

# The Provenience of the Oxford "Roland"

## Epilogue

IT IS FITTING TO ATTEMPT A SUMMATION of the ways in which this study purports to enlighten the provenience of the Oxford *Roland*, bearing in mind, of course, that in the present state of our knowledge assertions regarding the condition of the poem before Digby-23 cannot be definitive, for there are no earlier texts of a poem *qua* poem and external evidence is limited. Thus hypotheses can only be based on internal analyses and necessarily speculative reconstructions of poetic events now lost in time. In this respect, the arithmetic metaphor which has been proposed is no exception.

Essentially, it has been said that there are discernible in the Oxford version two arithmetic structures, an earlier one which was probably invented toward the beginning of the eleventh century and a later revision which was devised for the Oxford version of the beginning of the twelfth century. It is also posited that the numbers used in the structure were selected for their metaphoric significance, with the result that the pattern of the earlier version emphasized the excessive valor of Roland; that of the later, the vengeance of Charlemagne.

The evolution of the Roland matter is envisioned somewhat as follows: Between the early ninth century and about the beginning of the eleventh, jongleuresque poems were circulating which told of Roland's stand at Roncevaux. About the year 1000, a jongleur under clerical influence reviewed the material then in existence and constructed a new version incorporating the new character Olivier and embedding in the poem a numeri-

cal structure which reiterated in arithmetic metaphor the conflict between *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, which the clergy, in its desire to constrain the excessive warfare within the Christian community, wished emphasized. This version was thus sanctioned by the clergy and must have been written down at the time of composition and so preserved that it was available to the Oxford revisionist a century later.

Then at the beginning of the twelfth century, and again with the collaboration of the clergy, the old written version was reworked to express the changed attitude of the clergy toward militancy, an attitude inspired by the inception of the crusades. At this time the Baligant episode was added to permit a characterization of Charlemagne as the avenger of Christendom. The poet broke up the old number structure and superimposed a new one, and, as has been shown in chapter 4, he was not as accomplished in the art as was the poet of the original structure. This version is preserved in the Oxford manuscript.

In the meantime, throughout the eleventh century and later, other versions of the Roland story were circulating. These versions derived in part from the pre-Olivier story but at the same time borrowed freely from the written versions, which were perhaps being recited by a special line of jongleurs. It is possible that the other versions were transmitted orally until they came to be recorded in all of the manuscripts other than *O*. The present work treats only the line of provenience of the Oxford version. Other versions of the *Roland* corpus have not been examined for the presence of number structure; and, with the possible exception of the Latin *Pseudo-Turpin* or the *Carmen de prodicione Guenonis*, it is improbable that such a study would be fruitful.

Credence is lent to the proposal of this study by the fact that, at least during the period from the creation of the *Alexis* to the composition of the *Commedia Divina*, there was viable an aesthetic practice which sought to compose a poem so as to conceal within it an arithmetic structure with metaphoric intent. Since the postulated revisions of the *Chanson de Roland* fall roughly within this period of viability, the incorporation of such

structures in the poem would reflect contemporaneous aesthetic tradition. It has also been demonstrated that the conception of arithmetic structuring and the metaphoric significance of the numbers employed are consonant with the number philosophy of the Middle Ages, itself the product of a tradition of great antiquity. Finally, the coherence of the constructs and their congruence with the obvious intent of the poem as well as with the evolving historic, aesthetic, and philosophic ambience, indicate a probability in favor of the postulation which is well beyond chance.

Of necessity the postulation of two levels of number structure in the Roland epic implies that there was clerical participation in its composition and dissemination and that the version of the year 1000 was written. Both implications are in conflict with the tendency of current neo-traditionalism to view medieval epic poetry as exclusively the product of an oral jongleuresque tradition which was entirely free of learned influence. However, it is exactly the weakness of the neo-traditionalist position that so large a portion of the argument, pro and con, uses as a point of departure the Oxford version of the *Chanson de Roland*. This text has obviously received so much attention because of its beauty and its renown, but ironically, by reason of its very excellence, it is a defective example of the kind of transmission which the neo-traditionalists justifiably posit as the rule for the general corpus of Old French epic material. Let it be said that the battle for the cause of the oral transmission of Old French epic poetry has been won; few scholars today would question the magnitude of the accomplishment. Let us now concede that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is as arbitrary to insist that there was no written or clerical influence prior to the texts which happen to have survived as it is to argue that there was no such thing as oral transmission during the long *silence des siècles*.

