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Too Far and Back Again

**The Text and the Making of the
Medieval Hero in *La Chanson de
Roland*, *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, and
*La Vie de Saint Alexis***

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Writing on Sappho's famed fragment 31, Anne Carson argues that the poem presents "the radial construction of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (Carson 16). For Carson, the sides of the three-point circuit, "Conjoined...are held apart" (*If not*, Winter 16). This triangular conception of desire resembles in a number of ways Peter Haidu's "excluded third," in which, for the saint, "All potential thirds—father, mother, wife, the status of identity—are invoked and rejected" (*The Subject Medieval/Modern* 53). The saint, fueled by desire, rejects the world, which stands between him and his object of desire, God. Yet, as we will see, the saint—and the hero more generally—can, through text, be made to serve as a conduit between his society and the object of desire. In fact, he must do so, for the hero is also by definition he who has surpassed the limits of his culture and, in so doing, threatens the integrity of those same limits, as well as the order they contain.

By examining three texts, *La Chanson de Roland*, *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, and *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, I would like to suggest that the contradictory na-

tures of their heroes and the at-times-ambivalent attitudes of the texts toward those same heroes can be better understood through the triangular structure of desire. Namely, these texts seem fueled by desire for the *missing* third, God, a desire that also fueled the unifying mission of the crusades fought in his name. But despite the purported aim of the crusades, they could not and indeed perhaps did not wish to succeed entirely in their aims: Christendom has long depended on an Other against which to define itself, whether inside or out. In other words, the purportedly longed-for unity is not truly tenable. As we will see, heroes (and saints among them), while pursuing their fundamentally self-interested aims, are coopted through text by the societies whose limit they seek to test. From the point of view of society, this barrier testing is necessary for the cohesion of the Self, while for the hero the Other is necessary to consummate the self-interested aim. Having gone “too far” (Cowell 107), the hero must be made to pass through the figure of God, the object of desire, in order to be reincorporated back into the logic of society and so not be destructive to its aims. The tensions and fissures that the hero’s probing of limits reveals are clearly visible in the mechanism of that reincorporation, the text.

The text’s awareness of the dangers posed by the hero to the very culture that elects him as such is perhaps nowhere as apparent as in *La Chanson de Roland*, dated in the 11th or first half of

the 12th century. In fact, whereas for Andrew Cowell “this person guilty of blind and foolish pride is clearly admired by the text that tells his story” (*Medieval Warrior Aristocracy* 106), in reality the text’s admiration of Roland contains quite a few grains of caution and even weariness toward its hero. On the flip side, nor is Ganelon the unambiguous villain critics have suggested: when he delivers his message to Marsile, the text professes considerable admiration for his abilities: “Mais li quens Guenes se fut ben purpenset. Par grant saver cumencet a parler cume celui ki ben fair le set” (XXXIII, 1.425-427) [But Count Ganelon had understood everything; With great skill he begins to speak, As a man who knows just what to do¹], we are told. And just as, early on in the *Chanson*, Ganelon’s censure of Roland seems rather well deserved (Roland “starts it,” so to speak, and he laughs at his elder), later in the text Roland is criticized again, this time through the mouth of an unequivocally good and noble personage. As the battle devolves into chaos, Olivier says to him, “vassalage par sens nen est folie; Mielz valt mesure que ne fait estultie. Franceis sunt morz par vostre legerie” (CXXXI, 1.1724-1726) [Bravery with common sense is not foolish. Caution is worth more than recklessness]. Franks are dead because of your recklessness]. Although Roland’s actions have already made it clear, Olivier, a character who truly is “clearly admired” by the text, points explicitly to the destruction

Roland has caused his people. Thus while copious admiration undoubtedly exists for the hero in the text that bears his name, this admiration comes tempered with considerable criticism.

These moments of criticism all seem to point, however, to moments when Roland separates himself from his society, as though the text were in some ways at odds with its hero becoming exactly that. As Cowell correctly states, “the individual hero uses the external other as the means to establish his own internal heterogeneity and alterity” (Cowell 128). Indeed according to Cowell, “Roland ‘needs’ the Saracens. They are the medium by which he enacts his own heroic alterity...they are the necessary other by/against which his final, transcendent self-identity can be established ” (Cowell 129). However, what Cowell does not sufficiently emphasize are the ways in which the text makes clear precisely the *internal* quality of his heterogeneity: indeed, the *Chanson* shows that even though Roland’s heroism is based in quite a bit of alterity from the Franks, it is fundamentally dependent on that same group. He does not pursue a “purely individual identity which forever separates Roland from the Franks” (Cowell 106): at every step of the way, his identity as a hero is dependent on and imbricated with the social group he defines himself against.

Significant in this regard, in the *laissez* describing Roland’s death, the hierarchy of medieval society is invoked four times, with designations such as

“quens,” “bers,” “seignor,” and “cunte” (l. 2375, 2378, 2380, 2396) [count, baron, lord, count]. In *laisse* 174, we see the extent to which Roland relies on society to constitute himself as internally heterogeneous and therefore as a hero: “Turnat sa teste vers la paiene gent; Pur ço l’at fait que il voelt veirement que Carles diet e trestute sa gent, Li gentilz quens, qu’il fut mort cunquerant” (CLLXXIV, l. 2360-2365) [Towards the pagan people he turned his head, because it was his earnest wish that Charles and all his men should say that he, the noble count, had died conquering], the text tells us. He turns his head away from his people and toward the enemy in order, paradoxically, to ensure an honorable remembrance by the Franks. Yet this gesture is fundamentally an ambiguous one—one that, without the interpretation of the text, could very well come to signify its opposite.

Furthermore, the text is fundamentally ambiguous in its presentation of Roland moments before his death. When Roland feels that death is at hand, he separates himself from his people and goes to a pine tree in order to die alone: “Ço sent Rolland que la mort le tresprent...Desuz un pin i est alet curant” (174, l. 2355, 2357) [Roland feels that death is upon him...he ran over to a pine]. The symbolism of the pine, under which typically the king only sits, seems to suggest that the text esteems Roland as highly as though he were a king. However, a closer read

suggests that the stance is more ambiguous than this. Roland's haste—he goes “curant” [running] (1.2357)—offers a counterpoint to Charlemagne, who simply goes, “s'en vait” [goes] (12, l. 168). Thus it starts to seem not as though the text attributes the same status to Roland as it does to Charlemagne but that it is Roland who attributes this status to himself.

This ambivalence that follows the hero is nowhere more evident than in the figure of the olifant, which, meant to draw the Franks together in a time of need, instead serves to sever Roland from them. Although intended to draw reinforcements in battle, the olifant, due to the ways in which it is bound up to the honor culture of the society, instead leads to utter fragmentation. When Oliver urges Roland to sound it, Roland refuses. What has perhaps not been emphasized enough is his reason for doing so: not just the glory of wanting to fight this battle alone, but more importantly the shame he would face if he didn't. “En dulce France en perdreie mun los” (LXXXIII, l. 1054) [Throughout the fair land of France I would lose my good name], he tells Olivier. By losing his glory he would, of course, lose his internal heterogeneity, his unique status among his peers.

Of course, even when he *does* blow the olifant, he bursts his temple and ultimately dies. For Cowell, death marks the end of reciprocity and therefore irrevocable alterity (*Medieval Warrior* 108). Cowell argues, “The medieval

warrior aristocracy...seems to have found essentially intolerable the notion of such pure individualization, since the hero always dies as soon as he obtains it” (118). I would like to suggest a slightly different story: the hero's death is not the necessary consequence of his pure individualization (which, as we have seen, isn't), but the event necessary for the interpretive mechanism of text to take over Roland's own attempt to ‘write’ his story.

Indeed, whereas for Cowell “the text examines the type of individual produced by this specific culture, as a cultural product” (107), I would suggest that it is necessary to differentiate between Roland as the product of his culture at a social level and the product of his culture at the level of text. It is the text, after all, that produces the Roland that serves to measure his culture without collapsing its logic: it is his figure as a martyr that has, after all, served to bind the “Franks” for centuries, or more specifically the French, often vis-à-vis the Germans, who share that ancestor. The power of text to produce meaning is acknowledged by the text itself: when the archbishop sees the men's courage failing, he says “Seignors barons, n'en alez mespensant! Pur Deu vos pri que ne seize fuiant, que nuls prozdom malvaisement n'en chant” (CXV, l. 1515-1517) [Lord barons, do not indulge in base thoughts; In God's name I beg you not to flee, so that no man of worth can sing a shameful song].

The clearest mark of textual production of meaning, however, is the attitude it attributes to God toward the human players presented by the text. In fact, whereas the text's attitude often remains, as we have seen, ambiguous toward Roland, it is the aftermath of his death, when Gabriel comes to escort him to heaven, that signals clearly to the reader how we are meant to view Roland's conduct. Whereas in the moments preceding his death Roland turns his head toward Spain, his real final gesture is not this ambiguous one but his address to God, toward whom he stretched out his right glove. While Roland is clearly concerned, throughout the text, with his earthly reputation and how his fellows will view him, ultimately it is by offering himself up to God that he both ensures this earthly honor and renders himself free of it. That it is the text that attributes these actions and words to Roland is of course the feature of this scene that most stands to be emphasized. The figure of God allows the text to make sense of Roland's *démeseure*, excess, by justifying Roland's escape from complete submission to his earthly lord. Moreover, by presenting Roland's death under the rubric of martyrdom, the text coopts him fully to its cause: alterity, it seems, is only tolerated insofar as it serves as the foundation for greater social cohesion.

In light of this, it is not truly fair to say, as Cowell does, that "the point of pure integrity, marked by the gratui-

tous gesture, can be seen as the point at which the hero dies to his culture...in order to live as an individual" (*Medieval Warrior* 118). Rather, the point of pure integrity is the point at which the text takes over so that the hero may live on not as an individual but as a cultural figure. And, as we will see, the hero's conduct is characteristically not espoused by the text in order to be emulated by others. Rather, the epic is "a literary space which explicitly works to prevent this same disastrous perfection in the social space" (Cowell 108).

The role that the text plays in coopting the hero back from the limits of the group and the resistances that this project gives rise to are even more evident in *Le Charroi de Nîmes*. In this *chanson de geste* from the first half of the 12th century, the connection between the story ultimately presented and the introduction, where the narrator hails Guillaume as the "meillor home qui ainz creust en Dé" (l. 4) [the best man who ever believed in God] renders explicit from the very outset the artifice and ambiguity involved in coopting a hero back into the sense-making system of the society whose limits he tests. The introduction states, "Molt essauça sainte crestientez" (l. 12) [He greatly exalted holy Christianity²], fundamentally misrepresenting the motivations for the quest that Guillaume undertakes: as the text makes quite clear, the holy war Guillaume wages is a convenient alibi to justify his fundamentally self-interested undertaking.

In *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, Peter Haidu states that whereas in *La Chanson de Roland* both king and vassal are valorized positively, in the Guillaume d'Orange cycle only Guillaume is (59). This schema, while evocative, is also simplistic: for one thing, in *Le Charroi de Nîmes* Louis is not unequivocally bad. While Guillaume rages on, the king practices measure and forbearance, speaking only a handful of times and not allowing Guillaume's anger to affect him. Moreover, although *Charroi de Nîmes* states an unequivocal admiration for Guillaume in its opening, as with Roland the body of the text presents a more nuanced story.

Namely, while Haidu points out that Guillaume, as a vassal, is justly angry that Louis has forgotten his lordly duties, sufficient attention has not been drawn to the way that Guillaume's *reminder* of those duties to his lord is presented by the text as being fundamentally subversive in nature. Haidu and others have noted that Guillaume chooses honor when presented with the option to accept Louis' gift of land that would disinherit widows and children. However, this refusal runs deeper than a concern for the less powerful: unlike Roland, Guillaume's refusal of reciprocity also serves to point out to Louis his disregard for the social system he supposedly embodies and upholds. Put another way, to borrow Bourdieu's notion, Guillaume uses this refusal as an opportunity to point to codes governing the *habitus*, and his lord's failure to up-

hold those codes.

According to Guillaume, Louis did not rightfully repay his vassal for his service in helping Louis acquire and keep the crown (l. 131-134, 179-181). Guillaume bluntly calls him a bad lord, "mauvais seignor" (1.303), and accuses him of lying (1.282). Furthermore, once Louis begins to offer Guillaume gifts of land, Guillaume's anger only increases, as these gifts come at the price of disinheriting women and children: "Del gentil conte dui enfanz remés sont qui bien la terre maintenir en porront. Autre me done, que cestui n'ai soing" (1.312-314) [Two children have remained of the gentle count, who will well be able to maintain his land. Give me another, for I have no care for this one]. Thus Guillaume points over and over again to the values that supposedly constitute the *habitus*, therefore indicating its limits in a way that cannot be done from inside: a fish cannot point to its own bowl. By reminding Louis of the social order he is supposedly upholding, Guillaume also reminds him that he is better equipped to uphold that order than Louis.

This critique is even more pronounced in what follows, when Guillaume reminds the king to whom he owes his crown: "François le virent que ne valioies gaire: Fere en voloient clerc ou abé ou prestre" (l.166-167) [The French saw that you were hardly worthy, they wanted to make of you a cleric or an abbot or a priest], he says, and later, "Pris la corone, sor le chief l'en

portastes" [I took the crown, you were it on your head] (l.179-181). He even goes so far as to contemplate taking his crown: "Cuit li abatre la corone del chief: Ge l'i ai mis, si la vorrai oster" [I think to beat down the crown from his head. I have put it there and I will want to remove it] (l. 435-436). Although the text's presentation of Guillaume's actions has already condemned him, it goes a step further to place censure in the mouths of characters around him. As Olivier and others must do with Roland, here Bertrand must remind his uncle that such talk is unseemly for a baron: "Sire, ne dites pas que ber" (l. 437) [*Sire, speak only like a noble*] and "Vo droit seignor ne devez pas haster, ainz le devez server et hennorer" [You must not provoke your rightful lord, rather you must serve and honor him] (l. 422-423). From this perspective it is interesting to note that when Guillaume first rejects Louis' offers of land and property, he does so not because he feels it would be wrong to accept or because he fears causing harm to his lord, but because others would *say* that he has: "Vez la Guillelme...Comme il a ore son droit seignor boisié" [See there Guillaume...how he has cheated his rightful lord] (l. 399-400).

As the remainder of *Le Charroi de Nîmes* will go to show, this pointing to the system from without prefigures the way in which, in order to remain a faithful vassal, Guillaume must first venture out to the Other. However, unlike Roland, he does so not in order to

further himself from his culture but to ensure his integration back in it. In this first part of the text, however, Guillaume merely points to the difficulty with which he remains within the confines of his *habitus* and to the fact that if he so chose, he could exist outside it. As Lila Abu-Lughod argues of the subversive songs of women of the Awlad 'Ali in Jordan, "by exposing this other side of experience, individuals impress on others that their conformity to the code and attainment of the cultural ideals of personhood are neither shallow nor easy" (*Veiled Sentiments* 246). So too, here, by pointing to the failures and inadequacies of Louis and to Guillaume's ability to step outside of his *habitus* in order to observe it, he (the text) impresses on both the king and the reader the honor that comes from remaining within the bounds of vassalage nevertheless.

Indeed the Other, that which lies beyond the *habitus*, becomes necessary to maintain the order of the *habitus* as such. The only solution to the crisis at hand that Guillaume can think of is to request Valsore, Valsure, Nîmes, and Orange: "Donez moi, sire, Valsore et Valsure, Donez moi Nymes o les granz tors agues, après Orange" (l. 501-503) [Give me, sire, Valsore and Valsure, give me Nîmes with the great sharp towers, afterward Orange], a proposition that comes from the mouth of Bertrand. Of course, these are lands that Louis is explicitly not in a position to give him. In order to justify this excur-

sion, the Other must be vilified completely: “S’en giterai la pute gent tafure” (l. 511) [I will throw out the stinking truant people], says Guillaume.

As this line of thought makes clear, the excursion into the Other is justified by the inherent lack of worth of the latter: they are “pute gent” (l. 511) [stinking people]. This designation renders the pretext of the excursion even more puzzling, since Guillaume then frames his quest as a crusade: he invites others to join him in glorifying divine law, “la loi Deu essaucier et monter” (l.648) [Exalt and raise the low of God]. Conversion, it seems, would not change the fundamental character, racial and otherwise, of this unworthy people. Furthermore, this excursion into the Other must paradoxically, in order to preserve the honor of society’s own self-image, be conducted under the guise of eliminating the Other as such. By adopting the framework of a religious struggle for one that it is ultimately entirely worldly in nature (Guillaume wants land, power, and a wife), Guillaume’s actions can be glorified by the same text that presents his ambiguities and his arrogant self-interest.

The ambiguity that the text inscribes in the figure of Guillaume resonates strongly in the very title, which echoes the famous ruse of the Trojan horse. While other characteristics, such as the distinctive physical markers (Guillaume’s nose, Odysseus’s scar), evoke the similarities between these two heroes, *Le Charroi de Nîmes* cen-

tral ruse clearly echoes Odysseus’s own idea in the *Iliad*, which leads to the fall of Troy. Just as Odysseus’ men must at times remind him of the dangers of *démessure* (c.f. Book IX, l. 224), Bertrand serves to remind Guillaume of his duties as a vassal. And, as Odysseus does in such incidents as the famous encounter in Polyphemus’ cave, Guillaume sets up gratuitous and dangerous challenges for himself. Furthermore, just as, after years of wandering, Odysseus returns home and resumes his position in the social hierarchy, Guillaume’s own excursion into Otherness allows him to take up once more his rightful place as vassal. As we have already seen, it is once again the figure of God that allows Guillaume to foster social cohesion: arrogant and self-serving as he may be, the text makes clear that Guillaume is ultimately God’s servant.

While in both *La Chanson de Roland* and *Le Charroi de Nîmes* the Other is a concrete, external social group from which the hero draws his honor and against which he allows his culture to define its own boundaries, in the vernacular *La Vie de Saint Alexis* that Other *and* the object of desire is quite simply God. It is as if the *Vie* provides a limit case for the schema of desire. Indeed in this text, the third point of the triangle, the thing standing between the society (or Alexis) and the object of desire is not a pagan Other but the society itself. From this perspective it is interesting to note the instances in which Alexis’s actions are framed ex-

plicitly in terms of desire: “De tot en tot a Deu at son talent” [his whole desire was upon God³], we learn early on.

And although there is much to distinguish them (Odysseus is a devoted husband and father, for instance), nevertheless parallels between the story of Odysseus and Saint Alexis also abound. The structure of many years of wandering followed by homecoming draws the two tales into parallel with one another, and Evelyn Vitz’s remark (in the words of her students) that Alexis is more of a “blob” and a “lump” than a hero (“Narrative Analysis” 402) resonates with Odysseus, who through much of the *Odyssey* partakes in activities that are largely unheroic. If, as Patrick Vincent has noted, for the people of the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was “no clear distinction between the epic and the hagiographic poem” (“The Dramatic Aspect” 530), the comparison between Alexis and Odysseus, or between Alexis and Roland or Guillaume, for that matter, does not seem far flung. Indeed, as Vitz has justly pointed out, we must understand how and why Alexis is a hero in order to understand how he is a saint (“Narrative Analysis” 402).

As critics such as Vitz and Vincent have noted, Alexis isn’t a particularly likable or sympathetic saint. Vitz writes, “If Alexis seems less lovable, the reason is no doubt that he is portrayed as less loving” (“Narrative Analysis” 400-1). Indeed it is hard not to feel as though Alexis’s neglected and abandoned family members aren’t more

sympathetic and moving, as characters, than he is (“Narrative Analysis” 404). While this impression is less apparent in the Latin text—Haidu argues that, “More than the Latin text, the vernacular *Alexis*...emphasizes the sorrow of the excluded thirds” (*The Subject Medieval/Modern* 53)—the French *La Vie de Saint Alexis* exhibits the same tension in its portrayal of its “hero” as *La Chanson de Roland* and the Guillaume d’Orange cycle. Indeed while it is not untrue, as Patrick Vincent argues, that Alexis’s “actions are not presented as needing any justification” (“The Dramatic Aspect” 530), it would be going too far to say, as Vincent does, that “The poet never even implies adverse criticism of Alexis” (“The Dramatic Aspect” 530).

Far from it, at a crucial moment in the text, the narrator assumes a less distant stance from the narrative in describing Alexis’ mother’s reaction to her son’s death:

Qui donc li vit son grant duel demener
 Son piz debatre e son cors degeter,
 Ses crins detraire e son vis maiseler,
 Et son mort fil baisier ed acoler,
 N’i out si dur ne l’estoïst plorer.
 (LXXXVI).

[Whoever then saw her great sorrow
 Her beating her breast and flinging her
 body down
 Tearing her hair and bruising her face
 And kissing and hugging her dead son
 He could not have been so hard-hearted
 as not to weep.]

While the narrator claims that “whoever saw” her great sorrow would not have been so “hard-hearted as not to weep” the implication is, of course, that Alexis had seen her weep many a time without being moved. Through the mouth of Alexis’s mother the narrator makes this connection explicit just a few stanzas later, when she cries, “Filz Alexis, molt oïis dur corage quant ados-sas tot ton gentil lignage!” (XC) [“Son Alexis, you had a very hard heart when you turned your back on your noble lineage!].

This hardly flattering perspective on Alexis is evident much earlier in the text as well, from the narrator’s mouth directly. Shortly after Alexis’s return to Rome, the narrator says,

Soventes feiz les veit grant duel mener,
E de lour uelz molt tendrement plorer,
Trestot por lui, onques neient por el:
Il les esguardet, sil met el considrer;
N'at soing quel veiet, si est a Deu tor-
nez. (XLIX)

[Often he saw them engaged in great
mourning
And weep very tenderly from their eyes,
Above all for him, never once for some-
thing else.
He saw them and pondered them;
He had no care concerning what he saw,
so turned was he toward God.]

The strange line, “Il les esguardet, sil met el considrer” [He saw them and pondered them] is repetitive within the stanza itself: the stanza opens, “Soventes feiz les veit” [Often he saw them]. Thus the fact that Alexis has seen them

has already been stated by the text. That the narrator emphasizes Alexis’s viewing suggests an effort to drive home how truly unfeeling and impassive he is: he ponders and considers them, but their suffering does not register with him.

Moreover, the text contains the strong suggestion that Alexis’s actions would, if repeated on a large scale, cause society as a whole to crumble: indeed Alexis rejects all forms of *socius* in turning himself fully toward God. Upon first learning of her son’s disappearance, his mother cries, “Filz Alexis, por queit portat ta medre?” (XXVII) [Son Alexis, why did your mother bear you?]. Alexis has, through his actions, negated not only his lineage but also the reproductive principle on which society rests. It goes without saying that, in refusing to sleep with his wife, he also actively chooses not to partake in society’s perpetuation. It is unsurprising that the manuscript on which V.L. Dedek-Héry relied for his 1931 edition of the *Vie* belonged to Christine of Markyate, a woman who fought her family for the right to become a nun rather than marrying;⁴ the text evokes the subversion of the reproductive principle quite clearly. Whereas for Guillaume lineage, in other words the reproductive principle, is everything, for Alexis it is nothing: from a purely Darwinian point of view, his actions are as inimical as the homosexuality so condemned by the same church that canonized him.

A comparison between moments of

what can generally be termed “recognition” in *La Chanson de Roland* and *Le Charroi de Nîmes* illustrates the extent to which Alexis, perhaps more than either other hero, causes the social structure to fracture. Once Alexis’s father learns of his alms taker’s identity, he says, “Ne te coneümes net encor nen conuissum” (LXXII), [We did not know you and we still do not know you]. While “Ne te coneümes” [We did not know you] is obvious enough, it is striking that his father insists that even now, after this moment of recognition, he still does not know his son: “net encor nen conuissum” [and we still do not know you]. Alexis, by severing ties to his society, has become so Other that he is beyond recognition even once identified. When his mother recognizes him, she too emphasizes Alexis’s unknowability: “Tant t'ai vedut, si net poi aviser!” (LXXIX) [I saw you so often, yet I could not know it!]. While Alexis’s father emphasizes how even in the present, Alexis remains unknown, his mother instead insists that he has been unknowable since the beginning: “Net conoissee plus qu'onques net vedisse” (LXXXVII), she says [I did not recognize you any more than if I had never seen you]. Alexis’s otherness is so complete that it extends into both the past and future.

Compared with similar moments of recognition in *La Chanson de Roland* and *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, it becomes apparent, however, that textually it is more so the family than Alexis who is

cast in the role of Other. On the field of battle, the Sarasin Grandoine sees Roland and recognizes him by his fierce face and his elegance:

Grandonie fut e prozdom e vaillant
E vertuus e vassal combatant.
Enmi sa veie ad encuntret Rollant.
Enceis nel vit, sil recunut veirement
Al fier visage e al cors qu'il out gent
E al reguart e al contement. (CXXIV,
l. 1636-1641)

[Grandonie was a valiant and worthy man,
A strong and courageous fighter.
He encountered Roland in his path;
Without having seen him, he recognized him well
From his fierce countenance and his noble body
His gaze and his whole bearing.]

Interestingly, although a Sarasin, Grandoine is praised by the text as being “e prozdom e vaillant e vertuus e vassal combatant” [A strong and courageous fighter] (CXXIV 1.1636-1637). It is his valor—his “readability” by the culture of the *Chanson*—that constitutes him an able judge of Roland and allows him to recognize him for who he is. Once he does, he is immediately frightened: “Ne poet muer qu'il ne s'en espaent” [He cannot help but take fright] (CXXIV, 1.1642).

Similarly, upon Guillaume’s arrival in Nîmes, King Otran, momentarily rendered less Other through an emphasis on his valor and worthiness, recognizes (or almost recognizes) Guillaume. His attention is drawn first not to any

physical attribute but to Guillaume's skilled manner of speaking. It is then that he recognizes Guillaume's characteristic nose:

Li rois Otran le prist a regarder
Quant il l'oï si faitement parler,
Si a veü la boce sur le nés.
Lors li remembre de Guillelme au cort
nés. (1.1208-10)

[King Otran began to look at him
When he heard him speak in such a
manner.
And he has seen the lump in his nose.
Then he recalls Guillaume of the curb
nose.]

It is Otran's own worth that positions him to recognize Guillaume: he is described as courteous: "Cortoisement l'en a aresonné" (1.1215) [Courteously he has addressed him]. Otran, like Grandoine, is quickly frightened: "Quant il le vit, a poi n'est forsené" (1.1212) [When he saw him, nearly went mad]. What is significant in both of these scenes with regard to Alexis is the fact that in the *Chanson* and *Charroi*, the Other and the hero meet in a moment of recognition where the alterity of the former is temporarily diminished. In *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, however, the family (and Alexis) is so inexorably Other that, all while recognizing Alexis, their alterity and his cannot be bridged—they cannot know him, nor he them. Their otherness vis-à-vis Alexis and his vis-à-vis them is complete and total.

This troubling suggestion is the very thing that necessitates the text's coop-

tion of the hero back into the sense-making system of the social structure. Like Guillaume, who goes too far but comes back, having passed through the Other, into the structure he threatened to overthrow completely, Alexis is canonized. Like Roland, he has gone "too far" (Cowell 107) and must be reintegrated into the sense-making structure of their societies. From this perspective it is meaningful that it is the Pope who proffers the first interpretive framework for reintegrating Alexis. Responding to Alexis's parents' grief, he says,

"Seignour, que faites?" iö dist la pulcele,
"Que valt cist criz, cist duels ne ceste
noise?

Cui que sit duels, a nostre ues est il joie;
Quer par cestui avroms bon adjutorie:
Si li peioms que de toz mals nos tolget".
(CI)

[Lord, what are you doing?" said the
pope.

"What are all these cries, these lamentations, this noise?

To him this is sorrow, for us it is joy.

For through this man we shall have a
good helper;

this is the holy man who shall draw us
out of all evils".]

Alexis, the Pope states, will be "bon adjutorie," a helper, an intermediary between the people and God. This is confirmed when the people are described as turning all of their "desire" to the holy body: "A cel saint cors ont torment lour talent" (CVI) [They had turned their desires toward the holy body]. Alexis stands in as a funnel

through which the people's desire for God passes. Furthermore, in this scene it is almost as if the Pope were telling Alexis' parents that their son's complete rejection of his *habitus* and of its governing rules (through his disregard of lineage, inheritance, marriage, etc.) is not a surd but a necessary bridging of this world and the world to come: of this society and its textual Other, heaven.

In fact, as the text would have it, it is Alexis himself who governs to some extent his cooption back into the structure of the social world he seeks to escape. Just as Roland displays attempts to control the narrative through which his legacy will be remembered, and like Guillaume, Alexis shows similar concerns in drafting the charter that tells the story of his life while he still can: "De sei medisme tote la chartre escrist com s'en alat e come il s'en revint" (LVII) [He wrote the whole document by himself, how he had gone off and how he had come back]. The fact of reserving the reading of the charter for the pope, which Alexis does by refusing to part with it for anyone else, clearly signals his assignment of the hermeneutic task to the head of the sense-making system of Christian society. From this perspective it is also significant, moreover, not only that Alexis live in Rome, but that he goes back there willingly to die: he positions himself perfectly for the apparatus of sense making to take over after his death.

Just as in *Roland* the heroic identity formed is not, as we have seen, a purely

individualized one, neither is Alexis's: his posthumous identity is assigned by the Church and coopts him into its structure. In *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, Peter Haidu writes, "Identity, in the monastic ideology of the eleventh century, is inimical to complete submission to God. Alexis eludes the identity offered by God, so as to remain utterly faithful as subject, to a self-denial that is itself a form of prayer to the absent God" (*The Subject Medieval/Modern* 52). This is, of course, only half the story. After finishing the charter, Alexis holds it close to him so that no one will see it until he dies:

Tres sei la tint, ne la volst demostrer,
Nel reconoissent usque il s'en seit alez.
Parfitement s'at a Deu comandet.

(LVIII)

[He kept it close to himself; he didn't want to show it to anyone lest they recognize him, until he departed. He held himself perfectly to God's command.]

He does not reveal his identity, in other words, but God bestows his own glory on Alexis in time: "Prest est la glorie qued il li vult doner" (LIX) [the glory that He wanted to give Alexis was near at hand]. This glory, however, would be strictly personal, whereas the glory that Alexis is accorded after his death from the perspective of the text is anything but. His eventual canonization suggests that the people he had fled in Laodicea catch up with him in the end. From this point of view, Alexis'

fleeing to Rome represents a futile effort to escape earthly glory. While it can be argued that he is just staving off its inevitability until he is ready to die, as we have already seen, the choice to return home and to Rome of all places can hardly be seen as a neutral gesture. All while seeming to protest, Alexis is ultimately all too willing to be coopted back into his society, with all the posthumous reward that that entails.

The role of text and of narrative more broadly—here, the Church’s—in neutralizing the hero within its structure thus becomes apparent. Not only would Alexis look, not just to modern but to medieval eyes, “not [like] a saint at all, but a lunatic” if God were removed from the picture (Vitz 406), but, as Haidu’s concluding remark in his chapter on Alexis suggests, it is in some sense entirely arbitrary whom society chooses to coopt and whom to reject: writing of Peter Waldo, who, inspired by Alexis’ example, gave up his possessions and social standing to live a life of

renunciations, Haidu writes, “His story demonstrates both the performative power of narrative and its indeterminacy...it declared Peter Waldo a heretic” (*The Subject Medieval/Modern* 56). There is a definite quota to the number of exceptions society is willing to tolerate, and a quota, too, to the number that can be safely integrated before the sense-making apparatus loses credibility to do so.

Thus, as we have seen, the medieval hero, pursuing his own interests, tests the limits of his culture and is prevented from compromising both those limits and the logic through which that culture coheres through the mechanism of the text. The text gives sense to the hero’s going “too far” by reminding listeners that though he may defy or reject his earthly lord, he is always subject—and willingly so—to God. Indeed the hero serves as the conduit between the sides of Carson’s triangle, Alexis most obviously so. If “Eros is a verb” (*If not, Winter* 17), “Hero(s)” is, too.

¹ In this paper I rely on Glyn Burgess’s translation of the *Chanson*, with occasional modification. I am indebted to Virginie Greene for her help in deciphering all three of the original texts cited here.

² I use Guérard Piffard’s English translations throughout, again with occasional modification.

³ Throughout this paper I borrow from Leah Shopkow’s translation of the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, with modification where needed.

⁴ See Shopkow’s introduction to her translation of *La Vie de Saint Alexis*.

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