

Antar, an Islamic Counterpoint to Roland

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Given the tremendous impact that the tragedy of September 11 had upon the American psyche, literature about Christian-Islam conflicts will be read and taught with greater frequency than ever. One likely candidate among such literary works is *The Song of Roland*, already a popular epic to teach in translation to undergraduates in literature survey courses. I, like many other English professors, teach excerpts from *Roland* as part of a world literature survey, a course required of all undergraduates at my institution. As the medievalist for the Department of English, I also teach an upper-level medieval literature survey in translation.¹

In world literature survey courses, a primary consideration in choosing texts is context—that is, the selection of works that complement each other in a meaningful way. World literature anthologies, such as *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, include excerpts from *Roland* that are played off other medieval selections, particularly *Beowulf*. Anthologies and scholarly studies commonly compare *Roland* to *Beowulf*, Arthur, and the Cid as a way of illustrating the medieval concept of heroism. Nevertheless, I—and more importantly, my students—have found this approach to cross-cultural literature unsatisfactory because all these heroes serve as vehicles to promote Christianity at the expense of other religions. Also, my students have expressed interest in Arabic heroic literature and the Muslim response to *Roland*. I tried including excerpts of Arabic chronicles, but these, by themselves, also proved unsatisfactory, since the chronicle is a radically different genre from the epic and thus a departure from the focus on the medieval epic hero.

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Fortunately, in recent years, Islamic/Arabic scholars have begun to produce English translations from the abundant corpus of Middle Eastern heroic literature. After reading M. C. Lyons' summaries of Arabian epics in his series *The Arabian Epic*,² I settled upon the *Sīrat 'Antar* as the response to *Roland's* medieval Christian heroism. In Arabian epic literature, Antar and other heroes battle the Franks while in Spain—much as Roland and Charlemagne fight Saracens in Spain; unfortunately, none of these works have yet been translated into English. However, H. T. Norris's *Adventures of Antar* contains a translation of Antar's campaign in Africa that parallels *Roland* in striking ways.³

In terms of composition, *Roland* and *Antar* share similarities. From our perspective, both Roland and Antar are minor, shadowy historical figures that inexplicably become major epic heroes. Antara is the name assigned to the actual, historical Antar of pre-Islamic Arabia. Poems and chronicles of this historical Antara become the basis of both a popular oral and literary tradition of epic fiction. Norris reports that one version of the Antar cycle consists of fifty-five volumes (42), and present-day storyteller Abu Shadi of Damascus takes one year to recite the complete cycle of Antar.⁴

The best known story of Antar, and the one most frequently translated into English, stems from the historical Antara who was a poet. According to Peter Heath, *Antar* “. . . purports to recount the life story of the famous pre-Islamic Arab poet and warrior 'Antara ibn Shaddad [who lived during the late sixth century A.D.]. The historical 'Antara was a half-caste slave (his father was Arab and his mother black African) who won freedom and fame through his poetic and martial abilities and ended life as a respected member of the northern Arabian tribe of 'Abs.”⁵ The poet Antara becomes famous for his “hanged poem,” so called because he had to fight his lover's rivals and his enemies to hang this love poem on the walls of Ka'ba in Mecca. So famous does the legendary figure of Antar become that Muhammad was reported to claim that Antar was the only Arab

The Song of Roland reflects a similar transformation. The story of Roland's fall at Roncevaux and Charlemagne's subsequent vengeance appears in chronicles, becomes celebrated in popular oral tradition, and is preserved in written epics—in particular *The Song of Roland* found in the Oxford manuscript Digby 23.⁷ Just as Muslim pilgrims visit the Ka'ba where Antara's poem was hung, so too pilgrims could see Roland's tomb on their way to the shrine of St. James at Compostela. One historical source on the battle at Roncevaux is the chronicle *Nota Emilianense*: “In the year 778 King Charles came to Saragossa; . . . The king then decided that, for the safety of the men of the army, the courageous warrior Roland should remain with the rear guard. But when the army traversed the Port of Cize, at Roncevaux, Roland was killed by the Saracens.”⁸ Calling attention to Antar's and Roland's transformation from minor historical figures to epic heroes provides a classroom opportunity for the review of theories of oral composition by Parry, Lord, and others, along with an exploration into the complex relationship in medieval literature between popular storytelling and learned literary tradition.

As the class reads the epic literature, students are assigned the task of looking for parallels, either in individual written assignments or as group projects to be presented orally—assignments that ask students to critique cross-cultural literary representations of the Other. The rest of this article presents a few examples of those parallels.

Both *Roland* and *Antar* use repetition of similar literary structures to construct stories that celebrate heroic virtues embodied by Antar, Roland, and Charlemagne. For instance, both epics signal the beginning of a major episode through the use of prophetic dreams. Antar dreams that “a black whelp had come from my loins. . . it rose up against me in the shape of an eagle, sharp in beak and claw. It flew skywards . . . It fell upon me like a blow of fate. It dashed against me and buried its claws in my shoulders. It pulled me and threw me upon my back. I was at its mercy . . .” (97). Antar turns to a counselor to interpret the

dream. The interpreter notes that the eagle symbolizes war, so the dream is a prophecy of war. Of course, this is true, but it is much more. The black whelp from his loins indicates that he will battle his own African brethren, who will first fight against him but with whom he will eventually be reconciled.

In *Roland*, it is Charlemagne who has the prophetic dreams about a war, symbolically revealed through animal imagery. For instance, in one of his dreams, "A fierce bear bit him on the right arm. / He saw a leopard coming from the direction of the Ardennes, / It attacks his body with great ferocity. / A hunting dog came down the steps from inside the hall, / Running toward Charles by leaps and bounds" [El destre braz li morst uns uers si mals. / Devers Ardene vit venir uns leuparz, / Sun cors demenie mult fierement asalt. / D'enz de sale uns veltres avalat, / Que vint a Carles le gallops e les salz] (laisse 57, lines 727-31). Charlemagne's dream possesses elements similar to Antar's: a hound that indicates a relative (Roland) and beasts that symbolize war (the Saracen attack on Roland's rear guard, as arranged by Ganelon, Roland's treacherous step-father).

After foreshadowing the plot through dreams, the two epics' point of attack—that is, the event triggering the action—comes in the form of requests that the heroes feel they cannot refuse. Ghamra, a secondary wife to Antar, requests his help in her regaining territory conquered by an enemy in the Sudan: "I desire you to go with me to the lands of the Sudan in order to avenge me" (98). Like Roland's chivalry, Antar's heroism is centered around service: helping women and the weak against aggressors, loyalty to family and to allies.⁹ In *Roland*, when Charlemagne asks his barons to decide who will stay with the rearguard as the Franks return home from Spain, Ganelon volunteers his stepson Roland. Although realizing Ganelon is setting him up for defeat, Roland "spoke as a true knight: / 'Sir stepfather, I am much indebted to you, / You have nominated me for the rearguard'" [Dunc ad parled a lei de chevaler: / 'Sire parastre, mult vos dei aveir cher, / La reregarde avez sur mei jugiet'] (laisse 59, lines 752-54). Thus, the heroic code of pre-

Islamic bedouin Arabs shares some commonalities with the feudal chivalry of medieval France.

Furthermore, Antar is obligated to take revenge upon Ghamra's attackers, just as Charlemagne avenges the death of his nephew Roland by defeating the Saracens and putting Ganelon on trial for treason. The obligations imposed by relatives in the two epics lead to war. And, as typical of heroic feats, these battles involve journeys—Antar leaves the Arabian peninsula for northern Africa, and Roland and Charlemagne are in Spain fighting Saracens.

Battles constitute the bulk of the plot of these two works. The battles are arranged climactically so that one fierce enemy gives way to an even greater, fiercer threat. Like Roland, Antar's heroism comes from carrying out the duties of a real-life warrior in a larger-than-life manner. Heath explains that ". . . what separates heroes from warriors is not what each does but rather the different scales on which they do it."¹⁰ Just as Roland's small rearguard defeats waves of army legions, Antar's force of 300 in Africa at one point defeats an army of 9,000 (104).

One way the battles between the two epics intersect is in their treatment of the African enemy and of religion. African history haunts the medieval audiences of both *Roland* and *Antar*. As Norris notes, Antar's invasion of Sudan on behalf of Ghamra invokes memory of the sixth century pre-Islamic domination of Yemen by the Abyssinians, many of whom were Christian, and of the later Islamic Arab conquest of Northern Africa during the seventh century. Thus, the audience listening to Antar's conquest of the Christian Negus of Ethiopia and of his other African conquests are to remember that these Africans formerly occupied parts of the Arabian peninsula, only in turn to be repulsed from the peninsula and invaded by Muhammad's descendants (5). Similarly, *The Song of Roland* celebrates those who fought the Moorish control of Spain and implicitly those Crusaders who continue to fight Islam. Though clearly fiction, both epics are rooted in a "historical self-consciousness."¹¹

Hence, these wars against Africans have important religious implications. Individual African opponents are often described as fierce, evil giants who are idolatrous worshippers. For instance, in *Roland*, the Saracen Abisme “does not believe in God, the Son of Holy Mary; / He is as black as molten pitch” [Ne creit en Deu, le filz seinte Marie; / Issi est neirs cume peiz ki est demise] (laisse 113, lines 1473-74). As this passage implies, ethnicity gets tied to religion, which together forms the basis for much discrimination in the Middle Ages. Shortly before his confrontation with the Negus, who is portrayed as the supreme overlord of the African kings, Antar battles the Negus’s right-hand man, although here racial color is downplayed because Antar himself is the black leader of the lighter-colored Arabs. Before the battle, the giant, Al-‘Abd Zinjīr, taunts Antar and swears by his god Saturn: “From the army of the Negus there sallied forth a knight . . . No eye had seen one mightier than his frame nor more terrifying. He was like a flattened date palm or the stump of a burnt palm tree. . . . His voice echoed in the mountains, ‘If your vile knights have no stomach for this fight then summon your protector to fight me. I have sworn by mighty Saturn that I shall leave him as a carcass in the dust’” (182). As a follower of the Negus, this giant should be Christian. This idolatry is echoed in *Roland* with its various references to Muslims worshipping statues of the gods Mahomet [Muhammad], Termagent, and Apollo.

In both epics, God intervenes on behalf of the heroes. The fight between Antar and Al-‘Abd Zinjīr continues for seven days; just as the giant almost crushes Antar, Antar has a vision of the future Muhammad, which gives him the strength to kill the giant: “I was blessed by good fortune, by courage and with the aid of that Prophet about whom continuous tales are told and who will appear at the end of the age, Muhammad” (185). This episode signifies the future when the Arabs defeat Africa and introduce Islam. Like Antar, Charlemagne becomes weakened during his battle with the powerful emir Baligant, but his strength returns and he kills Baligant after the Angel Gabriel rouses him to action.

“Charles, hearing the sacred voice of the angel, / has no fear, nor is he afraid of dying. / His strength and mindfulness return to him, / He strikes the Emir with the sword of France” [Quant Carles oït la seinte voiz de l’angle, / N’en ad poür ne de murir dutance. / Repairet loi vigor e remembrance, / Fiert l’amiraill de l’espee de France] (laisse 262, lines 3612-15).

The heroes’ ultimate triumph over the enemy, then, is a triumph of religion, of one god over another. Thus, in the resolution of the plot, religious conversion emerges as a strong component. However, the two epics’ presentations of this religious victory differ considerably. Antar’s success in Africa is seen as anticipating the future victory of Islam in Africa; however, Roland’s battle ends in his defeat and death. The triumph comes when Charlemagne avenges the death of Roland, thereby destroying idolatry in Spain and converting many to Christianity. Roland’s death is not in vain.

The conclusion of both epics also focuses upon peaceful ways to resolve conflict. Antar accomplishes peace through family connections. Not only does Antar regain Ghamra’s lands, he regains lost relatives. After Antar captures the Negus in battle and while holding the Negus captive, Antar learns that his own mother, an African who was kidnaped and enslaved by his father, is a paternal aunt of the Negus. The two are then reconciled, and on his return home, Antar writes a poem about his adventures in Africa for his primary wife, ‘Abla: “All these kings [in Africa] appeared to have our lineage. Thus sorrow was replaced by joy and happiness. Oh, ‘Abla, here I come amid their mighty host as black in colour as the dead of night, . . . yet their hearts are white, just like the sun at dawn” (190). This poem reinforces the importance of family and, furthermore, refutes the notion that ethnic coloring reflects a person’s spiritual state, in contrast to *Roland*. Charlemagne takes the Saracen queen Bramimonde to France where she converts to Christianity and becomes a family member, living in Charlemagne’s home and becoming a god daughter to some of Charlemagne’s relatives. As an amplification

princess who converts to Christianity, marries one of Charlemagne's knights, and hands over Saracen lands to Charlemagne.¹² Thus, marriages serve as a way to cement peace. *Roland* also has the additional problem of Ganelon's treachery that is resolved through feudal trials and ordeals, an important episode that has no apparent counterpart in *Antar*.

Antar is like a photographic negative of Roland and Charlemagne: though their epics tell of the same subjects—heroism and religion—Roland and Charlemagne are the white Christian warrior, while Antar is the black (pre-)Islamic warrior. In conclusion, *Roland* and *Antar* serve as a logical pair in a world literature course that covers the medieval concept of the heroic.¹³

NOTES

¹*The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, a popular choice of textbook for literature survey courses, uses Frederick Goldin's translation. Paperback editions, such as the Mentor/Penguin translation by Robert Harrison, are also popular. However, all quotations from the epic in this paper will be from Gerard J. Brault's dual-language edition of the Oxford text and English translation: *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

²M. C. Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³H. T. Norris, *The Adventures of Antar* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1980). All quotations from the epic will be from this edition. The cost of this hardback can be prohibitive, so instructors may wish to use a service to gain permission to produce copies of selected pages, or instructors may wish to place copies of the book on library reserve for students to consult. The book can be ordered from the publisher for GB £20 or US \$42. The exclusive North American Distributor for Aris & Phillips is The David Brown Book Company, P.O. Box 511, 20

Main Street, Oakville CT 06779; toll-free: 800-791-9354; david.brown.bk.co@snet.net).

⁴"The Tale of the Last Hakawati," *Arabia.com*, <<http://www.arabia.com>>, 27 September 2000.

⁵Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), xiv.

⁶*Ibid.*, 142-48, 7. Charles Horne's translation of the hanged poem can be found on Paul Halsall's *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>>, September 1998.

⁷One subject of scholarly debate is the relationship between the assumed oral tradition and the Oxford manuscript containing *The Song of Roland*. For information on this debate and other aspects of the poem's composition see Pierre Le Gentil, *The Chanson de Roland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

⁸*Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁹Heath, 78-83.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 149.

¹²See, for instance, Alan Lupack, ed., *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances* (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1990).

¹³I would like to thank the members of the Société Rencesvals for their suggestions and comments on the version of this paper presented at the May 2001 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo.

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Once? Future? How Do We Teach Arthur's End?

Kathryn Marie Talarico

When faced with the daunting (but pleasant) task of having to prepare a syllabus for a course that either includes some material from the medieval Arthurian legend or is devoted exclusively to it, there arises the possibility of feeling that a pact is being made with the devil.¹ The Arthurian *matière* is one of the rare subjects that spans more than a thousand years of production and is found not only in literature but in art, films, plays, pop culture and, today of course, the Internet. The choices for material are almost endless: Do we have students read excerpts or whole texts? Use an anthology? Include films, pop culture, history, archaeology? The variety of approaches and syllabi, for instance, presented on the *Arthuriana* website (<http://dc.smu.edu/arthuriana>) or *The Labyrinth* website (<http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth>) is quite overwhelming. As I make choices for my Arthurian literature course, I anticipate a similar occurrence as that which happens in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*—some well-meaning hermit will pop out from behind a mailbox in New York City to explain, in great detail, why my latest choices are wrong!

Eventually I make those choices, and how I frame them, specifically for the undergraduate literature course in translation that I often teach, is outlined here in very broad terms.² Whether I provide this course at The College of Staten Island, CUNY, or at New York University for the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program, students invariably come with disparate backgrounds and from a variety of disciplines (English literature, comparative literature, art history, French literature, religious studies, history, philosophy, to name just a few). At NYU, there are also a number of students who come from the Tisch School of the Arts film school. The literary grounding of all these students

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