

H-France Review Vol. 9 (June 2009), No. 79

Margaret Jewett Burland, *Strange Words: Retelling and Reception in the Medieval Roland Textual Tradition*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. x + 332pp. Bibliography and index. \$37.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0268022038.

Review by Lynn Ramey, Vanderbilt University.

“Etre médiéviste c’est, au plus vrai, prendre position sur la C[hanson de] R[oland],” Bernard Cerquiglini informed us over twenty-five years ago.<sup>[1]</sup> Margaret Burland Jewett, acknowledging Cerquiglini’s maxim, enters this inevitable line of inquiry with a book that, despite the undeniable popularity of the subject matter, still manages to surprise and inform the reader.

Burland begins with an admonishment to her medievalist colleagues; while medievalists may have been writing frequently on the *Chanson de Roland*, they have failed to recognize sufficiently that *the* Song of Roland does not exist. As Burland points out, there are many versions of Roland’s song, each one differing from the next in substantial ways. The canonized manuscript referred to as the Oxford Roland cannot be considered a particularly telling manuscript for interpretation of medieval culture. Thus Burland refers to the multiplicity of Roland versions as the “medieval Roland textual tradition,” or the “Roncevaux tradition.”

To address this inequity, Burland selects three other versions of Roland’s story to interpret along with the Oxford Roland: the Châteauroux version, the Provençal version *Ronsasvals*, and *Galien restoré*. Burland’s point of comparison for these texts is the retelling of the disastrous rout at Roncevaux by characters within the stories. For instance, in several versions, including the Oxford Roland, Charlemagne is the bearer of the bad news of Roland’s and Olivier’s deaths to Aude, Roland’s fiancé and Olivier’s sister. In another version, this storytelling role is assigned to a passing pilgrim, who confirms Aude’s premonitory dream, and in yet a different take, one story gives the narrative nod to Olivier’s illegitimate son. For Burland, the point of the Roland story is the telling of the story—to whom and how the disaster were revealed provides the key to understanding the roles the texts played in the societies where they were found. Central to her thesis, therefore, is the point that privileging any one version, such as the Oxford Roland, when talking about *the* Song of Roland misses important information that can be gleaned by comparing several versions of the same story.

Her first chapter, on the Oxford Roland, reads Ganelon’s narrative style—how he speaks and describes events—as diametrically opposed to the ideal of *geste* narrative style. The beginning of the chapter has a fascinating and informative look at what *geste* style means, including the suggestion that perhaps the oral formulaic style so characteristic of early epic might well be a ruse to hide the potentially subversive nature of the vernacular epic text (p. 23). Burland underscores the societal importance of the *geste*, “It is not the place of the *geste*’s protagonists to sing their own praises or even to justify themselves after the fact; a fundamental trait of the *geste* is that it expresses a society’s consensus about events in its collective history” (p. 34). One of Ganelon’s transgressions, thus, is violating his responsibility to tell correctly the story that he has witnessed as messenger to the Muslims. However, Ganelon’s peers know of his mendaciousness and still elect to believe his version of the events leading up to Roncevaux. Roland, on the other hand, follows the narrative style of the *geste* when he speaks, preferring to use

factual and deliberately chosen speech. Burland contrasts the speech patterns of Ganelon and Roland through close textual reading of chosen passages to set up Ganelon's style as unreliable and Roland's as reliable. Thus, when Charlemagne tells Aude that Roland is dead but suggests that an alternative spouse should make up for her loss, his words are judged by Burland as an attempted reformulation of an inevitable tragic end to his story to Aude. Aude, of course, rejects his words and promptly dies, and Charlemagne's intent to tell a palatable story leads the reader to question even Charlemagne's reliability as a storyteller. Roland emerges as the only heroic character precisely because only he speaks in a heroic, that is to say *geste*-appropriate, manner. Thus Roland and the Oxford poet mirror each other in their narrative styles.

The second version of the Roncevaux story that Burland explores is the rhymed Châteauroux manuscript composed circa 1200. One of six rhymed versions of the story, the Châteauroux repeats but changes slightly the story found in the Oxford Roland. Within the changes that the Châteauroux makes, Burland focuses on three parts that are concerned with storytelling: the council scenes (where messengers travel back and forth between the Christian and Muslim camps), the horn debate (to blow or not to blow), and Aude's learning of Roland and Olivier's deaths. In each of these scenes, the ways that the story are told directly affect the reader's understanding of the inherent positive and negative characteristics of the speaking characters. Roland respectfully elects Ganelon for the mission to the Muslims, but Ganelon responds in an excessively emotional manner; Roland emerges as heroic. Ganelon tells the Muslim contingent that Charlemagne will split Spain between Marsile and Roland and deal with the Muslims in a heavy-handed manner, yet Charlemagne's written words bear no such threats; Ganelon is unmasked as unreliable. Finally, Aude has a premonitory dream of the deaths of Roland and Olivier, but as she seeks the truth she is repeatedly lied to or at least deflected from her purpose. An angel speaking through the dead body of her brother finally gives Aude the story of eternal peace that she seeks. Aude's search for the truth and ability to recognize deception give her a role that exceeds her place in other versions, and she emerges as a third heroic figure, accompanying Roland and Olivier.

*Ronsasvals*, the only surviving Occitan manuscript of the Roncevaux story, is the focus of the next chapter. This choice is not only of linguistic interest; the story was written in an atmosphere of ambiguity and political intrigue surrounding the thirteenth century Albigensian crusade. Burland finds that the rhetoric and vocabulary, particularly in the sequences where the storytelling occurs, underscore the "Occitan" love/hate relationship with the "French." In the same sequences where the Oxford and Châteauroux manuscripts emphasize a unity of narration, the *Ronsasvals* manuscript gives differing perspectives without privileging any one. The integration of Occitan lyric settings adds an additional flavor to the text.

*Galien restoré*, the story of Olivier's illegitimate son, is the final manuscript examined by Burland. Different from the other stories, *Galien restoré* tells the Roncevaux story from the perspective of a survivor of the massacre, Galien, who goes on to establish himself as a powerful ruler. In this fifteenth-century version, the audience is presumed to have forgotten about the heroes of Roncevaux, and the author reminds readers of their timeless importance. Galien became the central figure of the Roncevaux stories from the fifteenth to nineteenth century, before scholars uncovered the Oxford Roland in 1835 (p. 203). Because Galien survives the massacre, he carries forward the heroism that Roland and Olivier epitomized in the Oxford Roland. Burland claims for this text an early status of medievalism, noting that it imitates prior forms and builds upon, while modifying, established narrative forms. Unlike other fifteenth-century epics, *Galien restoré* returns to the rhymed *laissez* of the earliest versions. Galien, like the internal storytellers of prior versions, is left to tell the story, and his narrative style determines our judgment of both his value and the value of his words. Although this section does not focus on the same scenes privileged in the other sections, it nonetheless makes for a satisfying concluding analysis by pointing out that the very notion of narrative authority has changed by the fifteenth century. While

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there is a certain kind of nostalgia for older versions and forms, Galien shows the way to a more subjective storytelling style that will replace the attempts at objectivity that motivated prior versions.

Burland's approach to these texts tends toward formalism. While she states that, "... 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," her own analysis of the texts provides little or no application of historical or cultural context. At the outset of each chapter Burland gives historical information, such as the appearance of the Occitan version following the Albigensian Crusade, yet this information has little bearing on the readings that she provides of these texts. Her argument that many have missed important information in their politicized readings of the Oxford Roland is well made (p. 5). Almost completely absent from the book, interestingly, is the Saracen, particularly the historical Muslim and the conflict between cultures that forms the narrative context of all of the versions of this story.

In reading Burland's book, one senses a disapproval of historicist readings and a gesture toward a new or renewed interest in the close reading of a closed text, where meaning lies within the words and relationships developed within the text itself (or, in a pinch, in dialogue with other texts of the same tradition). In her chapter on the Occitan *Ronsasvals*, she tells how she has revised her earlier politicized reading of the epic, apparently based largely upon an experience where she was castigated by a reviewer when she attempted to publish an article--her story an odd echo of the censorship she originally proposed as affecting the composition of the *Ronsasvals* itself. Now, she claims, she has concluded "that the purpose of this text was not to advocate any one political viewpoint but, on the contrary, to encourage its audience (an audience quite possibly undergoing or recovering from the ravages of war) to read critically and to respond thoughtfully to the universal relevance of this story's themes and tensions" (p. 197).

It strikes me that in two cases (the Oxford and Occitan versions) Burland has brought up the extremely volatile political framing of the Roncevaux story-- Muslim-Christian warfare and the Albigensian Crusade--only to conclude that the author had no political inclinations or at the least that the medievalist must resist political readings. While I certainly agree that we cannot know with certainty what any author--past, present, or future--thinks by reading his or her writing, it is very difficult for me to believe that these authors put aside any political beliefs in order to encourage their audiences to respectfully weigh all opinions before proceeding. In fact, that reading does not strike me as particularly logical for a period so embedded in religious and political propaganda. This apolitical gesture is a tension that resurfaces through the book; an acknowledgement of the power and political possibilities of storytelling and writing, while simultaneously undermining that power in a way that does not leave the reader satisfied that Burland even espouses her own apoliticism.

In addition, one is left wondering why Burland picked these particular four versions of the Roncevaux story. While it is certainly true that no book can exhaustively cover everything, her very premise that the Oxford Roland has been unjustifiably privileged means she bears a certain burden for the choices she does make. She explains in part her choice of the Châteauroux manuscript, for example, because one of the manuscripts that she rejects is atypical, containing a scene not found in the other five. Yet she selects a version of *Galien restoré* precisely because of its divergent qualities--it is quite linguistically different from other versions of the same story. Because Burland makes no societal conclusions and her readings are largely based on a system that remains entirely within the work itself, she does not end up making unjustifiable claims based on her selection of texts, yet she does not fully motivate her choices, either.

The larger point I took from this book is that there are many versions of the story of what happened at Roncevaux, and that scholars have focused too much on the Oxford version. Burland does an excellent job at pointing out what is different and intriguing about the other versions she examines, and one

would hope that this would spark a new interest in these texts that have been unjustifiably ignored. This point alone makes Burland's work both important and essential reading for those studying "the" Song of Roland. The book frustrates the reader at times by falling into its own trap—studying selected texts without real justification for the choice and proposing that a larger political reading could come from looking at the entire corpus without actually making a larger political reading. While I would not relegate these criticisms to quibbles, I emphasize that Burland's book does very important work in suggesting a broadening of readings and a pulling back from some overly politicized readings of the story that miss the larger context.

Burland is an extremely thorough reader whose work signals, for better or worse, an important turn in medieval studies against historical or historicized readings. That Burland gives any historical context to these works at all must surely be a nod toward the prevailing forms of criticism of the recent past. There is something oddly refreshing about this book and its dressing-down of medievalists who have focused too long on a particular version of a particular text. I thoroughly enjoyed it and learned an incredible amount about "a" text I thought I already knew quite well. I find myself as a reader put in the position that Burland claims for readers and listeners of the Roncevaux story. In listening closely to the narration, one can glimpse something of what (academic) society considers normative storytelling, but one cannot know whether that adequately reflects the author's own position. One is left wondering about the dissertation—that other story of the Roncevaux stories, the story whose traces remain in the unrealized political contexts of the manuscripts and the tale of the censored academic.

#### NOTES

[1] Bernard Cerquiglini, "Roland à Roncevaux, ou La Trahison des clercs," *Littérature* 42 (1981):40.

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ISSN 1553-9172