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Knight, King, Emperor, Saint: Portraying Charlemagne in Middle English Romance

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Of the ten Middle English verse romances dealing with the Matter of France, mined out of the extensive French and Latin corpus of Charlemagne texts, most are clearly focused on the adventures of one or more of the heroic knights, Roland and Oliver, and their Saracen opponents Ferumbras, Otuel and Vernagu; yet they have been carefully 'packaged' as romances of Charlemagne. Evidence of concern to identify them properly as Charlemagne texts appears in some of the manuscripts: new headings and colophons are provided to make a clear reference to the person of Charlemagne.¹ Other evidence suggests that the figure of the Emperor Charlemagne was firmly embedded in popular culture in medieval England. For instance, the anonymous early-fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi*, a vast compendium of scriptural history, offers exciting bible stories, such as 'Of saul þe kyng and of dauy | How he fau3te a3eyn goly' [*Of King Saul and how David fought against Goliath*], as alternatives to the 'iestes' and romances that people are actually reading and listening to, which include stories of Brutus, 'first conquerour of Ingelande', of King Arthur and the Round Table, and 'How charles þe kyng and roland fa3t - | wit sarasynes walde þai no3t sa3t' [*How King Charles*

and Roland fought: they would not make peace with Saracens].² John Gower repeatedly names Charlemagne as the obvious example of worldly power and riches in his French-language text *Mirour de l'homme*: he is referred to five times in quasi-proverbial contexts (to crave adulation as if one were Charlemagne, for example; to dream one is richer and more powerful than Charlemagne; never was Charlemagne more victorious), as against only two mentions of King Arthur.³ Charlemagne was also well known as one of the three Christian kings among the Nine Worthies, together with King Arthur and Godfrey of Bouloigne, as Caxton points out in the preface to his *Life of Charles the Great*, claiming that he is publishing it to complete the set of three.⁴ In light of such evidence, the aim of this essay is to examine the various portrayals of the figure of Charlemagne in the Middle English romances for what their particular emphases may reveal about the concerns of different remodellings of the legend.

A significant part of Charlemagne's appeal to writers and readers in later medieval England was undoubtedly not his role as King of France but his reputation as ruler and protector of the whole of Western Christendom. At a time when Christian kings and nations were at war, when the papacy was divided by the scandal of rival popes in Rome and Avignon, and when Europe felt under increasing threat from the westward advance of the Ottoman Turkish armies, it is perhaps no wonder that writers should revisit the legends of Charlemagne, with their idealized image of a Christendom united by a powerful Emperor who positively supported the Church and the Pope in Rome (as did the English during the Schism) and who defended Christian lands from Saracen aggressors.⁵ This may explain the anxiety about attaching Charlemagne's name so securely to the Middle English romances derived from the narrative tradition: the power of his name as archetypal symbol of an ideal Christendom guarantees the significance of these anonymous texts and provides them with authority, and the way Charlemagne is represented in the opening lines of some of the texts supports this view.

The two earliest of the Middle English romances, *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel*,⁶ both adapt material from the opening of their source text to provide a description of Charlemagne at the beginning of the narrative. In *Roland and Vernagu*, derived from the thirteenth-century Old French *Johannes* translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, the English text rearranges the original account of the hero's conquests to construct a picture of his achievement of power and control throughout Europe, reversing the order given in the *Pseudo-Turpin*

Chronicle to produce a steady rise from King of France, ruler of neighbouring nations, including England, to Emperor of Rome, and finally, in a new addition, 'lord of al christendome' (15).⁷ In *Otuel*, an adaptation of the thirteenth-century *chanson de geste* *Otinel*, the English poem omits most of the original prologue and substitutes an introductory paragraph in which King Charles of France is described as a 'dou3ty' [*valiant*] chivalric hero who 'made sarazins ful tame' (8-9), and ultimately 'meintenede cristendom ari3t' (14) [*rightly*]. This same view of Charlemagne as essentially the hammer of the Saracens and defender of Christendom is inserted into the introductory descriptions in two other Middle English romances based on *Otinel*, *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell* and *The Sege of Melayne*.⁸ The unique manuscript copies of both the Middle English romances based on the twelfth-century Old French *chanson de geste* *Fierabras*, however, the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and the Fillingham *Firumbras*,⁹ begin imperfectly and so lack whatever response they once contained to the original epic prologue in *Fierabras*.¹⁰

None of these introductory descriptions includes details of Charlemagne's age or personal appearance, an omission that might seem surprising in view of the horizon of expectations for literary representations of Charlemagne set by the most celebrated of *chansons de geste*, *La Chanson de Roland*. D. D. R. Owen, noting that his person has 'a vital symbolic function in the poem' as idealized king of France and representative emperor of Christendom, points to 'his vast age and noble appearance' as markers for this almost superhuman role; at the same time, Owen reads Charlemagne's actions in the epic poem as revealing 'a very human, almost crumbling old man'.¹¹ Both sides of this complex portrayal can be seen to hinge on the iconic description near the start of the text: 'La siet li reis ki dulce France tient. | Blanche ad la barbe e tut flurit le chef, | Gent ad le cors e le cuntenant fier' (116-18).¹² [*There sits the king who holds fair France. White is his beard, and hoary his head, Handsome is his body and his bearing proud.*] Here his white beard and hoary head signify his revered wisdom and supremely powerful status; but the motif can also be used to focus attention on old age as a negative condition, as Ganelon claims: 'Ja estes veिल् e fluriz e blancs, | Par tels paroles vus resemblez enfant' (1771-2) [*You are old, white-bearded and hoary-headed: your words are like a child's*], and the epic poem ends with a troubling picture of the weary old king, unable to escape his heavy responsibilities: 'Pluret des oilz, sa barbe blanche tiret' (4001) [*He weeps, he tears at his white beard*].

In *Fierabras*, Charlemagne's white beard is the defining feature in the

Saracen emir's image of him: 'le viel canu barbé' (2540, 2794) [*the white-bearded old man*], but it is made clear later in the text that no loss of virility is implied: the emperor is as moved as his young knights are by Floripas' naked beauty, 'Pour tant s'il ot le poil et canu et mellé' (6194) [*Albeit he has a white beard and grizzled hair*];¹³ while in *Otinel*, Ogier identifies Charlemagne to the visitor by the same revered characteristic: 'Véez le là, à ce flori grenon, | A la grant barbe' (49-50) [*See him there, with the white moustache and long beard*], and thereafter Charlemagne is referred to as 'Karle à la barbe florrie' (196).¹⁴ Given the wide and consistent use of this motif in the French sources, it might seem odd how infrequently it occurs in the Middle English romances: in fact, the English narratives tend to restrict the motif to insults and threats directed at Charlemagne by the Saracens. For example, in the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* the poet adds the motif to Ferumbras's initial challenge, now to 'Charlis wiþ þe hore berde' (84, 94) [*with the hoary beard*], and the scornful reference is reiterated by other Saracen opponents (708, 5236). The same formula is adopted in *Roland and Vernagu*, where the giant Saracen declares he has come 'To fiþt wiþ king charlis | Wiþ þe hore bard' (663-4). Similarly, in the Fillingham *Otuel and Roland*, as soon as Charles has been identified by his 'hore berde' (70), Otuel responds by threatening to burn his 'hore lokkys' (82), and the same incident appears, less succinctly, in the Thornton *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell* (79-84, 94-6).¹⁵ In these stereotypical instances, Charles' white hair functions as a deceptive sign of apparent impotence to which the Saracens respond with hubristic and boastful scorn, thus providing assurance to the informed reader or listener of their eventual defeat, and adding further to Charlemagne's reputation as the unyielding focus of Saracen aggression. The absence of other references to Charlemagne's most recognizable feature in the romances contributes to their less complex construction of his strengths and weaknesses; even in the unique *Sege of Melayne*, where Bishop Turpin subjects Charles to prolonged and robust criticism for failing to match the bishop's own ardent appetite for holy war, Charles's white beard with its ambiguous potential for unfavourable gibes is never mentioned.

Some of the texts, however, do present a detailed physical description of Charlemagne in different terms. The texts in question are all derived whether closely or at a distance from the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, and draw upon the chapter entitled 'De persona et fortitudine Karoli'. C. Meredith-Jones draws attention to the peculiarity of this chapter, which occurs in two-thirds of the manuscripts consulted in his critical edition,¹⁶ but not in the group considered to

represent the earliest tradition, and argues that it should be regarded as a later interpolation, which illogically interrupts the continuity of the narrative with a description of Charlemagne's person.¹⁷ As he notes, the most memorable features of Charlemagne as portrayed in the *chansons de geste*, his great age and his white beard, are not mentioned at all in the *Pseudo-Turpin*; its portrait of Charlemagne, as Stephen Shepherd points out,¹⁸ is instead loosely based on the description in Einhard's *Life* (III: 22), a description that is itself patterned on those in Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*. However, whereas Einhard's description comes near the end of the text, and gives an account of Charlemagne's appearance in later life: tall and strong, but white-haired and corpulent, Charlemagne in the *Pseudo-Turpin* is in his prime, very tall, extraordinarily strong, with brown hair, a ruddy complexion, and a shapely body. The key difference is in the placing of the description in the text. Einhard, following Suetonius, provides a retrospective summary of the Emperor's physical appearance, private life, personal habits, and intellectual and spiritual character, before recounting his final days and death, whereas in the *Pseudo-Turpin*, the description occurs in the middle of the text, between the two major narrative sections that deal, first, with Charlemagne's holy wars in Spain in response to his vision of St James, concluding with the establishment of the see of Compostela, and secondly, with the heroic story of the Battle of Roncevaux and its aftermath. Each of these sections ends or begins with a formula indicating closure or new beginning, and it seems that the intervening chapter functions at least partly as a clear marker of the division between the two separate narratives. The contents of the chapter cover several topics: Charlemagne's bodily appearance and measurements; his habits in eating and drinking; examples of his great strength; his wisdom; his imperial ceremonies; his personal guard of 120 knights; and a summary of his other great deeds that prefaces the story to be told next. Some of these topics are abbreviated or amplified from the Einhard tradition, but the *Pseudo-Turpin* adds the account of Charlemagne's appearing on great Feast days with crown and sceptre and a drawn sword held before him according to imperial custom, and a lengthy explanation of the night-watch rota performed by the 120 knights, with drawn swords and torches. It is the phrase 'more imperiali' that seems to be key here: these customs are a signal or guarantee of Charlemagne's imperial status, and by placing the composite portrait of the Emperor before the narration of the Battle of Roncevaux, where Charlemagne is immediately named 'imperator famosissimus', the *Pseudo-Turpin* authenticates the heroic story and amplifies its importance, rather as a

royal seal with the image of the King crowned and holding his sceptre authenticates the document to which it is attached.¹⁹ The Middle English prose translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* (c. 1460) further attests to the importance of this second section of the text by its unique new title for the whole work: *The Storye of the Bataille of Rouncivale of Grete Charles the Emperoure*. In fact the title is given twice; at the opening of the text, the supposed author and subject are named: 'Turpine the Archebisshop / Of þe Bataille of Rouncivale', and after the prologue, the rubric states: 'Here Beginneth the *Titulus* of þe Chapiters of the Storye of the Bataille of Rouncivale of Grete Charles the Emperoure'. The translation of the chapter describing Charlemagne follows the Latin fairly closely but, like other passages in the text where Shepherd finds 'small additions reminiscent of vernacular romance ... which elevate the Christian heroes' (p. xli), so here, the translator highlights Charlemagne's role as Emperor, picturing him 'satte at mette in his trone imperiale';²⁰ and also emphasizes his chivalric credentials, calling him 'moste dou3tteste in dedis of armys, moste of kny3ttehode and chyualrye'. A similar portrait occurs in the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras*, where it is put in the mouth of Ferumbras at the moment of conversion, yielding himself to 'Charlis kyng, þe beste kny3t y-core | Pat is owar now lyuyng, oþer euere was her-before' (766-7). Compared with the stock description in the French text: 'le fort roi couronné' (1575), the Ashmole passage portrays Charlemagne as an idealized knight, a timeless embodiment of chivalry, and an exemplar of the values and way of life that both the converted Saracen Ferumbras and his vanquisher Oliver now embrace.

The other Middle English texts that contain the description of Charlemagne derive from the passage in the *Johannes* translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin*, which is somewhat abbreviated and differs in a few details: Charles's colouring is said to be black rather than brown, and the knights who guard him are described as 'bien sages et vaillanz'; *Johannes* also adds a brief sentence to the audience introducing the description.²¹ All these new features appear in the two English verse romances to include the description: the Auchinleck *Roland and Vernagu* and the Fillingham *Otuel and Roland*. Despite the difference of over a century between the two manuscript texts, there is a complex connection between their distinct but related narratives, most recently explored by Rhiannon Purdie in a discussion of the Auchinleck manuscript romances.²² Both of them derive in part from the *Johannes Pseudo-Turpin*, and as well as the description of Charlemagne, they also share an extensive introductory prologue briefly

summarizing all the *Pseudo-Turpin* material,²³ to which are added Roland's conversion of Otuel, and the story of *The Four Sons of Aymon*. It has been argued that the two romances represent a lost Middle English cyclic romance, now broken into two pieces, which originally consisted of a translation of *Otinell* spliced into a translation of the *Johannes Pseudo-Turpin*. It is also possible, however, that they are simply two separate works constructed on the same pattern, each carving out of the original texts a conveniently sized narrative sequence and prefacing it with what Derek Pearsall has described as 'a general Charlemagne prologue' that could appropriately be attached to any Charlemagne romance;²⁴ though it is clear that the Description of Charlemagne passage in each text, like the prologue, derives from a common source, as the versions in the two romances are extremely similar. This suggestion seems to fit well with the way the 'Description of Charlemagne' chapter is used in the two romances.

In *Otuel and Roland*, the *Pseudo-Turpin* material appears in the same sequence as in *Johannes*, albeit with some substantial abbreviation, so that the Description of Charlemagne occurs as usual between the establishment of the archiepiscopal see at Compostela and the lead-up to the Battle of Roncevaux. The English poem transforms the unpromising material about ecclesiastical administration into a proof of Charlemagne's supreme political power by the simple expedient of repeating his name seven times as instigator of every action, and alternating the formula 'Charles comaunded...,' with the metrical stress falling on 'Charles' at the beginning of the line, and the phrase 'By the hest of Charlemayne' [*command*], and finally summing up the episode thus: 'And so pay dude withoute lete; | For charlys hyt hade sette, | Durst no man be peragayne' (1973-5) [*And so they did without hindrance; because Charles had determined it, no one dared be opposed*]. This provides a natural preliminary to the following substantial description of the much-named Charlemagne.

In *Roland and Vernagu*, by contrast, the *Pseudo-Turpin* material is taken completely out of sequence. After a major cut, where the whole series of events concerning the pagan King Agolant is omitted, the Description of Charlemagne is inserted before the episode in which Roland fights the Saracen giant Vernagu. However, in this romance it is not so much Charlemagne's power that is on display, as the power of God: as in *Johannes*, the description of the holy relics presented to Charlemagne far outweighs the account of his liberation of Jerusalem by which he won them; the cities of Spain fall when he prays and their walls miraculously collapse; and other miracles contribute to the sense of wonder.

The English poem introduces a new miracle at the end of this section, a story of grapes ripening out of season: 'and while charls was in þat stede, | A fair miracle god for him dede' (305-6) [*in that place*]. This new episode functions as a narrative post-script to the conquest of Spain, designed to crown Charlemagne's achievements with this miraculous proof of God's favour. The following section in the English romance, dealing with Vernagu's challenge to Charles, is also extended by a new miraculous incident in which Roland, having so far failed either to convert Vernagu or to defeat him, is informed by an angel it is God's will that he slay the irredeemable giant. Both Christian heroes, Charles and Roland, are thus shown to be specifically sanctioned by God in their victories over unrepentant Saracen cities and people.

In both these romances, each with its own distinctive recasting of the *Pseudo-Turpin* material, the function of the Description of Charlemagne passage is to mark a new beginning in the text, and to emphasize the importance of the climactic episode. This is especially obvious in *Otuel and Roland* where a new couplet 'title' is introduced at the beginning of the description: 'Here Bygynnyth a rewful tale | How Rowlond deyde at rouncevale' (1976-7), but both passages begin with the same conventional formula signalling a change of topic.

Roland and Vernagu

Now late we be of þis ping,
& speke of charles þe king,
Þat michel was of mi3t,
Off hys lengthe and his brede,
As þe latin ous sede,

Ichil 3ou rede ari3t;
Tventi fete he was o lengþe

& also of gret strengþe,

& of a stern si3t,
Blac of here & rede of face,

Otuel and Roland

Now lete we be of þys,
& speke we of charlys
Þat muche was of my3t,

As Clerk ye doth in boke
rede

y schal 3ow telle a-ry3t;
Twenty fot he was of
lengthe

And þer-to man of gret
strength,

and a man of sterne sy3t,
Blake of here, red of
face,

Whare he com in ani place,

He was a douhti kni3t.

Four times in þe 3ere,
On his heued he bere,
wolde ber

þe holy croun of þorn,

At ester, at wissontide,

& at seyn iames day wiþ pride,

& in 3ole as god was born.

& atte þe mete in þe halle,
Among his kni3tes alle,
A drawe swerd him biforn,

þis was þe maner ay,
& schal be til domesday,

Of emperor y-corn.

& whare he slepe ani3t,

Wel wise he was & wi3t,

& douted of tresoun,

An hundred kni3tes him kept,

þat non of hem no slept,

þere he come in many
place,

He was a dou3ty kny3t.

Four tymes in the 3er,
vpon hys heued he

The holy croune of
þorne,

At ester, and at Whyt-
sontyde,

At seynt iames day with
pride,

and at þe tyme þat god
was Borne.

At the mete in þe halle,
among hys kny3tes alle,
With drawe swerd hym
by-forne,

That ys in þe maner ay,
and schal be tyl domes-
day,

Off Emperour þat ys
corne.

Where-so he slepe a-
ny3t,

wyse he was as felle to
hys ry3t

And Euer douted
tresoun

An hundred kny3tes
schulde hym kepe

were þat euer he schuld
slepe,

Pat were of gret renoun,

& eueri du3ti kni3t

Held a torche li3t,

& a naked fauchoun.

kny3tes Off grete
renoun,

And Euerych dou3thy
kny3t

hold a torche brennyng
bry3t

And a nakyd fachoun.

[Now we leave this (matter) and speak of (King) Charles who was very powerful. I will tell you his height and breadth exactly as stated in the Latin (book that clerks read). He was twenty feet tall, of great strength, and (a man) of severe aspect, with black hair and ruddy complexion; he was a valiant knight wherever he went. Four times a year, at Easter, Whitsun, St James' day and Christmas, he would proudly wear the holy Crown of Thorns on his head; and at dinner in the hall among all his knights, a drawn sword went before him. This was the imperial custom and shall be till the day of judgement. He was wise (as he ought to be) and always feared treason, so wherever he slept for the night a hundred knights of great renown kept watch over him, each holding a burning torch and a naked sword.]

There are two small but significant innovations in the romance version of the *Pseudo-Turpin* Description that seem designed to connect the passage to crucial events in the legend of Charlemagne. At his four great annual feasts, instead of the imperial crown, as one would expect from the sources, Charlemagne wears the Crown of Thorns which, according to the tradition of the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* and the *Descriptio qualiter Karolus Magnus clavum et coronam Domini a Constantinopoli Aquis Grani detulerit*, was one of the relics that was presented to Charles by the grateful Emperor of Constantinople;²⁵ or, according to the story told in the immensely popular *Fierabras* tradition, it was among the Passion relics stolen from Rome by Fierabras and later returned to Charlemagne to be enshrined at St Denis. Inserting it into the Description here is an economical way of alluding to this very important strand of the tradition, symbolizing Charlemagne's role as defender of Christendom; but it also serves to emphasize his divinely sanctioned status as Christian Emperor through the

associations of this particular Passion relic, in that it also signifies Christ's kingship.

The other alteration to the Description of Charlemagne in the romance version is an explanatory detail added to the account of the nightly watch, stating that Charlemagne kept a hundred knights of great renown on guard, with lit torches and naked swords, because he was wise and was afraid of treason. While fear of treason is no doubt a rational motive in any ruler, in the context of the Charlemagne legend it has immediate resonance for the reader or listener with the archetypal treachery of Ganelon, whose subversive intent and perfidious advice form an essential element in the Charlemagne tradition. The added detail here, then, functions in the same way as do the brief references at the opening of *Otinell* and the close of *Fierabras* to the story of the traitor Ganelon and the loss of Charlemagne's twelve peers: it places each new narrative clearly in relation to the epic tradition, and associates it with the most enduring and memorable story in the Charlemagne cycle.

These two Middle English romances are also alike in their portrayal of Charlemagne not only as the defender of Christendom from Saracen aggression, but specifically as a conqueror of other lands. In *Roland and Vernagu*, this derives directly from the *Pseudo-Turpin* material, where Charles is credited with the conquest and conversion to Christianity of England, France and many other parts of Europe; the romance adopts this element of Charlemagne's career to create a descriptive epithet, 'Charles þe conquerour' (57), and supports it with repeated references to how he 'wan' cities, lands and treasure 'Wiþ dint of swerd' (270) [*with sword stroke*], and had all these territories 'in [his] pouwer' (178). *Otinell and Roland* begins with exactly this portrayal of Charlemagne, offering to tell 'Off a conquerour | that was y-hote syr Charlemayne' (3-4) [*who was called*], who won Spain and overcame all his enemies (34), and the phrase 'Charlemayn the conquerour' is repeated throughout the *Otinell* part of the text, functioning as Charles's accepted cognomen (92, 276, 408, 1041, 1064), and leading to the triumphal ending of the story, in which he is said to have 'lyued in warre many 3erys' [*years*] and won every battle that he undertook (1686-90).

Conquest also figures prominently in Charlemagne's achievements in the *chanson de geste Fierabras* – or rather, 'Reconquist' (9) [*re-conquest*] as the prologue indicates, for Charles's agenda is to win back the relics of the Passion, and the epic closes with his having re-conquered Spain: an issue that would still have been of topical interest in the late Middle Ages when the three English

versions of *Fierabras* were composed and copied.²⁶ The Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* unfortunately lacks its ending as well as its beginning, but the other two Middle English *Fierabras* romances show typical independence in their adaptation of Charlemagne's re-conquest of Spain. In the *Sowdone of Babylone*, as the title indicates, Spain is not Laban's place of origin, as it is in the Anglo-Norman *Fierenbras*, where he is named repeatedly in the text: 'Laban d'Espaigne'; on the other hand, at the end of the Middle English romance, references to the 'londe of Spayne' are introduced, first, as Charles bestows Laban's possessions on Ferumbras and Guy, and secondly in a new summary of Charlemagne's conquests to conclude the poem, with no hint of further conflict as in the French texts: 'Thus Charles conquered Laban, | The Sowdon of Babyloyn | That riche Rome stroyed and wan, | And alle the brode londe of Spayn' (3259-62). Here Charles is portrayed rather as *rex pacificus*: he bids farewell to Guy and Ferumbras, foreseeing for them an entirely peaceful future in Spain assured by their mutual support and strength (3215-18), and so instead of his promise to come to their aid if needed with 40,000 troops, as in the Anglo-Norman text, here he invites them to visit him in France for their pleasure and to comfort his old age (3219-21). For the *Sowdone* poet, it seems it was not the image of Charlemagne as perpetual conqueror that held the greatest appeal, but Charlemagne portrayed as promoter of peace: it is not difficult to imagine that this would have been an attractive ideal in the century of the Hundred Years' War.

The Fillingham *Firumbras* is completely different: the Saracen king is Balam of Nubye and Spain is not mentioned at all, at least, not in the surviving part of the text. At the end, Charles gives to Guy 'that kingdom Ryche that balam helde' (1757), Guy establishes his control of the land and no more is heard of it. On the other hand, the treatment of the Passion relics is elaborated: uniquely, the miraculous proving of the relics' authenticity is here brought to a climax with Charles explicitly praying for a sign that he is 'worthy to haue thys holy thyng' (1817) and God's performing a 'fayre myracle for Charlys the kyng' (1824, 1821). No mention is made of distributing the relics to churches: the point of this version is to demonstrate by his winning 'the Relykys of goddys passyoun' that Charlemagne is 'that gode, holy kyng' (1833), as the text concludes. Charlemagne was in fact canonized in 1165, though as an act of the anti-Pope Pascal III, it was not entered in the Roman Breviary;²⁷ despite this, however, the tradition of his sanctity was evidently current in England, for in the Life of St Barbara found in some manuscripts of the *Gilte Legende*, there is a specific reference to the

'emperour Karolus Magnus, whiche for his holynesse by specyalle priuylege ys cleped Sanctus Karolus'.²⁸ In the light of the Fillingham *Firumbras's* concern with Charlemagne's sanctity, it is tempting to think that there may be an echo of Christ's five wounds when Balam wounds Charles in five places on his body (1620), rather than fifteen places as in the French texts (6000), but if so, the echo must be compatible with his heroic martial values: 'Oure noble kyng charlys, ful coraious in yre' (1621, 1589) [*very valiant in his wrath*]. Indeed, alongside the emphasis on Charlemagne's holiness, the Fillingham *Firumbras* also gives greater evidence of the king's role as action hero: here, uniquely, it is he who first reaches the bridge of Mautryble when Richard sounds the horn, and he who throws Gulfagor off the bridge 'with hys on hand' (1316-23), producing a portrait of Charlemagne through the romance as a whole as both warrior and saint.

In their different adaptations of the French texts' portrayal of Charlemagne, the Middle English romances, while properly responsive to their source material, show considerable creative independence. Each new text reimagines the portrait of Charlemagne in line with the particular priorities of its own reading of the legend, to construct Charles variously as defender of Christendom, powerful emperor, pattern of knighthood, God's chosen, wise ruler, unbeaten conqueror, peace-maker, saint and warrior-hero. As a brief postscript, there is a last, somewhat eccentric occurrence of the *Pseudo-Turpin* Description of Charlemagne in the *Legenda Aurea*, translated into Middle English first anonymously as the *Gilte Legende* (1438), and secondly as Caxton's *Golden Legend* (1483). It occurs in the anomalous section of the work entitled 'The history of St Pelagius the Pope, with many other histories and gestes of the Lombards, and of Mahomet, with other chronicles', in which two sentences on St Pelagius preface a chronicle of the Lombard people from the fifth century to 1250, with a digression on the prophet Mahomet and the beliefs of the Saracens.²⁹ The story returns to the Lombards, who 'were much contrary to the church of Rome, and to the empire, how be it they had received the faith' (p. 118), and recounts first Pepin's and later Charlemagne's victories over them. After briefly narrating Charles's coronation as Emperor, the chronicle turns to a lengthy explanation of the changes in the liturgy that took place at that time; so it comes as something of an afterthought when the text continues: 'And as Turpin rehearseth' (p. 125), and goes on to describe Charlemagne's appearance, measurements, strength and eating habits with all the usual details. Unlike the careful placing of this set-piece Description in the narrative of the *Pseudo-Turpin* and in the Middle English

romances, here it seems that, however oddly it sits in context, it was just too important a component of the Charlemagne tradition to be left out.

Notes

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¹ For details of how the texts and manuscripts make clear each romance's connection to Charlemagne, see P. Hardman, 'Roland in England: Contextualising the Middle English *Song of Roland*', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. R. Purdie and M. Cichon (Cambridge, Brewer, 2011), pp. 91-104 (93).

² *Cursor Mundi*, ed. R. Morris, 6 vols, EETS OS 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99 (1874-92), II. 147-8, 15-16.

³ *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1899-1902), II. 1303, 11298, 14273, 23870, 29443.

⁴ *The Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prynce Charles the Grete*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, 2 vols, EETS ES 36-7 (1880-1), p. 2.

⁵ For some discussion of this background see R. Warm, 'Identity, Narrative and Participation: Defining a Context for the Middle English Charlemagne Romances', in *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Romance*, ed. R. Field (Cambridge, Brewer, 1999), pp. 87-100.

⁶ Both unique texts are in the Auchinleck MS (c. 1340; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 19.2.1). All ten of the Middle English Charlemagne romances exist in unique copies.

⁷ 'The Taill of Rauf Coilyear' with the Fragments of 'Roland and Vernagu' and 'Otuel', ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, EETS ES 39 (1882).

⁸ Both are in the London Thornton MS (c. 1440; London, British Library, MS Add. 31042).

⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 33 (c. 1380-1400); London, British Library, MS Add. 37492 (c. 1475-1500).

¹⁰ In the *Sowdone of Babylone*, a fifteenth-century reworking of paired Anglo-Norman texts *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierenbras*, both halves of the Middle English romance suppress the original epic prologues with their accounts of Charlemagne, 'le roy Charles de France' (*Destruction de Rome*, 23), and open with uniquely positive portraits of his opponent, the Saracen sultan Laban, father of Ferumbras.

¹¹ *The Song of Roland*, trans. D. D. R. Owen (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1990), p. 27.

¹² *La Chanson de Roland*, ed. F. Whitehead, 2nd edn (Oxford, Blackwell, 1946).

¹³ *Fierabras: Chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. M. Le Person, CFMA 142 (Paris, Champion, 2003).

¹⁴ *Otinél: Chanson de geste*, ed. F. Guessard and H. Michelant, Anciens poètes de la France 1 (Paris, Vieweg, 1859). The Anglo-Norman version (in Coligny, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cod. Bodmer 168) uses this epic epithet more often than the continental version (in Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. Lat. 1616); it also develops Otinel's message with a colourful threat to singe Charles's beard (l. 43). The manuscript is available in facsimile online: <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/cb/0168>.

¹⁵ Both romances are here in accord with the Anglo-Norman *Otinél* rather than the continental version, so possibly suggesting an insular taste for such broad effects.

¹⁶ *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi ou Chronique du Pseudo-Turpin*, ed. C. Meredith-Jones (Paris, Droz, 1936).

¹⁷ A. C. Spearing draws attention to the inappropriate modern expectation of smooth narrative coherence in medieval texts, citing intrusive non-narrative passages in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Troilus and Criseyde* as examples, in *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ *Turpines Story: A Middle English Translation of the 'Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle'*, ed. S. H. A. Shepherd, EETS OS 322 (2004), pp. 81-2.

¹⁹ As a visual parallel, compare the full-page portrait of Charlemagne in armour, crowned and holding his sword, that appears as a frontispiece to the second part of the paired fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman texts, *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierenbras* in London, British Library, MS Egerton 3028.

²⁰ The additional stress on Charlemagne's imperial status in the Middle English prose version might conceivably reflect the self-image of Henry V and succeeding English monarchs who signalled their identity as Emperor of their possessions by the adoption of the imperial crown of state which figures significantly in royal iconography from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. See Philippa Hardman, 'The *Sege of Melayne*: A Fifteenth-Century Reading', in *Tradition and Transformation*, ed. R. Field, pp. 71-86 (76).

²¹ *The Old French Johannes Translation of the 'Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle'*, ed. R. N. Walpole, 2 vols (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976).

²² *Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge, Brewer, 2008).

²³ That is: Charlemagne's conquest of Galicia, his campaign against Ebrahim, Roland's fight with Vernagu, Ganelon's treachery, and Charlemagne and Turpin's defeat of the Saracens. The prologue survives intact only in *Otuel and Roland*, as the first folio of *Roland and Vernagu* has been excised; however, the remaining letters visible on the stub of the missing folio closely match the corresponding lines of the extant prologue.

²⁴ *The Auchinleck Manuscript: National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1*, intro. D. A. Pearsall and I. C. Cunningham (London, Scholar Press, 1977), p. x.

²⁵ Matthew Gabriele argues that the eleventh-century *Descriptio qualiter Karolus Magnus* was composed by a member of the entourage of Philip I in order to create a connection from Philip back to Charlemagne ('The Provenance of the *Descriptio Qualiter Karolus Magnus*: Remembering the Carolingians in the Entourage of King Philip I (1060-1108) before the First Crusade', *Viator* 39 (2008): 93-117). While it is an interesting thought that the importation of the Crown of Thorns into the two Middle English romances might have served a parallel purpose in supporting the claim to the throne of France of English kings from Edward III to Henry VI, the early date of the Auchinleck MS (c. 1330-40) in which one of the texts is copied makes this suggestion more likely to reflect coincidence than intent.

²⁶ See C. Tyerman, *England and the Crusades, 1095-1588* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 276-8; J. Phillips, *Holy Warriors: A Modern History of the Crusades* (London, Bodley Head, 2009), pp. 307-9.

²⁷ Nevertheless, his cultus was permitted at Aachen, and two centuries later Charlemagne was adopted as patron saint of France alongside St Denis.

²⁸ This reference is not in the Latin source for the Life. See *Supplementary Lives in Some Manuscripts of the Gilte Legende*, ed. R. Hamer and V. Russell, EETS OS 315 (2006).

²⁹ *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints, as Englished by William Caxton*, ed. F. S. Ellis, 7 vols (London, Dent, 1900), VII, 106-39.