

The Tale of Charlemagne
and Ralph the Collier
A TRANSLATION



JEFF SYPECK

The Tale of Charlemagne
and Ralph the Collier

A TRANSLATION

Jeff Sypeck

*“I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by letter,
Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel better...”*

Geoffrey Chaucer,
“The Parson’s Prologue”

COVER: Engraving of the interior of Aachen Cathedral, date unknown
FRONTISPIECE: "Lord Marmion's Armor and the Heraldry of the Heroes of Flodden,"
drawn by J.H. Nixon, engraved by W. Deeble, published by Charles Tilt, London, 1833

THE TALE OF CHARLEMAGNE AND RALPH THE COLLIER: A TRANSLATION

© 2010 Jeff Sypeck. All rights reserved. For permission to reproduce or distribute
this book, please write to jeffsypeck@gmail.com.

This translation was originally distributed as an e-book through
www.quidplura.com

First version published online December 1, 2007
First revision published online December 28, 2007
Second revision published online December 1, 2008
First print edition January 2010

Contents

Introduction

7

The Tale of Charlemagne and Ralph the Collier

A Translation

13

Bibliography

55

INTRODUCTION

The romance.

Charbonnier est maître chez soi: “the collier is master in his own house.” This French saying finds its most literal expression in *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear*, a late medieval poem that combines folktale motifs with elements of chansons and chivalric romances. Composed by an anonymous poet, this romance draws specifically on the Matter of France, the corpus of medieval stories about Charlemagne and his knights.

Observant readers will notice that the supposedly French landscapes described in this poem bear a curious topographic resemblance to Scotland. In fact, the oldest extant version of this romance was printed at St. Andrews in 1572 and rediscovered in the Advocates Library in Edinburgh in 1821. The poem itself was probably written during the second half of the fifteenth century. Its language, Middle Scots, is a variant of Middle English.

The scholarship on this romance is scarce but substantive. Some critics have noted its similarity to several European legends, folktales, and ballads, while others have suggested that the poet’s humor masks a deceptively thoughtful examination of courtesy, hospitality, and knighthood. Scholars disagree about which social stratum was likely to have been this poem’s most receptive audience, but as they continue to ponder *Rauf Coilyear*, the poem will no doubt retain its reputation as “technically and creatively the best of the English texts on the Matter of France.”¹

The translation.

Rauf Coilyear consists of 75 thirteen-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme of *a b a b a b a b c d d d c*. The first nine lines of each stanza are long lines that also alliterate, typically on at least two of the four stresses in each line, while the four short lines at the end of each stanza—the section called a “wheel” by modern scholars—alliterate according to the poet’s whim.

These thirteen-line alliterative stanzas are not unique to this poem. They also turn up in other works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries such as *Gologras and Gawain*, a Middle Scots

¹ Barron, p. 181.

In the chiefdom of Charles, by chance it befell¹
 That there struck a strong storm on the slope steep and wide
 Where emperors, earls, other men in that dell,
 Having turned from Saint Thomas before the Yuletide,²
 Were passing to Paris, appareled so well,
 Those prelates and princes all puffed up with pride
 Who willingly went where the king wished to dwell;
 Through the fairest of fields did they fare by his side
 In the morning, the worthiest, wide of renown,
 With dukes and Twelve Peers, 10
 Barons, knights young of years;
 Each proudly appears
 With the king leaving town.

¹ The name “Charlemagne” is derived from Latin *Karolus Magnus*, “Charles the Great.” This anonymous poet usually refers to the king as “Charlis” but also calls him “Charlis the Mane.”

² Lupack (p. 198) points out that this reference to Saint Thomas has been “variously interpreted.” He notes that the feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle occurs on December 21, but he remains open to the possibility that the poet may be depicting Charlemagne and his Peers returning from a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury—even though the historical Charlemagne preceded Becket by more than 300 years.

As those royal men rode on the rough, rugged moor,
 There was tendered a tempest that time, I hear tell.
 This storm from the east shot out sharply and sure
 And its draughts drove directly down every deep dell,
 So fierce from the firmament, fraught to endure;
 Folk found no footing, they faltered and fell,
 They prayed not to perish, the proud and the pure; 20
 With weather so wicked they wished not to dwell.
 In mountains of murk, men went mad with despair.
 By the break of the day,
 In such disarray
 Each was thrown his own way,
 And flung far from there.

The wickedest winds whipped so wild and fast
 That they blasted and blew anybody who stayed.
 By the time they'd been pacified, morning was past,
 And no noble knight knew where Charles now strayed. 30
 He learned there's none greater than God at the last:
 His sturdy, strong steed faced the storm unafraid,
 But he's flung from the court, for that lot Fate had cast,
 Five miles from the friends who might fly to his aid.
 In that storm, the stout sovereign was in quite a spot.
 While winds at their height
 Blew in mountainous blight
 And day turned to night,
 Charlemagne liked it not.

Loath was the king as the night lingered late, 40
 For he had no hostel to harbor his head—
 But along came a country-carl at a keen gait;¹
 Two baskets held high on the horse that he led.
 The king called the carl, for he'd no cause to wait:
 "Tell thy name, by the Rood, sir," that royal man said.²
 "Ralph Collier men call me," the carl did state,³
 "I live in this land, where I languish in dread,
 And all the long day I lead labors uncouth.
 Nearby I dwell,
 And charcoal I sell. 50
 You ask and I tell,
 And that's the whole truth."

"Indeed," cried the king, "I do not ask for ill!
 From fellow so noble, thy answer is fine!"
 "Well," warned the collier, "you wish what you will.
 If you find I'm deficient, the fault shall be thine."
 "May our Savior forbid! I've no sense and no skill,
 For I'm mired with my mount in this tempest malign.
 Bring me respite, I pray, from this rough, ruthless chill.
 Refrain from this fighting and feuds we'll decline, 60
 For I've much fairer uses for friendship in mind.

¹ A carl (from Old English *ceorl*, modern English "churl") is a commoner or rustic.

² A rood (from Old English *rōd*) is a cross. Swearing an oath "by the Rood" is to swear on the cross of Christ.

³ A collier burns wood to produce and sell charcoal.