



12-12-2018

Three Laisses from the Franco-Italian *Song of Roland*

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Recommended Citation

DuVal, John T. (2018) "Three Laisses from the Franco-Italian *Song of Roland*," *Transference*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol6/iss1/12>

John DuVal
*Three Laisses from the Franco-
Italian Song of Roland*

Anonymous
Chanson de Roland

23

Riding by day and moonlight, Ganelon,
like one who fears his death is somewhere close,
speaks to his horse, as lovingly he strokes
the brown spot on its back: “Dear sorrel, go
slower. No need to gallop now. Go slow.
Soon enough you’ll pass the river Rhone
and on beyond the valley Gardamonde
with its treacherous cliff side paths and plunging slopes.
Past it, no one returns to France and home.
I carry words to King Marsillio.
The man who sent you does not love me: Roland!
May God confound him, and He will, if only
God lets me live to deliver the death blow.”

23

30

Ganelon grips his sword until halfway
out of the sheathe it sparkles. He exclaims
“How precious you are to me, exquisite blade!
I’ve drawn and swung you through many a campaign
and carried you with honor many a day.
Charles, when he hears that Ganelon was slain
in a strange country will not hear you failed
to cut heads off the most courageous pagans.
Now we’ll find out what Marsillo’s men are made of!
The pagans mutter, “This Ganelon is brave.”

30

King Charles gives Amery a sword he carried
again and again in many a great battle.
One day is all it ever spent in France,
tested and true as Roland's Durendal,
more costly than a hundred gold Byzants.
He fastens it to him with a gold-rimmed sash.
Now he brings forth a helmet of great value.
He offers it to Amery the lad.
Then he brings forth a shield of elephant.
The emperor won it when he killed Braibant
and gave it to Roland from the dead man's hand.
At the shield's heart are sturdy ivory planks
Its outer leather is of elephant
and hangs from the neck on a gold-embroidered strap.
Around the rim the four winds wheel and gallop.
Heaven and earth are held there by enchantment,
the sun and moon as opposite companions.
Between them tiny stars light up the black.
Its surface never failed the man who grasped it.
All these he gives to Amery the lad,
the son of Count Arnaldo of Bellanda.

Commentary

These three *laissez*, that is, decasyllabic verse-paragraphs of various lengths whose lines end with the same assonance, are from the thirteenth-century Franco-Italian version of *The Song of Roland*, known as the V4 manuscript of St. Mark's Church, Venice. The first 3,870 lines of this version correspond closely with the first 3,682 lines of the 4006-line Anglo-Norman French *Chanson de Roland* known as the Oxford version by which almost all readers know this greatest of French epic poems. From then on, either a different scribal author or the same one, perhaps because the last pages of the manuscript in his hands were missing, seems to awaken to the opportunity to author an independent poetic narrative and ends with a 2,178-line series of adventures parallel to but different from those of Charlemagne and his warriors in the last 320 lines of the Oxford *Roland*. The V4's Franco-Italian reads more like a mixing of two languages than as a single language in itself, and scholars assume that it was composed in a Piedmont region where people, equally fluent in French and Italian, tended to alternate words and phrases from one language to the other as they spoke.

The first two of these three *laissez*, from early in the epic before it diverges from the Oxford version, feature Ganelon, one of the most convincing villains of literature and the only natural poet in the *Roland*, in the act of apostrophizing. In *laisse* 30, which is similar to *laisse* 34 of the Oxford version, the apostrophe to his sword is wonderfully appropriate to the situation. He is a Frenchman alone in Spain, surrounded by Saracens who murdered the last two ambassadors that the French sent and are now threatening to kill him. He has no one to trust or speak to but his own sword. This Franco-Italian *laisse*, with its talk of cutting off heads, is a little more specific than the briefer Anglo-Norman Oxford *laisse*.

The apostrophe to the sword must have inspired the Franco-Italian author to insert one of the extremely few early *laissez* that are totally independent from the Oxford version, a *laisse* where Ganelon speaks to his horse, his only animate friend, as he rides gloomily toward the fortress of the Saracen king.

The third of these three *laissez*, which also appears in

none of the other versions, occurs after the plot line of the V4 has diverged from the Oxford version. A young future hero, Amery, as he is about to be knighted by Charlemagne, receives a shield. The *laisse* begins as standard French-epic armor description and suddenly becomes magically Homeric, except that Homer's famous "Shield of Achilles" is seven times longer with so much more description that the Franco-Italian "Shield of Amery," with its earth and sky, sun and moon and stars, seems realistic and restrained in comparison.

Because *laisse*s are wonderfully variable in length, French epic poets use them as story telling units: a single action, a dialogue, a speech (as in *laisse*s 23 and 30), a description (as in *laisse* 314). Each is its own aural unit, and the change of assonance from *laisse* to *laisse* signals some kind of shift. As I translated, I imitated the original decasyllabics with loose iambic pentameter and assonance on the last stressed syllable of every line of a *laisse*. Thus in *laisse* 30, "campaign," "pagans," "made," and "brave" all assonate. For the sake of assonance and meter I took small liberties, such as adding in the last line of *laisse* 314 the name "Bellanda," Count Arnaldo's peaceful estate where his wife until recently has been able to keep Amery sheltered from warfare. Sometimes, however, a verse translation can be closer to the original than a prose translation because some rhetorical effects work better in verse than in prose. For instance, the paratactic style of the French epic writers, one short and simple grammatical unit followed by another, then another, *punch, punch, punch*, would grow tiresome in prose, but the line-by-line movement of assonantal verse hurries the story forward.

My primary edition in translating the Franco-Italian *Chanson de Roland* has been Robert F. Cook's 2005 "*La Chanson de Roland*": *The French Corpus*, Vol. 1, Part 2, *The Venice 4 Version* (Brepols), with its useful English language glossary, but Giuliano Gasca Queirazza's 1955 *La Chanson de Roland nel testo assonanzato franco-italiano* (Rosenberg & Sellier) is also very useful, especially for *laisse* 314, where Gasca Queirazza notices a problem and wisely attributes the manuscript's awkward mention of the shield first, and then the helmet, and then the shield again, to an error of the scribe, who accidentally transposed the like-sounding lines "Pois li oit aporté un eume luxant," (then he brought him a fancy helmet) and "Pois

li oit aporté un escu d'olifant” (then he brought him a shield of elephant). Following Gasca Queirazza’s example I have transported them back again, for a more intelligible narration and a steadier preparation for the ekphrastic climax of the *laisse*. With this emendation, the second “he brought forth a” stresses through repetition the compact power of the shield, which is tough as elephant, being made of both ivory and elephant hide.