

*The Song of Roland*



# *The Song of Roland*

Translated by  
Anthony Mortimer



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*The Song of Roland*

## I

Carles li reis, nostre emperere magnés,  
 Set anz tuz pleins ad estét en Espagne:  
 Tresqu'en la mer cunquist la tere altaigne.  
 N'i ad castel ki devant lui remaigne;  
 Mur ne citét n'i est remés a fraindre  
 Fors Sarraguce, k'est en une muntaigne.  
 Li reis Marsilie la tient, ki Deu nen aimet;  
 Mahumet sert e Apollin receimet:  
 Ne s' poet garder que mals ne l'i ateignet.

AOI

## 2

Li reis Marsilie esteit en Sarraguce:  
 Alez en est en un verger suz l'umbre;  
 Sur un perrun de marbre bloi se culched,  
 Envirun lui plus de vint milië humes.  
 Il en apelet e ses dux e ses cuntés:  
 « Oëz, seignurs, quel pecchét nus encumbret:  
 Li empereres Carles de France dulce  
 En cest païs nos est venuz cunfundre.  
 Jo nen ai ost qui bataille li dunne,  
 Nen ai tel gent ki la süe derumpet.  
 Cunseillez mei cume mi saivë hume,  
 Si m' guarisez e de mort et de hunte! »  
 N'i ad païen ki un sul mot respundet,  
 Fors Blancandrins de Castel de Valfunde.

10

20

I

For seven long years our emperor King Charles  
has been in Spain and conquered that proud country.  
From the high hills right down as far as the coast  
no fortress remains unfallen, no town not taken,  
not even a wall left standing to resist him.  
Yet still in Saragossa on its mountain\*  
King Marsile reigns, who has no love for God.  
He serves Mahomet and invokes Apollyon,\*  
but cannot ward off the ruin that awaits him.

2

Marsile in Saragossa seeks the shade  
in gardens where he rests upon a couch  
carved from a single block of blue-veined marble.  
His men are massed around, full twenty thousand.  
He calls on his dukes and his counts: "Listen, my lords,  
you see the evil fate that weighs upon us,  
for Charlemagne, the emperor of fair France,  
has come into this land to work our loss.  
I cannot offer him battle, I have no host,  
no troops I trust to triumph over his force.  
Counsel me, sages, save me from death and shame!"  
The pagans stand waiting, wordless,  
except for Blancandrin,\* whose castle is in Val Fonde.

## 3

Blancandrins fut des plus saives paiens,  
 De vasselage fut asez chevaler :  
 Prodom' i out pur sun seigneur aider,  
 E dist al rei : « Or ne vus esmaiez !  
 Mandez Carlun, a l'orguillus, al fier,  
 Fedeilz servises e mult granz amistez :  
 Vos li durrez urs e lëons e chens, 30  
 Set cenz camelz e mil hosturs müiers,  
 D'or e d'argent quatre cenz muls cargez,  
 Cinquante carre qu'en ferat carier ;  
 Ben en purrat lüer ses soldeiers.  
 En ceste tere ad asez osteiéet :  
 En France, ad Ais, s'en deit ben repairer.  
 Vos le sivrez a feste seint Michel,  
 Si recevrez la lei de chrestïens :  
 Serez ses hom par honur e par ben.  
 S'en volt ostages, e vos l'en enveiez, 40  
 U dis u vint pur lui afiancer.  
 Enveius i les filz de noz muillers :  
 Par num d'ocire i enveierai le men.  
 Asez est melz qu'il i perdent lé chefs  
 Que nus perduns l'onur ne la deintét,  
 Ne nus seiuns cunduiz a mendeier. » AOI

## 4

Dist Blancandrins : « Par ceste meie destre  
 E par la barbe ki al piz me ventelet,  
 L'ost des Franceis verrez sempres desfere :  
 Francs s'en irunt en France la lur tere. 50  
 Quant cascuns ert a sun meillor repaire,  
 Carles serat ad Ais, a sa capele ;  
 A seint Michel tendrat mult halte feste.

## 3

One of the wisest pagans was Blancandrin,  
 worthy and brave as befits a most noble knight,  
 a man cut out to give counsel and help his lord.  
 He reassures the King: “You have nothing to fear;  
 send Charles the proud a promise of faithful service;  
 feed him fine words of friendship; give him wild bears,  
 and lions, and dogs, and seven hundred camels,  
 a thousand falcons, and four hundred mules  
 heavy with silver and gold, and a convoy of carts,  
 no less than fifty, so he can pay to the full  
 the soldiers he hires. Tell him that long enough  
 he has warred in this land, and now he should be off  
 to Aix in France. Tell him that there you will come  
 at Michaelmas to receive the Christian faith,  
 and that from henceforth you will be his vassal,  
 holding your land and goods from him alone.  
 Should he want hostages, send them, ten or a score,  
 whatever will teach him to trust. Send our own sons,  
 the sons of our wives; I’ll sacrifice my own.  
 Better our children should hazard their heads  
 than that we should turn beggars, losing our lordship and land.”

## 4

Blancandrin said: “I swear by this right hand,  
 by this beard that the breezes lift from my breast,  
 that the whole French host will break camp and disband,  
 and the Franks hurry back to their homeland in France.  
 When every man is back to hearth and home,  
 King Charles will be at Aix, and in his chapel  
 will hold a solemn feast at Michaelmas.

Vendrat li jurz, si passerat li termes,  
 N'orrat de nos paroles ne nuveles.  
 Li reis est fiers e sis curages pesmes :  
 De noz ostages ferat trencher les testes.  
 Asez est mielz qu'il les testes i perdent  
 Que nus perduns clere Espaigne la bele,  
 Ne nus aiuns les mals ne les suffraitres. »  
 Dient païen : « Issi poet il ben estre ! »

60

## 5

Li reis Marsilie out sun conseil finét,  
 Si'n apelat Clarin de Balaguét,  
 Estramariz e Eudropin sun per,  
 E Priamun e Guarlan le barbét  
 E Machiner e sun uncle Maheu  
 E Joüner e Malbien d'Utremer  
 E Blancandrins por la raisun cunter.  
 Des plus feluns dis en ad apelez :  
 « Seignurs baruns, a Carlemagne irez ;  
 Il est al siege a Cordres la citét.  
 Branches d'olives en voz mains porterez :  
 Ço senefiet pais e humilitét.  
 Par voz saveirs se m' püez acorder,  
 Jo vos durrai or e argent asez,  
 Teres e fiez tant cum vos en vuldrez. »  
 Dient païen : « De ço avum asez ! »

70

AOI

## 6

Li reis Marsilie out finét sun conseil ;  
 Dist a ses humes : « Seignurs, vos en ireiz ;  
 Branches d'olive en voz mains portereiz,  
 Si me direz a Carlemagne le rei

80

The day will come, the deadline will elapse,  
 and he will have no word, no tidings from us.  
 The King is haughty and fierce, hard is his heart;  
 our hostages' heads will be lost, but better that  
 than the loss of our lovely and resplendent Spain,  
 the damage and distress that we would suffer."

The pagans say:\* "Perhaps what he says is true."

## 5

Marsile has closed his council. He calls Eutropin  
 and Estramariz and Clarin of Balaguer,  
 bearded Guarlan, Priamun, Maheu, Machiner;  
 Jouner and Malbien too from over the sea,  
 the ten most villainous vassals he could choose;  
 in the King's name Blancandrin addresses them all:  
 "Barons, my lords, ride now to Cordoba,  
 besieged by Charles; go bearing olive branches\*  
 to prove that you are humble and come in peace.  
 If you are cunning and conclude an accord,  
 you shall have lavish gifts of silver and gold  
 and all the lands and fiefs that you could wish for."

The pagans say: "That will be more than enough!"

## 6

Marsile has closed his council. He says to his men:  
 "Go now, my lords, with olive branches in hand;  
 then, in my name, by that same God he serves,  
 beg Charlemagne to show his mercy for me.

Pur le soen Deu qu'il ait mercit de mei.  
 Ja ne verrat passer cest premer meis  
 Que je l' sivrâi od mil de mes fedeilz,  
 Si recevrai la chrestïene lei :  
 Serai ses hom par amur e par feid.  
 S'il voelt ostages, il en avrat par veir. »  
 Dist Blancandrins : « Mult bon plait en avreiz. » AOI

## 7

Dis blanches mules fist amener Marsilies  
 Que li tramist li reis de Süatilie ; 90  
 Li frein sunt d'or, les seles d'argent mises.  
 Cil sunt muntez ki le message firent ;  
 Enz en lur mains portent branches d'olive.  
 Vindrent a Charles ki France ad en baillie ;  
 Ne s' poet garder quë alques ne l'engignent. AOI

## 8

Li empereres se fait e balz e liez :  
 Cordres ad prise e les murs peceiez,  
 Od ses cadables les turs en abatiéd.  
 Mult grant eschech en unt si chevaler  
 D'or e d'argent e de guarnemenz chers. 100  
 En la citét nen ad remés paien  
 Ne seit ocis, u devient chrestïen.  
 Li empereres est en un grant verger,  
 Ensembl'od lui Rollant e Oliver,  
 Sansun li dux e Anseïs li fiers,  
 Gefreid d'Anjou, le rei gunfanuner,  
 E si i furent e Gerin e Gerers ;  
 La u cist furent, des autres i out bien :  
 De dulce France i ad quinze milliers.

Before the month is out, he'll see me follow  
 to join him with a thousand trusty knights.  
 Once there, I shall receive the Christian law  
 and live as his liegeman in all friendship and faith.  
 Should he want hostages, say he shall have them in truth."  
 Blancandrin says: "For you that accord would be good."

## 7

Marsile commands that ten white mules be brought,  
 a gift sent to him by the Suatilian king,  
 barded with silver saddles and reins of gold.  
 The messengers mount them; in their hands they bear  
 branches of olive which they mean to bring  
 to the King who governs France. There is no way\*  
 Charles can escape the trap they have laid for him.

## 8

The Emperor makes merry and rejoices;  
 at Cordoba his engines have smashed the walls,  
 its towers have been brought down into the dust.  
 His knights have seized upon the spoils of the city,  
 the finest of armours, silver and gold galore.  
 Not a single pagan remains alive in the city,  
 they have all been converted or killed.

The Emperor sits in an orchard; by his side  
 are Roland and his comrade Oliver,  
 Duke Samson and fierce Anseïs, and the King's  
 own standard-bearer, Geoffrey of Anjou;  
 Gerin and Gerer too, and so many more,  
 full fifteen thousand of them from fair France.  
 The knights sit down on cloths of woven silk;

Sur palies blancs siedent cil cevaler, 110  
 As tables jüent pur els esbaneier,  
 E as eschecs li plus saive e li veill,  
 E escremissent cil bacheler leger.  
 Desuz un pin, delez un eglenter,  
 Un faldestoed i unt fait tut d'or mer :  
 La siet li reis ki dulce France tient.  
 Blanche ad la barbe e tut flurit le chef,  
 Gent ad le cors e le cuntenant fier :  
 S'est ki l' demandet, ne l'estoet enseigner.  
 E li message descendirent a piéd, 120  
 Si l' salüerent par amur e par bien.

## 9

Blancandrins ad tut premereins parléd,  
 E dist al rei : « Salvét seiez de Deu  
 Le gloriüs que devuns aürer !  
 Iço vus mandet reis Marsilies li bers :  
 Enquis ad mult la lei de salvetét ;  
 De sun aveir vos voelt asez duner :  
 Urs e leüns, veltres enchaïgnez,  
 Set cenz cameilz e mil hosturs müez, 130  
 D'or e d'argent quatre cenz muls trussez,  
 Cinquante care que carïer ferez ;  
 Tant i avrat de besanz esmerez  
 Dunt bien purrez voz soldeiers lüer.  
 En cest païs avez estét asez :  
 En France ad Ais repaïrer bien devez ;  
 La vos sivrat, ço dit, mis avoöz. »  
 Li empereres en tent ses mains vers Deu,  
 Baisset sun chef, si cumence a penser. AOI

some pass the time away with games of chance;  
 the old and wise prefer to play at chess,  
 while fencing pleases the athletic young,

Under a pine tree near to a hawthorn bush  
 they have set up a throne of solid gold,  
 the royal seat of one who rules fair France:  
 white is his beard, full-flowering his hair;  
 his body is nobly built, his bearing is proud:  
 no need to point him out to the curious stranger.  
 The messengers come and dismount, approach him on foot  
 and greet him with great show of love and goodwill.

## 9

It is Blancandrin who chooses to speak first;  
 He greets the King: "Hail, in the name of God,  
 the Lord of Glory Whom we should adore!  
 Here is the message sent by brave Marsile.  
 He has thought deeply on the faith that saves.  
 He offers you abundance of his riches,  
 lions and bears and boar-hounds held in chains,  
 a thousand falcons, seven hundred camels,  
 four hundred mules heavy with gold and silver,  
 and fifty carts, enough to make a convoy.  
 You'll have so many bezants\* in fine gold  
 that you can pay off all the men you've hired.  
 You have been in this land long enough. Now you should leave;  
 It is time you went back to your home at Aix in France;  
 You have my master's word that he will follow."

The Emperor lifts his hands high to the Lord,  
 then bows his head and soon is lost in thought.

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ANTHONY MORTIMER is Professor Emeritus of English Literature at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and also taught for many years at the University of Geneva. In addition to his scholarly work in the fields of Early Modern poetry and Anglo-Italian studies, he has published a series of translations: Petrarch, *Canzoniere* (2002) and Michelangelo, *Poems and Letters* (2007) for Penguin Classics; Pirandello, *Three Plays* (2014) and *Italian Renaissance Tales* (2019) for Oxford World's Classics; Angelus Silesius, *Sacred Epigrams* (2013) for AMS. For Alma he has translated Cecco Angiolieri, *Sonnets* (with C.H. Scott, 2008), Dante Alighieri, *Rime* (with J.G. Nichols, 2009), Guido Cavalcanti, *Complete Poems* (2010), Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova* (2011), François Villon, *The Testament and Other Poems* (2013) and Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* (2015).



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