

The effect of feudalism on its contemporary texts



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The French epic *The Song of Roland* (ca. 1100) loudly echoes the feudal values of its time. As it describes the transformation of France into a Christian nation united by loyalties to the king and country, the epic embodies the spirit of loyalty between a lord to his vassal. Although “*Aucassin and Nicolette*” is also an anonymous piece written in the same French vernacular at approximately the same point, it seems to be moving in an alternate direction. As a medieval romance, it also describes the same feudal society, yet appears to treat the situation more satirically.

Nevertheless, despite the satire in “*Aucassin and Nicolette*”, it remains alongside *The Song of Roland* as a chronicle of the age of feudalism, and thus both reinforce values promoted at the time. By the twelfth century, feudalism, which began in France during the eighth and ninth centuries under Charlemagne, had captured the governmental principles of much of Europe, including England, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, Sicily and Byzantium. The Feudal system changed according to time and place, yet adhered to the two main principles of warfare and land. The lord and the vassal swore allegiance (fealty) to each other, and thus the feudal ties relationships of loyalty and mutual trust were established. The lesser warrior-landholder (the vassal) would ensure a personal army to the greater warrior-landholder (the lord) in exchange for individual security and land (fief) which was guaranteed as hereditary possession if all promises were met. Even land held by the Church was considered feudal land, and archbishops, bishops and abbots were granted fiefs in exchanged for their reciprocal allegiance with the dukes, princes and kings. The relationship between the lords of certain countries to their rulers mirrored this model, and the feudal monarch was considered holy and divinely chosen. *The Song of Roland* resonates with <https://assignbuster.com/the-effect-of-feudalism-on-its-contemporary-texts/>

the feudal values that typified Europe at the time of its composition. Roland, the great warrior, is the perfect vassal to his lord, the emperor Charlemagne, the head of the Holy Roman Empire, responsible for defending and expanding Christendom. Charlemagne, “two hundred years old” (l. 539), is described as almost god-like, proving his divine status as the feudal monarch of “sweet France (the right arm of his body.” (l. 1194-5) Roland, “a fighter, there’s no vassal like him under the vault of heaven” (l. 544), is courageous, even foolishly so. When Oliver begs him to blow the horn to enlist help in what seems to be a futile battle, the warrior values intrinsic to Roland as a vassal propel his refusal. Instead, he answers, “may it not please God and his angels and saints to let France lose its glory because of me – let me not end in shame, let me die first. The Emperor loves us when we fight well.” [my emphasis] (ll. 1090-1094) As leader of the rearguard, his job is to protect the army and the king, and thus to call for help would be a betrayal of his commitment. He finally agrees to blow the horn when it is too late. As Roland senses his imminent death, he attempts to break his sword that encompasses holy relics, lest it fall into pagan hands. As he breaks it against a stone, he recounts all that he has done for Charlemagne and the many victories he has won for him. “For a long while a good vassal held you: there’ll never be the like in France’s holy land.” (l. 2311-2) He prepared for his death by confessing his sins and remembering “Charles, his lord, who fostered him.” (l. 2381) This exemplifies the relationship of reciprocity between the lord and vassal, epitomizing Charlemagne as the perfect lord, and Roland as the perfect vassal. Roland as the perfect vassal is emphasized in the thematic sub-climax of the epic. When Ganelon is chosen to an emissary to King Marsilion, which he will subsequently take as an opportunity

<https://assignbuster.com/the-effect-of-feudalism-on-its-contemporary-texts/>

to betray the Frank forces and his stepson, he drops the glove that Charlemagne hands him as an investment of his authority. Roland, however, upon his appointment as rearguard, unwittingly stepping into the trap that Ganelon has treacherously placed before him, makes a show of not dropping the lance handed to him by Charlemagne. This proves their positions when it comes to their lord. Roland would do anything for Charlemagne. He refuses to call for help until it's too late because he wished to defend his king. Even when he senses his death, he attempts to break his sword so that the pagans will never take over the Christians. In contrast, Ganelon, fueled by a personal hatred of Roland, proves treacherous to his lord. As the feudal compact requests, the vassal must have absolute loyalty to his lord in return for the lord's favor. Ganelon betrayed Charlemagne, yet until his end, Roland maintained his absolute devotion. Unlike *The Song of Roland*, "Aucassin and Nicolette" does not glorify the feudal system. Although Aucassin, the heir of Count Garin of Beaucaire, is instructed by his father to "take up [his] arms, mount [his] horse, defend [his] land and help [his] vassals" (II), Aucassin rejects the entire system of values, affirming instead that he would rather be with his "sweet friend" Nicolette. His, and later her, rejection of patrimony, a value integral to feudal society, gives hint to the author's approach to the context in which the story was composed. The very fact that Nicolette is called his "sweet friend" implies equality in their relationship, whereas women were not even mentioned in *The Song of Roland*. In general, the role of women in feudal society was that of the maiden in need of savior, not as an equal. "Aucassin and Nicolette" cannot escape the standards of its time, and Nicolette does require saving, yet she shows her independence as she escapes from her own prison and made her way through the forest alone.

Nevertheless, “ her beautiful hands and feet, which had never been accustomed to [walking across the bottom of the moat] were scratched and torn”(XVI), and Aucassin, “ his mind so firmly fixed on Nicolette(fell so hard on to a stone that his shoulder was dislocated”(XXIV). The gender reversal in Torelore, where the king is in “ childbed”(XXIX, 9) and the queen leads the war with “ A supply of fresh cheeses/ Rotten crab-apples/ And large mushrooms from the fields”(XXXI, 6-8) further exemplify the author's satire on the treatment of women in the feudal society. In addition to the gender reversal in Torelore, the community's attitude towards war also greatly differs from The Song of Roland and feudal society in general. Aucassin, raised to be a knight, attempted to help the war effort by striking “ right and left, killing many”, yet was admonished by the king, because it was not their “ custom to kill each other” (XXXII). To the feudal society, the role of the warrior is optimum, yet in Torelore, war is being treated as a game. The inhabitants give rule to the king, food is used as ammunition, and victory is not worthy of death. Yet despite its satirical costume, the story is unable to free itself of the values of its time. Nicolette must gain status as a princess in order to marry Aucassin, and even if that is another vehicle to parody the standards of status by revealing her true origin when it was needed, the fact remains that it was necessary in order to complete the story successfully. Even as a satire, it succeeds in imitating exactly that which it is satirizing. It becomes the ultimate medieval romance, because through all the tests given to both Aucassin and Nicolette they maintain their love for one another and the result is one of “ happily ever after”. Even though the author might have been attempting to mock the typical feudal society, he was nevertheless unable to escape the context surrounding the parody. Certain

<https://assignbuster.com/the-effect-of-feudalism-on-its-contemporary-texts/>

values may seem inherent, and even as one realizes the absurdity of their current situation, many things remain logical until viewed in retrospect. Though “ Aucassin and Nicolette” is a satire of the feudal society, often mocking the very values intrinsic to the social order, in contrast to The Song of Roland, which glorifies that very order, it nonetheless fails to escape several innate values of its circumstance. However, as a genre, The Song of Roland illustrates the feudal compact and the reciprocal relationship of the lord to his vassal wholly, while “ Aucassin and Nicolette” attempts to do just the opposite. Since both were written from a French perspective of feudal society, they are both case in point analyses of the period that they represent.