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Feudalism in The Song of Roland

In The Song of Roland, we gain perspective into the feudal societies that permeated medieval Europe. Feudalism was a social caste system characterized by its hierarchical structure and religious motivation. In this system, we see the relationships between Kings, and vassals (ruling nobility subject to the king), and serfs (the poor peasant class). The author of “The Song of Roland” represents these relationships not only on the Christian side with king Charlemagne, but also in the Muslim realm with king Marsilie. While these two groups are religiously dissimilar, their adherence to the principles of feudalism are almost identical. In this exposé of feudalism, we are provided examples of both “good” and “bad” vassals in terms of how closely they adhere to feudalism’s ideal social structure. In this essay we attempt to define what an ideal vassal would look like, then discuss how well examples of vassals in the text fit this ideal. Specifically, we look at an example of both a good and bad vassal in the Christian realm by analyzing the actions of Roland and Ganelon respectively. We then discuss an example of a good vassal in the Muslim realm personified by Blancandrin.

In a perfect world, feudalism aligns and compartmentalizes social classes beneath the king. At the bottom, we have serfs – the poor working class that are responsible for the manual labor necessary to run the kingdom’s farms. Above these, we have vassals – both knights and nobility that have been entrusted land by the king to rule. At the top of the feudal food chain, we have the King. In this social system, as one travels up the ladder of authority, one also becomes closer to deity. Serfs then viewed their service to vassals as a religious responsibility, and vassals

likewise viewed their service to the king as such. The vassal knights were also expected to follow the chivalrous code characteristic of medieval nobility. As such, they sought to uphold their dignity and bravery in the service of the king. A good vassal would serve tirelessly, even unto death to protect and honor the king. This vassal should do nothing to disrespect the king; the king's will and well-being are paramount to the his service. As previously mentioned, the author of "The Song of Roland" illustrates this king-vassal relationship in at least 3 instances, and we now look at each specifically.

First, in the Christian realm, we see Ganelon. Ganelon is the king's brother-in-law and Roland's stepfather. He represents a bad vassal – one who shrinks from the honor of serving the king Charlemagne. After Roland volunteers Ganelon for a dangerous mission on behalf of the king, we read the following in laisses 20 of "The Song of Roland": "Count Ganelon was filled with anguish at these words. He threw his large crimson cloak from his neck and stood there in his jerkin of silk" (*The Song of Roland*, 20). His blatant frustration with the assignment is uncharacteristic of the quiet nobility that chivalrous vassals should demonstrate. Despite his reluctance to complete the task, Ganelon is not quick to appear disobedient, saying: "Charles commands me to carry out a service for him and I shall go" (*The Song of Roland*, 20). Though Ganelon insists that his anger lies with Roland (who volunteered him) and not the king, we see his hints of disobedience in his blatant disrespect of vassal rituals. It was tradition for kings to leave a blessing of authority on a vassal tasked with kingly business by giving him a glove. We see Ganelon protest his assignment when he refuses to take the glove: "The emperor hands him the glove from his right hand but count Ganelon would gladly not have been there. When he should have taken it, he let it fall to the ground" (*The Song of Roland*, 25). From these actions we

infer that Ganelon falls short of the ideal. His opposition Charlemagne's wishes and reluctance to serve him inevitably make him a bad vassal.

In contrast to his stepfather, we see Roland portrayed as a good vassal – willingly laying down his life in protection of the king. After being placed as commander of the rear of the king's army, Roland's party is ambushed. Instead of alerting the king and calling for backup, he feels obligated to repel the ambush himself – to the laying down of his own life if necessary. When the proposition is made that he call for backup, Roland responds with the following: “‘May it not please God,’ replies Roland, ‘that it should be said by any living man that I ever sounded my horn on account of the heathen. Never shall my kinsfolk be reproached on this account. When I am in the thick of the battle, I shall strike a thousand and seven hundred blows’” (*The Song of Roland*, 85). He demonstrates that the well-being of the king is his highest concern. He doesn't want to bother the king, even when his own army is being attacked from the rear. Roland inevitably does die in battle, and his reputation as a good vassal is sealed with his life.

On the side of the Muslims, we are introduced to only one vassal by name: Blancandrin. He, like Roland, seeks to uphold his vassal responsibility nobly. Though he is mentioned relatively briefly in the text, he is shown completing his assignments with honor and respect. In the text he is explicitly described the following way: “Blancandrin was one of the wisest of the heathen. He was a good knight for his valour and a prudent man to counsel his lord.” (*The Song of Roland*, 3). After being assigned to council with the French, he accomplishes his assignment from king Marsilie with honor, and reports on his responsibilities: “He held Count Ganelon by the hand and he said to the king: ‘Greetings in the name of Mahomet and Apollin, whose holy laws we obey! We have accomplished your mission to Charles. He raised both his hands toward heaven, he praised his God, but made no other reply’” (*The Song of Roland*, 32). In every aspect

Blancandrin seeks to cater to the will of his king Marsilie. His council and service are evidently of great value to the king, and Blancandrin is therefore a good example of adhering to the ideals of feudalism.

Throughout *The Song of Roland*, we see examples of feudalism, particularly the dynamic of the king-vassal relationship. The author gives us examples of this relationship between both the king of the Christian French and the Muslim Spanish and their respective vassals. In doing so, we are given a look at both how these relationships should be in the ideal, and how these relationships fall short of the very same ideal. Blancandrin and Roland are representative of this ideal, while Ganelon falls short – going down in history as not only a traitor, but a vassal who shrunk from his duty.

Works Cited

The Song of Roland