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The Song Of Roland (Classics)



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The Song of Roland



Synopsis

On 15 August 778, Charlemagne's army was returning from a successful expedition against Saracen Spain when its rearguard was ambushed in a remote Pyrenean pass. Out of this skirmish arose a stirring tale of war, which was recorded in the oldest extant epic poem in French. The Song of Roland, written by an unknown poet, tells of Charlemagne's warrior nephew, Lord of the Breton Marches, who valiantly leads his men into battle against the Saracens, but dies in the massacre, defiant to the end. In majestic verses, the battle becomes a symbolic struggle between Christianity and paganism, while Roland's last stand is the ultimate expression of honour and feudal values of twelfth-century France.

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Customer Reviews

The Song of Roland is the most famous of the "chansons de geste" (songs of deeds) of the Middle Ages. It provides a fascinating view into the spirit of warriors of that time and their motivation. The Song of Roland gives an idealized picture, of course, and if we can believe the historians, the medieval knights never lived up to their chivalric ideal. The Song of Roland is not commonly included in the canon of must-read classics. Except in France, maybe. I assume the reason is that people in

our time do not trace back their roots to the feudalism of the Middle Ages, and that they consider the chapter of chivalry closed after Cervantes's satirical portrait of knighthood in "Don Quixote". In one respect, however, this gory tale of slaughter, martyrdom and revenge is very contemporary. It illustrates the mindset of crusaders who see the world in terms of Good and Evil, and the language they use to incite contempt of the other party. Apart from its historical value, the Song of Roland is also worth reading as literature - as an outstanding example for the heroic epic and as a piece of art whose "simple yet elevated style and tone of high moral purpose" (R. Harrison) is reminiscent of the Old Testament. The three most easily available translations of the Song of Roland in the market are: W.S. Merwin's 1963 prose translation with introduction, re-published in paperback by Random House's "Modern Library" in 2001 (ISBN 0375757112). His nine-page introduction is a succinct but sufficient overview of the historical events of AD 778 that became the basis of the Song of Roland.

The Song of Roland is an epic poem celebrating the heroic death of Roland, a Frankish knight and nephew of Charlemagne, in a battle against Saracen forces in Spain in 778. The poem is loosely based on historical events, with the scale and importance of the battle being enlarged many-fold until it becomes a titanic and conclusive engagement between the forces of Christianity and Islam. The poem begins with Charlemagne having campaigned for seven years in Spain, subduing all the country except the city of Saragossa and its king Marsile. Knowing that his forces cannot stand against the Franks, but that his enemy is eager to end the war and return home, Marsile pretends to submit to Charlemagne, giving him gifts and hostages. But Marsile finds an unexpected ally in Charlemagne's camp, the emperor's brother-in-law Ganelon who nurtures a deep hatred for his own stepson, Roland, who is the greatest and most feared of the Frankish knights. Ganelon helps Marsile plan an ambush of the Frankish army's rear guard as it marches back to France, then arranges for Roland to be in command of the rear guard detachment. The Song of Roland is contemporary with the development of the Arthurian legends, and there are some obvious similarity in the themes of chivalry and the stylized descriptions of knightly combat. The Roland epic, however, bears more resemblance to The Iliad, with its prolonged and gory battle scenes, than the more personal Arthurian Romances. Unfortunately, there are no characters in The Song of Roland who even approach the depth of an Yvain, a Lancelot, or a Gawain, to say nothing of an Achilles or Odysseus. Roland, his compatriots, and his enemies are all simply straightforward fighting machines, purely good or purely evil depending on the side for which they are fighting.

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