

## Hastings and *Roland*: The Triumph of the Mounted Knight

by Michael C.C. Adams

On October 14, 1066, Duke William of Normandy toppled the Saxon ruling dynasty of England and guaranteed his successful conquest of that kingdom. In so doing, William also established in the eyes of his contemporaries the virtual invincibility of the armored mounted knight. This in turn changed the social structure of England, altered the relationship between English men and women, shifted the course of English and, indeed, European history. Remarkably, this triumph on the battlefield of Norman-French, male warrior values finds an almost exact mirror image in one of the great epic poems of the Middle Ages. Though *The Song of Roland* ostensibly is about the defeat of Charles the Great's rear guard on his retreat from Spain in 778, the poem in its finished literary form was written down toward the end of the eleventh century and thus reflects the values of the Frankish warriors in the period of Hastings.

The Normans themselves came to make a connection between Hastings and *Roland* as in some sense complementing each other. The chronicler William of Malmesbury wrote in the early twelfth century that immediately before Hastings William put on his Hauberk, and "Then beginning the song of Roland, that the warlike example of that man might stimulate the soldiers, and calling on God for assistance, the battle commenced on both sides" (Giles 227). Wace, another twelfth-century author, added the detail that the poem was recited by Taillefer, William's jongleur or court performer, who rode out in front of the troops, tossing his sword like a drum-major's baton and "chantant / De Karlemaigne e de Rollant / E d'Oliver e des vassals / Qui morurent en Rencevals" (Holden 183) [Singing about Charlemagne and Roland and Oliver and their vassals who died at Roncesvalles].

David C. Douglas, a leading authority on sources for the battle, says that this may or may not have happened. Doubt is cast on the tale by the fact that none of the four contemporary accounts of the battle mentions it.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, says Douglas, "It is a good story and it might even be true" (*William* 199). Henry Adams thought it such a good tale that he embroidered upon it, suggesting that not only was *Roland* sung at the start of Hastings but also it had been heard before by William and Harold when they campaigned together against Count Conan of Brittany (Fig. 1). Adams conjectured that, during a night spent at Mont Saint Michel, Taillefer had recited the song (13-31). Whatever the case may be, the point is that, relatively early after the battle, the victors saw a relationship between the events at Hastings and the values in *Roland*.

Let us first look at Hastings and the consequences of that



Fig. 1. William and Harold, on the Brittany campaign, come to Mont Saint Michel. Here, Henry Adams believed, they heard Roland. Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidon, 1973) 21.

engagement. The two armies were rather different in make-up. The invading force of Normans and other Frenchmen was entirely professional in composition, each man following war as his central calling in life. Three arms were present. Lowest in status were the light troops, made up of archers and slingers. Next came dismounted men at arms, men below the rank of knight but able to afford a steel cap, an axe or sword, a shield, and perhaps a coat of mail or ringed metal. At the top of the hierarchy were the mounted knights, armored in mail and carrying lances in addition to sword and shield. Some still used the lance in the old-fashioned way, arm over head like a javelin. They would have to ride up alongside a foe and jab down at him with a stabbing motion. But others used the lance in a new and more effective manner. They rested the weapon under the arm and lowered the point to aim at the opponent's chest, charging at him full tilt. Couched in this way, the lance had tremendous shock impact (Fig. 2).

While the flower of William's army chose to fight mounted, the elite of the Saxons preferred to fight on foot. These were the housecarles or household troops of the Saxon king, his personal bodyguard and the bulk of professional soldiers available to him. Though the housecarles rode to battle on ponies, they usually chose to fight dismounted like the dragoons of a later era. This was to better wield their fearsome weapon, the battle axe, with which they could hew through man and horse. King Harold had a few archers and slingers with him, but the bulk of his army was fleshed out by the *fyrð* (pronounced "fud"). These were able-bodied farmers and craftsmen obeying a universal Saxon military obligation to come to arms in local defense (the ancestors of the British and American militias). Some, the more wealthy, had proper arms and a little military training. But many knew nothing of war and carried only farm tools to defend themselves.

The composition of the two armies thus dictated the nature of the battle. Harold, with a host of footmen, of necessity assumed a defensive stance. He occupied a position on Senlac Hill, a ridge some 600 yards long which shelved off steeply on both ends, protecting the flanks, and with woods in the rear to give shelter from mounted pursuit, should flight become necessary. *Fyrð*men with shields went in the forefront, creating a wall behind which stood the rest of the *fyrð* and, at the heart of the position, the king and his housecarles. Duke William, with a more flexible force and more options available to him, took the tactical offensive. He drew up at the foot of the hill in three battles or divisions. Each had front ranks of archers and slingers, then foot men-at-arms, followed in the rear by mounted knights.<sup>2</sup>

The Duke began the fighting around 9:00 a.m. by sending forward his light troops to enfilade the Saxon position. Their missiles could not penetrate the shield wall and they retired. William then sent his more heavily equipped infantry laboring up the hill. The housecarles moved through the ranks of the *fyrð* to meet them, and a savage encounter

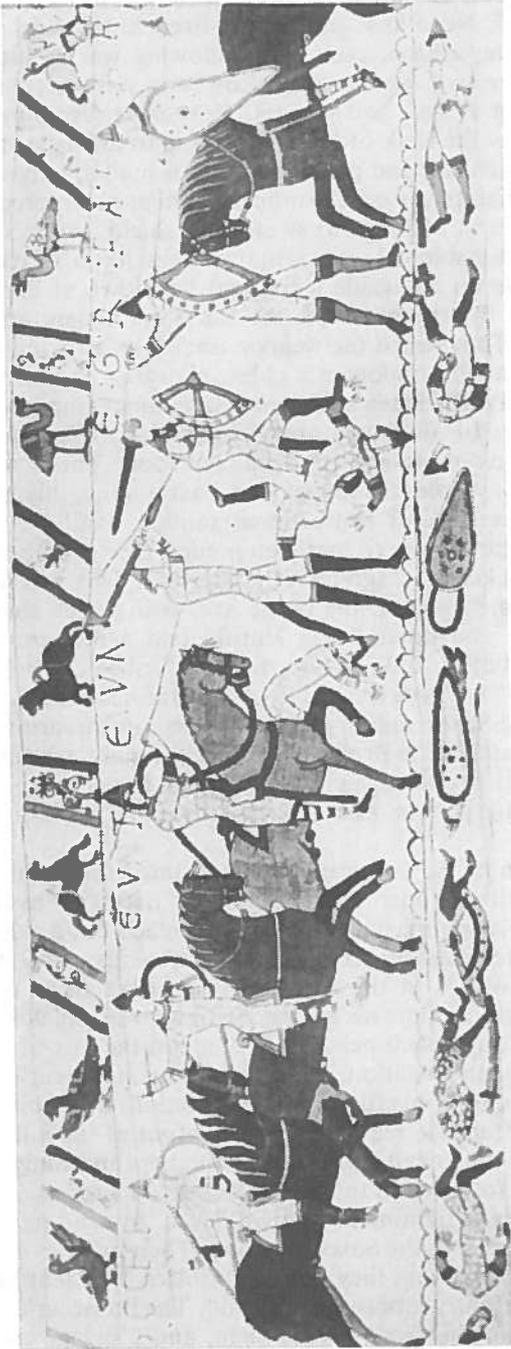


Fig. 2. Mounted Norman knights attack the Saxon position, some using the overhead and one the couched method of holding the lance. A housecarle wields his double-handed axe. Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidon, 1973) 38.

took place at the shield wall. The Norman-French were worsted and withdrew. The Norman commander ordered forward his mounted knights who thundered up the slope and engaged the Saxon line but were hurled back finally. So shocking was the ferocity of the Saxon axe-wielding that the Breton knights in the left-hand division panicked and began to flee the field (Fig. 3). They were chased by Saxon *fyrðmen* who did not have the discipline to stand their ground behind the shelter of the shield wall. The panic began to spread to William's center division but he quelled it and sent knights from this unit in behind the charging *fyrðmen*, sealing off their retreat and cutting them down at the base of the hill. Thus William turned near-disaster to advantage.<sup>3</sup>

As the day wore on, the Norman commander hurled attack after attack against the Saxon position, which shrank in upon itself as men fell. Yet the shield wall would not break. The Duke tried on the right what had worked on the left. He had his knights pretend to run away, bleeding off more *fyrðmen* to be cut down. The Saxons were weakened but still they held. Towards evening William, now apprehensive as night approached on a desperate battlefield in a foreign land, ordered a combined attack by knights and archers. The latter were to shoot their arrows high in the air above the Saxons, showering the missiles down on their opponents' heads. This caused confusion in the Saxon lines and disrupted the shield wall as men shifted position to protect their heads. Taking advantage of this softening of the enemy defenses, the knights crashed home, driving deep into the enemy position and cutting down Harold where he stood by his dragon banner (Fig. 4). With the king down, the Saxons lost purpose and left the field. Saxon resistance carried on in parts of England until 1071, when Hereward the Wake, a chieftain who had been fighting a guerrilla war in the fenlands of East Anglia, was finally killed. But to all intents and purposes the fate of England was already sealed at Hastings.

The Norman victory had profound consequences for medieval people and for us, the ancestors of the combatants living in the English-speaking world. The conquerors liquidated the Saxon ruling class and grafted French styles onto English, so that French manners entered the culture and our language became enriched by a French vocabulary. Thus, the French word *county* joined the English *shire* as a term for unit of local government (Barlow 151-88; McCrum et al. 73-76). More important for our purposes was the debate surrounding the question of why the Normans had won the crucial battle. As the dust settled and men had time to analyze what had happened, two essential reasons for Norman victory became orthodox. The first of these was strictly military and temporal. The battle was said to represent the triumph of the mounted knight and, more specifically, the knight charging home with lance couched under his arm for maximum shock impact.

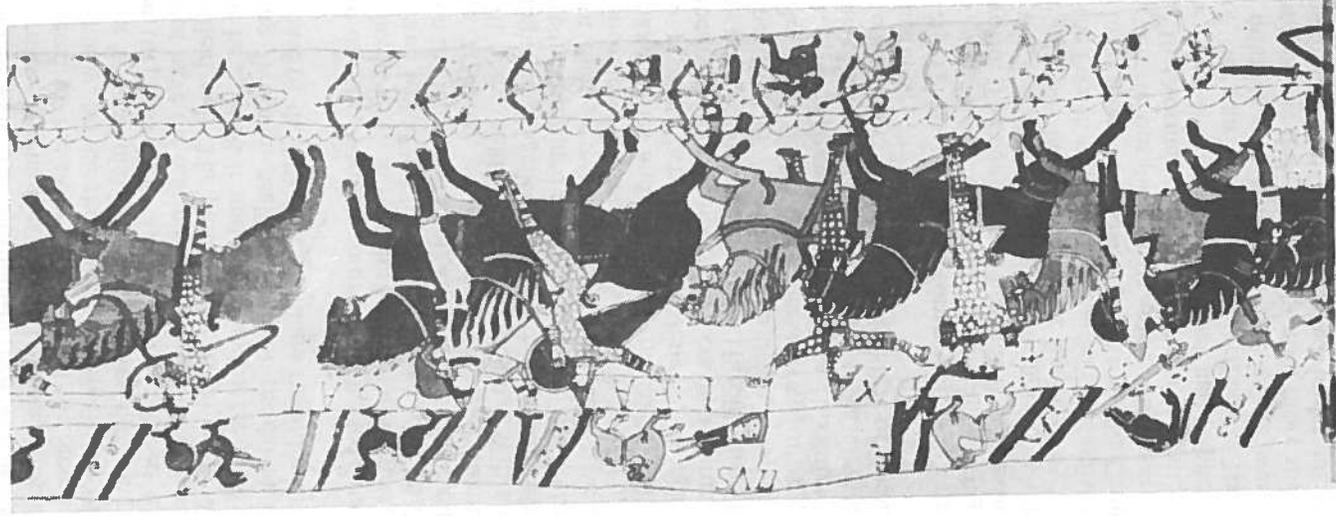


Fig. 3. William quells a panic caused by a rumor that he is dead. Eustace of Boulogne, the knight pointing to William, holds aloft the Papal banner. Note the bowmen appearing in the border. Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidon, 1973) 39.

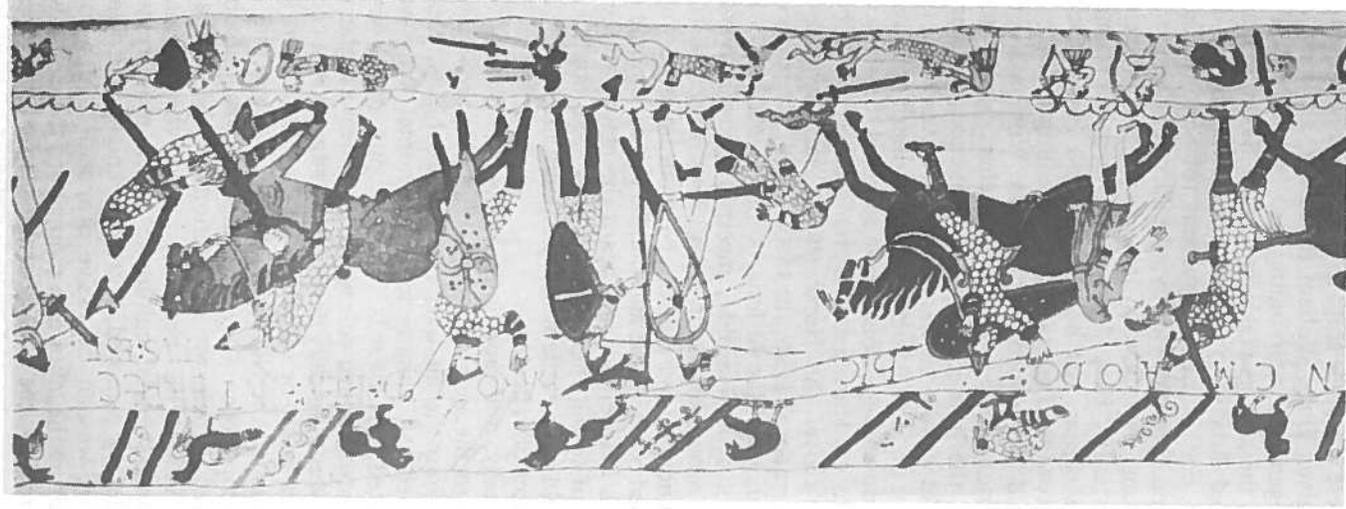


Fig. 4. Harold is cut down and drops his axe. Note the confusion in the Saxon ranks caused by Norman arrows. Charles H. Gibbs-Smith, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Phaidon, 1973) 42.

There was some truth to the theory. Mounted troops being available had given Duke William flexibility, allowing him to carry out such stratagems as surrounding and butchering the over-eager *fyr*dm<sup>e</sup>n. Also, the knights crashing into the Saxon line at the end of the battle had led directly to Harold's death and Saxon defeat. But there were other, equally weighty reasons for Saxon defeat which this analysis ignored. Most obviously, the Saxon *fyr*dm<sup>e</sup>n lacked discipline and weapons, two factors drastically limiting their effectiveness. More importantly, Harold chose to give battle prematurely. A mere three weeks earlier, the housecarles and Harold had been far north, at Stamford Bridge near York, defeating a Viking invasion of England. Harold had rushed south to face William so precipitately that some important foot soldiers, his archers, could not keep up with him. Also, the housecarles were weakened by their earlier efforts. Had Harold waited, his warriors could have rested, the archers might have caught up, and elements of the southern *fyr*d, sent home to take in the autumn harvest, could have rejoined the army.

Why did Harold attack prematurely? Was it because he had won his victory over the Norsemen by surprise and hoped to repeat the performance? If so, the tactic failed, for parties of mounted Norman knights saw Harold long before he arrived. Was it because William was ravaging Harold's ancestral lands in Wessex, and avenging the insult would brook no delay? Was it because Harold had learned the astounding news that the Norman invasion was now a holy crusade blessed by the Pope and that he was excommunicated? Did he need to attack before his army heard the news and men started to desert in fear of losing their eternal souls? We don't know, but at any rate Harold gave battle with a tired and incomplete army, diminishing his chances of victory.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, the Norman victory was owed not only to the knights but to William's archers who, shooting arrows high into the air over the Saxons' heads, created the chaos which allowed the knights to thrust home. Why was their contribution slighted, afterwards? Simply put, they were commoners, and emphasizing their role would give them a higher opinion of themselves than was politically desirable: to suggest that commoners could decide battles would be subversive of the social order. It was the knights who dominated the Norman polity, and it was they who decided how the battle had been won. Their analysis was undoubtedly self-serving and proved to their own satisfaction that the Norman way of doing things was indeed the best way. Also, the Norman dukedom was an advanced feudal culture in which most resources were geared to producing armored, mounted knights (Brown 33 ff). To equip a soldier was an expensive proposition in a cash-short society, one requiring the labor of a majority of those who worked on the land. In Normandy, the bulk of arable land was divided up into knights' fiefs or feus, estates with enough peasants on them to support a knight and

his retainers. So the Norman economy was strictly geared to defense needs (White 28-38; Burke 48-57).

William, convinced that the production of mounted knights was key to a healthy society, and seeming to be justified by Hastings, imposed this feudal structure on England. In so doing, he changed the culture radically. In Saxon England, soldiering had been only one of several high callings and was restricted largely to the king's household troops or housecarles. Lands and honors could be held for various other reasons and for talents outside the military field such as farming or the civil service. Women, who were not soldiers but might be valued for other qualities, could hold lands in their own names as the king's "menn," or vassals. Indeed, the Saxon word *mann* did not mean male only but embraced any person who figured in the social order (Fell et al. 89-108).

The conquest changed this. Land-holding was now tightly related to knight-service, and women in particular were demoted, pushed out of the ranks of property holders. A widow, for instance, who in Saxon England might have held and farmed her lands in her own right after her husband's death, was now married off to a new husband, a soldier who was thereby added to the ranks of William's knights in return for the fief (Fell et al. 148-49; Stenton 1-28). By 1087 William had carved up England into knights' feus and in this way could guarantee himself the services of about 5,000 mounted knights (Douglas, *Achievement* 77). He had also dealt a serious blow to the status of women. He had taken property and power from them. Man now meant in essence not a person but a warrior male, a man-at-arms.

The triumph of the mounted knight also fixed the image of the horseman in the western imagination for a thousand years. To ride and to carry a lance made you one of the privileged. To walk was to fall in the social scale. Because elite status was associated with the horses, armies clung to the mounted arm long after its military value had declined. Bowmen and pikemen ended the undisputed rule of the knight in the fifteenth century. Cavalry now had to become just one arm among many, and a vulnerable one at that. But the cavalry retained an elite social status, and the lance was eagerly re-embraced in the Napoleonic wars. The modern high-powered rifle put an end to whatever dubious justification for the lance there had been in the Nineteenth Century, yet lancers accompanied every major army to war in 1914, and Great War generals like Field Marshal Douglas Haig always had cavalry divisions poised behind the lines during a major offensive, convinced that they could still carry out their traditional function of exploiting a breakthrough and harrying the defeated foe (Gardner 52; Montmorency 190, 276). Both the United States and Britain spent more on cavalry than on tanks during the 1920s (Preston and Wise 286). As late as 1939, Polish lancers confronted German panzers in battle. Winston Churchill, puzzling between the wars as to why the armies had clung to cavalry for so long, said it simply had not

been possible to admit that any mechanic or chauffeur with a Maxim gun (the twentieth-century equivalent of a peasant archer) could unseat the flower of Europe's aristocracy in the elite cavalry regiments (Churchill 64-66). The legacy of Hastings died hard.

In analyzing their victory, the Normans saw a second key factor, the hand of God. They had fought under a Papal banner at Hastings, in a holy crusade, and their battle cry had been "God be with us." William built an abbey on the battle site in thanks to God for His aid. This may not be the first instance, but it is an early example of the tendency for a nation to believe that God is on its side. The Norman religion emphasized not the pacifistic gospel of the New Testament but the aggressive warrior values of the Old. Life was a fight between good and evil. Knights fought God's temporal battles on earth; clerics were his spiritual warriors (Brown 25). Often the two coalesced, as in the holy crusade against Harold when Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William's half-brother, and other churchmen fought in the field at Hastings. It followed that if the church was essentially another battalion of God's army, it should be run on military lines. For England, this would mean that the church must be made over in a masculine image. Women, who had risen as high as advisors to bishops and even to kings on spiritual matters and who, as heads of female holy orders, had heard the confessions of their sisters, would lose this status. Women who had contributed significantly to scholarly learning were effectively reduced to the status of handmaidens in a warrior church (Fell et al. 13-14, 109 ff).

Remarkably, all these crucial changes wrought by Hastings are mirrored in *The Song of Roland*. The poem is a tale about knights, told for knights who are its audience in the great halls of their castles. It is popular entertainment of a colorful, rambunctious kind. As such it reflects the basic values of the warrior caste. Inevitably, the story is completely male in perspective and emphasis. Women rarely appear, and when they do it is usually so that they may showcase male physical prowess. Thus the Saracen knight, Margaris of Seville, is so accomplished in arms,

. . . so beautiful he is  
 She that beholds him has a smile on her lips,  
 Will she or nill she, She laughs for very bliss,  
 And there's no Paynim [pagan] his match for chivalry (957-60).

Women rarely rise above the level of sex objects, booty to be gained in battle along with armor and lands. The pagan Emir exhorts his men before battle:

"Strike, Paynims, strike! that's what you're here to do!  
 I'll give you women, noble and fair of hue,  
 Honours and fiefs and lands I'll give to you" (3397-99).

The pagan queen, Bramimond, is treated with a little more respect when captured by the Christians. She will be taken back to France where Charlemagne intends to win her through love, an example of the medieval concept of conversion as the triumph of life over death. Nevertheless, she is a captive and utterly dependent on the king's good will for her freedom from force (3672-73).

This, then, is a world dominated by male values. Chief among these is loyalty, which was the cement of the feudal army, the glue holding fast vassal and lord in their contract of military service in return for land. In addition to his martial prowess, it is his great loyalty, extending to the ready sacrifice of his life, which makes Roland an admirable knight. When he realizes that the rearguard he commands is outnumbered and will be overwhelmed, Roland reminds his men that the feudal oath binds them to the death:

“Men must endure much hardship for their liege,  
And bear for him great cold and burning heat,  
Suffer sharp wounds and let their bodies bleed” (1117-19).

The knights are only valuable in so far as they fight hard for their lord. This is heavily reiterated. Roland comments: “If the King loves us it's for our valour's sake” (1092). And again, when a good blow is struck, Roland cries, “ ‘Tis for such strokes King Carlon loves us best!” (1560). The good soldiers remember their oath: “Walter the Count affirms, / ‘I'm Roland's man, him am I bound to serve’ ” (800-01).

The worst crime is to break one's oath because this endangers the whole feudal structure and places all in jeopardy. Hence, when Ganelon brings about the death of Roland and the rearguard through treachery, we are told by the poet in awestruck words: “He swore the treason and swore his faith away” (608). For Ganelon is reserved a death as horrible as his deed: he is tortured, torn apart by wild horses (3693-774).

Next to the bond between lord and vassal, loyalty of knight to knight matters most. Thus we have the deep friendship between Roland and his lieutenant, Oliver, which lasts until they are killed. The poem exudes the pleasure of warrior males in each other's company, a satisfaction which has compensated soldiers through the ages for the risks of combat. The knights in the story, as indeed in the poet's audience, enjoy the sense of camaraderie brought by the mutual sharing of satisfaction in bearing arms.

The epic reverberates with the echoes of well-given blows. It is about these that the knights most want to hear. When Oliver's sword strikes a Saracen with such force that

Clean through the middle the skull of him he cracks,  
The saffron byrny [mail coat] splits, and his breast and back,

And saddle, brave with gems and golden bands,  
 And through the spine the horse in sunder hacks,  
 And dead on field flings all before him flat,

Roland is overjoyed and cries: "I'll call you brother . . . after that" (3471-77). Again, when Roland wields his fine sword Durendal,

. . . with such ferocious valour  
 That to the nasal [nose piece] the whole helmet is shattered,  
 Claven the nose and the teeth and the palate,  
 The jaz'rain hauberk [mail coat] and the breastbone and  
 backbone,  
 Both silver bows from off the golden saddle;  
 Horseman and horse clean asunder he slashes,

and the French all cry: "What strokes! and what a champion" (1644-52). If the sword could wreak such havoc, small wonder that the Bretons panicked at Hastings when confronted by the terrible axes of the housecarles.

It is not sword or axe, however, that the knights most want to hear about from the mouth of the poet; it is the new and devastating technology of the couched lance which intrigues them, and they cannot get enough of it. The poet obliges with, for example, Roland galloping full tilt at his opponent:

He spurs his horse, gives full rein to his mettle,  
 His blow he launches with all his mightiest effort;  
 The shield he shatters, and the hauberk he rendeth,  
 He splits the breast and batters in the breast-bone,  
 Through the man's back drives out the backbone bended,  
 And soul and all forth on the spear point fetches;  
 Clean through he thrusts him, forth of the saddle wrenching,  
 And flings him dead a lance-length from his destrier [war horse];  
 Into two pieces he has broken his neckbone (1197-205).

This is the deadly collision power of the couched lance, so mighty that it drives the spine out of the back and snaps the neck from the force of the whiplash.

Over and over such descriptions are told, as though we are watching the replay of a particularly good move in sports. When Oliver charges,

Into his horse he strikes his spurs of gold,  
 Right baronly he rides to smite the foe.  
 He breaks the shield, he cleaves the hauberk close,  
 Clean through his breast drives lance and pennon both,  
 A spear's-length flings him dead from the saddle-bow;  
 (1225-29).

The knights want this reiteration because they are convinced that it is the couched lance which makes them invincible; they are the wielders of its immense power. Needless to say, the common foot soldiers, archers and the like, do not figure in the tale at all. Their part in the battle is written out so that the poet may concentrate on the deeds of the knights.

Victory relies on weapons expertly wielded, and on God. In *Roland* we see clearly the knights' view that God is an active participant in battles on earth. Their belief that God commands a warrior host reinforcing their army is simple and literal. God intervenes directly in battle. When Charlemagne takes a heathen blow to the head, damaging his helmet and taking off a piece of scalp, the king reels, stunned. God is impatient and sends the angel Gabriel to tell him to pull himself together and get on with the action: "Saint Gabriel comes hastening down to him: / 'And what,' saith he, 'art thou about great King?' " (3602-11). The knights are, literally, vassals not only of their earthly lords but of God and hold their celestial estates or places in heaven in return for crusader service. When Roland is dying, he holds up his right-hand glove, symbol of the feudal contract, and Gabriel comes down to fetch it, signifying that Roland has fulfilled his vassal service to God and may die in peace, the prelude to taking up his fief in heaven (142-43).

Given that this is God's war, it is not incongruous to the knights that God's immediate servants, the churchmen, fight with them in the field. Thus Archbishop Turpin, a character based loosely on the eighth-century Archbishop Tilpinus of Rheims, who had fought with Charlemagne, battles as did Odo at Hastings (Sayers 18). Turpin is a good knight, trained as much in arms as in religious ceremonial. He is ferocious in the melee:

Turpin lays in, nor spares; I tell you true,  
After he hit it it was not worth a sou!  
From flank to flank he spits his body through,  
And flings him dead wherever he finds room.

The Frankish knights, who all love a warrior, cry out on seeing how Turpin destroys the infidel: "A valiant blow and shrewd! / Right strong to save is our Archbishop's crook!" (1504-09).

The archbishop is a warrior priest who believes in a gospel of direct action. He has no patience with meek men who cannot take a soldier's part and wishes them put out of harm's way. He admires a good knight, one

"That bears his arms and sits a goodly steed;  
Forward and fierce in battle should he be,  
Else he's not worth a single penny-piece,  
Best he turn monk in monastery meek  
And for our sins pray daily on his knees" (1876-82).

With God on their side, standing at the apex of society, well-armored and with fearsome weapons (the most striking of which was the couched lance), the knights might well look out from the heights of their castles with a large degree of self-satisfaction. It was a satisfaction seemingly justified by Hastings and expounded in *Roland*. Indeed, if there is one quality about the poem which stays with us, it is this egocentric boastfulness. The knights are aware that they are vulnerable to a weakness within, an internal flaw in treachery, but beyond this they are complacent in their power. They cannot conceive of their own demise as a class. This was the problem ultimately with the feudal military vision. Unable to envision its own end, it could not prepare for or forestall downfall at the hands of more creative forces.

At Crécy in 1346 and again in 1415 at Agincourt, despised Welsh and English common archers with their plebeian weapon inflicted prohibitive losses on the mounted knights of French chivalry. In each case, the French suffered about 10,000 casualties in exchange for paltry losses on the other side. Though the figure of the knight would continue for centuries to conjure up the image of the aristocratic warrior, the death knell of his unchallenged dominance on the battlefield had been rung. And called into question along with it was the idea that God had divinely ordained the chivalric orders of Christendom.<sup>5</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of the four contemporary sources for the battle, one is English, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Contemporary Norman accounts were written by William of Poitiers and William of Jumieges. Bishop Odo commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry, a 231-foot by 20-inch pictorial retelling of the campaign. Four illustrations from the tapestry accompany this article. All four sources are collected in Douglas and Greenaway, eds., *Documents*. The reproduction of the tapestry is poor, however, and I recommend instead Gibbs-Smith.

<sup>2</sup>Historians are in fundamental agreement on the major action of the battle. A succinct account with excellent contour maps is Macdonald 14-17. Tetlaw and Howarth offer basic accounts of the campaign.

<sup>3</sup>The tapestry depicts this part of the battle in excellent detail. In one scene, William is shown rallying his panic-stricken knights, who have been further demoralized by a rumor that he is killed (fig. 3 in our text). In the next panel, the knights are shown cutting off the *fyrðmen* at the base of Senlac Hill.

<sup>4</sup>The most persuasive version of why Harold fought is Howarth 156 ff. Harold was excommunicated because William claimed, probably correctly, that Harold had earlier sworn on holy relics to support his claim to the throne. The Saxon was thus guilty of blasphemy.

<sup>5</sup>On Crécy, Fuller I, 461-67. The best study of Agincourt is Keegan, 79-116.

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