



THE CLONING OF THE *KARLAMAGNÚS SAGA* IN ANGLO-FRENCH TEXTUAL CRITICISM

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This essay may have the dubious distinction of being the one to emerge from this highly diverse conference that actually speaks the least about the internal nature or contemporary social context of Icelandic saga-writing, although I hope, in narrating to you a thread of saga-related criticism that has been spun over the last century and a half, to make it an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.¹ My general focus is the *Karlamagnús Saga*, a little-known work recorded in four highly individualistic Icelandic and Norse manuscript copies (all held today in the Arna-Magnaean collection in Copenhagen), two from the early 15th and two from the 17th centuries, and a further number of fragments from the 13th and 14th centuries; they all contain renderings into Icelandic prose of various pre-existing prose and verse fictions in Old French, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English, whose sole point of commonality is the presence of the Emperor Charlemagne (Hieatt I: 13-24). The work has been edited twice, first by Carl Unger in 1860 and more recently by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson in 1950, and the text and its challenges have been further illuminated in a very well-executed critical English translation made by the multi-talented Constance Hieatt in 1975.

Our story begins, as so many stories in medieval philology do, with Gaston Bruno Paulin Paris (1839-1903), the elder statesman of medieval French philology. For those of you not familiar with his work, Paris was a Professor of Romance Languages at the Collège de France in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the founder or co-founder of the influential philological journals *Revue critique*, *Revue historique*, and *Romania*. In 1896 he was awarded the seat in the Académie française previously held by Alexandre Dumas, and by the time of his death in 1903 he had authored a stunning number of pieces of criticism on nearly every major and minor text in the medieval canon: a celebratory bibliography of his work issued by Joseph Bédier and Mario Roques in 1904 itemizes over one thousand essays, monographs, books and lectures produced during his lifetime, an output far exceeding most of his medievalist contemporaries.



Despite the august reputation he had earned by the end of his life, my concern today is with the young Gaston Paris and the importance of a single biographical fact on the reception of the saga form in subsequent criticism on the medieval Charlemagne legends. Young Gaston Paris received his doctoral degree from the *École des Chartes* in 1865 at the age of 25, writing his dissertation on the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* (the celebrated historiographical forgery which presents itself as the eyewitness account of Archbishop Turpin to Charlemagne's conquest and Christianization of Spain in the eighth century). That same year – in fact, just a few months later – he completed work on what remains today his most influential study, the *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, a wide-ranging survey that sought for the first time to chart all the cultural manifestations of the Charlemagne legends throughout European literature, from the time of the Emperor himself up to the 17th century.

This biographical detail – that Paris produced a critical *magnus opus* at age 25 just as he was finishing his doctoral degree – is every bit as important as it would seem to us assembled here, who wrote our own dissertations not all that long ago, or who are currently looking forward with pity and fear to their impending compositions. (We need not go into the added challenge of composing them in Latin, which of course was the standard at Paris's time.) Why does it matter when Gaston Paris wrote his *Histoire poétique*? And what possible relevance could all this have for the reception of Icelandic sagas in the scholarly world?

The relevance is that in the exuberance of his youth Gaston Paris, a young, budding expert on the medieval Charlemagne legends, composed his *Histoire poétique* in the space of a few months in 1865 from the notes he had accumulated in his research on the *Pseudo-Turpin*, so that he would be able to announce its publication to the Faculty of Letters on 29 December 1865: *exactly seven hundred years to the day* from the declaration by Frederick Barbarossa of the canonization of Charlemagne by Pope Paschal III (29 December 1165). It must have been a conscious and deliberate act of homage to Charlemagne's memory, and whether or not Paris expected the publication he had so precipitously embarked upon to remain to this day one of the most influential works of literary criticism to come out of the 19th century, we can only imagine that the fact that it has would amuse and delight him.²

And it is a powerfully-enunciated overview, still capable, in its magisterial tone, of impressing a 21st-century reader. Unfortunately, Paris's haste inevitably caused him to simplify textual problems, to overstate the relationship between cultural idioms, and in general to provide



information which *seemed to be*, but was not, the last word on the subject of Charlemagne material, throughout northern Europe in particular. In the *Histoire poétique* he produced a sort of “master narrative” of Charlemagne provenance, a narrative of the entry of romance and historiographical material into the various European vernaculars which is often quite forcefully and firmly stated – as though he were compensating for the speed with which he was writing the work by masking the tentative nature of some of his observations with especially declamatory rhetoric. (Which, looking back on it, he probably was.)

For the *Karlamagnús Saga* itself, Paris depended wholly on the recent (1860) edition by Carl Unger – more specifically, on the Preface and Synopsis, in which Unger summarized the material of the *Saga*. He was able to list the component parts of the work, but very little more: he clearly had not read the saga itself, and after his brief summary he closed his short description of the Scandinavian Charlemagne material as a whole by lamenting the lack of editions and other scholarly material through which a reader in France might engage with the subject (*Histoire poétique*, 153). This in itself is not a problem: we are all aware of the pace at which scholarship moves, and especially of the pace at which it moved before electronic media hastened both our access to materials and our ability to share our ideas about them with one other. And none of us should ever look at the work of our scholarly predecessors and denigrate them for not knowing the things we know about – their awareness seems remote to us because we know so much more than they did, but as T.S. Eliot pointed out, “Precisely: and *they* are that which we know.”

What is a problem, and what can be usefully traced, is *misapprehension* and *misunderstanding*, and by studying the transmission of these we can often gain considerable enlightenment. It is true that Paris’s goal was not to point out gaps in contemporary knowledge, but rather to decisively reconstruct (with the available evidence) the spread of the Charlemagne legends throughout vernacular cultures in the later Middle Ages. His goal was a comprehensive survey – as its title proclaims, a “poetic history of Charlemagne” – and as his fame and reputation grew, the book’s contents, like all of his work, became enormously influential in medieval studies. Even his most passing remarks begat scholarly energy in the subsequent generation, and students of the medieval Charlemagne legends today still need to read the *Histoire poétique* simply because *so many* later scholars refer to it.



Drawn wholesale from Unger, Paris's ten-point itemization of the general structural components of the *Karlamagnús Saga* was very accurate, and the following table of contents described by him can still be used by us today (*Histoire poétique* 149-51):

1. *Charlemagne's Early Life* (From the death of King Pepin to the eve of the Battle of Roncevaux; source(s) unknown)
2. *Olif and Landres* (An accused queen story in which Charlemagne is present only peripherally; translated from a now-lost Middle English romance)
 3. *Oddgier the Dane* (Following closely the Old French *La Chevalerie Ogier de Danemarch*)
 4. *King Agulandus* (The longest section of the *Saga*; an amalgam of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and the *Chanson d'Aspremont*)
 5. *Gvitalin the Saxon* (An account of a campaign against the Saxons, related to Jean Bodel's *Chanson de Saisnes*)
 6. *Otuel* (Following closely the Old French *Chanson d'Otinel*)
 7. *The Voyage to Jerusalem* (A "very close translation" of an identified Anglo-Norman manuscript of the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*)
 8. *The Battle of Runzival* (Often "quite close" to the Oxford manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland*)
 9. *William Short-Nose* (Based on the French poem *Moniage Guillaume*)
 10. *The Death of Charlemagne* (Based on the account in Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*)

But Paris knew that there must be manuscript materials lying behind the *Saga* which neither he (nor others) knew about – he knew that the diverse components of the *Saga* were translated for the most part from French or Anglo-Norman exemplars. But which ones? Might they still be extant somewhere in Scandinavia? He wanted to know this – he *needed* to know this in order to be able to gauge the degree to which the narrative material in the *Saga* had been based on those sources, to be able to discern how much of the *Saga* was the work of its innovative



translators, and in general to fill in more of the as-yet fragmentary awareness of the Charlemagne texts.

But he could not readily find these things out, and given the compressed time frame in which he was writing he was forced simply to state the following:

A l'époque où ils ont été rédigés, il existait évidemment encore plus d'une de ces chansons de la première époque dont nous avons signalé la perte (p. 70); il ne serait pas impossible, par conséquent, qu'on en retrouvât quelques-unes au fond des bibliothèques du nord de l'Europe; peut-être cependant l'auteur islandais était-il venu en France et avait-il connu là les récits qu'il a rapportés ensuite dans sa patrie. (*Histoire poétique* 149-50)

[At the time when they [i.e., the parts of the *Karlamagnús Saga*] were drafted, there evidently existed more than one of the original *chansons* which we have mentioned above (p. 70) must now be lost; it would not be impossible, consequently, that one or more may be discovered within the collections of the libraries of northern Europe; possible, moreover, that their Icelandic author traveled to France and there became acquainted with the stories which he subsequently took back to his homeland. (My translation)]

Paris thus gestured in the direction of unknown, but possibly still extant, exemplars – of previously-existing manuscript copies in French verse standing behind existing ones in Icelandic prose.

Here is where I arrive at the real subject of my talk today. Gaston Paris's chapter on Charlemagne in Scandinavia is the seventh chapter of the *Histoire poétique*; the eighth is entitled "The Legend of Charlemagne in England," and is the briefest and most superficial of the entire work. Within its five short pages, Paris (who was, we should remember, writing the first comprehensive scholarly discussion on the subject) stated that all the romance and hagiographical work translated into English from French models was, apart from Chaucer, of little value, and that the imported Charlemagne material in particular, because of the late date at which it appeared in the language (the 14th and 15th centuries), was of little interest (*Histoire poétique* 154-55).

He then did a most remarkable thing: he observed that a small group of Middle English Charlemagne romances showed the same general structural relationship to their sources as did the Charlemagne works in German, Italian, and (especially) Icelandic. Perceiving that among them these brief English poems contained many of the basic structural elements of the



Charlemagne canon – in other words, the Voyage to Jerusalem story, the Otinel and Fierabras (converted Saracen) stories, the Battle of Roncevaux story, and several episodes from the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* – he made what turned out to be a very important passing remark:

Charlemagne et Roland. Tel est le titre que nous croyons devoir restituer à un poème qui n'a pas encore été jugé comme il doit l'être. La première partie seule a été publiée, sous le titre de *Roland et Ferragus*, qui ne convient qu'à un récit, et Ellis a analysé, comme poème indépendant, sous le titre de *Sir Otuel*, également insuffisant, la fin de la second partie. Ce poème, qui est une espèce de résumé des guerres de Charlemagne contre les Sarrasins, très-imparfaitement connues de son médiocre auteur, se divise ainsi: 1° le voyage de Charlemagne en Terre-Sainte, d'après la légende latine; 2° le commencement de la guerre d'Espagne, d'après les premiers chapitres de Turpin (jusque et y compris l'épisode de Ferragus); 3° *Otuel*, mais dans une autre version, plus mal écrite et versifiée; 4° la fin du récit de Turpin. ...[L]a liaison des quatre parties est incontestable.... Ce poème est donc une sorte d'ouvrage cyclique, mais qui ne peut se comparer à l'œuvre de Girard d'Amiens, au *Karl Meinet* ou à la *Karlamagnus-Saga*. Il est écrit en stances de six vers, coupe très-utilisée dans l'ancienne poésie anglaise. Il n'a aucune valeur de fond ni de forme. (Histoire poétique 156)

[*Charlemagne and Roland.* This is the title which I believe should be restored to a poem which has not yet been recognized as it should be. Only the first part has been published, under the title *Roland and Vernagu*, which only fits one episode of the story, and Ellis has analyzed, as an independent poem under the equally unsuitable title of *Sir Otuel*, the end of the second half. The poem, which is a type of résumé of the wars of Charlemagne against the Saracens (very imperfectly known to its mediocre author), may be divided thus: 1) The voyage of Charlemagne to the Holy Land, following the Latin legend; 2) The beginning of the Spanish campaign, following the first chapters of Turpin (up to and including the Vernagu episode); 3) *Otuel*, but in another version, worse written and versified; 4) The end of the story of Turpin. ...The connection of the four parts is incontestable.... The poem is thus a sort of cyclic work, but cannot be compared to the achievement of Girard d'Amiens, to the *Karl Meinet*, or to the *Karlamagnús Saga*. It is written in six-line stanzas, a form much used in ancient English verse. It has no distinctiveness of source or form. (My translation)]

“*Charlemagne and Roland*”: Paris coined this title, and here introduced it to his readers as a *fait accompli* – as if he were only providing a name for a somewhat neglected but definitely real and recognizable work which must once have existed if the existence of the known Middle English texts was to be explained. This is the *ur-text* he calls “a kind of cyclic work,” a momentous collection of English verse based on French sources; his implication was that “*Charlemagne and Roland*” was a large, heterogeneous Middle English narrative, created



(possibly even by a single person) within a short span of time by the translation into Middle English of a number of Old French and Anglo-Norman exemplars.

Does this sound familiar? It should: it's a description of the *actual* composition process of the *Karlamagnús Saga*. Gaston Paris has deftly imposed upon the extant fragments of Charlemagne romances in Middle English a model of order, sequence, and source which he had just described in the previous chapter of his book.

Paris's claim about the cyclic origin of the Middle English Charlemagne romances seems very impressive, but his reasoning was quite direct. He knew from descriptions published by early 19th-century antiquarians like George Ellis (who he names in the extract printed above) that two of the Middle English romances, "Roland and Vernagu" and "Otuel and Roland," were both in twelve-line tail-rhyme stanzas, and that, apart from the Otuel (or Otinel) material with which the latter poem begins, they both contained episodes derived from the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*. Further, he knew that there was very little overlap in those *Pseudo-Turpin* episodes, and that "Roland and Vernagu" generally drew from the first half of the *Pseudo-Turpin*, while "Otuel and Roland" drew from the second half. Looking only at the large narrative blocks of the texts (and not at manuscript details), the two poems thus appeared complementary to him, and to explain their estrangement he provided an imaginary circumstance in which a scribe (or several scribes) misplaced copies or bumbled the copying of the texts so that they "drifted apart" from one another. "Charlemagne and Roland," as Paris introduced it, must therefore have existed by at least 1330 (the date of "Roland and Vernagu") and must have been composed of several *ur*-texts in Middle English tail-rhyme stanzas.

A few simple rhetorical devices are largely responsible for the impression of unity and trustworthiness this hypothesis bears. First, Paris was not concerned with the details of verse forms or of manuscript filiation, but rather with larger structural features: he expressed the elements of his "Charlemagne and Roland" as numbered sections of a larger corpus and did not discuss aspects interior to those sections. Moreover, he offered four known sources from which a fifth unknown one seemed naturally to derive – the weight of tradition was thus on his side, and the notion of a cyclic work which brings together the diverse strands of a legend is always attractive and compelling. But we must realize the implications of this macroscopic or large-scale positivist approach: in comparing this hypothetical "Charlemagne and Roland" to



an actual work like the *Karlmagnús Saga*, Paris intended the word “cyclic” to be synonymous with “collective,” like an anthology, and the result of a single directing hand.

Despite the casual nature of its original context, Gaston Paris’s declaration of the existence of a Middle English Charlemagne cycle was enthusiastically taken as fact: “Charlemagne and Roland” was invoked in passing as an actual, extant title in all the standard medieval literary histories and handbooks of the later 19th and 20th centuries. Although the cyclic poem theory was unverifiable for decades because the manuscript containing one of the component poems, “Otuel and Roland,” was mis-shelved in the British Museum for over a hundred years, there can be no doubt that between 1865 and 1950 it was widely acknowledged to be a real Middle English work and to be the authoritative explanation for the existence of the English Charlemagne romances: one finds it named in Bernhard ten Brink’s *Geschichte der Englischen Literatur* (245), Leon Gautier’s *Bibliographie des chansons de geste* (155), Anna Hunt Billings’s *Guide to the Middle English Metrical Romances* (49-84), William Schofield’s *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer* (153-55), and even A.C. Baugh’s *Literary History of England* (187).

The claims for the cyclic work are undermined, however, by the simple fact that there is no objective evidence of a single comprehensive work such as “Charlemagne and Roland” in English before the time of William Caxton – more than 150 years later than the time “Charlemagne and Roland” would have had to have existed. On both the general and specific levels the theory does not stand up to close inspection; it reveals itself to be in large part the result of preconceptions about the actions of scribes set out in particularly dominant rhetoric and by relying on secondhand narrative summaries for its foundation. Despite this lack of corroborating evidence, the *notion* of a saga – of a large work made by gathering, translating, and sequencing a group of heterogeneous narratives as part of a deliberate and recoverable project – clearly appealed to the generations following Paris who found it to be so very *orderly*.

Without exception, the men and women who responded to Paris’s views on the lost cyclic Middle English saga/poem did so from the assumption that “Roland and Vernagu” and its would-be complement, “Otuel and Roland,” could not have been written intentionally in their surviving forms. When compared structurally to their eventual source, the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, the romances seemed at best confused and naïve readings; at worst they seemed



inept and embarrassing examples of medieval versification. Shuffled folios and scriptorium intrigue, which Paris had suggested as possible reasons for the “messy” transmission, were elaborated upon by these subsequent scholars to explain the more stubborn interpretive points in what was repeatedly described as a decay from Latin prose to English verse; and various kinds of textual evidence (such as similar phrasings, and identical or similar spellings of proper names) were brought to bear to buttress the broader theoretical discussion.

Moreover, each of the contributors to scholarship on the Middle English Charlemagne cycle approached her work on the vernacular romances from a previously-existing interaction with the Latin history of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*: their scholarly ideologies, in other words, promoted consideration of the English texts almost exclusively in terms of their filial descent from the Latin; they considered all vernacular textual production except that overseen by recognizable authorities to be an act of organic corruption. Gaston Paris, for example, probably chose the title “Charlemagne and Roland” in the first place because it reinforced his *a priori* assumptions about the influence in England of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* – the formal Latin title of the *Pseudo-Turpin* is *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*, or “History of Charles the Great and Roland.”

The actual details of the cyclic poem theory were not evaluated at all, by anyone, until 1935 – seventy years after Paris’s *Histoire poétique* was published, and more than thirty years after his death, when the manuscript of “Otuel and Roland” resurfaced in the British Museum. Its editor for the Early English Text Society, Mary Isabelle O’Sullivan, enthusiastically agreed with Paris that “Otuel and Roland” and “Roland and Vernagu” were the remnants of a cyclic work. She was the first person to bring any kind of manuscript evidence into the discussion, and her pronouncement of the viability of the theory came at just the time that another American scholar, Laura Hibbard Loomis, was writing an essay about a possible *location* where such a cyclic composition could have been achieved: a secular scriptorium in London in the early 14th century, which she named “The Auchinleck Bookshop” because she believed one of its products to have been the famous Auchinleck Manuscript, a miscellany dating to about 1330 and today kept in the National Library of Scotland (Loomis 182-87). To fit the notion of a “cyclic work,” several Middle English translations of French Charlemagne texts would have had to have been made at the same time and place, and toward the goal of presenting a single, comprehensive collection of the events of the life of Charlemagne. Loomis



supplied a possible venue for this translation by describing (in notoriously vague terms) a commercial scriptorium capable of enabling tremendous textual interconnections: she described a textual Land of Cokayne in which even the most puzzling transmission circumstances could be explained. Each of the Bookshop's employed scribes (Loomis called them "literary hacks") would translate (as necessary), versify (as necessary), and copy down a piece, relying continually on the written exemplars of a small but extensive library within the Bookshop for finishing rhymes or apt epithets – and in this recoverable manner the scribes created a highly "traceable" and intertextually-rich set of 14th-century romances (Loomis 165-82).

A singular convergence is visible here: the tandem influence of O'Sullivan's edition (1935) and Loomis's article (1942) prompted a subsequent series of articles in the later 1940s and '50s by two American medievalists, Ronald N. Walpole and Hamilton Smyser, which set out to cement the Charlemagne saga theory into Middle English literary history once and for all. Gaston Paris's "Charlemagne and Roland" was about to find a new home – in Laura Loomis's Auchinleck Bookshop.

Between them, Walpole and Smyser detailed the circumstances whereby a 13th-century French manuscript of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* "became" the two extant English tail-rhyme romances. Their essays for the most part elaborate on the stubborn cruces introduced by O'Sullivan; they reconstruct an ancestry for the hypothetical cyclic poem and offer evidence for assigning sources to "Roland and Vernagu" and "Otuel and Roland." Like Paris's initial work, the filiations outlined by Walpole and Smyser are not made according to Lachmannian stemmatics; instead, they are an application of ideal of textual descent based on large narrative blocks. "Charlemagne and Roland," according to the narrative eventually provided by Walpole and Smyser, must not only have been created in the Auchinleck Bookshop, but may, they said, have existed in the actual Auchinleck Manuscript itself in this specific order (Walpole, "Charlemagne and Roland," 397-98):

1. *[The Voyage to Jerusalem]* (Hypothesized to introduce Charlemagne's life and deeds, "inherited" from the Johannes version of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*)
2. *Roland and Vernagu* (Episodes from the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* concerning Charlemagne's invasion of Spain, culminating in the Roland/Vernagu debate)



3. *Otuel a Knight* (Based on the *Chanson d'Otinel* and introduced in the Auchinleck Manuscript by a 3-line link from “Roland and Vernagu”)
4. *Otuel and Roland* (Also based on the *Chanson d'Otinel*; the second half of it complements the Otuel story in “Otuel a Knight”)
5. *Firumbras* (Two translations of the *Chanson de Fierabras* exist in Middle English, one of which is in the same manuscript as “Otuel and Roland”)
6. *[Other episodes from the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle preceding the Roncevaux Battle]* (The reasons for including these are not specified)
7. *The Song of Roland* (Probably similar to the fragmentary Middle English poem, which contains elements of both the *chanson de geste* version and the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* version of the Roncevaux battle)
8. *[Other episodes from the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle following Roncevaux, up to and including the death of Charlemagne]* (Otherwise unspecified)

The similarity to the actual narrative structure of the *Karlamagnús Saga* is patent. As investigators of the Charlemagne legends, Walpole and Smyser seized on the Auchinleck Bookshop to describe phenomena which they would have otherwise been hard pressed to find a venue for. They presented the genesis of the Charlemagne romances to us in the same plausible scribal setting that Loomis had described: a group of men, certainly working under one roof in a lay scriptorium, directed by a General Editor whose function it was to oversee the assembly of a finished product. None of them, Loomis, Smyser, nor Walpole, had ever seen the Auchinleck Manuscript or even a photographic copy of it; they all relied on the general description of the manuscript published in the 1880s (Kölbing 178-91). Yet they were nevertheless able to make claims about romances in wholly different Middle English dialects having “the authority and antiquity of a quondam appearance in the Auchinleck Manuscript” (Smyser 1946, 281).

Our case study of the transfer of characteristics from the saga form to an anachronistic Middle English context is nearly complete – but the accretion of literate characteristics does not end with Ronald Walpole’s last article on the subject in 1951. In 1961, nearly a century after Gaston Paris published his passing remarks on the subject, French medievalist André de



Mandach used the “Charlemagne and Roland” theory to support his expansive notions of an international Charlemagne poetic consciousness. In the first volume of his *Naissance et développement de la chanson de geste en Europe* (the ninth volume of which came out in the early 1990s), de Mandach increased the legitimacy of the cyclic poem theory by renaming “Charlemagne and Roland” as “La Geste de Charlemagne Auchin-Fillingham de l’Angleterre” (“The English Auchinleck-Fillingham Geste of Charlemagne”). And he took the remarkable step of naming its author: at the conclusion of the poem “Otuel and Roland” there is a faint colophon which seems to read “Amen quod I Gage.” De Mandach suggested that this reference revealed the name of the creator of “Charlemagne and Roland” – that his name was probably John Gage, “Joseph being an unpopular name in anti-Semitic thirteenth-century England,” and that this “John Gage” was the single directing hand responsible for the cyclic poem (121). Although citations to de Mandach’s work are today nearly always carefully circumscribed by warnings about his nearly manic tendency to over-represent circumstances (and about his confusing tendency to rename practically every manuscript, family of manuscripts, or hypothetical family of manuscripts he comes across), we cannot ignore the fact that he is, like Gaston Paris, a noted, influential, and much-published medievalist. His impulse to magnify the Middle English material to the point that he felt comfortable providing an actual *name* for the author of a now familiarly-named work was the last stage in bringing “Charlemagne and Roland” into full virtual reality.

As I remarked earlier in this summary, the importance in all this textual history lies not just in its ability to help us understand the conditions and paradigms which guided past interpretations, but also in its ability to reveal the extent to which those interpretations are still alive in reference materials we ourselves may own and use today. If one consults the entry on Charlemagne legends in the 1967 *Manual of the Writings in Middle English* – one of the most basic and useful sources for manuscript and edition information on the variety of Middle English verse and prose – one will find an entry for a work entitled “Charlemagne and Roland” (Smyser, “Charlemagne Legends” 80). One will also find, listed beneath its name, a set of its contents and characteristics, as well as a bibliography composed of recognizable scholars (Gaston Paris, Ronald Walpole, Hamilton Smyser, André de Mandach) who have validated the existence of the work. As recently as 1990, the saga-inspired cyclic poem theory was cited in passing to explain the existence of the Middle English poems (Lupack 2). To all



intents and purposes, “Charlemagne and Roland,” a Middle English work similar to the *Karlamagnús Saga*, has been written into reality by the needs and desires of modern medievalism.

Finally we come to the lessons, the “moralia,” of this thread of criticism. (And no, the moral is *not*, “If you write your magnum opus before the age of thirty don’t grow up to be a famous French philologist.”) In my opinion the chief lesson is that today, informed by postmodern notions of unpredictability, textual instability, and an ultimately unrecoverable past, we do not share the *need* to link together into master narratives the texts which we read. We haven’t abandoned the notion of rigor, of course, and there are still plenty of instances in which we can identify and taxonomize source manuscripts or in which we can definitively state that source manuscripts have been lost. But we also know that the production of vernacular texts in the Middle Ages – in Iceland or anywhere else – need not be discolored in our mind’s eyes by the stereotype of a slavish and inevitably corrupting hack-work scribe introducing errors into the Verbal Truth of his Authorized Original. That’s modern prejudice, not medieval practice.

Whether or not the many sagas of Norse and Icelandic origin had substantial oral-composition elements, it has always been abundantly clear that the *Karlamagnús Saga* did not: the use of it as a template, a pattern, or (in keeping with this essay’s title) a “master clone” for an imaginary Middle English Charlemagne cycle is partly due to its relative knowability, textually speaking. The *Saga*’s use of pre-existing material, all translated and placed into relative sequence by only one or two persons, appealed tremendously to the generation of philologists just previous to our own – scholars who, when they could not find organic life, brought it to a comparably knowable, complete, and structured Charlemagne text. In this sense the saga model was used by Gaston Paris and his followers in an act of *medievalism*: they created a new medieval text which never existed, but “should have.” If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, surely the cloning of the *Karlamagnús Saga* into “Charlemagne and Roland” is a testament to the enduring appeal of a truly timeless narrative form.



NOTES

¹ This paper was presented in Borgarnes with the generous assistance of Patrick J. Murphy, through whose input and insight (though not made explicit in the authorship of this printed version) it was greatly enriched.

² I owe the general observation of this concordance of publication date to a passing remark made by Jacques Monfrin in his analysis of developments in 15th-century Charlemagne historiography, written in 1965 (the eight hundredth anniversary of Charlemagne's canonization) for the Société de l'histoire de France (67).

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