

**THE CHARACTER TYPES  
IN THE OLD FRENCH  
CHANSONS DE GESTE**

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**WILLIAM WISTAR COMFORT**

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INTRODUCTION.

"Le moyen âge forme un anneau indispensable dans la chaîne de la transmission littéraire à travers les siècles."—Gaston Paris, *Cosmopolis*, Sept., 1898.

Three-quarters of a century has elapsed since the mediæval epic literature of France first attracted the attention of scholars. This interval has been marked by an uninterrupted succession of texts discovered and edited. The value of these texts to the student of language is great; their value to the historian of politics and society is considerable;<sup>1</sup> but their literary bearing has not been sufficiently emphasized. To this day the general public has but a vague idea of the character and significance of that national epic of which the *Chanson de Roland* is the highest expression

<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Meyer, *Bull. annuaire de la Soc. de l'hist. de France*, v. xxvii, pp. 82-106; G. Paris, *Romania*, v. xxii, p. 145; Charles Potvin, *Nos premiers siècles litt.*, v. i, p. 26.

and which Léon Gautier strove so bravely to render popular.<sup>1</sup> The mediæval literature of France has not yet completely recovered from the reputation of vulgarity given to it by the Renaissance.

Ticknor, in speaking of the *Poema del Cid*, remarks that we read it "for its living pictures of the age it represents and for the vivacity with which it brings up manners and customs so remote from our own experience that when they are attempted in formal history, they come to us as cold as the fables of mythology."<sup>2</sup> These words express admirably the charm exercised by the old French *chansons de geste* upon the mind of the student who wanders at will among their treasures. These poems, at first sight so monotonous and so crude, are really the living expression of the society which produced them. They throb with the pulse of the changing political, social, and literary conditions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When we recall the importance of these centuries in the pre-Renaissance literature of France, we marvel that so little has been written to make clear the place of the epic poems in the evolution of French literature. If "the Middle Age is an indispensable link in the chain of literary transmission," surely we should seek in the national epic some reflection of the development of French nationality and literary art.

With this end in view scholars have made many detailed studies of individual poems and of certain historical characters therein treated. These studies have been of a historical and critical rather than of a literary nature. Now that a considerable number of *chansons de geste* have been edited in a fairly definitive form, the time has come for a comprehensive appreciation of their value conceived from a purely

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Revue des Questions hist.*, v. ii, p. 329; *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, v. lx (mars-juin, 1899).

<sup>2</sup> Ticknor, *History of Spanish Literature*, v. i, p. 15.

literary point of view. We have a right to ask what was the message of these long poems to their age, and what is the literary inheritance they have left to us in these latter days. Truly contemporary with the age which produced them they surely are. Yet, in spite of the wide gulf of changed conditions which separate us from them, we recognize in the *dramatis personae* of the *chansons de geste* men and women of like passions with ourselves, trusting in the same eternal forces which make for goodness, and tempted by the same evils which assail mankind in all generations.

The human interest of the French epic poems, as revealed in the actors in these mediæval dramas, has never been lost from sight in the writing of the following pages. Our study is not philological in any sense; it is historical only in a broad sense; it does, however, seek to throw fresh light upon the literary ideals and execution of our mediæval ancestors. The method to be followed, then, will clearly be of an expository character. The poems themselves will be allowed to present the evidence; we shall but draw the patent conclusions. Much will be taken for granted, as requiring no further proof beyond that already adduced by experts in the neighboring field of historical criticism. But an earnest effort will be made to get nearer to the mind and art of feudal society in its last phase, to determine the forces at work which produced this rich literature, which enabled it to hold its popularity for three centuries, and which finally account for its failure as an expression of contemporary ideals.

Such an exposition as we here anticipate would have little bearing upon our knowledge of the literary sense of the Middle Age, were it not that we assume the mediæval poet-historian to have been in close contact with his audience. Between the *jongleur* and his auditors there was a perfect understanding. His livelihood depended upon his

success as a purveyor of acceptable entertainment, in which each auditor might feel his share. Thus, whatever the original subject of the poem, the treatment of it was a response to contemporary taste and requirements. Only so could perfect harmony exist between the story-teller and his audience. Moreover, the former's appeal in these poems is not to the romantic and the marvelous, but to the historical and the true. Our *jongleur* angrily disclaimed the reputation of a wonder-working magician, but insistently asserted his devotion to veracity. It is intended, then, here to study the literary art of the Middle Age from a new view-point; more specifically, to watch the *trouvère* as he handles the traditional epic material.

The new view-point has been found in the characters which figure in the *chansons de geste*. Their conventionality and unvarying recurrence enable us, without violence, to divide them conveniently into types. Each type of character will be studied chronologically, so far as possible, and the significance of its evolution will be noted. With the belief that such an exposition along six different lines will contribute to our knowledge of the mediæval man in his relation to literary expression, we pass to our examination of the poems themselves.

#### THE KING.

It is not our purpose under this heading to reconsider the facts so carefully exposed by Gaston Paris in *L'histoire poétique de Charlemagne*. But the figure of the great Emperor dominates to a great degree the whole body of the poetry which occupies our attention. It is with his epic personality and with his far-reaching activities that other persons and events are brought into relation. A study of the personages in the French epic necessarily begins with Charlemagne.



It was the purpose of Gaston Paris to trace the poetic history of Charlemagne through the epic poetry not only of France, but of those countries into which the French epic material penetrated. He has classified the legends, many of them of local origin, which grew up in regard to the birth, marriage, conquests and pilgrimages of the Emperor. These were the matters of prime interest to a feudal audience, and it was upon these events that the imagination of the *trouvères* loved to dwell. "Les milieux populaires ne s'intéressent aux affaires publiques que par rapport à leur côté individuel et personnel. C'est le héros qui passionne le peuple, ce ne sont pas les destinées nationales dont il a la responsabilité, ni les graves intérêts qui reposent sur sa tête."<sup>1</sup> In spite, however, of the vagaries and palpable inaccuracies resulting from popular treatment, one is astonished in reading *L'histoire poétique* by the general accord of history and legend. This, too, is the conclusion recorded by Paris at the close of his long study.

The accord of history and poetry interests us, however, very little just now. For it is not of Charlemagne as an historical personage that we are thinking. It is rather of a king as an impersonal figure and of the rôle that is assigned to him in a body of poetry which supposedly expresses very accurately the sentiments of the public for whom it was cast into shape. If in this poetry the king is exalted far above the people, if he dwells in an atmosphere almost exclusively his own, it may be supposed that in fact the ideal of a king at that period was held in sufficient reverence to permit such a literary presentation. If, on the other hand, the figure of the king is not at all epic in character, if his arm is shortened, his prerogatives scorned and his majesty only unwillingly admitted, we must suppose the influence of the

<sup>1</sup> Kurth, *Histoire poétique des Mérovingiens*, p. 226.

great vassals at work. The literary elevation or humiliation of the king considered relatively to that of his great vassals forms the interest of a study of the royal personage. For, as Luchaire has said: "L'histoire politique de la France pendant la plus grande partie du moyen âge peut se résumer dans la lutte soutenue par le pouvoir royal contre la féodalité."<sup>1</sup>

Rajna<sup>2</sup> and Kurth<sup>3</sup> have proved that tradition had busied itself with some of the Merovingian kings. But by the time when our literary period opens the Carolingian dynasty had taken to itself all the traditions of former times. With the exception of Clovis in *Floovant*, we meet only the names of Charles, Pepin and Louis as applied to the king of France. The latter two names owe their distinction respectively to the father and the son of Charles the Great. So absorbing was the personality of the great Emperor that all other Charles' became confounded with him,<sup>4</sup> just as Pepin the father of Charlemagne absorbed Pepin the father of Charles Martel, and Louis the son of Charlemagne caused the oblivion of all the other Louis'. This process of centralization is one of the most familiar features of popular poetry. The author of *Doon de Maience* felt the confusion of identity to which it gave rise when he wrote:

"Segnurs, vous savés bien, et je en sui tous fis,  
Que plusors Kalles ot (chà arrier) à Paris,  
A Nerbonne la grant ot plusors Aymeris,  
Et à Orengie rot maint Guillaume marchis,  
Et si rot maint Doon à Maience jadis."

*Doon de Maience*, p. 201.

It is not necessary to account for Charlemagne's promi-

<sup>1</sup>A. Luchaire, *Histoire des Institutions Monarchiques de la France sous les premiers Capétiens, 987-1180*; vid. Préface.

<sup>2</sup>*Origini dell' epopea francese.*

<sup>3</sup>*Histoire politique des Mérovingiens.*

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Rajna, *Origini*, p. 199 f.

nence in the epic poetry of the Middle Age. His learning, his imperial dignity, his defense of the Church against Mahometan invasion,—all these qualifications guaranteed for Charlemagne first rank among his country's rulers. Of these three historical qualifications, the first, naturally, left hardly a trace in the epic treatment of the Emperor. It is an exceptional note,—that of Charles the mediæval scholar :

“L'ampereor troverent an son palais marbrin.  
L'apostoilles li conte la vie Saint Martin,  
Et devise la letre et espont le latin.”

*Chanson des Saisnes*, v. i, pp. 64, 65.

So also *Renaus de Montauban*, p. 161. To his claim as political organizer, as divinely protected Roman Emperor, however, full justice was done. The memory of the imperial power of the historical Charlemagne contributed potently to the original majesty of the epic king of France. But it was Charles the warrior, the right arm of the Church, the valiant defender of Christendom against pagan and Infidel invasion that comes most prominently into view.<sup>1</sup> For the attention of a society which made fighting its principal occupation was necessarily devoted almost exclusively to the battlefield and to those heroic contests which the Emperor and his faithful vassals waged in the defense of France and of Christendom. This is the scene displayed when the curtain goes up in the *Chanson de Roland*, the earliest *chanson de geste* that has been preserved.

Before turning to the poems themselves for evidence, it should be stated here what we intend to show: that there were three distinct treatments of the royal personage in the epic poems. Whether he be called Charles, Pepin or Louis,

<sup>1</sup>For the literature based upon Charles' personal religious enthusiasm cf. G. Paris, *Hist. poët.*, and Gerhard Rauschen, *Die Legende Karls des Grossen im xi und xii Jahrhundert.*