the Saracen leaders to plan the battle at Roncesvalles pass. In the end, Ganelon accomplished his goal, Roland was killed. By plotting to ambush Roland and the other French soldiers, Ganelon forfeited all loyalty to his lord, (Roland) to the king, and to God. He was severely punished for his breach of loyalty.

While on trial, Pinabel and the rest of his thirty companions supported his cause, claiming that he should be allowed to remain in the service of the king. They defended Ganelon by claiming his actions were not treason but merely a personal issue with Roland. In the end, the trial was decided by a to-the-death battle between Thierry, who supported Ganelon's guilty verdict, and Pinabel, who fought for Ganelon's innocence. The people believed that the winner would be favored by God; therefore, the survivor of the death match will be the supporter of the Godliest course of action. Thierry is the weaker opponent, the odds are against him. The concept of the lord and vassal relationship comes into play to decide the victor of the battle. Thierry is
remaining loyal to his lord by defending his King's judgment.

Pinabel is also acting according to his duty to be loyal to his lord, Ganelon; although, by Ganelon's decision to breach his duty of loyalty, he has sealed the fate of not only himself, but the fate of his loyal vassals as well. Since Pinabel is the stronger opponent, he soon gains the advantage in the death match and strikes a blow that should have been fatal. God intervenes and spares Thierry, giving him the opportunity to strike the lethal blow against Pinabel. This lethal blow wins the death match and confirms the fate of Ganelon and his followers.

Thierry is spared due to his loyalty to his lord, Charlemagne, who had also remained loyal to the ultimate authority, God himself. Due to Ganelon's breach of his duty to remain loyal to his lord, he is condemned to death, along with his companions. The people decide to hang the remaining of the thirty companions; this punishment is not sufficient for Ganelon's actions. Ganelon is subject to be torn limb from limb by four high-spirited, fiery, horses. This instance of Ganelon's treason shows how loyalty is the single most important character trait during this era; along with this, a breach of one's duty to be loyal to his lord is the single most despised action and is punishable by torture and death.

The social structure of the Saracens is based on the same concept of a feudal hierarchy as that of the French. The Saracen people believe that they must remain loyal to their king, Marsilla, and to their god, Allah. They adhere to the same vassal and lord relationships as the French; although, there is one crucial difference. Time and time again, the Muslim armies are defeated by the Christian armies. The nature of the vassal and lord relationships offers a clear explanation of why this is happening. The Muslims, like the Christians, are loyal to their lords, who are then loyal to the king. The difference lies in the loyalty of the kings. Charlemagne worships the God of the Christians where Marsilla worships Allah.

Due to Marsilla's means of worship, his loyalty lies with the wrong deity. According to the feudal system shown in the text, this is essentially a breach of his duty to be loyal to the Christian God which is likely to be severely punished. As was the case with Ganelon, a breach of loyalty by the lord results in punishment of that lord as well as punishment for the subsequent levels of vassals. Marsilla was directly punished by losing his right hand. He also lost his kingdom as well as hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Many of his followers are punished by losing their lives while the survivors witness a collapse of the Muslim society after the French invasion.

In battle, it became evident to the French soldiers that their God was with them. Several miracles of God are mentioned in the book showing that God intervened in the battle to aid the French. When they became aware that god was intervening, the soldiers cried out "King Charles is in the right against these pagans and God has left the verdict up to us!" (Harrison 242 2267-3368) Since Charlemagne remained loyal to the correct deity, he was rewarded by being the victor of the final battle described in the text. When he engages Balligant, Charlemagne was struck in the head by a potentially fatal blow that cuts through his armor and skin to his skull. Through God's intervention, he survives and is given the strength to defeat Balligant.

This causes the Muslim army to retreat. The narrator describes the scene by saying, "the pagans flee—God wills them not to
stay." (Harrison 262 3623) The Muslim army falls back to the city of Saragossa where they are overrun by the French soldiers who breach the walls and capture the city. Once again, the French soldiers are successful due to their adherence to the feudal hierarchy.

In the *Song of Roland*, the well being of any society largely depends on the loyalty of the king to the correct deity and the loyalty of the people to their king. The text shows many examples of the rewards and punishments of loyalty to a lord or the lack thereof. In the text, a hero is shown to be a noble vassal who serves a noble lord. Loyalty is the most prized character trait among the people. Those who display loyalty are greatly rewarded while those who fail to display loyalty are severely punished.