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STRANGE WORDS

Retelling and Reception in the Medieval Roland Textual Tradition

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Introduction
The Song of Roland and the Narrativity of Roncevaux

The Song of Roland has been unjustly neglected by generations of modern medievalists. This would be an absurd claim, of course, if I were using that title in the way that has become customary, referring to the single version of this medieval narrative that is contained in manuscript Digby 23 at Oxford University. That particular text, which specialists of the chanson de geste tend to call, instead, "the Oxford Roland," has probably received more attention over the past two hundred years than any other text in the medieval French canon. The single text most readers know as the Chanson de Roland or Song of Roland is widely considered to be required reading for students of French literature, world literature, and Western civilization. This text has also been the subject of an impressive number of published critical analyses, which have exerted upon it many different approaches yielding nearly innumerable individual interpretations. Indeed, offering one’s own interpretation of this text has been described as an all but inevitable rite of passage for scholars of medieval French literature.1 How does this consistent and widespread attention constitute neglect?

As scholars of the chanson de geste have long insisted, the text now known as the Chanson de Roland is really only one member of a larger narrative tradition that medieval authors and audiences understood to be a coherent entity transcending all of its individual manifestations. The story of the deaths of Roland and the twelve peers of France at the Battle
of Roncevaux circulated in countless oral and written versions during the Middle Ages and has survived to the present day in dozens of manuscripts, each one differing considerably from the others in language, style, and content. Since the Oxford Roland cannot be claimed as the direct source for any of the other surviving manuscripts, this textual tradition does not represent the ongoing literary legacy of that individual text. Instead, the medieval Roncevaux textual tradition was the written stage of a literary legend that predated the Oxford manuscript in oral transmission and then continued independently for centuries afterward. As Douglas Kelly has said of medieval texts in general, "For us the texts are artifacts; in the Middle Ages they illustrated stages in a dynamic process of social and moral reflection elaborated in textual commentary and correction." The importance of this larger narrative of Roncevaux to medieval culture, particularly in France, is clear not only from its survival in multiple textual forms but also from references to the story in other medieval literary texts, from artistic representations of it in several pieces of monumental sculpture, and even from a documented trend toward naming pairs of sons Roland and Olivier well before the Oxford Roland was written down. Since it is well known that the Roncevaux story occupied a position of great cultural prominence over a period of several centuries, why have so few scholars bothered to study any Roncevaux manuscript other than Oxford, and why has only one monograph, published over fifty years ago, offered readings of multiple versions of the story side by side?

Modern critics’ neglect of the larger Roncevaux textual tradition bespeaks an indifference toward the post-Oxford manuscripts in the present day that is a diluted remnant of the marked antipathy of nineteenth-century scholars. The positivist and nationalist sources and expressions of this antipathy have been amply documented by a number of scholars tracing the modern reception history of the Oxford Roland, so there is no need to restate them here. Medievalists today are well aware of the prejudices of nineteenth-century medieval studies and consciously intend not to perpetuate them. When it comes to the Roncevaux textual tradition, however, it is worthwhile to recall that the enduring and misleading reputation of the post-Oxford Roland manuscripts as minor variants upon a singular, superior masterpiece is the result not of mere ignorance but rather of the fact that these texts were once relegated deliberately to critical oblivion and have never been entirely reclaimed.

Because a larger narrative tradition about Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux not only exists but actually generated the Oxford Roland rather than having been generated by it, applying the title Chanson de
Roland to that text alone is a distortion. It has become such a familiar distortion, however, that it sounds unnatural, and requires explicit commentary, to apply that title more appropriately to the entire Roncevaux textual tradition. The issue of the title itself is relatively trivial, especially because the title Chanson de Roland is a modern invention that does not appear in any medieval manuscript of which I am aware. Moreover, the conventional usage of that title to refer to the Oxford manuscript is probably too entrenched to be changed at this late date. What is in need of transformation, however, is modern critics’ perception of the Oxford Roland (whatever one chooses to call it) and of its place in the larger narrative tradition to which it belongs. That text was probably never intended to be read apart from its larger tradition: the ubiquitousness of the Roncevaux story in medieval culture would have made such isolated reception virtually unimaginable at the time when the text was written. One might even say that the Roncevaux narrative tradition is the textbook example of medieval literary mouvance: in his well-known Essai de poétique médiévale, Paul Zumthor used the manuscript tradition of the French Roncevaux texts as a visual aid to illustrate the notion of mouvance, specifically of the inherently multiform nature of literary works in the Middle Ages. Under the title “Oeuvre ‘Chanson de Roland,’” Zumthor lists as separate branches the names of several individual manuscripts and writes below that the subtitle “Textes: Les Chansons de Roland.” Zumthor’s chart illustrates the idea that the individual manuscript texts are all examples of the larger work but that that work cannot be said to exist fully in any one text. This notion of the inherently multiform medieval work has been restated and elaborated many times since then, to the point where it has become an accepted commonplace of the field. Yet relatively few scholars of medieval literature put this notion into practice by granting equal attention and authority to all surviving versions of the texts they analyze, in spite of the ever-increasing availability of both manuscripts and critical editions of textual variants that were once considered too “minor” to merit the attention of modern researchers.

This would be an opportune moment for any scholar of medieval French literature to give more thought to the implications of the Oxford Roland’s relationship to the larger Roncevaux textual tradition. These days, the Oxford version itself may be suffering as much as the more neglected Roland manuscripts from the inordinate amount of past attention devoted to it and from its resulting isolation from the rich intertextual field within which it was designed to signify. Many scholars of medieval French literature now see the Oxford Roland as a unique and
familiar entity whose form and meaning have been fully elucidated by past studies and about which there is little need to say more. At the same time, some university professors are giving the Oxford Roland a less prominent place in medieval studies curricula because of its reputation as propaganda for the Crusades, or for other repressive political agendas particular to its twelfth-century context; these aspects of its conventional reputation seem to place the Oxford Roland outside the category of what might be intriguing or even palatable to many of today’s readers. This reputation not only oversimplifies the Oxford Roland itself but also stifles the Roncevaux story by shackling it to a single redaction and a single historical moment, a limitation that disregards the parameters of the literary field in which the Oxford version itself first circulated. The Oxford Roland shows ample evidence of its engagement with its immediate historical context, but as part of a larger cultural enterprise of enduring relevance, for the Roncevaux story in all of its forms is concerned with how people of different historical moments strive to understand themselves in relation to one another.

A central focus of the Roncevaux texts, and therefore of this book, is the formulation and reception of narratives about past and future events, narratives that serve to affirm and/or call into question the coherence of individual and collective identities across time. The Roncevaux texts all return repeatedly to episodes in which characters within the fiction compose, transform, and interpret such narratives. These episodes make the point (usually implicitly, though at times explicitly) that literary narratives perform for entire societies the same restorative or destructive functions that these texts ascribe to the narratives told and heard by individual characters. Thus the Roncevaux texts both dramatize and problematize the importance of narrative to lived experience, and in particular to identity formation and perpetuation. By including in these dramatizations the reception of character narratives by other characters, these texts also implicate the audience prominently in their statements about the social functioning of narrative. Since the “audiences” within the Roncevaux texts frequently reject the narratives they hear, choose between competing narratives, or formulate alternative narratives of their own, a close examination of narration and reception within the fiction of the Roncevaux texts has much to tell us about how their authors perceived the reciprocal dynamics of narration and reception in which they were themselves engaged with their medieval audiences.

Of course, traditional readings of the Oxford Roland do see that text engaged, along with its contemporary audience, in a diachronic exami-
nation of collective identity, but in a way that tends to be too strictly circumscribed. Some of the best-known lines from that text owe their fame to the fact that they seem to announce prescriptive truths to medieval audience members about what their identity should be, on the basis of identities formulated by the narrator and characters of the text. For example, Charlemagne is called "our" emperor in the opening line, although the historical Charlemagne died three centuries earlier; Roland at one point pronounces the universal judgment that "[p]agans are wrong and Christians are right";\(^\text{12}\) and as the audience prepares to witness the graphic violence of Ganelon’s execution by drawing and quartering, the narrator intones, "Any man who betrays kills himself along with others" [Hom ki traïst, sei ocit e altroi] (v. 3959). Since these three lines occur at the beginning, middle, and end of the text, it is legitimate to view them as elements of a consistent thread running through the narrative as a whole, implying that this narrative about political events of the past should be taken as an encouragement or a warning to audience members about how to conduct themselves within the political context of the twelfth-century present. Such a reading is of limited utility, however, since there is much more to the issues of identity and diachronic exchange in the Oxford \textit{Roland} than these three lines and others like them and, within the larger Roncevaux textual tradition, much more than the Oxford \textit{Roland} in its entirety. The political and cultural viewpoints that have contributed so much to the modern reputation of the Oxford \textit{Roland} as a single text actually cannot be fully understood apart from their signification within the larger complex of cultural issues that medieval authors associated consistently with the Roncevaux story in all its forms.

The project of this book is to access that larger set of issues, whose contours emerge more clearly from the narrative strategies characteristic of the surviving Roncevaux texts than from the particular events of the Roncevaux story. Although the Oxford \textit{Roland} has been analyzed many times as a literary text whose primary purposes were political\(^\text{13}\) because its plotline consists of a series of political and military conflicts, my interest is in reading it, alongside three other medieval Roncevaux texts, somewhat in the opposite direction. Within the dramatization of the multiple conflicts that animate the Roncevaux story from start to finish, my readings of that story in four different versions consistently identify instances of discourse by characters and narrators that provide insights about the role of narrative structures in articulating and eventually resolving psychological, social, political, and historical tensions.
These texts demonstrate in a fascinating variety of ways how the construction of narratives, and especially their subsequent reconstruction and reinterpretation, function as essential cognitive techniques for the Roncevaux characters. Each author reshapes this central preoccupation of the Roncevaux story with evident care because these portrayals of narrative retelling and reception in character discourse suggest the important contributions that these rewritten literary narratives themselves were making to their contemporary culture. Evidence of a deliberate metaleterary agenda underlying the character narratives emerges clearly from comparative analysis of multiple Roncevaux texts. The varying form, subject matter, narrative strategies, and dynamics of reception displayed by the discourse of characters in each text prove not only that narrative itself was a theme consistently associated with the Roncevaux story but also that authors frequently found ways to connect character narratives to contemporary trends in medieval literature.

My goal in bringing to the fore these instances of metaleterary discourse is not merely to make the point that the Roncevaux texts contain a reflexive or "self-conscious" component, and it is certainly not to claim that these texts saw themselves as expressions of an "art for art’s sake" mentality. I believe that the Roncevaux authors made the functioning of literary narratives a consistent theme of their texts precisely because they understood the powerful influence of literature, and particularly of the "matiere de France," upon the "imagined community" of Old French speakers that was being ever more forcefully converted into a nation throughout the period in which the Roncevaux texts of this study were composed (twelfth through fifteenth centuries). Yet the type of metaleterary commentary contained in the Roncevaux texts is quite distinct from some modern and postmodern brands of metafiction, in which the production and circulation of literature are the primary focus of the plot. As Robert Siegle has cautioned, it is severely limiting to make assumptions about the universal functioning of literary reflexivity only on the basis of recent forms of it, for, according to that perspective, "A reflexive narrative would . . . be about 'only' art and would tell us little else. It would not affect our view of reality, our essential values and philosophical assumptions—would be, in other words, a safe but frivolous project." It will be easy for readers familiar with the Oxford Roland to understand that this is not an apt description of the Roncevaux story, whose very premise—a bloody battle (or battles) between the Christian Franks and the Muslim Saracens resulting from treachery at the highest levels—offers a troubling test to the "essential values" and "philosophical assumptions" of its audiences in all times.

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and places. Rather than either ignoring or dictating their audiences’ values and assumptions, the Roncevaux texts often seem to be testing or questioning them; reading the Roncevaux story in this spirit can transform some of our received ideas about the political and cultural stakes of the Roncevaux story and its implicit metaliterary commentary.

Although some readers of the Oxford Roland may think of the Roncevaux story as action driven, nearly every major articulation of the Roncevaux plot in every surviving version is also heralded by one or more instances of narration and interpretation by characters. This essential narrativity becomes increasingly complex as the story unfolds because the overall structure of the Roncevaux plot causes the majority of these narratives to be recapitulative, retellings that themselves constitute reinterpretations of past events and then also elicit alternative reinterpretations from the characters who hear them. The basic structure of the Oxford Roland can provide an initial example for readers familiar with that text. The narrative of Oxford begins with the council scenes in which Ganelon’s plan for the attack at Roncevaux takes shape, while the Franks and Saracens debate among themselves the merits of making a peace agreement with the other side. The battle itself occupies the longest portion of the text, followed just after the structural center by the Franks’ revenge battles against the enemy forces of Marsile and Baligant (whose responses to the Battle of Roncevaux are communicated to the audience along with those of the Franks). Charlemagne conducts funerary rituals for the warriors killed at Roncevaux, and further episodes show his return to France, burdened with the sad duty of informing surviving family members of what happened in the battle. The last major episode of the text, the trial and execution of Ganelon, brings a judicial resolution to the narrative; the specific crime of which Ganelon is accused is that of arranging to have twenty thousand of Charlemagne’s men killed at Roncevaux.

The first observation to be made about this basic structure is that the Battle of Roncevaux provides the clear reference point for everything else that the text recounts, an observation that also holds true for the post-Oxford versions. For this reason most medieval authors of these texts described their subject matter in manuscript explicits as “Roncevaux” and seldom as “Roland” or, for that matter, as a “song.” Yet it is equally apparent that none of the surviving Roncevaux texts limit themselves to recounting the Battle of Roncevaux alone, so when their
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authors say that their narratives are about "Roncevaux," that label encompasses not only the battle itself but also the other episodes in which characters verbally anticipate, interpret, and retell it. A basic structural comparison between the surviving versions reveals that the only three scenes to appear in every Roncevaux text are the Battle of Roncevaux, the mourning of Charlemagne and his warriors at the battlefield, and the episode in which Charlemagne brings the news of the battle to Aude (the fiancée of Roland and the sister of his companion Olivier). Therefore even the most abbreviated versions of the story include a triptych formed by the battle, an initial verbal grief response to it, and then a retelling of it to a new audience, one that constitutes a reinterpretation and meets with a newly disturbing reception when Aude dies of grief. Most surviving versions, but not all, add another layer of retelling and reception after Aude’s death, in the form of Ganelon’s trial, during which the characters engage in heated and explicit debate about how to interpret the initial causes and lasting consequences of the battle. Several versions also include the council scenes at the start of the text, which, along with Ganelon’s trial, form a frame around the Roncevaux narrative as a whole within which its central tensions are verbally presented and contested in three stages: before, during, and after the battle. Lexical and structural echoes between these three stages of narrative articulation encourage audiences to perceive the interpretative development that these episodes elaborate through implicit comparison with one another. Thus the varying structures of the essential narrative of "Roncevaux" all reserve an important place for verbal retelling and reinterpretation of the battle among the characters, though they may offer more or less numerous and complex examples of it.

Audience reception is also a prominent component of the architecture of the Roncevaux narratives, although it, too, may manifest itself differently from one text to another. The most obvious way in which the structure of every Roncevaux narrative takes the audience into account is by systematically granting the audience privileged access to information about the future events of the plot before they occur, information of which the protagonists are (tragically) unaware at the same moment. It has been said that this audience awareness was inevitable because it was circumstantial: by the time the surviving manuscripts were written down, the Roncevaux story was so well known that narrators did not hesitate to discuss major events of the plot from the beginning of each text because they would not be spoiling its surprises for anyone (several such cases of "prolepses" by the primary narrator can be observed in the early scenes of the Oxford Roland, vv. 9, 95, 178–79, 710–16). Yet a more essential
privileging of the audience is inscribed in the basic parameters of the Battle of Roncevaux as a narrative event. One of the defining features of this literary battle is that the audience observes it from start to finish in vivid detail, but Charlemagne and the rest of the Frankish army do not even realize the battle is underway until it is nearly over and thus never arrive in time to witness it for themselves. Different texts introduce variants to this model, but these only serve to emphasize further this traditional perceptual gap between the audience and the surviving characters within the fiction.

These narrative parameters of the literary Battle of Roncevaux mean that it is as temporally inaccessible for the surviving characters within the fiction as was the real event that inspired it for medieval audiences. Since Charlemagne reaches the battlefield very soon after the last of the warriors has died, his arrival at Roncevaux can be said to occupy a contiguous or even synchronic historical moment in relation to that of the battle. Yet the irrevocable nature of his warriors’ deaths, and their incapacity to tell their own stories, place the direct experience of the battle in a past moment as inaccessible as if it had occurred centuries before. (This simultaneous contiguity and inaccessibility is portrayed vividly in the Oxford Roland, laisse 177.) Because of their privileged narrative perspective, the audience members themselves serve as the eyewitnesses to the battle that are conspicuously missing from the fictional universe. As such, they are capable of perceiving any discrepancies in the narratives about the battle that are told by Charlemagne and the other characters in the post-Roncevaux episodes. In a larger sense, then, this narrative strategy shared by all the surviving Roncevaux texts allows the audience to serve as infallible judges of the characters’ own narrative strategies, some of which were also characteristic of storytelling in the medieval audiences’ own literary culture.

One purpose of the closing episodes of the Roncevaux narratives seems to be precisely that of exploring the contours of the audience’s complex relationship to the fictional characters and their competing discourses and, by implication, any audience’s relationship to the multiple narratives that medieval literature told and retold about a number of legendary past events. On the one hand, the audience is encouraged to identify strongly with the fictional characters whom they watch fighting and dying at Roncevaux and therefore to judge harshly the fictional characters who later misrepresent the experiences of those beloved warriors in their recapitulative speeches. On the other hand, the audience also can identify readily with the dilemma of the surviving fictional characters, who are forced to perceive what happened at Roncevaux through
the cloud of temporal estrangement and the imperfect illumination of speculative reinvention. Medieval audiences may or may not have cared about the historical accuracy of literary narratives, and perhaps there is more evidence to suggest that audiences did not value such accuracy than to suggest that they did. What is interesting about the Roncevaux narratives in relation to many other medieval literary texts, then, is that they all share a narrative mechanism that strongly encourages the audience to judge the accuracy and intentionality of narrative retellings. By making such retellings a consistent feature of their post-Roncevaux episodes, and indeed by making them a matter of life and death (Aude) and of basic justice (Ganelon’s trial), the Roncevaux texts not only draw attention to the dynamics of narrative retelling and audience reception but also elevate these literary functions to the status of individual and societal duties of the utmost importance.

Indeed, as I will show with numerous examples in the following chapters, the Roncevaux retellings formulated and processed by these fictional characters have clear political, religious, and cultural implications for their audiences, in addition to serving as a source of psychological and ethical integrity for the characters themselves. The interplay of personal identification and objective judgment that I have just described as characteristic of the implied audience of these texts suggests that the narrative of Roncevaux was perceived consistently in the Middle Ages as a suitable forum for serious political, social, and literary commentary: the audiences were encouraged not only to sympathize with the characters but also to evaluate the profound effects of their discursive choices upon themselves and others. What I wish to emphasize most about the nature of this commentary, by analyzing four distinct forms of it in the four texts in this study, is that it did not always advocate the same political, social, or literary views. Instead, what all of these Roncevaux narratives have in common is that they seek to engage their audiences in interpreting actively the discourses they hear, rather than receiving such discourses passively, whether as sheer entertainment or as unexamined truth.

Both the importance and the complexity of the Roncevaux texts’ shared focus on retelling and reception are encoded in the title of this book, *Strange Words*, a reference to Aude’s famous rejection of the discourse about Roncevaux and its consequences that is told to her by Charlemagne in the Oxford version: “Cest mot mei est estrange” [This word is strange to me] (v. 3717). I emphasize from the outset the “strange-
ness” both of words themselves and of discursive dynamics between characters in the Roncevaux texts because my readings of specific instances of retelling and reception within the fiction often hinge upon the anomalies of characters’ speech or upon its wary reception by other characters. Some readers may be surprised by this approach to discourse among the Roncevaux characters, having been predisposed by traditional Roland criticism to view the language of these texts, instead, as univocal and monologic. Yet I am not alone in reading them differently: it has been a distinctive tendency of recent Roland criticism to focus on the indeterminacy of words and of representational and interpretative strategies in that text, a trait that certain scholars perceived in the Oxford Roland decades ago.

Two books deserve special mention here because of their profound influence on my view of language, individual and social identity formation, and the function of competing narratives in the Roncevaux texts. Peter Haidu’s The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State (1993) uses a semiotic approach to reveal the profound instability and the active maneuvering lying just below the surface of the Oxford Roland’s veneer of stable, unified political and social identities. The complexity and/or indeterminacy of particular words and symbolic gestures in the fictional universe of Roncevaux provide points of access for Haidu’s readings of textual passages drawn from every section of the poem. Although my study does not share Haidu’s political and historical focus, my approach to comparing successive, interrelated instances of character narration in the Roncevaux texts often makes use of a similar emphasis on particular words whose meaning becomes clear only through their recurring and at times shifting usage in the speeches of different characters. Sarah Kay’s The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance (1995), on the other hand, deliberately sets the Oxford Roland aside in order to offer readings of other chansons de geste, in comparison to the contemporary romances with which they share many significant traits and outside the long shadow cast by the Oxford version in most previous considerations of the epic genre. Although Kay therefore does not devote much attention to the Roncevaux narratives or focus systematically on the functioning of character discourse, her observations about the narrative dynamics of many twelfth- and thirteenth-century chansons de geste do frequently emphasize their multivocality. For example, one recurring theme of Kay’s study is the tendency of many chansons de geste to generate “alternative narratives” or “counternarratives” that emerge gradually through the unfolding of their plots, contesting the assumptions inherent in the more apparent narrative threads with which these
The introductory chapter of Kay’s study of the *chansons de geste* as “political fictions” also posits the inherent indeterminacy of religious discourses in medieval literary/historical texts such as the *chansons de geste*, of a kind that reflects rather than belies their Christian perspective. Kay points out that medieval Augustinian notions of history as expressions of human sin presided over by a divine providence whose purposes are unknowable “acknowledge that power, although belonging in a totality, can only be perceived through partial, fragmentary, contradictory, and ultimately indeterminate representations.” Therefore, whether the events of the Roncevaux texts are perceived primarily as the products of human political maneuvering or of divine providence manifesting itself through the medium of imperfect human actors, it is to be expected that the verbal formulation and recapitulation of this series of events would be characterized by frequent conflict and indeterminacy. Because the Roncevaux texts devote a great deal of attention to depicting this flawed process as it occurs among their fictional characters, both political and religious readings of this textual tradition can be enhanced by a closer examination of the way they are encoded in the characters’ “strange words.”

For example, if the Oxford *Roland* is regarded as a narrative structured around the articulation in three stages of the specific issues and high social stakes of character discourses and their reception, three famous and vehement verbal conflicts immediately leap to mind from the three major sections of the plot: the conflicting policy recommendations of Roland and Ganelon during the initial council scenes, the debate between Roland and Olivier during the battle about whether to sound the horn to summon Charlemagne, and the conflicting statements of Charlemagne and Ganelon on the issue of whether Ganelon should be prosecuted as a traitor. These scenes all dramatize the possibility that one person may reject entirely the discourse of another, and rightly so, for there are obvious flaws even in the speeches of those characters whose points of view are ultimately validated by the text. Indeed, one consistent approach of the Oxford *Roland* to the portrayal of these debates is to make the “wrong” point of view sound, initially, more logical and trustworthy than the “right” one. This is particularly true of Olivier’s well-reasoned recommendations during the horn debates (with which nearly all modern critics are strongly sympathetic), but even the traitor Ganelon’s public speeches are often logical and persuasive, an impression represented within the text by their initially positive reception by other characters. These three scenes, along with several oth-
ers in the Oxford *Roland*, show not only that characters regularly refute the very basis of each other’s discourse but also that the narrative strategies of the text as a whole encourage audiences to feel alienated on a regular basis, even from the discourse of heroic characters.

The verbal indeterminacy and contentious reception of character discourses in each individual Roncevaux text are compounded through the comparative analysis of multiple representatives of the textual tradition. What is fascinating about studying this verbal alienation in the larger Roncevaux textual tradition is that many surviving texts include it as a prominent and consistent feature but that each text does so in its own way. For example, the most significant difference between the Oxford *Roland* and the other surviving Roncevaux texts is in its treatment of the Aude episode, which lasts for thirty lines in Oxford and nearly a thousand lines in some other versions. The full-length version of this episode not only devotes more attention to Aude but also has Charlemagne lie to her, and sometimes to all of France, about what happened at Roncevaux and how many warriors died there. Since the audience knows the truth about Roncevaux, including how important it was to the dying warriors that their sacrifice be properly understood after the fact, the audience’s natural sympathy lies with Aude, and the drama of this episode results from the suspense felt by the audience about whether and how Aude is going to learn the truth. In other words, the audience spends this entire portion of the narrative feeling alienated from Charlemagne’s discourse and anticipating the moment when a character will express that alienation within the fictional universe by denouncing the emperor’s lies. Thus Aude’s characterization of Charlemagne’s truthful but awkward discourse in the Oxford *Roland* as “strange” represents a greatly softened version of the more usual Aude episode from the larger tradition but nevertheless retains in that key term the verbal alienation whose source is abundantly clear in the longer redactions of this episode.

Furthermore, each Roncevaux text includes at least a few scenes that do not appear in any of the others, and quite often the focal point of these scenes is character discourse. The Châteauroux manuscript is the surviving version that most closely resembles the Oxford *Roland* in its early scenes, but even this reworking of modest scope interpolates into the familiar sequence of events at the Frankish councils some unusually hostile verbal exchanges between Charlemagne and Ganelon, including one in which Charlemagne calls Ganelon a proven criminal. These additional words from the Charlemagne of Châteauroux are enough to transform the audience’s initial perception of the emperor, whose
motivations for entrusting Ganelon with the mission to Marsile are difficult to fathom once he has voiced his mistrust so early and so explicitly. One distinguishing feature of the Occitan version, *Ronsasvals*, is that it includes frequent speeches by characters who are virtually silent or even absent from other Roncevaux texts. Moreover, a number of these speeches occur when these characters are alone, or when another character in their presence is unable to hear what they are saying. In other speeches, heroic characters deliberately say the opposite of what they really mean, and in some cases they are successfully understood nevertheless. Thus *Ronsasvals* not only features character discourse more prominently than some other Roncevaux texts but also ascribes to it particular variants of communicative "strangeness" not found elsewhere in the textual tradition. As for *Galien restoré*, the final Roncevaux text in the medieval French textual tradition and in this study, its flagrant linguistic discrepancies make virtually every line of it sound "strange," as it combines Old French, Middle French, and improvised forms lying somewhere between the two. Furthermore, the content of its characters’ speeches is at times surprising in light of the more common characterizations of these characters in other Roncevaux texts, such as when Roland disparages the power of prayer or when the mighty Charlemagne worries that his army will lose the battle against Baligant unless fresh reinforcements arrive from somewhere else.

The medieval Roncevaux authors’ shared focus on discourse provides a key to medieval rewriting in general, indicating that authors may have chosen to rewrite a particular story as much for its stylistic possibilities as for their interest in its apparent subject matter. As in the examples just described, the characters’ discourse is designed to sound "strange" not only to other characters within each text but also to audiences who have the opportunity to hear the radically different ways in which the characters express themselves in different versions of the Roncevaux story. It is precisely the stability of the basic Roncevaux plot that makes the characters’ varying discourses emerge with such startling force for readers of multiple Roncevaux texts. In spite of some plot variations between one Roncevaux text and another, as well as some discrepancies caused by apparently accidental textual lacunae in certain surviving manuscripts, the Roncevaux textual tradition as a whole is characterized by a strikingly consistent series of core episodes, by comparison with medieval French textual traditions that have received more attention from modern critics, such as those of the Grail quest or of Tristan and Yseut. What characterizes these other textual traditions is a common premise with certain predictable ramifications but also with built-in
opportunities for individual authors to adapt the plotline to their own purposes. The Grail texts are inherently variable because there are always multiple knights simultaneously but independently searching for the Grail. As for Tristan and Yseut, the fact that they always experience periods of separation from each other, from King Mark’s court, or both allowed medieval authors to devise many new contexts and combinations for these texts’ common characters and themes. The Roncevaux textual tradition is far more cohesive than these subcategories of the Arthurian material because it is defined by a shared central event that, in turn, governs every other event recounted alongside it. Even the most radical examples of rewriting in the Roncevaux tradition are limited to omitting, reducing, or expanding existing episodes because the very parameters of the “Roncevaux” category inhibit the invention of entirely new episodes or the transformation of the context in which familiar episodes occur. Yet the Roncevaux tradition is also far more diverse than most manuscript traditions of a common text. Some Old French narratives, such as the Floire et Blanchefleur in verse or the Perceval in prose, survive in two distinct but clearly related textual forms that have come to be known in modern criticism by concise labels such as “redactions A and B,” but no such convention has been devised for the Roncevaux narratives. Critics sometimes speak of the “rhymed Rolands,” a group of six thirteenth-century Roncevaux texts, as if they were a single entity, but representations of the relationships between them in a chart as a conventional stemma tend to be wide and horizontal because there are as many differences as similarities between any one of these manuscripts and all the others.

The cohesiveness of the Roncevaux plot and its consistent dramatization of retelling and reception work together to draw audiences’ attention to the new elements introduced into the Roncevaux narrative by each of its individual manifestations and to heighten audiences’ awareness of those changes as contributions to an ongoing conversation among the larger tradition’s different versions. In the Middle Ages, that conversation unfolded within the clearly delineated literary space called “Roncevaux,” but its strategies of signification did not require that audiences be exposed to all of the narratives within that space or even to any particular subset from among them: the distinctive “Roncevaux” plot and narrative strategies facilitate their comparative interpretation even by audiences familiar with only two versions, any two versions. The lack of documentable relationships between most of the surviving manuscripts means that these texts probably were not direct
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commentaries upon one another. A comparative study of selected Roncevaux texts therefore simulates the conditions of medieval reception in that it allows for a kind of comparative consideration that is not contingent upon a proven relationship between specific texts. The flexibility of comparative reception made possible by the cohesive medieval literary entity "Roncevaux" also means that the possibility that these narratives circulated simultaneously or successively in oral and written forms may not pose as many interpretative problems as some commentators have imagined. It is clear that the story of Roncevaux was told in oral forms that predated the surviving written texts, but the combination of apparent autonomy and inherent relatedness that we can observe among the surviving texts is also the dynamic thought to prevail among orally composed versions of a common story.30

Each chapter of this book is devoted to an individual Roncevaux text, demonstrating the ways in which its approach to rewriting is both dramatized and problematized by the characters’ spoken discourse. At the start of each chapter, readers will find an overview of the central arguments to follow as well as a short introduction to the material and editorial issues associated with the unique manuscript of the text to be analyzed in that chapter. The first chapter, on the Oxford Roland, considers the words and actions of several main characters as realizations or refutations of the characteristics associated with the term geste, which the closing line of the poem applies both to the Oxford Roland itself and to its sources. Since this text was probably one of the earliest written versions of the Roncevaux narrative, if not the earliest, its author would have had every reason to want to highlight both its novelty and its adherence to the preceding tradition that had formed the expectations of its contemporary audience. By comparing the narratives about the past formulated within the text by Roland, Charlemagne, Ganelon, and the primary narrator, I demonstrate that these narratives and their reception embody the Oxford author’s own dilemma, implicitly portraying the writing of this text as a heroic enterprise undertaken for the collective good, in marked contrast to the potentially fraudulent and self-serving narratives contained in texts written by individual authors who do not hold themselves to the high standard of the geste.

The author of the Châteauroux manuscript, analyzed in chapter 2, rewrites the Roncevaux narrative in a way that privileges the process of reception in two major stages. First, the early episodes of this text include long passages drawn nearly unchanged from existing texts (in-
including one source clearly related to the Oxford *Roland*), a mode of rewriting that displays prominently its own adherence to tradition. At the same time, carefully selected changes to these sources guide the audience systematically toward one particular interpretation of the motivations of Roland, Ganelon, and Charlemagne, whereas other contemporary texts (including the Oxford *Roland*) allowed for more ambiguity in the portrayal of these characters. Later in the text, transmission and reception are emphasized in a different way through the extended Aude episode, which dramatizes Aude’s reception of the deliberate misrepresentation of Roncevaux by Charlemagne and a literate cleric, on the one hand, and of the inherently truthful Roncevaux narratives communicated to her by prophetic dreams and angelic messengers, on the other. The Châteauroux manuscript’s focus on the reception of the Roncevaux story by the text itself, by the audience, and by characters within the story emphasizes the contribution of insightful reception to successful literary transmission, rather than privileging the contribution of skillful storytelling.

Chapter 3 examines the unusual multivocality and interiority featured in the Occitan version, *Ronsasvals*. By omitting the initial council scenes, the post-Roncevaux battles against Marsile and Baligant, and Ganelon’s trial, this Roncevaux narrative finds sufficient space and time to linger over the characters’ gradual cognitive and verbal processing of the battle itself (among the warriors) and then of the painful losses inflicted by it (among the surviving characters). The audience hears frequently what characters are saying and thinking during the battle and its aftermath; this interior view of the characters, as well as the absence of a number of traditional plot elements, represents Roncevaux more as a spiritual crisis caused by sinful attitudes than as a political crisis caused by characters’ actions and reactions. Verbal discourse among the characters not only expresses these personal flaws but also may serve to overcome them, through rhetorical strategies such as saying the opposite of what one really means or communicating the essential meaning of a message through metaphors that may survive intact despite subsequent rewording by the messenger. These verbal exchanges among the characters exemplify the text’s own rewriting strategy: a faithful transmission of essential content that operates, paradoxically, through deliberate and blatant transformations of form.

The late-fifteenth-century text *Galien restoré*, to which chapter 4 is devoted, rewrites the Roncevaux narrative as a monument to the complex functioning of literary memory. The text begins with metatextual comments about the audience’s responsibility for keeping alive the memory
of past heroes and then places at the center of its version of the Roncevaux story a young hero, Galien, who operates according to a similar, though largely unconscious, intertextual memory of the heroic deeds of his ancestors. This harmony between the primary hero of the text and the narrator’s charge to the implied audience is disrupted, however, by a certain antipathy toward Galien and his optimistic perspective on the part of Olivier, Roland, and the primary narrator during this text’s account of the episodes at Roncevaux. Charlemagne and the other traditional Frankish survivors also have trouble at times negotiating between their grief over the warriors they have lost and their joy at finding in Galien the solution to many of their traditional post-Roncevaux problems. Thus Galien restoré, like the other texts in this study but in its own unique way, represents within its fictional universe the tensions involved in its own composition and reception. This is a text that sought to strengthen the audience’s memory of the preceding textual tradition, but its contemporary success ultimately caused it to overshadow its textual ancestors: Galien restoré made an early transition into print and has continued to circulate ever since, while the other Roncevaux texts in this study probably stopped circulating by the fifteenth century and had to be rediscovered by scholars in the nineteenth century.

That modern process of rediscovery and reception of the Roncevaux texts has been nearly as fraught with political, social, and literary tensions as the Roncevaux fictional universe itself. The analyses in the following chapters make the point that the simultaneously autonomous and collaborative literary enterprise exemplified by the Roncevaux texts offers an approach to literary rewriting and reception that causes these tensions to enhance rather than to inhibit readers’ understanding of the processes of representation and interpretation underlying them all. The goal of this book is not merely to defend the value of a group of neglected medieval texts but to document the ways medieval texts addressed themselves to sophisticated critical audiences for whom reception and comparative analysis could be simultaneous and multilayered. At the same time, the high stakes of verbal representation and interpretation in the Roncevaux texts demonstrate with particular poignancy medieval authors and audiences’ shared awareness of the limited capacities of human narratives to make sense of human experience. By subordinating the particular political and cultural viewpoints of each individual version to the metanarrative perspective shared by them all, I wish to magnify rather than to reduce the scope of these texts as collaborative dramatizations of human cognition, communication, and commemoration.