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**An Icon and a Human:  
Medieval Ethico-Religious Standards as Unveiled in Roland and Parzival**

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the ambivalent Danish prince wonders "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them." Writing at the height of the English Renaissance, Shakespeare imbued within his protagonist a restless mind and an inconstant spirit. Indecisive in pressing worldly matters, Hamlet instead seeks solace by delving into the depths of his soul. Medieval literature, however, had yet to pierce humanity with such philosophical, Shakespearean acumen. Authors did not paint intimate portraits with words; rather, they envisioned the world with an omniscient eye—one perched from above in order to capture the vast panorama of action below. Two texts in particular exemplify the popularity of epic narratives in the medieval epoch: *The Song of Roland* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. When the protagonists of the respective texts decide *not* to do something, ala Hamlet, the reader has little insight into their motivations. Neither author places lengthy, introspective soliloquies in the mouths of their protagonists. Logic never plays a part in either protagonist's consciousness. Indeed, through their critical decisions, both protagonists reveal more about the social, ethical, and religious standards of the Middle Ages than of their own thought processes.

One should not, however, lump the texts into the same category, for in truth they are anchored by very different characters. Roland's controversial decision arises from Christian obstinance. His is a pious pride fortified by a lifetime of experience; Parzival's inadvertent sins, on the other hand, stem from the young knight's innocence or naivete. On an even greater scale, further dualities emerge between the two texts. *The Song of Roland* is sparse in its psychological detail and altogether vacant in transitional, linear plotting. This paucity of detail occurs not only because of medieval writing conventions—it is also due to the demands of a narrative centered on a martyr. If the modern reader finds *The Song of Roland* desolate in many aspects of its narrative and characterization, then *Parzival* lacks coherence for an entirely opposite reason—it is extremely dense. Given the context of his times, where literature was laden with abstract symbolism, Eschenbach nevertheless creates characters of surprising psychological

complexity. He relies on a quirky sensitivity to illuminate the human condition and all of its attendant frailties. Parzival's tumultuous quest for the Grail is but a microcosm of every man's quest for humility and religious fulfillment. Here, the hierarchies of Christiandom present themselves through literature: Parzival represents flawed, often-wayward humanity; Roland, meanwhile, personifies a larger-than-life Christian icon by way of his imposing, superhuman persona.

Written in a paratactic tongue, *The Song of Roland* forces the reader to infer transitions and motivations. The narrator describes action, not thought. For this reason, the reader can comprehend Roland's decision *not* to blow his horn only through external factors. Caged in at a mountainous pass, Roland's Christian army must fend off the infidel forces led by Marsilla. Charlemagne has invested Roland with the responsibility of leading the Carolingian forces against Marsilla's Muslim entourage—a duty of unparalleled importance. It is enough to haunt the king; though he has attained an almost Biblical status in age and wisdom, Charlemagne fears his decision. Ganelon, who like Judas abandons his leader for money, has already betrayed his forces. Ominous dreams replete with symbolic beasts descend upon Charlemagne at night: “a vicious boar is biting his right arm. He sees a leopard coming from Ardennes that furiously rips into his body.” This imagery hardly evokes the flaming red cross dreamt by that other great Christian king, Constantine. In Charlemagne's dream, ravenous enemies devour the Christian body politic. Victory is only a nebulous proposition.

Clearly, this dream foreshadows the ferocious battle yet to come at Roncesvals, where Roland will make his last stand. A sense of drama—however false it might be—is thus infused into the narrative. If the Christian king falls prey to doubt, then so follows the state. Indeed, as the battle looms ever closer, the naysayers and Doubting Thomases multiply. Ganelon, the erstwhile Frank, assures the pagans that Roland's death will seal the fate of the France; Olivier has such premonitions as well. During the battle, Roland's closest companion laments, “you shall die, and France shall be disgraced.” Before the climactic event, Charlemagne brings his nocturnal concerns into the daylight: “My fair lord nephew, know this for the truth: I'm making you a gift of half my host. Keep them intact, for that is your salvation.” The very existence of the horn signifies that it is not

wrong to call for help in dire circumstances; in fact, it is protocol. All of these examples suggest that Roland goes beyond the normal call of his duty in not crying for help. Beyond that, he violates Charlemagne's direct orders when he does not blow his horn the first time.

Set against this backdrop of doubt and fear, Roland stands all the more proud, for he is everything that others are not. A mythic uber hero who slays hordes of infidels in the name of God, Roland's Christian pride will not allow him to admit the superiority of the pagan forces. He declares, "May God forbid that it be said by any man alive I ever blew my horn because of pagans." Like the other characters in the story, the modern reader judges this behavior as macho, bullheaded, and foolhardy. Roland would then seem to fit the mythic mold first cast by Achilles in *The Iliad*. In Achilles, the reader has a seemingly perfect ancestor to Roland: Achilles too was legendary for his insatiable hunger for battle, and he too let pride cloud his decision-making. For all of his gifts, Achilles squanders most of *The Iliad* by brooding and decrying the petty wrongs visited upon him by Agamemnon. Like Roland, Achilles dies within the course of a narrative that had previously centered on him. Thus, the reader has an admired superhuman who nonetheless lets his pride sabotage his greatness. Achilles and Roland, tragic heroes par excellence.

After a closer inspection, however, these ancient ties prove tenuous. The writer of *The Song of Roland* speaks not only for himself, but also for his entire people. His narrative serves as a pseudo-national anthem. And the Christian world of eleventh century France—which is revealed in a story about an eighth century conflict—is far different than the pagan one described by Homer over a thousand years earlier. As in *The Song of Roland*, *The Iliad* tells the tale of an already legendary conflict. Even before the poet could invoke his muse, the audience knew what the outcome would be—Troy would not survive. The most notable rift between the texts occurs in how the narrator treats the sure-to-be defeated enemy force. In *The Iliad*, the doomed Trojans actually engender more sympathy than the Achaeans. While Achilles broods, the Trojan Hector nobly fights; Homer portrays him in the loving glow of his father, his wife, and his young child. Achilles finds redemption not through his epic outbursts of violence, but through an act of compassion towards the enemy. Having slain Hector and having desecrated his corpse,

Achilles relents to the pleas of the Trojan king Priam. Throughout *The Iliad*, Homer emboldens the character of the Achaeans by placing them in a fight against a noble enemy.

Contrast this discourse with the one presented in *The Song of Roland*. In the Christian world, the idea of fate assumes a considerably different form. *The Song of Roland* opens with its didactic, omniscient narrator declaring “Marsilla holds it (Saragossa); he does not love God, but serves Mohammed and invokes Apollo. No matter what he does, his ruin will come.” Here, the reader hears an authoritative voice that mimics God’s—no matter what transpires in the narrative, the Christian forces will prevail. In a universe constructed by a Christian God, only those who follow the Christian faith are welcome. The Islamic forces will never win, because they fight against the will of the most powerful creator. Enemies behave in treacherous, satanic ways. Steeped in this chauvinistic belief system, the medieval warrior could never fight a worthy enemy. Compassion slips out of the Christian doctrine in deference to a stringent worldview; Roland declares before his Muslim enemy that “I cannot love your kind, your way is that of heresy and pride.” The inflexible religious doctrine of the eleventh-century can be summed up in Roland’s words at the battlefield at Roncesvals: “The pagan cause is wrong, the Christian right.” It’s a simple dichotomy that leaves no room for interpretation; Roland’s statement may as well have come from the mouth of God himself.

Lacking many of the qualities present in ordinary humans, Roland behaves as a true conduit of God’s will, and his actions at Roncesvals culminate in his martyrdom. If suffer he must, then suffer he will. The equation here is stoic as it is mystical: in suffering, one can attain spirituality. Christianity regales in the story of Christ’s passion cycle, and devout followers can only gain insight through suffering. Roland not only feels the pain that Christ felt, he reenacts his death. As in life, Roland’s death reaches beyond the merely human. In keeping with martyrdom, Roland must die for his cause, and martyrs are by definition *not* tragic. To the contrary, an everlasting paradise awaited holy Christians after death, and relinquishing one’s life in the service of God was an unequivocal good. Roland reminds his dubious friend Olivier that “A man should suffer hardships for his lord, and persevere through dreadful heat and cold; a man should lose, if

need be, flesh and blood.” Immediate, earthly suffering—all things pertaining to the flesh—should fade away, overpowered by otherworldly thoughts. Though the story focuses upon a battle, where viscera fly with horrifying immediacy, the real subtext of *The Song of Roland* lies in a more contemplative, timeless realm. Christ casts his shadow over Roland’s death: “Around midday a widespread darkness falls, and light comes only when the skies are torn...it is the requiem for Roland’s death.” This passage mirrors Christ at Mount Golgotha, when darkness spread all over the earth. Here, the narrator unveils a true image of Roland without actually describing his form. His visage can be seen in the mosaics of medieval churches, where Jesus towers over the viewer in rigid, stern solemnity. Through his pathos and otherworldly foresight, Roland’s decision not to blow his horn can only be judged as meritorious. The decision, after all, emanates from a Christian martyr who had already entered the annals of French legends. Roland’s “acrimonious and proud” heart strongly beats inside medieval religious doctrine.

Wolfram Von Eschenbach, a German poet writing some two hundred years later (1203 AD), interprets another popular epic narrative—the Arthurian tale of Perceval’s quest for the Grail. If *The Song of Roland* examines matters of the heart only indirectly and abstractly, then *Parzival* takes a far more upfront and introspective path in its examination of Christian faith. Like *The Song of Roland*, *Parzival* offers violence and excitement to pique the interest of the reader. But *Parzival* also has a far more spiritual undercurrent running through it, owing to its origins in Celtic manuscripts, Chretien d’Trois, and above all else to Eschenbach’s artistry. Eschenbach describes a vivid, turbulent, and distinctly human spirituality that had in the past taken form only in symbolic, arcane incarnations. Take the opening lines of the book, for they carry import throughout: “If vacillation dwell with the heart the soul will rue it. Shame and honor clash where the courage of a steadfast man is motley like a magpie. But such a man may yet make merry, for Heaven and Hell have equal part in him.” Already, Eschenbach has presented a schismatic view of courage—an unthinkable idea for whoever wrote the *Song of Roland*. Even the analogy of mankind to the magpie—a bird of ominous black plumage—would not have rested well poetically in *The Song of Roland*. Essentially, these ambivalent lines foreshadow the famous dichotomy presented by Hamlet in his “To be or not to be” soliloquy. To live honorably or to die shamefully—that is the question.

Decisions are to be made. For Eschenbach, both good and bad exist within the same human heart; on one pole darkness and death reside, on the other pole lies salvation. Only the courageous can fight off temptation and lean towards the light of God's glow.

Perhaps the poet's more complex ethico-religious view isn't exceptional—the Christian world he inhabited had undergone great changes. The disastrous Second Crusade (circa 1147) and the lay investiture controversy had diluted its central power. The laity had found a form of religious emancipation: secular rulers could grant symbols of religious authority to Church appointees. Couple this complicated religious world with the emergent social rules placed on vassals, lords, and knights, and the reader has a unique blend of the practical and the spiritual. The Arthurian code of conduct operated for all knights, and this code placed a special emphasis on treating woman in a chivalrous manner. Such a system is ever present in Parzival's otherwise religious quest, thus creating a new form of epic narrative that embraces romance and adventure. Parzival, indeed, presents an allegorical figure: in spite of his exceptional innate talents in knighthood, Parzival progresses from ignorance to self-awareness in an entirely ordinary manner. His sins are innocent sins, the omissions of an unenlightened youth. In this manner, Eschenbach educates and entertains the reader all at once. By using the engaging medium of prose, Eschenbach outlines the ethical and religious thought that was paradigmatic of his day.

Young Parzival is eponymous with the human condition—his name means “pierce through the heart.” The reader knows that heartbreak and pain await the young boy. Like all of humanity, Parzival must confront original sin and mankind's naturally wayward state. In the words of Trevrizent, Eschenbach's fictional mouthpiece, “Human nature has a wild, perverse strain.” Lost in ignorance, Parzival asks, “Oh mother, what is God?” Through this question, one sees that mankind is not naturally born into a state of grace. As his name suggests, Parzival hurts others as he hurts himself. Like the prodigal son, Parzival leaves the loving confines of his home against the protestations of his family. His mother, Herzloyde (“heart's pain”), dies of heartbreak in his absence—the first inadvertent sin of many that Parzival commits in his journey to Arthurian knighthood and the Grail castle, Munsalvaesche. In a spate of uncontrolled anger, Parzival accidentally kills Ither, a blood relative along the Arthurian line, and he has

amorous misadventures when he takes some chivalrous advice too literally. Time and time again, Parzival sees the world in merely concrete terms. He lacks the capacities of reason and thought. Gurnemanz helps propel Parzival into mature knighthood by advising him in matters of Arthurian conduct. Yet for all his acquired social knowledge, Parzival lacks true inner piety.

When Parzival reaches Munsalvaesche, he encounters a Grail castle enveloped in an ambience of mystery and agony. He has just reached that unattainable Grail, that most celestial object, when he is derailed by his own inexperience in matters of the heart. Compassion—that evanescent Christian virtue and Arthurian ideal—evades young Parzival in his interaction with Anfortas, the suffering fisher king. In order to acquire the Grail, Parzival must ask of Anfortas the Question. The contents of the Question are startlingly simple and obvious: “Sir, what ails you?” But Parzival chooses instead to bow to the Letter of the occasion, which dictates that such a question would be too forward and thus impolite. In the text, Eschenbach consistently seeks to cull the Spirit from the Letter. Whereas the Letter is crafted by man to help corral evil or uncouth tendencies, the Spirit is that more spiritual law ordained by God. In the Grail castle, the Spirit of the situation calls for compassion. At its Latin root, compassion contains the word “passion.” Literally, this word means “to suffer.” One can only attain compassion through suffering. The suffering Christian must learn humility and penitence before he can understand the ways of Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of all mankind. Then, and only then, can Parzival forge a true Christian heart.

Lonely and rejected, Parzival falls straight from innocence into disillusionment. Again, he asks, “Alas, what is God!” Yet here Parzival speaks in the voice of the doubtful adult, rather than in the voice of a curious child. Such a statement stands as a signpost along Parzival’s tortuous journey towards fulfillment. His faith has no fortitude, and he longs instead for his wife. He claims, “I am deeply resentful of God, since he stands Godfather to all my troubles.” In Chapter Nine, Parzival undergoes a spiritual education that will reconcile his conflicted feelings towards God. Visiting the penitent hermit Trevrizent, Parzival sees firsthand a man who has undergone a religious conversion through true faith. Herein lie the keys to the story. Eschenbach uses Trevrizent so that he may funnel contemporary Christian doctrine into the narrative. Even the hermit

brandishes the wounds of the human heart—a vessel always at war with itself. Trevrizent recounts his days as a young knight, and admits, “From time to time I paired chaste with sinful thoughts.” It comes as no surprise, then, that not even God operates as a unified whole: “His wares are of two sorts: He offers the world love and anger.” To not offend God, one must believe in Him at an innermost level of consciousness, for “Thoughts keep out the rays of the sun...Thoughts are darkness unlit by any beam. But of its nature, the Godhead is translucent, it shines through the wall of darkness...only if it (the thought) be pure does God accept it. Since God scans our thoughts so well, alas, how are frail deeds must pain him!” Surely Parzival had never hoped to envision the unseen, where external reality merely signifies metaphysical events.

Anfortas, as it turns out, was punished because he forsake the translucent light of God—he let licentious and youthful impetuosity subvert his true duty to the Grail. The carnal and the physical overpowered the spiritual. Of Parzival’s journey to the Grail castle, Trevrizent exclaims, “All he achieved there was shame, for he saw all the marks of suffering yet failed to ask his host ‘Sire, what ails you?’ Since youthful inexperience saw to it that he asked no question, he let slip a golden opportunity.” Were Parzival to ask the question of Anfortas, he would have found a response brimming with knowledge; Anfortas’s indiscretions translated into a lifetime of sorrowful suffering. To keep the Grail, one must have passion and compassion, both attributes of suffering. Armed with these virtues, the humble Christian can then understand with more sensitivity the ethereal yet powerful workings of God.

*The Song of Roland* and *Parzival* truly reflect the societies from which they came. In both works, the protagonist finds himself at the epicenter of an extraordinary moment: Roland stands at the mountainous pass at Roncesvals, watching as the black throngs of the infidels accumulate like storm clouds; Parzival stands in the afflicted Grail castle, feeling eternity slip from his grasp in an unreal haze. A tale of martyrdom, *The Song of Roland* celebrates Roland as a hero who chose to fight and die, rather than sacrifice his faith for immediate convenience. Far from foolish, Roland’s behavior only bolsters the fortress of faith for the medieval Christian community. His character remains as fearsome and as omnipotent as any medieval religious icon in the world of art; Roland’s gargantuan Christian qualities are both inspiring and unattainable to the masses.



*Parzival*, however, details the allegorical quest of everyman as he searches for humility and piety in a world of strife and confusion. When Parzival fails to ask the Question, his silence in actuality speaks volumes. He had yet to obtain compassion and inner-knowledge through suffering, and could not shed the external trappings of the world. In *The Song of Roland* and in *Parzival*, the reader encounters different strains of medieval Christianity—the otherworldliness of Roland, and the all too worldly Parzival. The dichotomies of the medieval world come to life again through the critical actions of both protagonists.

