



Paula Leverage, *Reception and Memory. A Cognitive Approach to the Chanson de geste*, Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam – New York, 2010

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Reception and Memory is a brilliant attempt to analyze the Old French *chansons de geste* with the tools of the contemporary cognitive sciences. The biggest difference with Rubin's work¹ being the importance accorded here to the reception—instead of the production—of the poems, it is perfectly understandable why Leverage spends so many efforts in order to individuate the authentic audience of the works analyzed.

Indeed, in the first two chapters the author proves the audience of these songs to be more various than expected, thanks to four categories of evidence: external and internal sources, as well as codicological data and—lastly—evidences from the transmission of the manuscripts. The conclusion of the scholar is that—in the *chansons de geste*—“we must recognize multiple audiences [...]. The evidence from the first two chapters not only points to religious, courtly, bourgeois and popular audiences, but indicates that the audiences were not discrete, and that one reception context inevitably entails another”².

The discussion on the audience leads to a re-examination of the well-known query about the orality of the performance. Thanks to the data previously collected, Leverage argues that the correlation between formulaic style and oral composition is not as stable as we suppose. At the same time, she deduces that some style effects—e.g. repetitions, as well as the poets' insistence on visualization—are, in reality, rhetorical/mnemonic devices. Thirdly, she infers that behind the composition of these poems there is a complex cognitive mechanism; in other words, the “repetitive art of the *chansons de geste* is indeed founded on a ‘constructional logic’ with a neurological basis, but a logic which governs perception and recognition, the poles of memory process”³.

Finally, she hypothesizes not only that some stylistic features—like medieval *collatio*—are used in order to memorize easily the text, but also that they provoke aesthetic effects on the listener and evoke emotive responses.

Despite the fact that Leverage gives an innovative lecture of very well-studied texts, her conclusions are well documented by a long list of examples. In particular, it is of interest to see

¹ David Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions. The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

² Cf. p. 293.

³ Cf. p. 190.

the way the pagan/Christian messengers address to pagan/Christian kings in the *Chanson de Roland*:

Blancandrin (pagan) to Charlemagne (Christian): "E dist al rei: Salvét seiez *de Deu*";
Blancandrin (pagan) to Marsile (pagan): "E dist al rei: Salvez seiez *de Mahun*";
Ganelon (Christian) to Charlemagne (Christian): "E dist al rei: Salvez seiez *de Deu*";
Ganelon (Christian) to Marsile (pagan): "E dist al rei: Salvez seiez *de Deu*".

Even if the formulae are quite similar each other, in this passage we can easily recognize the aesthetic effects invoked by Leverage. When the pagan messenger addresses to a king, he commends him in the name of the king's god; on the contrary, when the Christian messenger is greeting a king, he always does so in the name of the Christian god, no matter who he is addressing to. This example shows clearly what the audience of the *Chanson de Roland* expected while listening the poem: when at least one of the two interlocutors was Christian, the god invoked should be Christian, too.

Leverage's analysis enlightens many fields of research till now not so much exploited by the scholars. For example, it is quite likely that the same cognitive devices analyzed in *Reception and Memory* were used in other passages of the *Chanson de Roland*⁴.

Li quens Rollant se jut desuz un pin,
Envers Espagne en ad turnét sun vis.
De plusurs choses a remembrer li prist,
De tantes teres cum li bers conquist,
De dulce France, des humes de sun lign,
De Carlemagne, sun seignor, ki-l nurrit;
Ne poet müer n'en plurt e ne suspirt.
Mais lui meïsmes ne volt mettre en ubli,
Cleimet sa culpe, si priet Deu mercit:
– Veire Paterne, ki unkes ne mentis,
Seint Lazaron de mort resurrexis
E Daniël des leons guaresis,
Guaris de mei l'anme de tuz perilz
Pur les pecchez quë en ma vie fis! –
Sun destre guant a Deu en puroffrit:
† Seint Gabriel de sa main l'ad pris.
Desur sun braz teneit le chef enclin;
Juntas ses mains est alét a sa fin.
Deus tramist sun angle Cherubin
E seint Michel <de la mer> del Peril;
Ensembl'od els sent Gabriel i vint:
L'anme del cunte portent en pareïs

Li emperere de sun cheval descent,
Sur l'erbe verte s'[i] est culché adenz;
Turnet su<n> vis vers le soleill levant,
Recleimet Deu mult escordusement:
– Veire Paterne, hoi cest jor me defend,
Ki guaresis Jonas tut veirement
† De la baleine ki en sun cors l'aveit,
E esparignas le rei de Niniven
E Daniel del merveillus turment
Enz en la fosse des leons o fut enz,
Les .iiii. enfanz tut en un fou ardant;
La tue amurs me seit hoi en present:
Par ta mercit, si tei plaist, me cunsent
Que mun nevold pois<se> venger, Rollant! –

Just before his death, Roland declaims a liturgical prayer called *Commendatio animæ*, commonly recited in church by devoted Christians who were dying; the formula consisted in the repetition of a long list of miracles operated by God, with the hope that he will manifest his power and his

⁴ The text is taken from Cesare Segre, ed., *La Chanson de Roland*, Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1971, p. 447-449 (laissez 2375-2396) and p. 550-551 (laissez 3096-3109).

mercy even to the present believer⁵. The same formula being declaimed also by King Charles some laisses later, the audience easily overlapped the two scenes, the death of the hero and the (quasi) death of the king⁶.

Therefore, we can strongly suppose that—in the medieval *chansons de geste*—the use of the *collatio* was more spread than we think, and we can predict that, in future, the study of the *chansons de geste* from a cognitive point of view could still reserve many other unexpected results.

⁵ I already argued this in my Ph.D. thesis, submitted for printing in “L’Erma di Bretschneider”. The use of the *Commendatio* was widespread in the medieval poems; cf. my communication *La ‘Commendatio animæ’ dans les littératures romanes des origines* in the international interdisciplinary conference *Formulas in Medieval Culture*, Nancy – Metz (France), June 7-9, 2012.

⁶ The similarities between the two scenes are even more than the use of the *Commendatio*: cf. “**Li quens Rollant** se jut desuz un pin” with “**Li emperere** de sun cheval descent | Sur l’erbe verte s’[i] est culchét adenz”; “**Envers Espagne** en ad turnét sun vis” with “Turnet su<n> vis **vers le soleil levant**”.