Extracts from the *Song of Roland*


[Halsall Introduction]

*The Song of Roland* is an anonymous Old French epic, dating perhaps as early as the middle 11th century. It represents a glorification of the ideals of the French nobility in the period. The story refers to a historical incident during Charlemagne's time, a minor skirmish in his Spanish campaigns. In the song it becomes glorified as the Battle of Roncevalles.

LXXX

Oliver mounts upon a lofty peak,
Looks to his right along the valley green,
The pagan tribes approaching there appear;
He calls Rollanz, his companion, to see:
"What sound is this, come out of Spain, we hear,
What hauberks bright, what helmets these that gleam?
They'll smite our Franks with fury past belief,
He knew it, Guenes, the traitor and the thief,
Who chose us out before the King our chief."
Answers the count Rollanz: "Olivier, cease.
That man is my good-father; hold thy peace."

LXXXI

Upon a peak is Oliver mounted,
Kingdom of Spain he sees before him spread,
And Sarrazins, so many gathered.
Their helmets gleam, with gold are jewelled,
Also their shields, their hauberks orfreied,
Also their swords, ensigns on spears fixed.
Rank beyond rank could not be numbered,
So many there, no measure could he set.
In his own heart he's sore astonished,
Fast as he could, down from the peak hath sped
Comes to the Franks, to them his tale hath said.

LXXXII

Says Oliver: "Pagans from there I saw;
Never on earth did any man see more.
Gainst us their shields an hundred thousand bore,
That laced helms and shining hauberks wore;
And, bolt upright, their bright brown spearheads shone.
Battle we'll have as never was before.
Lords of the Franks, God keep you in valour!
So hold your ground, we be not overborne!"
Then say the Franks "Shame take him that goes off:
If we must die, then perish one and all."

LXXXIII

Says Oliver: "Pagans in force abound,
While of us Franks but very few I count;
Comrade Rollanz, your horn I pray you sound!
If Charles hear, he'll turn his armies round."
Answers Rollanz: "A fool I should be found;
In France the Douce would perish my renown.
With Durendal I'll lay on thick and stout,
In blood the blade, to its golden hilt, I'll drown.
Felon pagans to th' pass shall not come down;
I pledge you now, to death they all are bound.

LXXXIV

"Comrade Rollanz, sound the olifant, I pray;
If Charles hear, the host he'll turn again;
Will succour us our King and baronage."
Answers Rollanz: "Never, by God, I say,
For my misdeed shall kinsmen hear the blame,
Nor France the Douce fall into evil fame!
Rather stout blows with Durendal I'll lay,
With my good sword that by my side doth sway;
Till bloodied o'er you shall behold the blade.
Felon pagans are gathered to their shame;
I pledge you now, to death they're doomed to-day."

LXXXV

"Comrade Rollanz, once sound your olifant!
If Charles hear, where in the pass he stands,
I pledge you now, they'll turn again, the Franks."
"Never, by God," then answers him Rollanz,
"Shall it be said by any living man,
That for pagans I took my horn in hand!
Never by me shall men reproach my clan.
When I am come into the battle grand,
And blows lay on, by hundred, by thousand,
Of Durendal bloodied you'll see the brand.
Franks are good men; like vassals brave they'll stand; 
Nay, Spanish men from death have no warrant."

LXXXVI

Says Oliver: "In this I see no blame; 
I have beheld the Sarrazins of Spain; 
Covered with them, the mountains and the vales, 
The wastes I saw, and all the farthest plains. 
A muster great they've made, this people strange; 
We have of men a very little tale." 
Answers Rollanz: "My anger is inflamed. 
Never, please God His Angels and His Saints, 
Never by me shall Frankish valour fail! 
Rather I'll die than shame shall me attain. 
Therefore strike on, the Emperour's love to gain."

LXXXVII

Pride hath Rollanz, wisdom Olivier hath; 
And both of them shew marvellous courage; 
Once they are horsed, once they have donned their arms, 
Rather they'd die than from the battle pass. 
Good are the counts, and lofty their language. 
Felon pagans come cantering in their wrath. 
Says Oliver: "Behold and see, Rollanz, 
These are right near, but Charles is very far. 
On the olifant deign now to sound a blast; 
Were the King here, we should not fear damage. 
Only look up towards the Pass of Aspre, 
In sorrow there you'll see the whole rereward. 
Who does this deed, does no more afterward." 
Answers Rollanz: "Utter not such outrage! 
Evil his heart that is in thought coward! 
We shall remain firm in our place installed; 
From us the blows shall come, from us the assault."

LXXXVIII

When Rollant sees that now must be combat, 
More fierce he's found than lion or leopard; 
The Franks he calls, and Oliver commands: 
"Now say no more, my friends, nor thou, comrade. 
That Emperour, who left us Franks on guard, 
A thousand score stout men he set apart, 
And well he knows, not one will prove coward.
Man for his lord should suffer with good heart,
Of bitter cold and great heat bear the smart,
His blood let drain, and all his flesh be scarred.
Strike with thy lance, and I with Durendal,
With my good sword that was the King's reward.
So, if I die, who has it afterward
Noble vassal's he well may say it was."

LXXXIX

From the other part is the Archbishop Turpin,
He pricks his horse and mounts upon a hill;
Calling the Franks, sermon to them begins:
"My lords barons, Charles left us here for this;
He is our King, well may we die for him:
To Christendom good service offering.
Battle you'll have, you all are bound to it,
For with your eyes you see the Sarrazins.
Pray for God's grace, confessing Him your sins!
For your souls' health, I'll absolution give
So, though you die, blest martyrs shall you live,
Thrones you shall win in the great Paradis."
The Franks dismount, upon the ground are lit.
That Archbishop God's Benediction gives,
For their penance, good blows to strike he bids.

XC

The Franks arise, and stand upon their feet,
They're well absolved, and from their sins made clean,
And the Archbishop has signed them with God's seal;
And next they mount upon their chargers keen;
By rule of knights they have put on their gear,
For battle all apparelled as is meet.
The count Rollant calls Oliver, and speaks
"Comrade and friend, now clearly have you seen
That Guenelun hath got us by deceit;
Gold hath he ta'en; much wealth is his to keep;
That Emperour vengeance for us must wreak.
King Marsilies hath bargained for us cheap;
At the sword's point he yet shall pay our meed."

XCI

To Spanish pass is Rollanz now going
On Veillantif, his good steed, galloping;
He is well armed, pride is in his bearing,
He goes, so brave, his spear in hand holding,
He goes, its point against the sky turning;
A gonfalon all white thereon he's pinned,
Down to his hand flutters the golden fringe:
Noble his limbs, his face clear and smiling.
His companion goes after, following,
The men of France their warrant find in him.
Proudly he looks towards the Sarrazins,
And to the Franks sweetly, himself humbling;
And courteously has said to them this thing:
"My lords barons, go now your pace holding!
Pagans are come great martyrdom seeking;
Noble and fair reward this day shall bring,
Was never won by any Frankish King."
Upon these words the hosts are come touching.

XCVII

And his comrade Gerers strikes the admiral,
The shield he breaks, the hauberk unmetals,
And his good spear drives into his vitals,
So well he's pinned him, clean through the carcass,
Dead on the field he's flung him from his hand.
Says Oliver: "Now is our battle grand."

XCVIII

Sansun the Duke goes strike that almacour,
The shield he breaks, with golden flowers tooled,
That good hauberk for him is nothing proof,
He's sliced the heart, the lungs and liver through,
And flung him dead, as well or ill may prove.
Says the Archbishop: "A baron's stroke, in truth."

XCIX

And Anseis has let his charger run;
He goes to strike Turgis of Turtelus,
The shield he breaks, its golden boss above,
The hauberk too, its doubled mail undoes,
His good spear's point into the carcass runs,
So well he's thrust, clean through the whole steel comes,
And from the hilt he's thrown him dead in dust.
Then says Rollant: "Great prowess in that thrust."
And Engelers the Gascoin of Burdele
Spurs on his horse, lets fall the reins as well,
He goes to strike Escremiz of Valtrene,
The shield he breaks and shatters on his neck,
The hauberk too, he has its chinguard rent,
Between the arm-pits has pierced him through the breast,
On his spear's hilt from saddle throws him dead;
After he says "So are you turned to hell."

The count Rollanz, he canters through the field,
Holds Durendal, he well can thrust and wield,
Right great damage he's done the Sarrazines
You'd seen them, one on other, dead in heaps,
Through all that place their blood was flowing clear!
In blood his arms were and his hauberk steeped,
And bloodied o'er, shoulders and neck, his steed.
And Oliver goes on to strike with speed;
No blame that way deserve the dozen peers,
For all the Franks they strike and slay with heat,
Pagans are slain, some swoon there in their seats,
Says the Archbishop: "Good baronage indeed!"
"Monjoie" he cries, the call of Charles repeats.

And Oliver has cantered through the crush;
Broken his spear, the truncheon still he thrusts;
Going to strike a pagan Malsarun;
Flowers and gold, are on the shield, he cuts,
Out of the head both the two eyes have burst,
And all the brains are fallen in the dust;
He flings him dead, sev'n hundred else amongst.
Then has he slain Turgin and Esturgus;
Right to the hilt, his spear in flinders flew.
Then says Rollant: "Companion, what do you?
In such a fight, there's little strength in wood,
Iron and steel should here their valour prove.
Where is your sword, that Halteclere I knew?
Golden its hilt, whereon a crystal grew."
Says Oliver: "I had not, if I drew,
Time left to strike enough good blows and true."
CVII

Then Oliver has drawn his mighty sword
As his comrade had bidden and implored,
In knightly wise the blade to him has shewed;
Justin he strikes, that Iron Valley's lord,
All of his head has down the middle shorn,
The carcass sliced, the broidered sark has torn,
The good saddle that was with old adorned,
And through the spine has sliced that pagan's horse;
Dead in the field before his feet they fall.
Says Rollant: "Now my brother I you call;
He'll love us for such blows, our Emperor."
On every side "Monjoie" you'd hear them roar.

CIX

The battle grows more hard and harder yet,
Franks and pagans, with marvellous onset,
Each other strike and each himself defends.
So many shafts bloodstained and shattered,
So many flags and ensigns tattered;
So many Franks lose their young lustihead,
Who'll see no more their mothers nor their friends,
Nor hosts of France, that in the pass attend.
Charles the Great weeps therefor with regret.
What profits that? No succour shall they get.
Evil service, that day, Guenes rendered them,
To Sarraguce going, his own to sell.
After he lost his members and his head,
In court, at Aix, to gallows-tree condemned;
And thirty more with him, of his kindred,
Were hanged, a thing they never did expect.

[Oliver is killed, and Roland is mortally wounded in combat]

CLXXIV

But Rollant felt that death had made a way
Down from his head till on his heart it lay;
Beneath a pine running in haste he came,
On the green grass he lay there on his face;
His olifant and sword beneath him placed,
Turning his head towards the pagan race,
Now this he did, in truth, that Charles might say
(As he desired) and all the Franks his race; --
'Ah, gentle count; conquering he was slain!'—
He owned his faults often and every way,
And for his sins his glove to God upraised.

CLXXV

But Rollant feels he's no more time to seek;
Looking to Spain, he lies on a sharp peak,
And with one hand upon his breast he beats:
"Mea Culpa! God, by Thy Virtues clean
Me from my sins, the mortal and the mean,
Which from the hour that I was born have been
Until this day, when life is ended here!"
Holds out his glove towards God, as he speaks
Angels descend from heaven on that scene.

CLXXVI

The count Rollanz, beneath a pine he sits,
Turning his eyes towards Spain, he begins
Remembering so many divers things:
So many lands where he went conquering,
And France the Douce, the heroes of his kin,
And Charlemagne, his lord who nourished him.
Nor can he help but weep and sigh at this.
But his own self, he's not forgotten him,
He owns his faults, and God's forgiveness bids:
"Very Father, in Whom no falsehood is,
Saint Lazaron from death Thou didst remit,
And Daniel save from the lions' pit;
My soul in me preserve from all perils
And from the sins I did in life commit!"
His right-hand glove, to God he offers it
Saint Gabriel from's hand hath taken it.
Over his arm his head bows down and slips,
He joins his hands: and so is life finish'd.
God sent him down His angel cherubin,
And Saint Michael, we worship in peril;
And by their side Saint Gabriel alit;
So the count's soul they bare to Paradis.