

When men cry: grief and masculinity in the song of roland



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Masculine identity in *The Song of Roland* is grounded in emotional experience. From knights on the battlefield to King Charlemagne, men throughout the poem frequently weep or faint because of the intensity of their emotions. Contrary to expectations of medieval gender roles, male expressions of grief in *The Song of Roland* are crucial in defining and constructing acceptable forms of manhood. Performances of strong emotion during times of war are central to the male-dominated feuding culture—these descriptions provide a model of honorable conduct for knighthood and a method of legitimizing political acts of violence.

Stephen D. White's essay "The Politics of Anger" from *Anger's Past: Social Uses of Emotion in the Middle Ages* provides important historical context for the analysis of emotion and masculinity. He asserts that men operated under "well understood conventions about when it was proper to display emotion" (White 137). Emotions typically expressed in the home differed from those considered appropriate among other nobles or on the battlefield. For Roland and his men, grief is especially crucial while at war, because a lack of emotion could be considered an insult to king and country. White also explains that emotion had "a well-defined place in political scripts" and could serve as a catalyst for political action (152). Grief was a means of garnering sympathy during conflicts, particularly among the male nobility. Descriptions of emotions had the power to "inspire pity for the alleged victim and provoke anger and violence at the victimizers" (144). In this way, displays of anger or grief acted as a public demonstration of the wrongs that had been suffered and the injury towards one's honor. Medieval emotion for men was inextricably associated with the politics of the nobility.

Representing emotion in literature was not a neutral act, rather these portrayals were used as a strategic tool to moralize conflicts or regain social power.

Due to the lack of significant female influence in the narrative, *The Song of Roland* establishes a form of masculinity that allows for a much broader range of emotional expression. The two named female characters, Aude and Queen Bramimonde, are sidelined from the main conflict and have little agency. Masculine elements of violence, warfare and brotherhood dominate the core of the story, and the manhood of its characters is rarely brought into question. Even the horses are described in exaggerated and competitive terms: “There is no falcon who’d beat him in a race” (60). This transforms the narrative into a space where male is the cultural default and masculinity is defined in relation only to other men. Because *The Song of Roland* establishes the masculine identity in a purely male-dominated space, extremes of emotion are deemed more acceptable and natural than if there were female characters to compare it to.

Masculinity in *The Song of Roland* emphasizes an emotional code of conduct that applies to knighthood, suggesting that grief—displayed through physical acts such as crying and fainting—is an honorable response to suffering on the battlefield. Grief is directly tied to the role of knighthood when Roland weeps for his fallen men “as a true knight would do” (72). In this scene, mourning is shown to be the essential response to tragedy and the ultimate expression of male devotion. The weeping, fainting and suffering of men demonstrates a heightened sense of loyalty to the king and the nation of France. Rather than being a sign of weakness, the emotional sensitivity of

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Roland, Charlemagne and their knights is shown to exemplify the loyalty and honor of knighthood. Although strong emotion is associated with honor on the battlefield, Ganelon's portrayal as a dishonorable figure indicates the vital role that context plays in defining acceptable standards of emotion. When Roland laughs at him during a meeting with the King's closest barons, Ganelon "suffers such pain he nearly splits with rage" and "comes close to falling in a faint" (13). He is directly contrasted with Roland in terms of emotional states: Ganelon's feelings seem to border on hysterical when compared to Roland's rationality and self-control. While Ganelon demonstrates extreme emotion and its physical manifestations, he does so in a way that is outside the context of war. In this way, Ganelon's emotions are set apart from those of the characters who exemplify honorable knighthood. His outburst ultimately serves to introduce his most dishonorable act—betraying Roland and his men to the Saracens. By expressing and acting upon his emotions outside of the framework of war, Ganelon is characterized as unmanly both through his lack of honor and his emotional performance outside the acceptable limits of masculinity.

Beyond the social implications of honor and knighthood, male demonstrations of grief in *The Song of Roland* also serve an essential political purpose. Upon witnessing the deaths of many of his men, Roland is described as "grieving and filled with bitter rage" (79). This direct contrast, as well as the consistent use of sorrow to motivate violent acts against the Saracens, indicates that grief and violence are closely connected in the narrative. The most explicit connection between grief and revenge occurs as Charlemagne prepares his men for the final battle by telling them to "

avenge your griefs and thus relieve your feelings and your hearts” (135).

While the Pagans must be tempted with material gifts such as “wives” and “fiefdoms,” the Franks are shown to be compelled towards violence by a deep loyalty and sympathy for their fellow knights (126). Not only does this legitimize the violence of the Franks, but it paints Roland and his men as the righteous heroes of the narrative.

Despite the fact that women were typically characterized as the more emotional sex in the Middle Ages, *The Song of Roland* redefines traditional manhood to include expressions of powerful emotions. Even as men faint and weep on the battlefield, they strengthen their sense of loyalty, brotherhood and honor and rationalize the use of violence to achieve political ends.