

The Texts—An Overview

N'ot que trois gestes en France la garnie;
 ne cuit que ja nus de ce me desdie.
 Des rois de France est la plus seignorie,
 et l'autre après, bien est droiz que jeu die,
 fu de Doon a la barbe florie,
 cil de Maience qui molt ot baronnie.

.....
 De ce lingnaje, ou tant ot de boidie,
 fu Ganelon, qui, par sa tricherie,
 en grant dolor mist France la garnie.

.....
 La tierce geste, qui molt fist a prisier,
 fu de Garin de Monglenne au vis fier.

.....
 Einz roi de France ne vodrent jor boisier;
 lor droit seignor se penerent d'aidier,

.....
 Crestiente firent molt essaucier.

[There were only three *gestes* in wealthy France; I don't think anyone would ever contradict me on this. The most illustrious is the *geste* of the kings of France; and the next, it is right for me to say, was the *geste* of white-bearded Doon de Mayence. . . . To this lineage, which was full of disloyalty, belonged Ganelon, who, by his duplicity, plunged France into great distress. . . . The third *geste*, remarkably worthy, was of the fierce Garin de Monglane. . . . Those of his lineage never once sought to deceive the king of France; they strove to help their rightful lord, . . . and they advanced Christianity.]

BERTRAND DE BAR-SUR-AUBE, *GIRART DE VIENNE*

Since the Middle Ages, the corpus of chansons de geste has been divided into groups based on various criteria. In the above prologue to the thirteenth-century *Girart de Vienne*, Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube classifies

epics according to their heroes' lineage. He uses the word *geste* to refer to the lineage itself, the deeds attributed to members of this lineage, and the songs commemorating these deeds. The first *geste* is associated with Charlemagne and members of his family, including his renowned nephew Roland. The second grouping revolves around the lineage of traitors that produced Ganelon, who betrayed Roland at Roncevaux. Bertrand's own *chanson* belongs to the *geste* of Guillaume d'Orange, named here for his illustrious ancestor Garin de Monglane.

Modern scholars use the term "cycles" to categorize the *chansons de geste* as well as other vernacular narrative assemblages such as the prose Tristan and Lancelot-Grail cycles. When applied to the epic, the notion of cycle takes into account the genealogical component inherent in Bertrand's taxonomy. A typical process of cyclic formation involved an initial song whose popularity led to sequels and prequels featuring the same hero as well as his forebears, descendants, or other relations. Epic cycles, then, proliferated in much the same way as the *Star Wars* films, by a gradual amplification of existing material through accretion. Cyclic prequels may relate the hero's early exploits (*enfances*), while sequels may include a hero's death or retirement to a monastery (*moniage*); the cycle of Guillaume d'Orange exemplifies this form of cyclicity. Moreover, many works in the *geste* of Guillaume are preserved in "cyclical" manuscripts that group the related texts materially. When individual works were gathered into cyclical manuscripts, they often required adjustments to link separate source texts and resolve contradictions. (Often, however, compilers dispensed with the fine-tuning and did not attempt to eliminate narrative inconsistencies among texts.)¹ Cyclification was part of a larger intellectual movement in the thirteenth century that sought to categorize vast bodies of knowledge in an attempt to achieve encyclopedic wholeness.²

The other two cycles cited by Bertrand do not display the same kind of "organic" integrity as the Guillaume cycle. The *geste* of the King(s) could theoretically encompass any works featuring Charlemagne, his father Pepin the Short, his grandfather Charles Martel, or his son Louis the Pious. Modern scholars, however, speak of a more limited "Charlemagne cycle," which François Suard divides into two thematically coherent subgroups: works pertaining to the disaster at Roncevaux and works in which Charlemagne figures prominently.³ Unlike the Guillaume cycle, the Charlemagne cycle is not characterized by a clear cyclical manuscript tradition.

Similarly, the *geste* of Doon de Mayence is a problematic category that imposes a genealogical unity upon disparate works portraying barons who rebel against royal authority. This group, commonly known today as the “cycle of rebellious barons” or the “epic of revolt,” includes works devoted to Ganelon’s lineage as well as autonomous texts such as *Raoul de Cambrai*. Other significant epic clusters not mentioned by Bertrand are the Lorraine cycle and the Crusade cycle.

As the epic tradition developed, poets sought to promote their tales and characters by forging links with those of other, more prestigious cycles. Thus *Hervis de Metz*, a prequel to the Lorraine cycle, identifies its heroine Beatrice as the great-aunt of Charlemagne.⁴ Moreover, some poems partake of multiple cycles: in *Girart de Vienne*, Charlemagne and Roland play a significant role, the heroes are part of the lineage of Garin de Monglane, and they rebel against Charlemagne.⁵

This overview begins with the principal French epic cycles outlined above, followed by discussion of notable works that fall outside these broad categories. Separate sections are devoted to the French epics of the later period (14th–15th centuries) and Occitan texts. An appendix before the endnotes provides a list of the chansons de geste cited, with approximate dates, number of lines, and type of versification.

The Charlemagne Cycle

Li premiers des enfans, de ce ne doutez mie,
 Que Pepins ot de Berte, la blonde, l’eschevie,
 Orent il une fille, sage et bien ensaignie,
 Fenme Milon d’Aiglent, molt ot grant seignorie,
 Et fu mere Rollant qui fu sans couardie,
 Ains fu preus et hardis, plains de chevalerie.
 Aprés ot Charlemaine a la chiere hardie,
 Qui puis fist seur paiens mainte grant envaie. (vv. 3473–80)

[The first of the children—do not ever doubt this—that Pepin had from the blonde and elegant Bertha was a daughter, wise and cultivated, the wife of Milon d’Aiglent, who had great power; she was the mother of Roland, who was without cowardice; on the contrary, he was valiant and bold, full of chivalry. Then there was Charlemagne of the bold countenance, who launched many great attacks on the pagans.]

BERTE AS GRANS PIÉS

The chansons de geste played a significant role in the elaboration of the medieval Charlemagne legend. The point of departure for the Charlemagne cycle is the *Chanson de Roland*, which dates from the late eleventh or early twelfth century and is one of the oldest specimens of Old French epic poetry. This text, examined in greater detail in chapter 3, recounts the tragic loss of Charlemagne's rear guard at Roncevaux. Charlemagne's nephew Roland incurs the wrath of his stepfather Ganelon, who plots with the Saracen king Marsile to ambush Roland and his companions. Though they defend themselves valiantly, the knights of the rear guard all perish, including the twelve Peers, the elite of the imperial army. They are avenged when Charlemagne and his army return to wage a second battle and when Ganelon, found guilty of treason, is executed.

A number of later songs constitute preludes to the Battle of Roncevaux. *Gui de Bourgogne* (early 13th century) relates Charlemagne's earlier Spanish expeditions, alluded to in the first laisse of the *Roland*: "Set anz tuz pleins ad estét en Espagne" (v. 2) [He [Charles] had been in Spain seven long years].⁶ During the absence of Charlemagne and his barons, a new generation comes of age in France. They join their fathers in Spain and are instrumental in a number of victories against the Saracens. While Charlemagne is on a pilgrimage to Compostela, Gui de Bourgogne captures the city of Luiserne, but Roland challenges him for the honor of presenting it to Charlemagne. The emperor quells the dispute and prays God to destroy Luiserne; Charlemagne's prayer is answered, and his army sets out toward Roncevaux. *Aspremont* (late 12th century) is less directly related to Roncevaux but does invent a partial backstory for Roland. The tale opens with the arrival of a Saracen envoy, Balant, who announces that the pagan king Agolant threatens to have his son Aumont crowned in Rome. Charlemagne and his troops undertake an expedition to Aspramonte in southern Italy, but the emperor first imprisons his impetuous nephew Roland, deemed too young to participate. Eventually Roland breaks free, and he and his companions help the Frankish forces to defeat the Saracens. A portion of the poem is thus devoted to Roland's *enfances*: in his first great exploit, the defeat of Aumont, Roland conquers the emblematic objects that will accompany him to Roncevaux—his horn (*olifant*), his horse Veillantif, and his mighty sword Durendal. The "good Saracen" envoy Balant, persuaded of the superiority of Christianity by Charlemagne's trusted adviser Naimés, converts after the Frankish victory. Other pre-Roncevaux Span-

ish expeditions are related in *Otinel* and *Fierabras*, both from the twelfth century.

The well-known *Voyage* (or *Pèlerinage*) *de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople* presents a very different image of Charlemagne and the twelve Peers. This short twelfth-century epic is a mostly comic tale that mocks elements of the heroic tradition. In an attempt to prove his superiority to the emperor Hugo of Constantinople, Charlemagne undertakes a voyage, stopping first in Jerusalem, where he receives relics from the patriarch. He then proceeds to Constantinople, a city so dazzling in its riches that it outshines all of Charlemagne's possessions. The twelve Peers indulge in drunken boasts (*gabs*), the most outrageous of which is Oliver's sexual boast with regard to Hugo's daughter. With God's help, the Peers are able to accomplish their rash boasts, terrifying Hugo. In the end, Hugo pays homage to Charlemagne, and Oliver declares his love to the Byzantine princess. The latter relationship comes to the fore in *Galien le Restoré*, which survives only in a fifteenth-century reworking but is thought to date from about 1200.⁷ Galien, the bastard son of Oliver and Hugo's daughter Jacqueline, participates in the Battle of Roncevaux, where he encounters his dying father. The narrative multiplies the adventures of Galien and reconfigures the Roncevaux material around the restoration of Galien's family honor.

Several songs depict Charlemagne's reign in the wake of Roncevaux. The *Chanson des Saisnes* by Jehan Bodel (late 12th century) relates Charlemagne's campaigns against the Saxons. The Saxon king Guiteclin invades Charlemagne's lands in the hope that the emperor and his troops have been weakened and demoralized by the loss of the twelve Peers. The hero Baudouin, nephew of the emperor, and his companion Berart are strongly reminiscent of Roland and Oliver. In accordance with the prologue, which promises a song "de chevaleries, d'amours et de cembiaus" (v. 26) [of chivalry, of love, and of combat],⁸ the narrative recounts Baudouin's military and amorous exploits. When Charlemagne slays Guiteclin, Baudouin marries Guiteclin's widow, Sebile, who converts to Christianity. Later in the poem, however, Baudouin and Berart are killed in battle and mourned by Charlemagne. Saxony is conquered at last, and a converted Saxon is crowned king. The thirteenth-century song *Gaydon* prolongs the tale of Thierry, who prevailed in the judicial combat against Ganelon's relative Pinabel at the end of the *Chanson de Roland*. Thierry, now the Duke of Angers, has taken