

## Song of Roland

For seven years, the valiant Christian king Charlemagne has made war against the Saracens in Spain. Only one Moslem stronghold remains, the city of Saragossa, under the rule of King Marsile and Queen Bramimonde. Marsile, certain that defeat is inevitable, hatches a plot to rid Spain of Charlemagne. He will promise to be Charlemagne's vassal and a Christian convert in exchange for Charlemagne's departure. But once Charlemagne is back in France, Marsile will renege on his promises. Charlemagne and his vassals, weary of the long war, receive Marsile's messengers and try to choose an envoy to negotiate at Marsile's court on Charlemagne's behalf.

Roland, a courageous knight and Charlemagne's right-hand man, nominates his stepfather, Ganelon. Ganelon is enraged, thinking that Roland has nominated him for this dangerous mission in an attempt to be rid of him for good. Ganelon has long been jealous of Roland, and on his diplomatic mission he plots with the pagans, telling them that they could ambush Charlemagne's rearguard as Charlemagne leaves Spain. Roland will undoubtedly lead the rearguard, and Ganelon promises that with Roland dead Charlemagne will lose the will to fight.

After Ganelon returns with assurances of Marsile's good faith, Roland, as he predicted, ends up leading the rearguard. The twelve peers, Charlemagne's greatest and most beloved vassals, go with him. Among them is Oliver, a wise and prudent man and Roland's best friend. Also in the rearguard is the fiery Archbishop Turin, a clergyman who also is a great warrior. At the pass of Rencesvals, the twenty thousand Christians of the rearguard are ambushed by a vastly superior force, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Oliver counsels Roland to blow his oliphant horn, to call back Charlemagne's main force, but Roland refuses. The Franks fight valiantly, but in the end they are killed to the man. Roland blows his oliphant so that Charlemagne will return and avenge them. His temples burst from the force required, and he dies soon afterward. He dies facing the enemy's land, and his soul is escorted to heaven by saints and angels.

Charlemagne arrives, and he and his men are overwhelmed with grief at the sight of the massacre. He pursues the pagan force, aided by a miracle of God: the sun is held in place in the sky, so that the enemy will not have cover of night. The Franks push the Saracens into the river Ebro, where those who are not chopped to pieces are drowned.

Marsile has escaped and returned to Saragossa, where the remaining Saracens are plunged into despair by their losses. But Baligant, the incredibly powerful emir of Babylon, has arrived to help his vassal. The emir goes to Rencesvals, where the Franks are mourning and burying their dead. There is a terrible battle, climaxing with a one-on-one clash between Baligant and Charlemagne. With a touch of divine aid, Charlemagne slays Baligant, and the Saracens retreat. The Franks take Saragossa, where they destroy all Jewish and Moslem religious items and force the conversion of everyone in the city, with the exception of Queen Bramimonde. Charlemagne wants her to come to Christ of her own accord. With her captive, the Franks return to their capitol, Aix.

Ganelon is put on trial for treason. Pinabel, Ganelon's kinsman and a gifted speaker, nearly sways the jury to let Ganelon go. But Thierry, a brave but physically unimposing knight, says that Ganelon's revenge should not have been taken against a man in Charlemagne's service: that constitutes treason. To decide the matter, Pinabel and Thierry fight. Though Pinabel is by far the stronger man, God intervenes and Thierry triumphs. The Franks draw and quarter Ganelon (tie each limb to one of four horses running in opposite directions, which tears the victim to pieces). They also hang thirty of his kinsmen.

Charlemagne announces to all that Bramimonde has decided to become a Christian. Her baptism is celebrated, and all seems well.

But that night, the angel Gabriel comes to Charlemagne in a dream, and tells him that he must depart for a new war against the pagans. Weary and weeping, but fully obedient to God, Charlemagne prepares for yet another bloody war.

Charlemagne - Historically, Charlemagne (742?-814), was king of the Franks and a committed, militant Christian. A loyal ally of the pope and a great conqueror, he forced conversions as he expanded the boundaries of his empire outward from

his central territory, straddling present-day France and Germany. In 800 he was crowned emperor by the pope, legitimizing his rule over the former Roman empire in western Europe. After his death, he became legendary; it is this legendary Charlemagne, the most perfect Christian king, symbol of the spirit of the Crusades, and favorite of heaven, who is presented in *The Song of Roland* as leader of the Frankish troops and Roland's uncle and avenger. His name means literally, "Charles the Great."

**Roland** - Roland is only mentioned in passing in the historical records, as the prefect of the Breton Marches, among those who fell at Roncesvals. In *The Song of Roland*, however, he is the hero. He is one of the twelve peers of France, Charlemagne's nephew and favorite, a skillful and extremely bold warrior and understands the Frankish campaign in Spain as a crusade, allowing no compromise with the Saracens. His sometimes showy boldness and his great popularity among the Franks and success on the battlefield arouse the venomous resentment of his stepfather, Ganelon, who arranges with the Saracens the ambush at Roncesvals. He dies a martyr's death at Roncesvals and is directly taken up to Paradise by saints and angels. The rest of the poem recounts how Charlemagne avenges his death.

**Olivier** - A gallant warrior, one of the twelve peers of France, and Roland's best friend, Olivier is the protagonist's foil, setting off Roland's daring with his own prudence: "Roland is bold, Olivier is wise, and both of them are marvelously brave" (87.1093-1094). At Roncesvals, Olivier sees how the Franks will be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the Saracens and urges Roland to blow his oliphant and call back to Charlemagne for aid. Roland is too proud to do so, angering Olivier, but the two end their quarrel before dying, remaining the greatest and most tender of companions. Olivier, along with Roland and Turpin, is taken back to France for burial by Charlemagne's men.

**Turpin** - The archbishop Turpin, who fights and dies alongside Roland at Roncesvals, represents Christendom's turn towards militant activity at the time of the Crusades. The way he battles against the pagans reflects the views put forth in Pope Urban II's famous speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095, the direct inspiration for the First Crusade. He is a stout and valiant warrior—"no tonsured priest who ever sang a mass/performed such feats of prowess with his body" (121.1606-1607). He is the last to die besides Roland; when he sees Roland faint, Turpin tenderly sets out for a stream to fetch some water for his dear comrade, but, mortally wounded, he falls down dead before reaching the water. Along with Olivier and Roland, he is taken by Charlemagne's men back to France for burial.

**Ganelon** - Ganelon is a well-respected Frankish baron and Roland's stepfather. He resents his stepson's boastfulness and great popularity among the Franks and success on the battlefield. When Roland nominates him as messenger to the Saracens, Ganelon is so deeply offended that he vows vengeance. This vengeance becomes treachery as Ganelon plots with the pagan Blancandrin the ambush at Roncesvals. At the end, justice is served when Ganelon's comrade Pinabel is defeated in a trial-by-combat, showing that Ganelon is a traitor in the eyes of God. Thus Ganelon is torn limb from limb by four fiery horses.

**Thierry** - Thierry is the single dissenting voice at the council of barons convened to judge Ganelon. While the others urge that Ganelon be acquitted and allowed to continue serving Charlemagne, Thierry argues that, because Roland should have been immune from personal attacks while he was in Charlemagne's service, Ganelon's action was not private vengeance but a betrayal of the emperor. Ganelon's friend Pinabel then challenges him to trial-by-combat. Pinabel is the mightier warrior, but God intervenes to allow Thierry victory. From this proof of God's judgment of the matter, the Franks realize that Ganelon is the basest traitor and kill him.

**Pinabel** - Ganelon's closest companion and a mighty and eloquent Frankish baron, Pinabel defends Ganelon at his trial. He at first convinces Charlemagne's council of barons to let Ganelon live, but he is challenged by Thierry, and killed by the weaker man in trial-by-combat, thus showing with whom God's favor lies. Pinabel's thirty kinsmen who, according to the protocol of such things, volunteer to be hostages to ensure that Pinabel will show up at the appointed time and place and conduct himself properly during the battle are rather gratuitously hung at the end of the poem.

Naimes - The chronicles say nothing about Duke Naimes other than that he was a Gascon lord who paid homage to Charlemagne, but he became known as a wise advisor in medieval legends. He is prudent and loyal, but his prudence sometimes leads him astray, as when he urges moderation and mercy toward Marsilla. He is less under the sway of his passions than Charlemagne or any of the rest of Charlemagne's barons; when the Franks weep and faint upon seeing the carnage at Roncesvals, "Naimes profoundly pities all of them" (177.2417). He fights nobly in the battle against Baligant's army.

Oger - The Danish count Oger is one of Charlemagne's fiercest and most reliable vassals.

Gautier - Count Gautier of Hum is among the twelve barons Roland picks for his rear guard. Gautier is to lead a thousand Franks in scouting around the hilltops and ravines around the pass. He is the third to last to perish at Roncesvals, just before Turpin and Roland.

Basan and Basil - Some time earlier on in Charlemagne's Spanish campaign than the point at which The Song of Roland begins, Marsilla had sent an embassy of pagans carrying olive branches over to Charlemagne with a peace offer. Charlemagne then sent two of his counts, Basan and Basil, over to the pagans to negotiate and the pagans chopped off their heads. Roland reminds the king of this incident when urging him not to pay any attention to Marsilla's later offer of peace; Ganelon too remembers the two ill-fated messengers when he takes such offense at Roland nominating him as an envoy.

Alde - Alde the Beautiful is Olivier's sister and Roland's betrothed. She dies of grief the moment she hears of Roland's death.

Baligant - At the beginning of Charlemagne's campaign in Spain, Marsilla sends for help from Baligant, the emir of Babylon and the noblest that Islam has to offer. Years later, Baligant finally arrives with an enormous army and sets out to give Charlemagne battle. Charlemagne and he are evenly matched as far as skill and strength go, but, because of a light touch of angelic intervention, Charlemagne is able to kill Baligant, thus avenging Roland and conquering Spain at a stroke.

Marsilla - Marsilla is the pagan king of Saragossa, the last Spanish city to hold out against the Frankish army. His vassal Blancandrin plans with Ganelon the ambush at Roncesvals and death of Roland. While Roland does die that day, he brings a handsome price beforehand, chopping off Marsilla's right hand. Badly weakened by this wound, Marsilla dies of grief when he hears of Baligant's defeat. Marsilla's queen, Bramimonde, is later taken to Aix and converts to Christianity.

Bramimonde - Marsilla's queen Bramimonde falls into a deep despair and feels utterly disgraced after her husband's defeat by the Franks. She begins to curse the Saracen gods for not having helped Marsilla and his men on the battlefield and loses faith in Islam. When the Franks take Saragossa, Charlemagne decides to bring her back to Aix to convert her to Christianity, which she does by true conviction. She is baptized Juliana.

Blancandrin - The shrewd pagan Blancandrin is one of Marsilla's most useful vassals. He suggests that they offer treasure, hostages, and a deceitful promise to Charlemagne that Marsilla will come to Aix and convert to Christianity to save their honor and lands from the great Frankish army. Marsilla picks him to deliver the peace offer to the Franks. He and the Frank Ganelon then plot together the ambush at Roncesvals and death of Roland.

Aelroth - Aelroth is Marsilla's fiery nephew and leads the Saracen ambush squad along with a dozen Muslim lords, paralleling the leadership of the Frankish rear guard by Charlemagne's nephew Roland and the twelve peers. Fittingly, he is killed by Roland at Roncesvals.

Falsaron - One of the twelve Saracen lords picked to battle the twelve Frankish peers at Roncesvals, Falsaron is Marsilla's brother. His forehead, we are told, is "a half-foot wide" (94.1218). He is soon killed by Olivier.

Corsablis - King Corsablis from Barbary is an evil magician and one of the twelve Saracen lords picked to battle the twelve Frankish peers at Roncesvals. He is soon killed by Turpin. The implication that this expert in black magic is the Islamic equivalent of the archbishop is typical of the way that Muslims are depicted in *The Song of Roland*.

Margariz - Margariz of Seville is "loved by all the ladies, he's so handsome; / not one can look his way without a glow, / nor, looking at him, keep herself from giggling" (77.957-959). He is one of the twelve Saracen lords picked to battle the twelve Frankish peers at Roncesvals. There he gives Olivier a good blow, but God protects Olivier from being wounded by it.

Jurfaleu - Marsilla's only son, Jurfaleu the Blond, is killed at Roncesvals; his head is chopped off by Roland.