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Treachery and Treason

“ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER (Dante 3.9).” Beyond these gates lies the expanse of Hell, with all those who committed evil in their days on Earth. In his story, *The Inferno*, Dante is guided through the many levels of Hell, learning of what lies in wait for the wicked. In the final ring Dante finds many souls from history who betrayed their kin or country. Among these sinners is a vassal of Charlemagne, Ganelon (Dante 32.121). In his tale *The Song of Roland*, a famous Chanson de geste, Ganelon betrays Charlemagne during the conquest of Spain, and is executed for his treachery. As two influential pieces of Christian literature, *The Inferno* and *The Song of Roland*, share a common moral compass despite the changing of the Christian world during the times these pieces were written. They show the Christian view on betrayal, and how, despite the evil of other sins, treachery is by far the most condemning.

Ganelon was among those closest to Charlemagne’s trust. He was tired of the long conquest that Charlemagne and his men had been on for seven years, and suggested they make peace with the Saracens, saying: “We’ve fought enough, Leave we the fools, and with the wise be one” (Burgess 15). Convinced by this argument, Charlemagne asks for a volunteer to go and make peace, but when Ganelon’s stepson volunteers Ganelon for the mission, he rages (Burgess 22). Before he reluctantly leaves, the king reminds him of his duty to the crown: “Now certainly you go when I command” (Burgess 24). Ganelon curses Roland, and, in his spite and anger, plots against his son and fellow vassal with the enemy. He convinces the Saracen king that the real threat to the kingdom is Roland, and “When he be slain, shall peace once more abound” (Burgess

29). When Roland is dead and Charlemagne discover's the treachery committed amongst his men, Ganelon is tried for treason, but argues that his grudge was simply revenge against Roland (Burgess 273). He is almost let off, but God intercedes and proves him guilty of treason through a miracle (Burgess 286). He is gruesomely drawn and quartered for his crime, his limbs, "were from his body dragged" (Burgess 289).

Roland was the polar opposite of his treasonous stepfather. Similarly to Ganelon, he was close to the great Charlemagne, however, he would never undermine the faith his king put in him. He was a model Knight, a loyal vassal, and the nephew of Charlemagne (Burgess 177). His loyalty was the ultimate opponent of treachery. In the fateful meeting with the king's vassals, Roland warns of Marsilla's treachery, as his previous betrayal was still fresh on Roland's mind (Burgess 14). Though Roland is outnumbered in this decision, he remains loyal to Charlemagne and continues to serve. Even as he faces death at the newly discovered plot of his stepfather and Marsilla, he bravely stands his ground to fight and calls for the return of Charlemagne to at least avenge the death of his comrades (Burgess 156). He dies thinking only of his king and his God (Burgess 176).

The reward for loyalty over treachery was made apparent at the death of Roland, as he was greeted and carried off to heaven by Michael and Gabriel, two of the greatest Angels in all Christianity(176). He was loyal to the very end, and was rewarded and greeted into the hosts of Heaven, while Marsilla who he knew to be treacherous, "to Hell live devils took" (Burgess 264). Despite Roland's imperfections, as he was at times said to be prideful, and his hubris was indeed his downfall (Burgess 131), his loyalty that led to repentance in his last breath saved him (Burgess 175).

In stark contrast, we learn of the reward for treachery through Ganelon's fate. As is evidenced by his presence in the ring of Antenora in the ninth ring of Hell, God did in fact judge Ganelon as a traitor to country (Dante 32.88). The different levels Dante traverses house the various sinners who are punished for their crimes against God. The deeper the ring of Hell, the more vile the sin, and the more cruel the punishment. At the center of it all is Satan, the ruler of Hell, forever trapped in the ring of traitors. The punishment for treason is being frozen in ice forever, trapped by their cold hearts and deeds (Dante 32.34). The greatest of the sins punished in Hell is the very one that Ganelon committed and was vilified for. His pride, wrath, and numerous other shortcomings were essentially ignored by the story, which opted to show how his betrayal of his king was what damned him. The only worse punishments being received in Hell are those of Judecca, the innermost ring in the ninth ring of Hell (Dante 34.61). The greatest sin in *The Song of Roland* was also the greatest sin in *The Inferno*. The glory that awaited Roland was denied to Ganelon because his heart was cold enough to betray his king and his God. The same fate awaits all traitors according to Dante's portrayal of Hell.

This consistency in morality and punishment displays a common theme of Christianity throughout the 11th to 14th centuries, even reaching the modern day. In Christian dogma, betrayal is the chiefmost sin that can be committed, as it is the sin Satan committed in Heaven that sent him to the depths of Hell. There is no sin greater than betraying others, and as demonstrated by Cocytus, Antenora, and Judecca, the worst of all is betraying a lord. Judas, Brutus, and Cassius, the three traitors in the mouths of the devil are still considered among the worst of the worst in human history (Dante 34.64). Even further still, Judas is considered the worst of all sinners, as he betrayed the Son of God, and therefore God himself. This is crucial to understanding the gravity of betrayal in Christendom. It is clear that traitors are likened unto

Judas and Satan, replicating the ultimate act against God. Ganelon betrays his king, but does much more than that symbolically. Through Charlemagne he betrays God, as the king was considered the direct link between God and Humanity in *The Song of Roland* (Burgess 291). On the other hand Roland plays a part more akin to that of Jesus Christ, loyally following God in all things. Through this Christian perspective, it is clear to see why traitors would be the ones punished in the deepest recess of Hell, and given the prevalence of Christianity in the modern world, it is no wonder that the likes of Benedict Arnold are seen in equally negative light. Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno* and *The Song of Roland* are indicators of the beginnings of these beliefs we see carried on today, and will likely see carried on for years to come.

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