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The English victory is the high point of the herald's poem, but he also describes the death of his master and the declining health and ultimate death of the Black Prince himself in 1376. The poem thus ends not with an optimistic tone after the victory, but with rather an elegiac tone of nostalgia over the loss of the flowers of chivalry.

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chansons de geste

The chansons de geste (or "songs of great deeds") are heroic or epic poems in Old French written chiefly in the 12th and 13th centuries. The poems celebrate the martial deeds of historical or pseudo-historical French heroes (the word *geste* has a secondary meaning of "history") and at the same time glorify the ideals of chivalric feudal society. Although the chansons de geste provide some of the raw material (the "matter of France") for later medieval romances, their main focus is on war, and love has little or nothing to do with their stories.

There are some 120 extant chansons de geste, many of which concern the emperor CHARLEMAGNE and his retinue. This cycle of epics is called the *Geste du Roi,* and the best-known of these, the *Chanson de Roland* or *SONG OF ROLAND,* is also one of the earliest (ca. 1100). A larger and more unified cycle of 24 poems revolves around the career of William d'Orange (also known as Guillaume de Toulouse), another important historical figure from the time of Charlemagne. Some chansons de geste are written about the exploits of Christian knights against Saracens. A fourth group of poems is concerned with feudal barons from northern France who revolt against their sovereign lords as a result of some injustice.

The typical verse form used among the chansons de geste, at least in the earlier examples, is a 10- or 11-syllable line marked by a strong caesura after the fourth syllable. The lines are grouped into stanzas (called *laisses*) of varying length, united by assonance—that is, repetition of identical vowel sounds—in the final word of each line of the *laisse.*

One area of scholarly contention regarding the chansons de geste has to do with their origin. There are clearly passages of formulaic diction in the existing poems, which suggests that they have an origin in oral tradition. But it is also clear that the prevailing worldview of the songs seems more that of the period of the Crusades than that of the Carolingian era in which most of the narratives are set. Some scholars believe that the stories originated at Charlemagne's time and were passed down and added to in oral tradition for hundreds of years. Another theory is that the songs originated much closer to the time of the written versions and were composed by wandering JONGLEURS who picked up historical facts and traditions in their wanderings. Either way it can be said with some certainty that the kernel of the story in each chanson de geste is much older than the written text, and that the individual texts do contain some elements of oral tradition.

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chansons de toile (*chansons d'histoire*)

Thirteenth-century sources use the term *chansons de toile* (or occasionally *chansons d'histoire*), or

"spinning songs," to refer to a small but distinct group of French poems that present brief narratives with female protagonists, often a noble lady mourning the absence of her knightly lover. These short poems are memorable for their ability to create a scene with a few vivid images and for their lively dialogue.

These songs usually begin by naming the heroine—Bele Doette, for example, or Bele Yolande. Then the poem describes what the heroine is doing—it may be spinning or embroidering, it might be sitting alone in a tower window, it might be reading. But from this standard beginning, a number of different kinds of narratives might ensue. In Bele Doette's song, for example, the protagonist hears of her lover's death and ends by becoming a nun at Saint-Pol. Bele Yolande, on the other hand, gives herself to her lover at the end of her song, and we are told:

> *fair Yolande clings to him with kisses,*
> *and in France's sport she pins him fast.*
>
> (Dronke 1996, 98)

These songs consist of several short stanzas united by a single rhyme and separated by a substantial refrain. In "Fair Yolande," for example, there are six four-line stanzas and a two-line rhyming refrain in Yolande's own voice that translates " 'God, how the name of love is sweet: I never thought it would bring me grief!' " (Dronke 1996, 97).

Altogether there are 20 extant *chansons de toile,* most of which are anonymous. Nine of these appear in one *chansonnier* (or songbook manuscript) attached to St. Germain-dez-Pres. Six songs have survived because they were included in longer works—five of these in one text, the *Roman de Guillaume de Dole* (ca. 1210) by Jean Renart. The other five poems are attributed to the 13th-century poet Andefroi le Bastart.

It has been suggested that all of the anonymous *chansons de toile* are the work of a single 13th-century poet (perhaps Andefroi himself). But there are some significant differences between the poems attributed to Andefroi and the other lyrics: Musically, the anonymous lyrics are in a minor mode while Andefroi's are in a major. Andefroi's poems use 12-syllable lines while the anonymous poems generally use much shorter lines, sometimes six or eight syllables. Andefroi's songs also usually have more stanzas than the typical anonymous *chansons de toile.* It seems likely that the anonymous poems are much earlier than Andefroi's—most likely 12th century at the latest, and that Andefroi's poems are a revival and reworking of the earlier genre.

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Charlemagne (Charles I, Charles the Great) (742–814)

One of the most important figures of the medieval world, Charlemagne was king of the Franks and ultimately emperor of the West. Renowned for his military strength, which enabled him to expand his empire from the North Sea to the Pyrenees, Charlemagne's more important contribution to Western civilization includes the revival of learning and the arts that was encouraged and that flourished under his reign. In addition, the legend of Charlemagne provided material for many popular literary treatments in the centuries that followed.

Born in 742, the son of King Pepin the Short and Berthe (daughter of Caribert, the count of Laon), Charlemagne became joint ruler of the Frankish Kingdom with his brother Carloman in 768. His early reign was strongly influenced by his virtuous mother (d. 783), even after Charles ruled in his own right following his brother's death in 771. His first major war occurred in 773, when he invaded Lombardy in response to a threat to the pope. Charlemagne crushed the Lombards, put their king into a monastery, and assumed the crown of Lombardy himself.

For some 10 years after this, Charlemagne fought the Saxons and finally defeated them, forcing their leader, Wildukind, to be baptized and adding their territory to his growing empire. In 788, Tassilo, the duke of Bavaria and technically one of Charlemagne's vassals, defied the king and was subsequently defeated. Like the Lombard king before him, Tassilo was pressured into entering a monastery, thus adding Bavaria to Charles's empire. Shortly thereafter, in 791, Charles became embroiled in a long war with the Avars, who ruled an area along the Danube. Ultimately, in 799, he defeated them as well and expanded his hegemony once again.

About this time Pope Leo III was under attack again, and he was deposed in 800. Charlemagne once again crossed the Alps and restored the pope to his position, after which, on Christmas Day 800, the pope, seeing Charlemagne as the true protector of the faith, crowned him emperor of the West—the first to be crowned since the sixth century.

Charlemagne continued to reign until his death in 814, after which his empire was divided among his sons. He maintained good relations with the eastern, or Byzantine emperor, as well as with the caliph of Baghdad, Haroun-al-Raschid, who not only sent him a white elephant but agreed to protect pilgrims en route to Jerusalem, deep in Muslim territory.

Charlemagne built a great imperial palace at Aachen, a wonder in its day, and was interested not only in conquest but also in establishing order and promoting learning in his empire. During what became known as the "Carolingian renaissance," schools were set up across the empire, the arts flourished, and monasteries began building up great libraries, preserving manuscripts and making multiple copies of older texts in their scriptoria, thus preserving many classical texts that might otherwise have been lost. He convinced the great Anglo-Saxon scholar ALCUIN to become priest of the imperial chapel and to help reform education in his realm. Alcuin headed the palace school and standardized the LIBERAL ARTS curriculum, composing textbooks for use in studying grammar, logic, astronomy, and rhetoric. Alcuin also is credited for developing the Carolingian minuscule—a form of cursive script that allowed for clear and rapid transcription.

In addition to his influence on learning, Charlemagne himself became the subject of literary texts. EINHARD (a student of Alcuin's) wrote an early biography of him, *Vita Caroli Magni* (*Life of Charlemagne*), published in about 830. Written in imitation of Suetonius, Einhard's biography contains a good deal of firsthand, personal detail, and has often been admired for its fidelity to truth. A second idealized biography, *Gesta Caroli* (The deeds of Charles), is believed to have been written by NOTKER BALBULUS in 883–84. Composed for Charlemagne's great-grandson Charles the Fat, Notker's biography helped to establish Charlemagne as a legendary hero.

Many legends developed around Charlemagne, glorifying him as the defender of the faith (which could be said with some truth), particularly against Saracens (which was entirely apocryphal). Charlemagne and his knights became the focus of a cycle of heroic poems known as the *geste du roi,* a group of some 20 epic poems of the sort known as CHANSONS DE GESTE. Charlemagne is the central figure of these poems, but they general involve the exploits of his "12 Peers," the chief warrior knights or "paladins" that owe him allegiance. The list varies, but in the earliest and most important poem in the cycle, the *Chanson de Roland,* or *SONG OF ROLAND,* the list includes Roland, Oliver, Gérin, Gérier, Bérengier, Otton, Samson, Engelier, Ivon, Ivoire, Anséis, and Girard.

In the end Charlemagne's contributions to Western culture are among the most significant in history, but ultimately his legend became popular enough to rival his actual accomplishments.

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Man'yōshū is 149 lines. The *chōka* alternates lines of five and seven syllables, and ends with a final couplet of two seven-syllable lines. In effect, the last five lines of a *chōka* are identical in form to the more popular *tanka:* 31 syllables in five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables. Further, the *chōka* was typically followed by one or two (or even more) short poems called *hanka*—a word from the Chinese meaning "a verse that repeats." These *hanka,* usually in the five-line form of the *tanka,* acted as envoys, detailing, enlarging, or summarizing the theme of the longer main body of the poem.

Of the 4,516 poems anthologized in *The Man'yōshū,* only 265 are *chōka.* These, however, are generally the most memorable poems in the collection, particularly those attributed to the acclaimed poet HITOMARO Kakinomoto, called the "Saint of Poetry." One of his best-known poems is the *chōka* "On leaving his wife as he set out from Iwami for the capital." The main body of the poem consists of 24 lines and ends with these verses:

Farther and farther my home falls behind,
Steeper and steeper the mountains I have crossed.
My wife must be languishing
Like dripping summer grass.
I would see where she dwells
Bend down, O mountains!

(Nipon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 1965, 32)

The poem is accompanied by two *tanka*-like *hanka,* the last of which reads:

The leaves of bamboo grass
Fill all the hill-side
With loud rustling sounds;
But I think only of my love,
Having left her behind.

(Nipon Gakujutsu Shinkokai 1965, 32)

The effective but understated emotion that gives the poem its lyrical appeal is characteristic of the *chōka* in the *Man'yōshū.* Although *chōka* continued to be composed after the collection in *the Man'yōshū,* none of these is particularly effective, and the *chōka* was soon virtually completely displaced by the *tanka* among Japanese poets.

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Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1140–ca. 1190)

Chrétien de Troyes, writing in French in the late 12th century, may be the inventor of the genre of chivalric ROMANCE. He is certainly the poet most responsible for shaping the form and style of Arthurian literature as it developed through the high Middle Ages. Basing his narratives in part on tales told by wandering Breton MINSTRELS, and building on the currency of GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH's pseudo-historical *HISTORY OF THE KINGS OF BRITAIN* (ca. 1136), Chrétien adapted the legends of King ARTHUR and his knights to the current vogue of COURTLY LOVE and created a new kind of literature, more focused on the interior development of individual knights than on the nationalistic stories of war available in the established narrative CHANSONS DE GESTE. Five Arthurian romances are attributed to Chrétien: *ÉREC ET ÉNIDE* (ca. 1170); *CLIGÈS* (ca. 1176); *YVAIN* (or *Le Chevalier au Lion, The Knight with the Lion*) and *LANCELOT* (or *Le Chevalier de la Charrette, The Knight of the Cart*), which he worked on simultaneously between ca. 1177 and 1181; and finally *PERCEVAL* (or *Conte du Graal, The Story of the Grail*), which he left unfinished upon his death, sometime before 1191. His works survive in some 30 manuscripts, two of which contain all five romances.

Little can be said about Chrétien's life other than what can be gleaned from the comments,

particularly the prologues, to his extant romances. He dedicates his *Lancelot* to the Countess MARIE DE CHAMPAGNE, daughter of ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE, who had married Count Henry the Liberal sometime between 1159 and 1164. Chrétien claims to have gotten both the subject matter and themes of his poem from Marie, implying that he was likely a court poet at Troyes, the capital of Champagne, during Marie's time there. The dedication of *Perceval* to Philip, count of Flanders, suggests that Chrétien found a new patron in Philip in the 1180s, and the unfinished state of *Perceval* may indicate that Chrétien died before the count's death in 1191.

In *Cligès,* Chrétien declares that he is the author of *Érec et Énide,* and that he has also translated Ovid's *Commandments* and *The Art of Love* into French, along with parts of the Latin poet's *Metamorphoses.* He also claims to have written a poem of King Mark and Isolde the Blond—a contribution to the famous medieval legend of TRISTAN AND ISOLDE that is no longer extant. This prologue establishes a fairly clear chronology of *Érec* as Chrétien's first romance and *Cligès* as his second, the other three following since they are not yet mentioned. It also suggests that Chrétien was a writer educated in the seven LIBERAL ARTS, familiar with Latin, but working in the vernacular for nobles at court—and therefore likely a cleric, like his contemporary in Marie's court, ANDREAS CAPELLANUS.

Chrétien's romances are written in the traditional verse form of Old French, octasyllabic (eight-syllable) couplets. They average about 7,000 lines (except for *Perceval,* which is unfinished at 9,000). The five poems explore similar themes, and in that sense complement one another. *Érec et Énide* explores the marriage of a knight who prefers to spend all of his time at home with his new wife, and his lady who urges him to engage in the kind of adventure that will bring him honor and shore up his sagging reputation. His subsequent struggle to prove his chivalric worth, and his wife's struggle over whether to keep quiet and obey her husband or to warn him when danger approaches, makes a fascinating narrative of mutual growth in nobility. In the comic romance *Cligès,* the plot focuses on the importance of maintaining technical purity and innocence, and on the heroine's not becoming like the adulterous Isolde. Fénice is loved by Cligès and returns his love, but will not be unfaithful to her husband. Therefore she takes a potion that makes her appear to be dead, and once she is legally dead, she is free to indulge her love for Cligès—thus by the end of the romance her morality is just as questionable as Isolde's.

In *Yvain,* Chrétien reverses the situation of *Érec,* for the protagonist, after winning his lady, is granted leave to go forth and win his reputation, but forgets his promise to return to his wife in a year. After she forsakes him, Yvain must go through grief and madness before he works his way back to his beloved through acts of charity and service to others. In Lancelot, the situation of *Cligès* is reversed, and Lancelot and GUENEVERE engage in precisely the kind of affair that Tristan undertook with Isolde, and Lancelot's willingness to perform any task, even if it means his public dishonor, is a sign of his perfect private devotion to his beloved.

In Chrétien's final romance, *Perceval,* the protagonist is depicted in a long process of maturation, learning about knighthood, about love, about religion, and ultimately about charity, since he learns it was his lack of charity that prevented him from achieving some of the tasks set before him, including asking the question about the nature of the Grail procession that will cure the Fisher King.

Chrétien is also the author of two extant lyric poems, and has occasionally been suggested as the author of the pseudo-hagiographical *Guillaume d'Angletree,* though most scholars dispute his authorship of this text. Although recognized as a pioneer, Chrétien has not always been appreciated as an artist. In the early 20th century, the scholar Joseph Bédier called him "not so much a creative artist as a clever compiler." But he is responsible for introducing the Lancelot-Guenevere story and the theme of the Holy Grail into the Arthurian tradition—two of the tradition's most enduring themes. His use of the romance influenced popular and courtly literature for some 400 years, and his courtly style was adopted by GUILLAUME DE LORRIS in the highly influential 13th-century *ROMAN DE LA ROSE.* His stories influenced Middle

High German texts like WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH's *PARZIFAL,* on the later French VULGATE CYCLE, on MIDDLE ENGLISH romances like *YWAIN AND GAWAIN* and *SIR PERCEVAL OF GALLES,* and even texts in Italian or in Old Norse. Chrétien's influence on subsequent literature has been enormous, and it might be argued that his focus on the growth and maturity of characters and on their interior lives begins the development that leads to the modern novel.

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Christ and Satan (eighth century)

The text now known as *Christ and Satan* is an OLD ENGLISH work in three distinct sections forming the fourth and final poem in the JUNIUS MANUSCRIPT. The poem, probably written in eighth-century Anglia, comprises 730 extant lines in ALLITERATIVE VERSE (some lines are missing from the last section of the poem).

The unity of the poem is questionable. Certainly the style and language are consistent throughout the text, but there is no continuous narrative, which has led some scholars to suggest that the text is actually made up of three separate poems. The manuscript's editor, however, has proposed that *Christ and Satan* is not intended primarily to be a narrative but rather a number of lyrical passages on related biblical and theological themes.

Part I, the longest section of the text at 364 lines, depicts the lament of Satan after his fall from heaven. Notable in this section is the use of language recalling Old English ELEGAIC POEMS, a vocabulary that speaks of Satan as an outlawed wanderer, bereft of his Lord's mead hall. Part II of the poem is concerned chiefly with the HARROWING OF HELL, though it also touches on the deeds of the Risen Christ and on Judgment Day. An interesting part of this section is Eve's prayer to Christ as he enters hell—she laments her part in the Fall and reminds Christ that he was born of one of her own daughters, and so pleads for deliverance from hell. The third and shortest part of the poem retells the story of Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness. This part of the manuscript is apparently incomplete, however, leaving out Satan's urging of Christ to test God by throwing himself off the tower.

There is no single source for the Old English poem. The first part is drawn from earlier Christian legends of Lucifer's fall. The second draws largely from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and from the Gospels, and the final part from the temptation stories in the Synoptic Gospels. At one time, it was customary to attribute all of the poems of the Junius manuscript to CAEDMON or his school, but modern scholars make no such claim, though it has been suggested that *Christ and Satan* has elements of both the Caedmon and Cynewulf "schools" of poetry.

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Christine de Pizan (ca. 1364–1430)

Often known as the first professional woman of letters, Christine de Pizan (or Pisan) was born in Venice but as a child moved to the court of Charles

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Somadeva (11th century)

Somadeva was a Sanskrit poet known for his late 10th-century collection of tales called the *Kathasaritsagara* (The ocean to the rivers of story). Little is known of his life, but he seems to have been of the Brahman caste, and he does mention in his text that Queen Suryamati of Kashmir was his patron and that he wrote the *Kathasaritsagara* for her, to take her mind off the study of the sciences. Somadeva based his work on a much older collection of stories called the *Brhathatha* (The great romance), attributed to Gunadhya. The *Brhathatha* is no longer extant, but Somadeva's rescension is a worthy aesthetic creation in its own right, and preserves a good deal of ancient Indian folklore.

The *Kathasaritsagara* contains some 350 tales, including some collections of stories that have been brought in from a variety of sources. Clearly Somadeva did not create any of these tales, but retold them in an entertaining way. The tales are not unlike European fairy tales in their emphasis on adventure and on the supernatural. A number of them are somewhat bawdy. They are told in a relatively simple narrative style and with details that appeal to the reader's imagination.

The *Kathasaritsagara* is structured as a framed narrative, not unlike the *Thousand and One Nights* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* The largest frame explains how the *Brhathatha* came to be written after two goblins were tossed out of paradise for listening to the tales the god Siva told his wife Parvati. Required to tell all of Siva's stories to someone on earth in order to win their way back to heaven, one of the goblins relates the stories to a troll, who later conveys them to Gunadhya, who tells them to the world.

Within this tale is the main frame of the *Kathasaritsagara,* in which Prince Naravahanadatta acquires a great deal of wealth and magical powers that make him king of the spirits of the air. In the meantime he has a number of amorous encounters with a princess and other beautiful women. Many of the stories in the collection are told by characters within the narrative of this frame to entertain lovers and friends, just as Siva's original tales were told to entertain his wife.

Since the stories of the *Kathasaritsagara* most often deal with the acquisition of wealth, and have middle-class protagonists who focus on material gain, it has been suggested that the stories reflect the materialist values of cosmopolitan areas of 11th-century India. Somadeva's book is a valuable historical source for the social customs of the time, as well as an entertaining collection of colorful characters and powerful, imaginative stories.

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Song of Roland (*Chanson de Roland*) (end of 11th century or early 12th century)

The Old French *Chanson de Roland* is one of the most famous epic poems from the Middle Ages and inspired a number of medieval imitations, such as the Priest Konrad's Middle High German *Rolandslied* (ca. 1170), The Stricker's *Karl der Große* (ca.

after 1220), and many other Old Norse, Middle English, Welsh, Dutch, and Latin versions. It also spawned a whole group of similar epic poems in French, known as CHANSONS DE GESTE (Songs of Deeds). Whereas the later Middle High German *Rolandslied* emphasized the nationalistic aspect of the story, the Old French *Chanson de Roland* underscored the religious motif above all. The anonymous Old French poet—the name of Turoldus, who is mentioned in the last line of the text, cannot be trusted as a biographical reference—relied on concrete historical events and transformed those into a literary masterpiece apparently in the immediate aftermath of the First Crusade (1096–99).

In 777, a group of Saracen (Arabic) princes traveled from Spain to the court of CHARLEMAGNE asking for his military assistance against some of their Muslim opponents. Although the king was already involved in military operations against the Saxons, he agreed and soon marched into Spain, using two armies, the first crossing the Pyrenees in the direction of Gerona, the second crossing the Basque Pyrenees in the direction of Pamplona. Both armies then joined and they besieged Saragossa, but to no avail. When new hostilities broke out in Saxony, Charlemagne had to return, but during the passage through the Pyrenees, his rear guard was ambushed by Basque troops on August 15, 778, and all men were killed, including Anselm, the king's seneschal, and Roland, duke of the Marches of Brittany.

About 200 years later, the many legends concerning these events were transformed into a major epic, the *Song of Roland.* Here Charlemagne, who had been 38 at the time of the expedition, is described as a 200-year-old ruler who represents all of Christendom in its historical struggle against the Saracens, who have replaced the historical Basques and are depicted as evil-spirited, treacherous, and monstrous opponents who resort to the most unethical strategy to conclude a seven-year war against the Christians. Anselm does not figure in the epic, whereas Roland emerges as Charlemagne's nephew and as a warrior with superhuman strength, accompanied by Oliver and 10 other peers, the paragons of French chivalry. The Saracens under Marsile attack with 400,000 men and rely on the betrayal of the 20,000 Frankish troops by Count Ganelon, Roland's own stepfather, who is jealous of the protagonist and is bent on destroying his nephew and his peers. Despite his prophetic dreams, Charlemagne moves out of Spain, leaving the rear guard behind, unknowingly clearing the way for the slaughter. When the Saracens approach, Roland refuses to call his uncle back with the help of his horn, Olifant, afraid of damaging his own honor. His friend Oliver seriously criticizes him for his failure to use Olifant, but when the Frankish army has been reduced to 60 men, he then rejects Roland's suggestion finally to use the horn. Archbishop Turpin, however, points out that the dead need to be buried, whereupon Roland blows the horn, but in the process the arteries of his temples burst, causing his own death. The Saracens flee when they hear the sound, but Charlemagne arrives too late to save any of his men.

The king carries their corpses back to *dulce France* (sweet France), when he is suddenly confronted by the army of Marsile's overlord, the emir Baligant. Charlemagne defeats him and conquers Saragossa, before he then returns to his capital at Aix-la-Chapelle. Oliver's sister Aude, Roland's fiancé, dies from grief over the tragic news, and Ganelon, after a difficult trial with an ordeal, is tried and condemned to death by quartering.

The anonymous French poet, who obviously drew from a variety of oral sources, created a remarkably consistent and compact epic narrative that is divided into individual *laisses,* or stanzas. The *Chanson* is characterized by many dialogues, clearly identified characters, and concrete motivations. Scholars are divided about the proper interpretation of Roland's decision not to call back Charlemagne when the rear guard is first attacked. Whereas some perceive this as a personal failure due to his hubris and false sense of heroism, others argue that this forces the king to return to his war efforts and to defeat the Saracens once and for all. This epic contains detailed discussion of honor, military discipline, chivalry, loyalty, friendship, treason, jealousy, wisdom, the conflict between Christians and Muslims, revenge, the question of faith, martyrdom, bravery, leadership, the significance of dreams as messages from God, the fundamental decision-making process in life, and the absolute conflict between good and evil.

The text has been preserved in a number of manuscripts, the oldest from the second half of the 12th century (Oxford, Bodleian, Digby 23 [O]). The corpus of manuscripts is divided into a group of Old French versions and a group of Franco-Italian versions, best represented by the early 14th-century manuscript V in the Codex IV in the Biblioteca di S. Marco in Venice. The *Chanson de Roland* was first rediscovered in the early 19th century by Francisque Michel, who published the *editio princeps* in 1837, which inspired generations of medievalists and others to pursue their interest in the heroic world of the Middle Ages.

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Albrecht Classen

sonnet

The sonnet is a 14-line lyric poem that has its origins in medieval Italy. The term comes from the Italian *sonnetto,* meaning "little sound or song." While the sonnet has become a prevalent literary form in a number of languages and has acquired different forms (most notably the Shakespearean or English sonnet form), the first sonnets followed what is now known as the Italian or Petrarchan form, consisting of hendecasyllabic (or 11-syllable) lines arranged into an octave (or eight-line section) followed by a sestet (or six-line part). Typically there is a turn of thought or *volta* beginning with the sestet, so that a conventional sonnet might ask a question in the octave to be answered in the sestet, or introduce a situation in the octave to be interpreted in the sestet, or express a desire or complaint in the octave that is assuaged in the sestet—any two-part progression that involves a pivotal change that can occur in the sestet of the poem.

The earliest extant sonnets are credited to GIACOMO DA LENTINO, a notary attached to the imperial court of Frederick II in Sicily, who flourished between 1215 and 1233. Giacomo's sonnets rhymed *abababab cdecde;* the following is Frederick Goldin's translation of one of Giacomo's earliest:

> *The basilisk before the shining mirror*
> *dies with pleasure;*
> *the swan sings with greatest rapture*
> *when it is nearest death;*
> *at the height of its pleasure the peacock*
> *gets upset when it looks at its feet;*
> *the phoenix burns itself all up*
> *to return to be reborn.*
> *I think I have become much like these*
> *creatures,*
> *I who go gladly to death before her beauty*
> *and make my song lusty as I approach the*
> *end;*
> *in merriment I suddenly despair,*
> *burning in fire I am made new again in joy*
> *because of you, whom I long to return to,*
> *gentlest one.*
>
> (Goldin 1973, 219, ll. 1–14)

Like most of the later Italian sonnets, this one is about love, and plays on the COURTLY LOVE convention of dying for love of one's lady. The turn of thought accompanying the sestet's change of rhyme involves the speaker's comparison of himself with the fantastic animals he has introduced in the octave.

The sonnet form was picked up and used by many later poets of the Italian Middle Ages. In particular the Tuscan poet GUITTONE D'AREZZO altered the form in the later 13th century to create the *abbaabba* rhyme scheme for the octave, a pattern that became standard in all later Italian sonnets. The great Tuscan poets Guido GUINIZELLI and Guido CAVALCANTI utilized this form, and DANTE included