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(Mis)Remembering the Past: The Middle English *Song of Roland*'s Contemporary Religious Alterations to a French Tradition

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> Culture is always old, and yet the possibilities of change within it are
> infinite and fresh.[1]

The little-studied fifteenth-century English fragmentary *Song of Roland*, an adaptation of the French *Chanson de Roland*, describes the battle of Roncevaux with significant differences in emphasis from its French predecessors, revealing the changes made when a text recounts a past event in a different language and in dialogue with changed contemporary circumstances. The Middle English *Song* places Roland's religious motivations in a position of greater importance than feudal or military concerns, which can be aligned with evidence of increasing lay piety and a personalized construction of devotion in the late Middle Ages. Comparing the Middle English fragment with its French counterparts reveals an increased sense of religious certainty, as Roland's decision to fight a battle that he knows will result in the slaughter of his peers is represented as a choice of religious fortitude and as a result of complete faith in a merciful God. The author's portrayal of past events is thereby strongly aligned with his present.

The extant manuscript of the *Song of Roland* is estimated to have been produced between 1450 and 1500, four centuries after the most well-known version of the *Chanson de Roland*, the Oxford manuscript, and corresponds to lines 674-1736 of the Oxford version. Seven other French manuscripts exist, some of which are fragmentary, dating from the thirteenth century with one exception that, like the English *Song*, dates from the fifteenth century.[2] I have compared the English *Song* with the French texts, revealing that it is more than a simple translation but manipulates the past in order to speak to contemporary concerns and readers. This is in contrast to earlier views of the *Song* as a rudimentary rendition of a French *chanson* which misconstrues the original, such as those of Smyser and Barron. Barron allows that the narrative of the *Song* 'moves swiftly and competently' but, placing the text alongside its French counterparts, asserts that 'both alliteration and rhyme

have obviously suffered in transmission' and that what remains is a 'somewhat superficial, external account' of events.[3]

Upon closer examination, many critics have recognized that the *Song* should not be viewed as an unsuccessful attempt to make a direct translation of a previous *chanson*, but that it has its own purposes and identity. For example, Farrier argues that the author of the *Song* has made deliberate changes to the structure and discourse of the text in order to clarify the issue of Roland's moral responsibility for the defeat at Roncevaux, accentuating disapproval of his actions, highlighting Ganelon's treason, and emphasizing the battle as the scene of a senseless loss of life, all of which lead to, she argues, an increased morality in the tale.[4] Similarly, Shepherd contends that the author has deliberately made alterations to impart a sense of 'a sympathetic embracing of everyday life and its exigencies', to sustain rhetorical activity, to augment the heroic tone and, once more, to create something new.[5] What these arguments have in common is a sense that the changes made in the *Song* are not accidental, but an indication of what Shepherd refers to as 'technical dexterity'.[6] More recently, Hardman writes that 'this text is by no means attempting a close or faithful translation', but that alterations and new material suggest a 'transformation of genre' and contribute topics 'of particularly acute interest to writers and readers in England in the turbulent late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries'.[7] In particular, it is the religious context of the fifteenth century that is at the core of my reading of the *Song*.

It has been argued in the past that religion in the late Middle Ages, and the church in particular, were creatures in decline, preparing to shuffle off in preparation for the Reformation and the upheaval that it brought. In 1961, for example, Leff argued that 'the later middle ages witnessed an evergrowing series of extra-ecclesiastical movements, indifferent or hostile' to the church, leading to 'the loss of its position as the spiritual and intellectual arbiter of christendom'.[8] More recently, however, a different impression of late medieval religion has emerged. The 1990s saw the publication of research presenting religion in the later Middle Ages as far from weak or withering. Indeed, Duffy begins his seminal text, *The Stripping of the Altars*, with the comment, 'Traditional religion had about it no particular marks of exhaustion or decay'.[9] Far from it, as the historical evidence seems to show; for the non-clerical population, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a time of increased interest and involvement in their own, lay-inspired brand of religion. Such are the specific characteristics of religious worship at this time that their reflection may be glimpsed in certain contemporary texts.

Duffy is not alone in suggesting that 'a common and extremely rich religious culture for the laity and secular clergy had emerged by the fifteenth century'.[10] Rice further argues that 'in later fourteenth-century England, the persistent question of how to live the "best life" preoccupied many pious Christians, and new answers proliferated for enterprising lay people', while Aston refers to 'a rising tide of devotional activity among believers'.[11] Visible changes in how people worshipped God and new religious movements, therefore, were a sign of the revitalization of religion among large sectors of the English public. As Aston states, 'The voice of secular men and women, commanding attention, demanding instruction and spiritual assurance, becomes audible as never before in the fourteenth and fifteenth

centuries'.[12]   Changes in how religion found expression reflect the devotional interests of these voices; in the later Middle Ages 'hard-nosed city shopkeepers just as much as aristocratic ladies with time on their hands took an active and enthusiastic interest in things of the spirit' so that, in twenty-first century terms, 'market forces dominated'.[13] It is clear that the later Middle Ages were a time in which lay people developed their own interests in religion that were not necessarily inspired directly, or at least solely, by the church, and therefore that such interests were at the heart of daily life. Correspondingly, religious movements began to move from the ground up, an upward motion in which 'devotions pass, often without fanfare, from the realm of unofficial religion to that of official exercise'.[14]

Evidence suggests that religion spread its wings over every aspect of life. There was, for example, an increase in the founding of new religious orders and a growth in those already existent.[15]   The appetite for religious ceremonies can be seen in the new feasts that became part of the church calendar, particularly in the 1480s and 1490s, and the influence of lay people on late medieval church buildings was visible and tangible.[16] The desire to be part of church life was so extensive that numerous guilds and confraternities were established in order to allow poorer sections of society to be involved.[17] Devotion in the late Middle Ages thus did not consist merely of attending church once a week, but gratefully and eagerly accepted and demanded religious practice in everyday life. Religious worship that was alive outside clerical texts and structures may have also exerted a certain influence on lay, secular texts such as romance.

It is particularly important for the study of religious terms in Middle English literature that religious worship during the later Middle Ages gave great significance to the use of particular words which carried weight in the minds of the audience. Prayers written in English proliferated in the later Middle Ages and evidence suggests an emphasis on their incantatory powers and an acute awareness of variations in the words used in them.[18] As Duffy stresses, 'since this was a culture in which specific prayers or Gospel passages were believed to be especially powerful, to bring particular blessings or protection from certain evils, even the unlettered laity noticed, and valued, such variations'.[19] It is hard to believe, then, that they would have seen religious terms even in romance texts as meaningless. For example, the Office of the Cult of the Holy Name of Jesus guaranteed 3000 years' remission to those who celebrated it, suggesting that use of the name of God was highly important.[20] It is particularly relevant to this article that the Charlemagne sequence of terms for God was included in the Office, suggesting that the name of Charlemagne was linked to religion in the fifteenth century and may have affected how Charlemagne romances were read.[21]

A similar relationship between religious enthusiasm and literature can be seen in the popularity of saints. Although, as Kieckhefer points out, the cult of saints is nothing new, devotion to saintly figures grew in the later Middle Ages.[22] Saintly devotion influenced the naming of children, bequests in wills, and the creation of miracle stories, revealing the interlinking of secular culture, literature and religious life.[23] In addition, saints were amongst the figures represented in the variety of 'portable domestic imagery' evident during the later Middle Ages in woodcuts, figurines, and importantly for this discussion, books.[24] Pilgrimage to the shrines of saints also coincided with 'the multiplication of pilgrimage literature in

England in the fifteenth century'.[25] Interest in travelling to the Holy Land of Jerusalem may, in fact, help to explain the continuing popularity of texts concerning characters from the East, such as the Charlemagne romances.

Evidence for the interplay of religion and literary output in the later Middle Ages can be clearly seen in contemporary religious drama, which was at the same time entertainment and 'a fundamental means of transmitting religious instruction and stirring devotion'.[26] Dunn emphasizes that although the *Corpus Christi* plays, for example, occurred only once a year, they involved months of preparation and revealed 'the presence of the Biblical material in the midst of daily life'.[27] That the plays may have a particular relevance when studying the romances of the later Middle Ages is apparent in Kieckhefer's observation that within such plays 'though the link between the text and the sermon might be allegorical and by modern standards rather tenuous, such conventions allowed for creative reflection on established authorities'.[28] This suggests that a reader in the fourteenth or fifteenth century may have been used to finding allegorical meaning in texts and connecting this to his or her own life, something worth considering when thinking about the reception of romance.[29]

The increase in the production of religious texts for the laity was due to the spread of literacy.[30] In order to meet demand, such textual production increasingly occurred in English, with the result that 'a substantial portion of the literature in Middle English is religious'.[31] This cannot be ignored when analyzing the literature of the period. It is clear that some members of the church hierarchy worried that access to scriptural texts without guidance may lead to error or heresy, and a possible link between the two, aligned with the production of the Bible in English for the first time, has led some to argue that 'vernacular books were by definition suspect' and that this attitude 'degenerated into simple mistrust of vocal expressions of English pietism, characterized in the fifteenth century by fear of possession of almost anything written in English'.[32] On the other hand, vernacular texts were used by many, and use of English as the official language of England was growing. There is no reason, then, why religious overtones in romance may not have been taken seriously by their readers.

Quite apart from the vitality of late medieval worship, a particular representation of God within it is visible. Religion centred around a particularly humane, reassuring figure. Saints, for example, were celebrated for their benevolence, for their homeliness and for their status as intercessors with God. Pilgrimage to their shrines was, as Duffy explains, 'an assurance that God was in his Heaven and the Devil did not always have the last word'. Mercy, rather than penance and punishment, was key.[33] Religious drama as well is described by Dunn as 'an affirmative perspective on the faith, a rich intermingling of intelligence and emotion creating confidence and hope in a vale of tears', an expression of joy rather than fear.[34] God was often seen, according to the evidence, as a reassuring figure rather than as a temperamental judge.

This reassuring figure can be sought in contemporary literature. Clutterbuck differentiates between two facets of God in medieval and early modern English poetry, the 'heroic' theory (most often found in late medieval narrative) in which Christ's death is not a payment necessary for salvation but a continuous act of the Trinity, revealing God's eternal

mercy, and the 'satisfaction' theory which focuses on Christ's human suffering during the Passion and God's mercy as a discontinuous act, dependent upon the placation of his justice.[35] The latter theory associates the Passion with a forbidding God as judge. However, Clutterbuck points out that 'literature is able to use a mixture of theories' and that, for example, there is a combination of the 'heroic' and 'satisfaction' theory in the English Crucifixion lyrics.[36] I believe that a similar focus on both Christ's suffering for man and God's eternal mercy can be seen in late medieval religious worship and in references to Christ in romance.[37] The representation of Christ's suffering does not fit into the 'satisfaction' theory of God as a judge who requires repayment and which, as Kieckhefer argues, 'heightened the conviction of guilt for one's sins', but rather aligns itself with Duffy's assertion that it was rather 'a theological statement, the sacrament of the love of the Trinity for humanity, a pledge, perpetuated daily in the Eucharist, of god's will to redeem and renew'; in other words, a 'heroic' representation of God.[38] Enthusiasm for depictions of the suffering of Christ does not represent man's fear and guilt, but is a positive portrayal of trust in God.

In addition, widespread interest in religion may have been compounded in the fifteenth century by political events. The *Song*'s date of composition coincides with the Hundred Years' War, inviting investigation into the status of an English text using well-known French heroes during a time of English-French antagonism. Warm has suggested that this apparent incongruity can be explained by concentration on the religious rather than national identity of the knights, arguing that the Middle English Charlemagne romances overlook the rivalry between France and England in order to construct 'an idealised vision of the past, within which true Christian knights fought the infidel rather than one another'.[39] Warm views this concentration on religion as a reflection of 'an increasingly fragmented Christian meta-state' in the fifteenth century as a result of papal Schism and the emergence of nation-states; religion and politics are thereby intertwined.[40]

Furthermore, with the Anglo-French war viewed as unsuccessful, attentions may have turned to more visible threats such as the Turkish invasion of Europe in the fifteenth century. Housley refers to the re-emergence of the Ottoman Turks as an expansionist power as the greatest force shaping religious war at the time.[41] Indeed, the particular importance of the Turkish intrusion lay in the fact that in the eyes of many 'the consequences of the Ottoman conquests included not just the extinction of the Christian faith, but also the end of civilised values'.[42] The need to fight the Turks was hindered by the Anglo-French war and the Schism, which prevented the creation of a united Western, Christian front so that by 1396 'a crusade and the restoration of Catholic unity had long since been accepted as the ultimate objectives of the Anglo-French peace negotiations'.[43] It was also seen by some 'that the rise of Islam was a consequence of the growth of worldliness in the Church', a punishment for sin, necessitating a return to simple religious values.[44]

The religious and political context described above, although not dictating the way a text such as the *Song of Roland* may have been produced, is likely to have some influence on it, because as Allmand asserts, 'it was through literature that society thought aloud, commented on changing moral and political values, and reacted to developments of which it disapproved'.[45] It is relevant, then, that the moral overtones of the *Song* are introduced at the

beginning of the fragment in an episode where the Christian knights, on the night before battle, enjoy a little too much the wine and women given by the Saracens as a false sign of their willingness to renounce hostilities, despite the fact that this scene originates in another arm of the Charlemagne tradition, the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, and does not exist in any of the French *Roland* manuscripts.[46]

Hardman has pointed out that the inclusion of material from different traditions suggests that the *Song* is 'a purposeful adaptation by the English poet of the original materials into a new, different work'.[47] Adaptation to the religious climate of the fifteenth century may be a factor in these revisions. With the hint of an exasperated sigh, the narrator offers this comment about the knights' misdemeanours: 'they synnyd so sore in þat ylk while| that many men wept and cursed þat vile', expressing his disappointment at such a transgression.[48] Shepherd attributes the focus on wine in this scene to a concern with everyday life and human failings rather than with religion, but the focus on sin and the description of the event as a 'vile', or wicked deed, seems to suggest moral overtones.[49] Alternatively, 'vile' could refer to Ganelon, but this reading retains the moral overtones of the word with its links to evil. It is true that the *Song* does not include the explicit statement of the Latin text that the knights who sinned with women as a result die in battle, but this may be due to either a shortening of the material or a concentration on the necessity to avoid sin as harmful to the soul, as opposed to avoiding sin through fear of its physical consequences. Such a warning would be suitable for a fifteenth-century lay audience concerned with living healthy religious lives every day.

From the beginning of the fragment, when Ganelon persuades Charlemagne that it is safe to return to France, there is a visible change in thematic emphasis from a concern with human nature to a concern with religious battle. In the French texts, Ganelon promises that the Sultan will follow Charlemagne's religion and rule, and take Spain from him:

> 'ja ne verrez cest premier meis passét
> qu'il vos sivrat en France le régnet
> si recevrat la lei que vos tenez,
> jointes ses mains iert vostre comandét;
> de vos tendrat Espaigne le regnét.'

> ['Before the month has passed, you will see him follow you to the kingdom of France, receive your religion, join his hands under your command, hold Spain from you.'][50]

In the English *Song*, it is said that the Sultan, as well as 1000 of his men (more importantly for the success of Christianity), will be christened, believe in Jesus, leave their religion, and follow Charlemagne's command: 'all will be cristenyd & leue on Ihesu crist. | ther law will they lef sone alon, | And at thy comandement þey will done' (ll. 24-6). The triple emphasis on religion and the omittance of any mention of Spain in the *Song* reveal religious rather than earthly concerns. Furthermore, on the Saracen side, the Sultan's nephew assures him

not that 'Las serat Carles, si recrerrunt si Franc; | n'avrez mais guere en tut vostre vivant' ['Charles will be worn out, the Francs admit defeat; you will have no more war in all your life'], but that 'ye ned nothinge dred in this stound | that euer cristyn kinge thy croun shall were' (*O*, ll. 871-2 and *Song*, ll. 472-3). This battle for religious right, rather than an earthly battle of land and strength, may also help to explain why descriptions of the many individual and gory battles that make up the larger battle of Roncevaux are reduced in the English *Song*.

Ailes argues that the feudal and religious aspects of the French *Chanson* are bound together in a complementary relationship in which 'God is the ultimate feudal Lord'.[51] In the *Song*, the focus is on individual relationships with God rather than feudal relationships. When facing battle in the French manuscripts, Roland makes the oft-quoted comment that 'pur sun seignur deit hom susfrir granz mals | e endurer e forz freiz e granz chalz, | si'n deit hom perdre del sanc e de la char' [a man must suffer for his lord great pains, and endure great cold and great heat, must lose blood and flesh] (*O*, ll. 1117-19). His greatest loyalty is to his king. This passage is not copied into the English *Song*, which does, however, include an image not present in the French texts depicting Roland on his knees, praying to God as the Saracens approach in order 'our soulis to-day to send to thy blise riche' (l. 608). His loyalty is, above all, to a heavenly lord. As a result the frequent remarks in the French manuscripts that Charlemagne will love his knights for their attacks on the Saracens are removed from the *Song*. Daniel's description of religion in French *chansons de geste*, including the *Chanson de Roland*, as 'important, but in a supporting role' is not translatable to the English *Song*, which seems to adopt the increased concern with active religion in the lives of the fifteenth-century audience.[52] Each reader may not fight as a knight, but can certainly pray as a soldier of Christ.

Throughout the *Song*, religion is emphasized over worldly concerns. Roland's command to his lookout at Roncevaux, for example, is not to ensure that Charlemagne does not lose any vassals as in the French ('que l'emperure nisun des soens n'i perdet'), but to see 'if eny hethyn be þer to wirche us wo', the priority being the Saracen religion as a hindrance to Christianity rather than Charlemagne and his men (*O*, l. 806, and *Song*, l. 318). The same sense of priority is present in Amaris's approach to the Christians, where instead of taunting Roland with the accusation that he has been betrayed by Charlemagne – 'Traït vos ad ki a guarder vos out: | fols est li reis ki vos laissat as porz!' [He who should have protected you has betrayed you: the king is foolish who left you at the gates!] (*O*, ll. 1192-3) – he affirms 'thy lay is fals, and also thy lordes', striking at the religious heart of the text (l. 656). Consequently, as Roland kills Amaris he states, 'thy soule ... to satanas I be-teche! | thou shalt neuer greve man þat to god will seche', instead of proclaiming 'Carles n'est mie fol, | ne traison unkes amer ne volt. | Il fist que proz qu'il nus laisad as porz: oi n'en perdrat France dulce son los' [Charlemagne is not mad, and he never loved treason. He did well who left us at the gates: France will not lose her reputation] (*Song*, ll. 663-4 and *O*, ll. 1207-10). Finally, there are several descriptions in the French manuscripts of French knights missing their wives, children and lands at home, which are missing from the *Song*. In a century where war between two neighbouring Christian countries prevented war against the Turks, the *Song*'s presentation of firm Christian belief in battle against the Saracens has added resonance.

Furthermore, added to the increased focus on fighting for Christ in the *Song* are descriptions of God and allusions to him that characterize his persona in a way that seems to reflect currents in late medieval piety. Dalrymple has looked at religious invocations in Middle English romance and argued that they 'constitute a neglected stylistic feature' with 'considerable doctrinal force', 'delivering images of proactive deity, a god in more than name only'.[53] In a strongly religious period, it makes sense that references to God should be meaningful rather than merely line-fillers, and the importance allotted to Christ's name in prayers and religious drama, as discussed above, reinforces this.   Moreover, a reference to God 'suggests the solidarity of the imperilled Christian protagonists with Christendom and implies their ready access to a Christian deity through his attributes', allowing God to become familiar, individualized and approachable in what may be a reflection of the personalized devotion of the laity in the fifteenth century.[54] Dalrymple also argues that descriptions of God are used in various ways across various texts. Therefore, it is possible to see references to God being employed in a specific way in the English *Song*, suggesting the shaping of a particular image of God.

Following Dalrymple's example in relation to the *Song*, a consistent pattern to the portrayal of God can be found.   Interjections such as 'I be-tak you to crist' (l. 230) and 'god be his gid!' are common in the text, reflecting a concern with positioning God as guide in whom one should trust (l. 253). Furthermore, the overriding concern is not with God as creator, as Dalrymple finds generally in Middle English romance, but with God as merciful ruler, with a corresponding attitude that decisions should be based on resignation to God's will rather than personal fears or concerns, something which may reflect the trust in God's mercy shown in depictions of the Passion and devotion to homely saints in the later Middle Ages.[55] Interestingly, the most famous version of the French *Chanson*, the Oxford manuscript, contains no characterized references to God. These do exist in other French manuscripts, particularly the Venice 7 and Paris versions, suggesting either that the English *Song* derives from these less well-known manuscripts at some point or that there is a coincidental concern within these versions and the *Song* about religion.

However, even this shared concern is not equal in all texts.   The French manuscripts that characterize God generally contain more references to him than the *Song*; God as creator, for example, is referred to five times in the Venice 7 manuscript, but only once in the *Song*, suggesting that the latter is not concerned with God as the originator of humankind but with his continuing guiding role. Christ as redeemer is explicitly referred to once in both manuscripts.   Christ's Passion is referred to seven times in the Venice 7 manuscript, but twice in the *Song*, taking second place numerically and revealing God's role as merciful deity to be important. Most significantly, God as ruler is referred to twice in the Venice 7 manuscript but four times in the *Song*. This is the only description which reverses the trend of fewer references in the English text, and along with references to God's mercy as shown in the Passion represents a portrayal of God as a guiding hand whose influence continues to be felt every day. The portrayal of characters who trust in God in their decisions may reflect a fifteenth-century belief in a God who can be trusted to be merciful in his judgments.

I believe that added to invocations to God as ruler in the *Song* may be several references to Christ at supper with saints in Heaven, which Dalrymple is not sure how to categorize, and references to God being rightfully in charge.[56] For example, when Charlemagne has a dream before the battle of Roncevaux that bodes ill, the advice of his barons, described as 'right resson', is 'now let god alone, and do all his will', advice not present in the French texts (ll. 119-20). The *Song* shows a faith that God will come through at the all-important moment of judgment, because he is a merciful God whose decisions are of uppermost importance. God's compassion is reflected in the small number of references to redemption and the need to satisfy God in the *Song*, and the many claims that God will certainly receive the knights at Roncevaux into Heaven.[57] Similarly, when Gautier, the lookout that Roland sends out at Roncevaux, comes back wounded, it is emphasized that it is not Christ's will that he should suffer so many injuries, insisting on God's humanity and mercy: 'but cristis | willis ne wer in þat ilkey stond, that euer he shuld suffur so many a wound' (ll. 350-51). Even after his defeat, Gautier continues to emphasize the need to follow God's advice as he comments to Roland 'crist the red, roulond', and emphasizes that his desire for vengeance comes from God: 'that I wer on them vengid, god it wold!', comments that do not appear in any French manuscripts and that place God at the heart of life's most important decisions (ll. 358, 363).

Correspondingly, the most frequent references and calls to God in the *Song* are requests for him to guide the knights' behaviour, rather than requests for aid in particular situations; these are non-specific requests which show a faith in God's judgment and a willingness to follow his wishes, and are not present in the French manuscripts. God is not a being who must be placated or feared, but one who is always mindful of his creatures and should be relied on at all times. Throughout the text there is less desperation about the position of the French when faced with an overwhelming number of Saracens, because they have faith that God will save their souls at the end. In the French manuscripts, the French often call on Roland and Oliver to reassure them; in the Venice 4 manuscript the gravity of their situation is particularly emphasized in the description:

> Li Franchi de França e desvee.
> De colps firir e de nos martiriee.
> Perdu ont ses lances e espee,
> e de lor homini un grant mitee.

> [The Franks of France were mad, struck by hits and martyred. They had
> lost their lances and swords, and a great part of their men.][58]

In the *Song*, any despair about the death of Christians is brief and easily overcome by the reassurance that 'in heuyn be þer soulis with-outon thought!' (l. 373) The narrator himself is often asking God to save Roland and his men, reflecting perhaps the personal relationship and trust in God visible in fifteenth-century religion.

The *Song* also reveals a noticeable absence of the conditional sense of God's love referred to in Clutterbuck's discussion of the 'satisfaction' theory, where the knights must first act and then be rewarded. Turpin celebrates Mass and blesses the men before battle in the *Song*, but in the French texts there is a greater emphasis on Turpin absolving the knights of their sins, telling the knights, 'Asoldrai vos pur vos anmes guarir' [I absolve you to protect your souls], to which the narrator adds, 'ben sunt asols, quites de lur pecchez' [they were well absolved, quit of their sins], showing that a merciful God is not a guarantee (*O*, ll. 1133, 1140). In contrast, when Roland refers to the Passion in the *Song* it is to reassure his men by reminding them of God's love, telling them, 'Think he suffrid for vs paynes sore, | we shall wrek him with wepins þer for' (ll. 627-8). The emphasis is on the fact that God has already suffered for humankind, and his willingness to do so has been underlined as Roland has promised his men immediately beforehand that 'we shall supe ther seintis be many, | And crist soulis fedithe, this is no nay' (ll. 625-6). Roland's suggestion that his men should avenge Christ against his enemies does not suggest repayment as a requirement for salvation, but rather an act of thanks to a merciful God. Many of the French manuscripts, on the other hand, clearly state the conditional requirements of a seat in paradise in a passage not present in the *Song*, as Turpin tells the knights, 'Seglo avrem in lo regno paradis; | mais li coard miga no i sera mis' [We will have seats in paradise, but the coward will not] (V4, ll. 1487-8). The fact that in the English version it is also Roland rather than Bishop Turpin who promises paradise to his men may reflect the growing involvement of the laity in fifteenth-century religion.

Religious certainty comes to the fore in the *Song* in the scene where Roland debates whether to sound his horn in order to alert Charlemagne to the plight of the French rearguard before the battle of Roncevaux begins. He does not focus on the need to protect the renown of France and the knights' reputations as in the French manuscripts – where it is emphasized that 'Ne placet Deu ne ses seinz ne ses angles | que ja pur mei perdet sa valur France! | Melz voeill murir qu'a huntage remaigne' [God forbid, and his saints and angels, that France should lose its valour for me! It would be better to die than remain in shame] (*O*, ll. 1089-91) – but simply asks, 'Olyver art thou aferd of this sight?' (l. 535) He continues, 'let the king of heuyn hed to vs tak', emphasizing faith in God and the desirability of referring to his will in contrast to the knights' suggestion that heaven will be of help only when they are dead (l. 544). Roland's response that his knights should be ashamed by such thoughts and his instruction to 'Flee fast þat is afferd' reveal his faith in God and shame those who doubt God's judgment (l. 564). The knights soon also realize that to fight is the necessary, noble thing and do so 'in cristis name' (l. 577).

Faith in God is consequently revealed in the fact that success in battle is attributed to God's will and his favouring of the Christians in the *Song*. As Hardman has pointed out, a difference between the portrayal of Christian reaction to success after the first battle at Roncevaux is visible in the French and English texts.[59] The Middle English *Song* depicts Roland telling his men 'we ought to worshippe god myche of his grace' for their victory, followed by Turpin commenting 'this lord that we serue louythe his own, | that so few of his fellid so many', before all Christian knights thank Christ for keeping them safe (ll. 810, 812-

13). As well as showcasing Christian fellowship, as Hardman suggests, the representation of Christ the ruler to whom decisions and outcomes can and should be trusted can be seen as setting an example and pointing the way for Christian readers.[60] This contrasts with the French manuscripts, where instead of Turpin's validation of the knights as safe in the love of Christ, he states that such victory shows 'que bons vassals ont nostre empereür' [our emperor has good vassals], placing Charlemagne as the leading and important authority rather than God (*O*, l. 1444).

Comparing the Middle English fragment with its French counterparts reveals the increased role that God and God's trustworthy decisions as ruler play in the later English *Song*, and hence underlines that texts are strongly influenced by the overriding concerns of an era. It is this rewriting of the past which allows for a constant reinvention of stories. Roland's decision to fight a battle that he knows will result in the slaughter of his peers is represented in the English text as a choice of religious fortitude and resilience over personal self-interest or doubt, based upon trust in an accessible God who is active in everyday life, a God who will be merciful without the need to be placated. In an atmosphere of religious enthusiasm and political uncertainty in England, it may be that the concept of relying on the Christian faith and in God as the only true guide to life echoed in the minds of contemporary readers of the *Song*. Not only does the *Song* redraft the past, it suggests suitable future behaviour for its readers by using the hero to suggest ideal conduct from a fifteenth-century religious, and possibly political, point of view: to trust in God in daily life and to unite in faith in his name may have been seen as at the same time appealing to a late medieval audience and necessary to prevent fighting within Christendom in order to turn aggression to the Turkish East. The narration of a historical event therefore has as many links with the present, and the future, as with the past.

Notes

[1] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 357.

[2] I have referred to these texts as edited by J. J. Duggan and others in *La Chanson de Roland – The Song of Roland: The French Corpus*, 3 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

[3] H. M. Smyser, 'Charlemagne Legends', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. J. B. Severs, I: Romances (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), p. 96 and W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 91-2.

[4] Susan E. Farrier, '*Das Rolandslied* and the *Song of Roland* as Moralizing Adaptations of the Chanson de Roland', *Olifant*, 16 (1991), 61-76 (64).

[5] Stephen H. A. Shepherd, '"I have gone for þi sak wonderfull wais": The Middle English Fragment of the Song of Roland', *Olifant*, 11 (1986), 219-36 (226-7, 236).

[6] Shepherd, "I have gone for þi sak wonderfull wais", 236.

[7] Phillipa Hardman, 'Speaking of Roland: The Middle English Roland Fragment in BL MS Lansdowne 388', in *Medieval Historical Discourses: Essays in Honour of Professor Peter S. Noble*, eds Marianne J. Ailes, Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Françoise H. M. Le Saux (Reading: University of Reading, 2008), pp. 99-121 (pp. 99, 110).

[8] Gordon Leff, 'Heresy and the Decline of the Medieval Church', *Past and Present*, 20 (1961), 36-51 (36, 38).

[9] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 4.

[10] Duffy, p. 63.

[11] Nicole R. Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. ix and Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 1.

[12] Aston, p. 25.

[13] Duffy, pp. 233-4.

[14] Aston, p. 1 and Richard Kieckhefer, 'Major currents in Late Medieval Devotion', in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, eds Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 76.

[15] R. N. Swanson in *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* states that 'the number of Carthusian houses rose from three to eight between 1350 and 1420' (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 277.

[16] Duffy points to an 'extraordinary and lavish spate of investment by laymen and women in the fabric and furnishing of their parish churches' and estimates that 'maybe as many as two thirds of all English parish churches saw substantial rebuilding or alteration in the 150 years before the Reformation', pp. 45, 132.

[17] Furthermore, Kieckhefer argues that 'the intermediate position of devotions, between the public acts of liturgy and the private act of contemplation, provided not just for flexibility but also for a sense of linkage between church and home', p. 101.

[18] Duffy, p. 120.

[19] Duffy, p. 114.

[20] The increase in the provision of such indulgences also encouraged further religious devotion, such as 'the celebration of specific masses or reading certain books'; religious practice therefore encouraged wider interest in religious thinking and was explicitly linked to the use of language and literature. See Swanson, pp. 292-3.

[21] Duffy, p. 284.

[22] Kieckhefer, p. 96. Aston also points to the fact that 'in England alone one can set beside the nine successful processes of canonization between 1198 and 1500 another ten that failed' (p. 11).

[23] Swanson, pp. 257, 288.

[24] Aston, p. 12. Kieckhefer also describes the later Middle Ages as 'the era of lavishly ornamented books of hours commissioned for wealthy patrons, of small devotional ivory panels for private devotion, of inexpensive and generally crude woodcuts for popular consumption' (p. 75).

[25] Duffy, p. 192.

[26] Duffy, p. 67.

[27] E. Catherine Dunn, 'Popular Devotion in the Vernacular Drama of Medieval England', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 4 (1973), 55-68 (58).

[28] Kieckhefer, p. 78.

[29] Swanson writes that 'the interplay between the many possible sources of religious instruction – sermons, drama, literature, pictures, songs and so forth – is a notable feature of the period' (p. 279).

[30] Duffy writes that devotional texts were now 'literally within the grasp of the middling and lower sorts, a fact abundantly evident in their wills' (p. 212).

[31] Kieckhefer, p. 78.

[32] John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England: 1370-1529* (London: Longman, 1983), pp. 339, 341.

[33] Duffy states that 'heavy emphasis on the duties and obligations of the Christian life, the need to do good and be good, was never a dominant feature of the popular veneration of the saints. Instead the brightly painted and beautiful images spoke of the overflowing abundance of God's grace' (p. 187).

[34] Dunn, 65.

[35] Charlotte Clutterbuck, *Encounters With God in Medieval and Early Modern English Poetry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 32-3.

[36] Clutterbuck, p. 35.

[37] This is particularly evident in representations of the Passion of Christ and the Christocentric approach that was the 'strongest aspect of lay piety at the time' (Swanson, p. 276). Kieckhefer notes four developments in the art of the later Middle Ages which reveal a growing fascination with the Passion: increasing attention to the entire sequence of events, a full cast of characters, the isolation of moments from postcrucifixion narratives, and a predilection towards the emblems of the Passion as important symbols in their own right (p. 85).

[38] Kieckhefer, p. 102 and Duffy, p. 36.

[39] Robert Warm, 'Identity, Narrative and Participation: Defining a Context for the Middle English Charlemagne Romances', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. Rosalind Field (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 87-100 (p. 87).

[40] Warm, p. 88.

[41] Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 62.

[42] Housley, p. 133.

[43] J. J. N. Palmer, *England, France and Christendom* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 182.

[44] Housley, p. 146.

[45] Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c. 1300-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 151.

[46] C. Meredith-Jones (ed.), *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi, ou Chronique du Pseudo-Turpin* (Geneva: Slatkin Reprints, 1972).

[47] Hardman, p. 101.

[48] *The English Charlemagne Romances*, Part II, ed. S. J. Herrtage, E. S. 35 (London: EETS, 2008), ll. 75-6. Subsequent references to this text will be by parenthetical line reference only.

[49] Shepherd, 223.

[50] The Oxford version, ed. Ian Short, in *La Chanson de Roland – The Song of Roland: The French Corpus*, ed. J. J. Duggan and others, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), vol. I, Part 1, ll. 693-7. Subsequent references to this text will be by parenthetical line reference only.

[51] Marianne J. Ailes, *The Song of Roland – On Absolutes and Relative Values* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p. 8.

[52] Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 116.

[53] Roger Dalrymple, *Language and Piety in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. viii, 33, 102.

[54] Dalrymple, p. 104.

[55] Dalrymple, p. 64.

[56] Dalrymple, p. 189.

[57] Clutterbuck, p. 32.

[58] The Venice 4 version, ed. Robert F. Cook, in *La Chanson de Roland – The Song of Roland: The French Corpus*, ed. J. J. Duggan and others, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), vol. I, Part 2, ll. 1403-6. Subsequent references to this text will be by parenthetical line reference only.

[59] Hardman, p. 108.

[60] Hardman, p. 108.