

The Epic Quarrel: Racial Origins and National Identity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France (1859-1870)

Colleen Hays

Before the nineteenth century, many French literary scholars did not consider most medieval works worthy of serious literary study.¹ However, a new enthusiasm for medieval texts, inspired by the work of eighteenth-century historians La Curne de Sainte-Palaye and Le Grand d'Aussy, led to a reconsideration of medieval literature in the nineteenth century that blossomed under the combined influence of Romanticism and Nationalism. The importation of these two movements from Germany impelled the French to delve into their past to explain their origins. The literary historian J. J. Ampère described the mind-set in 1834: “Maintenant on a senti que la nationalité d’un peuple se compose de son histoire, et que pour connaître les racines de la nôtre il fallait plonger [...] dans cette terre vigoureuse et tant labourée du moyen-âge [...] pour en retirer rayonnante la statue de la patrie.”² An important goal, then, for nineteenth-century French medievalists was to arrive at conclusions concerning the impact which the three elements of the heritage composing French nationality (Gallic, Roman, and Germanic) had had on medieval literature. The most popular literary vehicle for this discussion was the French epic, *La Chanson de Roland*, first published in 1837.

Political, Cultural, and Intellectual Environment

An examination of the social context establishes the scope and relevance of the identity debate and elucidates the various factors influencing literary scholars. As Robert

1 Hays, “Literary History and Criticism,” 14-44.

2 Ampère, “De l’histoire de la littérature française,” 409.

Morrissey notes, the promise of the French Revolution of 1789 had not been fulfilled: “the triumph of liberation was soon followed by the anguished fear of disorder and of the disintegration of society. In the opinion of many, the new ‘hero’ had abused his power and transformed it into tyranny.”³ As the century progressed, France appeared unable to return to the security formerly provided by the monarchical system. While the Revolution of 1830 was greeted by many as the proper end to the French Revolution, ten years later the July Monarchy’s weak foreign policy eroded French self-esteem. Koenraad W. Swart explains, “The refusal of the government to risk a European war in defense of what were considered to be legitimate French interests greatly contributed to the feeling that France was a declining power.”⁴ Although the beginning of the Revolution of 1848 was marked by hope and excitement, its aftermath was disappointing, particularly to French intellectuals whose confidence in the future was being destroyed,⁵ and, as Eric C. Hansen notes, there was an overwhelming conviction that France was sliding into decline: “Although the idea of decadence is a hoary one [...] its influence was never more powerful than among French intellectuals during the second half of the nineteenth century.”⁶ At the same time, French scholars were also suffering serious identity issues as German philosophers, scientists, and authors assumed the cultural and intellectual leadership of Europe. When Mme de Staël lauded German genuineness and intelligence at the expense of French sophistication and wit (*De l’Allemagne*, 1813), French scholars followed her lead, praising German culture and making pilgrimages to Germany.⁷ Georges Renard describes the extent of German influence on French scholars: “À partir de ce moment, jusqu’à nos jours, comment énumérer tous les esprits qui sont plus ou moins teintés de germanisme? Il serait plus court de citer ceux qui échappent à la contagion.”⁸

Since many French intellectuals were convinced that the French star was declining, it is not surprising that some were strongly influenced when German philosophers and scientists presented their theories of Northern superiority.⁹ The French diplomat Comte

3 Morrissey, *Charlemagne and France*, 251.

4 Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, 63.

5 Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, 86.

6 Hansen, *Disaffection and Decadence*, 2.

7 For more information on French “germanophilia” in the nineteenth century, see Quinet, “De la Teutomanie,” 927-38; Renard, “L’influence de l’Allemagne,” 673-721; Texte, *Études de littérature européenne*; Reynaud, *L’influence allemande*; Carré, *Les Écrivains français*; Digeon, *La Crise Allemande*; and Monchoux, *L’Allemagne*.

8 Renard, “L’influence de l’Allemagne sur la France,” 675.

9 For details, see Simar, *Étude critique*; Poliakov, *Le mythe aryen*; and Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*.

Arthur de Gobineau was one who not only agreed with these theories, but also sought to verify them in *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853). While Gobineau was not a popular author, he was known by scholars such as Ernest Renan and Alexis de Tocqueville, who respected his work.¹⁰ Gobineau postulated that France had been a great nation after the fifth-century invasion that placed Germanic tribes in a dominant position. However, through years of interbreeding, France had gradually declined as the purity of its Germanic lineage was diluted with Gallo-Roman stock. According to Gobineau, the Aryan elements passed down through the nobility over centuries would be entirely levelled, resulting in complete miscegenation. Although most French scholars did not embrace the totality of Gobineau's theory, many did propose that the Germanic conquerors, with their great youth, energy, and vitality, had rejuvenated the inferior, weaker Gallo-Romans.¹¹ Fustel de Coulanges describes the prevailing opinion: "Que n'a-t-on pas dit depuis lors [1815] sur la race germanique! Nos historiens n'avaient que mépris pour la population gauloise, que sympathie pour les Germains. La Gaule était la corruption et la lâcheté; la Germanie était la vertu, la chasteté, le désintéressement, la force, la liberté."¹²

However, not all French scholars accepted the Germanic component of the French "race" as superior. In particular, the historians François Guizot, Augustin Thierry, and Henri Martin all took issue with the idea that the Germanic elements in French society were superior to the Gallo-Roman, believing instead that the French Revolution had been a revolt by the *Tiers Etat* (the Gallo-Roman element) against the nobility (the Germanic element) and that the former was coming into its own power. A debate over the superiority of France's racially distinct populations, which had its roots in previous centuries, ignited again under the influence of nineteenth-century Nationalism. Rather than promoting a homogenous French identity, many French scholars insisted upon the differences between the "races" of their ancestors, a differentiation that informed the discussion concerning the spirit of the origin of the French epic.

Before Francisque Michel published the *Chanson de Roland* (1837), many French intellectuals had been concerned about France's lack of a work or a group of works

10 While de Tocqueville did not agree with Gobineau's thesis, he promoted the candidacy of Gobineau to the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques, as described in de Tocqueville's correspondence with Gobineau in "*The European Revolution*" & *Correspondence with Gobineau*, 232.

11 The racial origin of the French had been a political issue starting in the 1500s. For more information, see Barzun, *The French Race* (especially chapter 1); Poliakov, *Le mythe aryen*, 29-48; Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History*, 72-109; and Devyver, *Le Sang Épuré*.

12 De Coulanges, "De la manière d'écrire," 241-42.

internationally recognized as an epic. The publication of the *Nibelungenlied* in the eighteenth century only put more pressure on French scholars who weakly responded by theorizing that a French epic must have existed at some point, since France had such a renowned literary past.¹³ Although one might expect that the serendipitous discovery of the *Roland* would be enthusiastically welcomed by the nationalist camp and would immediately spawn much scholarly comment and criticism, it was several years before a substantial response materialized and French scholars claimed their long sought *tête épique*.¹⁴ Francisque Michel's 1837 edition in Old French¹⁵ was simply inaccessible to many and, according to Léon Gautier in his 1872 edition of the *Roland*, Eugène Delécluze's 1845 translation¹⁶ was overlooked as the Revolution of 1848 diverted critics' attention away from the epic.¹⁷ It was Génin's 1850 version which first garnered widespread scholarly attention, resulting in a scholarly focus on the epic status of the *Roland* by such scholars as Francis Génin, Ludovic Vitet, Émile Littré, Émile Souvestre, and Gaston Paris.¹⁸ Particularly after 1858, scholars explored other controversial issues concerning the *Roland*, including its date and the form and transmission of its original songs, in addition to the racial origin of its spirit. It was a propitious time for these studies since during the Second Empire medieval literature assumed a political importance. As Ridoux notes, "Il y eut [...] une sorte d'utilisation officielle du Moyen Age par un régime qui, ne bénéficiant pas de la légitimité naturelle de l'ancienne royauté, ne répugnait pas à souligner des persistances historiques entre la France contemporaine et la France médiévale."¹⁹ Indeed, in 1857, the medievalist J.-B. Mary-Lafon went so far as to compare the relationship of Napoleon III and Abd el-Kader, the Algerian political and military leader, to that of Charlemagne and Fierbras.²⁰

13 See Fauriel, "Origine de l'épopée chevaleresque du Moyen-Age," 513-75, 672-710; Chabaille, "Épopées chevaleresques," 342-61; Ampère, "De la littérature française," 22-34.

14 The immediate response to the publication of the *Chanson de Roland* was limited to brief articles in newspapers and journals. For a list, see Michel's 1869 edition of *La Chanson de Roland et le Roman de Roncevaux*.

15 It is interesting that during these years, scholars were not engaged in a debate over the possible relevance of the *Roland*'s Anglo-Norman dialect. While Gautier and Génin believed that it was written by a Norman and Gaston Paris surmised Breton authorship, scholars at this time were not yet generally focusing on its dialect.

16 Delécluze, *Roland ou la Chevalerie*, vol. 2.

17 Gautier, ed., Introduction to *La Chanson de Roland*, clxxvij.

18 Génin, *La Chanson de Roland*; Littré, "De la poésie épique," 40-64; Gaston Paris, "La Chanson de Roland et les *Nibelungen*," 292-303; Souvestre, *Causeries historiques*, 206-24; Vitet, "La Chanson de Roland," 817-64.

19 Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 74-75.

20 Mary-Lafon, *Fierabras*, xiii. Quoted by Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 75.

As mentioned before, scholars were interested in many issues regarding the *Roland*,²¹ but it was the discussion on the origin of the French epic, the most national of medieval works, which epitomized the French ambiguity regarding the nation's past. Some French scholars stressed the Germanic origin of the French epic, hoping to underscore France's racial link to Germany, the European leader at the time; others, reacting negatively to Germanic ascendancy, postulated a Gallo-Roman origin for the *Roland*; and a third group, emphasizing the unity of the French people, insisted on a French or *Roman* origin.²² This study is an exploration of the criticism pertaining to its racial spirit and its relationship to French national identity in the years between 1859 and the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, after which there was little desire to establish racial ties to Germany. It is based on an examination of journal articles and literary histories from the time period, particularly the critical response to Gaston Paris's *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne* and Léon Gautier's *Les épopées françaises* of 1865, focusing on the origin of the spirit of the epic.

Criticism on the Origin of the Spirit of the French Epic

In *L'origine de l'épopée française et son histoire au moyen âge* (1859), the classicist and historian Charles d'Héricault relies on Tacitus and others who testify that the Germanic tribes had sung the exploits of their ancestors.²³ D'Héricault believes that the specific traits of Germanic tribes inspired these early songs, which he refers to as *cantilènes héroïques*: "Le caractère particulier de la race germaine et le temps où elles [les cantilènes] étaient composées devaient leur imposer une apparence fière, frémissante et barbare, légèrement adoucie par le ton vague de la poésie septentrionale."²⁴ While he hypothesizes that the *chansons de geste* naturally originated from these Germanic songs, d'Héricault admits that no complete *cantilènes* are extant since, he argues, they were intended only to be sung and were therefore not recorded. However, d'Héricault knows of a partial *cantilène*, the *cantilène de Saucourt*, dating from 881, whose origin he claims for the Germanic race:

21 The present study is limited to criticism on the Oxford *Roland*. For an in-depth discussion of the events surrounding its discovery and its different versions, see Faucon, "La bataille (du poème)," 13-23.

22 While *linguae romanae* refers to languages which evolved from Vulgar Latin, in this study *Roman* refers to a language which had undergone sufficient changes to be recognized as early French and distinct from Germanic languages.

23 Including Lucan (39-65 CE), Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330 - c. 395), Gregory of Tours (538-594), Jordanes (6th century), and Alberic of Trois-Fontaines (c. 1200 - 1252). D'Héricault, *Essai sur l'origine*, 11.

24 D'Héricault, *Essai sur l'origine*, 14.

quand on songe au développement de ce chant, lorsque surtout on le compare aux poésies populaires latines, on admet facilement que c'est dans le génie de la race germanique qu'étaient contenus les éléments de notre instinct épique. Il devait logiquement en être ainsi : la race franque était la race guerrière et conquérante; ces exploits étaient son œuvre et sa gloire, c'étaient ses poètes qui devaient naturellement prendre soin de les chanter et ses soldats qui pouvaient se réjouir de les entendre.²⁵

D'Héricault believes, however, that it is only with the development of “la langue vulgaire, la langue romane ou plutôt la langue française,” that the French epic was born since Latin and German were both incapable of expressing the epic spirit.²⁶ Paradoxically, he reiterates immediately afterwards that the *cantilènes*' origin is Germanic: “Il ne faut pas oublier cependant que leur naissance est surtout attachée à l'entrée de la race franque, la race épique, dans la langue vulgaire.”²⁷ This citation clearly illustrates d'Héricault's view — that there is a causal relationship between the Germanic spirit and the origin of the French epic, for the Franks were the *race épique*.

Another scholar convinced of the German contribution to the French epic was the internationally renowned critic and philologist Ernest Renan, “un champion de l'impérialisme, de race, de l'aryanisme et surtout du germanisme théorique,” who eulogized the Germanic values in French society that had disappeared in the later Middle Ages:²⁸

Les nobles fictions dont avait vécu le moyen âge sont évanouies ; Charlemagne est devenu un ridicule personnage dont les romanciers, indignes successeurs des trouvères, font le type de l'imbécillité [...]. Tous les éléments moraux que la race germanique semble avoir portés dans la Gaule avec elle, le sentiment de l'indépendance individuelle, la révolte contre le système administratif et gouvernemental des Romains, où l'individu n'avait aucun droit contre l'État, la grande imagination, l'héroïsme chevaleresque, ont disparu.²⁹

That which remained was *l'esprit gaulois*: “plat, positif, sans élévation, fort avisé pour les choses de ce monde, moraliste à sa manière, mais à condition qu'on entende par moralité l'art de réussir ici-bas.”³⁰ According to Renan, German lineage produced a noble literature (i.e., the epic) while the Gallo-Roman culture hastened the deterioration of these morally superior works — a literary miscegenation.

25 D'Héricault, *Essai sur l'origine*, 16.

26 D'Héricault, *Essai sur l'origine*, 16.

27 D'Héricault, *Essai sur l'origine*, 17.

28 Sellière, “L'impérialisme germanique,” 837.

29 Renan, *Essais*, 307.

30 Renan, *Essais*, 308.

In his article on French medievalist Joseph-Victor Le Clerc, Renan takes Le Clerc to task for not recognizing the Germanic contribution to the French epic, a contribution that he feels is essential to French accomplishments in the Middle Ages:

il ne vit pas que nos grandes épopées du moyen âge étaient à quelques égards germaniques de génie, que jamais la Gaule pure ni la Gaule transformée par Rome n'eussent produit de tels chants ; il n'essaya pas d'analyser le composé ternaire qu'on appelle « France », pour voir duquel de ses trois composants sortaient ces œuvres admirables. — Sans doute, toute production du moyen âge, art gothique, scolastique, chanson de geste, naît en France ; mais qu'était cette France où naissaient de si beaux fruits ? Un pays dominé par la grande féodalité germanique.³¹

Opposing Renan's viewpoint, Paulin Paris, one of the great figures of pre-medievalism, argues that the Gauls inspired the French epic, basing his argument on the observations of Lucan (39 - 65 CE), Claudius Aelianus (c. 175 - c. 235) and Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330 - c. 395) who stated that the Gauls had a habit of celebrating their heroes in primitive songs.³² Paris supports his argument with a citation by the philosopher and historian Posidonius of Apameia, quoted by Athenaeus (fl. c. 200 CE) in *The Learned Banquet*:

'Les Celtes [...] se font accompagner de parasites, même au milieu des camps. Ces parasites ne manquent pas de faire un éloge général et particulier de tous ceux qui partagent le festin; leurs paroles sont recueillies par leurs poètes appelés Bardes, dont l'emploi est de courir le pays, en chantant les louanges des guerriers illustres.'³³

Paulin Paris then corroborates the Gallo-Roman thesis in the same way that d'Héricault defends the Germanic, relying on the testimony of witnesses from centuries past:

Ainsi, [...] dès le temps de Possidonius d'Apamée, c'est-à-dire avant l'ère chrétienne, les Gaulois avoient des bardes ou trouvères qu'ils chargeoient de recueillir le souvenir des grandes actions et de les célébrer dans des chansons héroïques. C'étoit précisément la *chanson de geste*, et l'on ne voit pas quelle différence pouvoit se trouver entre celles dont parloit Possidonius, Lucain, Ælien et Ammien Marcellin, et celles des premiers jongleurs du Moyen âge.³⁴

31 Renan, "Joseph-Victor Le Clerc," in *Mélanges*, 496.

32 Paulin Paris, *Les chansons de geste*, 14-15. For further information on Paulin Paris, see Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 33-41.

33 Paulin Paris, *Les chansons de geste*, 15.

34 Paulin Paris, *Les chansons de geste*, 15.

In his *Histoire des idées littéraires en France au XIX^e siècle et de leurs origines dans les siècles antérieurs* (1863), the literary historian Alfred Michiels also denied Germanic influence on the French epic. In a chapter ostensibly concerning the Celtic influence on French literature, he makes a political and racial statement, claiming that whoever has studied the history of nations knows that the French Revolution was imbued with a Celtic character, an idea earlier proposed by Guizot and Thierry. He attributes to the Gaelic, or Gallic, race³⁵ many of the traits and qualities typically associated with Germanic tribes and *vice versa*:

L'amour illimité de l'indépendance, l'aventureuse audace, le fanatisme et l'ardeur guerrière qui signalent cette période, sont autant de traits particuliers à la race des Gaëls [...]. Ce n'est pas des Germains que nous les tenons: voyez leur prudence, leur tranquille assujétissement, leur amour du foyer domestique, leur terreur du jeûne et des privations qu'endurent les armées; [...] on renonce à établir aucun parallèle entre ces nations pusillanimes et la race gallique, toujours brave dans ses actions, dans ses paroles, et atteignant les dernières limites de l'intrépidité, lorsque les circonstances demandent de grandes sacrifices. Jamais elle n'a pu souffrir aucune domination.³⁶

Michiels praises the contributions of the Celts to French culture and art for several pages, before concluding with a repudiation of Germanic influence on the French epic and on French art in general. He even goes so far as to exclude the *Nibelungenlied* from the category of medieval literature:

Les grandes épopées des temps intermédiaires ne leur [aux Germains] appartiennent cependant en aucune façon. Arthur, le Saint-Graal et même Charlemagne, quoique Teuton d'origine, furent chantés par les Gaëls. Dietrich de Berne et les Nibelungen n'ayant vu le jour qu'au douzième siècle, peuvent à peine compter parmi les cycles du moyen âge.³⁷

Believing that patriotism and literary criticism should not be discrete entities, Michiels appeals to other scholars to follow the example of French historians who recognize the importance of France's Gallic past:

Nous débarrasserons ainsi une des sources obstruées de notre histoire littéraire [...]. Cette opération a été faite pour l'histoire politique: MM. Amédée Thierry et Michelet l'ont habilement exécutée. Leurs prédécesseurs n'avaient point compris l'élément gaulois dans le nombre des causes générales, qui ont déterminé le sort de la nation [...]. Nous

35 Michiels uses the terms "Gallic," "Gaelic," and "Celtic" interchangeably.

36 Michiels, *Histoire des idées*, 371.

37 Michiels, *Histoire des idées*, 382.

croyons urgent de mettre à son tour la critique sur cette voie: elle a manqué assez longtemps de patriotisme.³⁸

In contrast, the most enthusiastic defence of Germanic influence on the French epic comes from the medievalist Léon Gautier, who had studied in Germany and who emphasizes the Frenchness of the French epic while also devoting three chapters of *Les Épopées françaises* (1865) to its Germanic elements. In these chapters, Gautier credits German influence with an indispensable role in creating the *chansons de geste*: “Tout est german, tout est barbare dans ces épopées primitives. Rien de celtique, rien de romain.”³⁹ According to Gautier, the *chansons de geste* are Germanic in origin because their concept of the royalty and jurisprudence is German, and the Roman and Gallo-Roman strategy “n’avait rien qui ressemblât au courage indisipliné, à la vaillance toute sauvage, à la frénésie guerrière des héros de nos romans.”⁴⁰

Gautier continually notes the importance of Charlemagne to the French epic, without whom “nous ne posséderions pas aujourd’hui une seule chanson de geste.”⁴¹ His words reflect the ambiguous status of Charlemagne, a French hero of Germanic origin: “Charlemagne parut: l’épopée germanique ne périt pas. Il était temps: encore un siècle de petits rois et de petites guerres, et c’en était fait de la grande poésie de nos pères.”⁴² Gautier conflates nationalities when he refers to Charlemagne as the “plus grand” and the “plus Français de tous les héros de nos chansons”⁴³ but elsewhere refers to him as “l’honneur de la race germanique.”⁴⁴ Thus, he demonstrates his own ambivalent feelings concerning French heritage, claiming German inspiration for the epic while also wishing to franciser Charlemagne and the *Chanson de Roland*.

In the year when Gautier published his work on the *chansons de geste*, the son of Paulin Paris, medievalist Gaston Paris, a former student of Friedrich Diez and a proponent of the documentary method in critical studies, also published his first major work, *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*.⁴⁵ In the Introduction, Gaston Paris first discusses the generic origin of epics before claiming their parentage for the Aryan race: “Il s’en faut toutefois que tous les peuples qui ont eu une poésie nationale aient des épopées; on

38 Michiels, *Histoire des idées*, 373.

39 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 10.

40 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 12.

41 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 38.

42 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 38.

43 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 43.

44 Gautier, *Les Épopées françaises*, 25.

45 For more information on Gaston Paris, see Ridoux, *Évolution des études médiévales*, 44-47 and 124-30.

n'en trouve au contraire que chez un petit nombre de peuples aryens."⁴⁶ To ensure that there is no ambiguity, Paris includes a footnote: "C'est à tort qu'on a parlé d'épopées égyptiennes, juives, arabes, finnoises, américaines; ce nom ne convient pas aux monuments qu'on a ainsi désignés."⁴⁷ He further clarifies exactly which nations have, or do not have, an epic:

Telle est l'Italie, où on ne trouve pas trace de poésie nationale [...]. Les chants héroïques n'ont pas donné d'épopée en Écosse ni en Serbie, par exemple; mais ils se sont conservés et offrent à la critique une matière extrêmement intéressante; l'Espagne (en laissant ici de côté le poème du *Cid*) a plusieurs classes de chants nationaux fort remarquables qui n'ont pas dépassé cette forme : tels sont les *Romances Fronterizos*. En Scandinavie, en Lithuanie, en Russie, les chants nationaux se sont arrêtés à une forme qu'on peut appeler intermédiaire entre la poésie contemporaine et l'épopée. Les véritables épopées sont celles de l'Inde, de la Perse, de la Grèce, de l'Allemagne, de la Bretagne et de la France.⁴⁸

Paris then broaches the topic of the origin of the French epic. While other literary critics were heatedly discussing the racial origin of the spirit of the French epic, Paris turns instead to a more concrete consideration: the *matériaux* of the epic, which he states are the "chants nationaux des Français."⁴⁹ Disagreeing with d'Héricault, he maintains that there must have been songs in both German and *Roman* celebrating Charlemagne and that the greatest evidence for these *Roman* songs is "l'existence de l'épopée française à une époque assez rapprochée de celle-là [à l'époque de Charlemagne]."⁵⁰ Paris devotes the rest of the Introduction to supporting this claim with documents from the past.

Much later in the book, Paris promotes the *Roman* thesis again when he asserts that the absence of mythological elements in the French epic, elements frequently found in the Germanic epic, proves that it is *Roman*. The French epic "a germé, elle est née et elle a fleuri sur un sol tout historique," and is based on concrete personages and events, not myths.⁵¹ He surmises that since the German Carolingian cycle has many more references to mythology than the French, the French cycle cannot be Germanic in origin, but must be *Roman*:

En Allemagne, où une vaste cycle mythologique survécut longtemps, à l'état de vagues récits, de superstitions tenaces, de dénominations populaires, à la religion qui en était

46 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 2-3.

47 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 3, n. 1.

48 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 9.

49 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 11.

50 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 45.

51 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 431-32.

l'âme, les quelques récits qui se rattachent à Charlemagne offrent au mythologue un butin plus riche que l'immense épopée française.⁵²

Paris does not engage in a debate over something as nebulous as the origin of the spirit of the epic and limits his comments on the racial origin of the French epic to the areas of language and myth, areas which can be supported with literary references. Ironically, as intent as he is upon scientifically proving his findings, he nevertheless resorts to racial stereotyping in his remarks about Aryans and non-Aryans, underscoring France's racial bond with Germany as one of the few Aryan nations capable of producing an epic. Some contemporaneous scholars, such as Boissier and Lenient, who generally praised his book, viewed his Aryan thesis as inappropriate and unfounded.⁵³

The news of the Prussian victory over the Austrians at Sadowa, Czechoslovakia, in July 1866, changed many French scholars' attitude towards Germany and German culture. This victory marked the European, and particularly the French, recognition of the military prowess of Prussia. French scholars who had long admired Germany as an idealistic, peaceful country were unprepared for Prussian aggression, and some were quite worried about what the Prussian victory meant for France. Claude Digeon describes the effect that Sadowa had on the French mindset: "La victoire prussienne de Sadowa marque un premier ébranlement. Après 1866, une inquiétude se fait jour."⁵⁴ Although none of the following scholars specifically mentions Sadowa, their comments suggest a French reaction to the Prussian aggression.

In 1867, Gaston Boissier, *maître des conférences* at the École Normale, professor of Latin poetry at the Collège de France, and a frequent contributor to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, critiqued both *Les Épopées françaises* and *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*. Boissier first briefly examines Paris's work, which he generally accepts as a work of scholarship except for his Introduction, which he says lacks Paris's usual scientific method and even contains "des affirmations hasardées."⁵⁵ He challenges Paris's notion that the epic belongs only to the elite nations when "on va nous apprendre que des peuples qui ont conquis et gouverné le monde n'ont pas eu d'épopée. Suffit-il d'affirmer sans preuves 'qu'elle est l'apanage exclusif des peuples âryens,' quand on sait que beaucoup de savans pensent le contraire."⁵⁶ He turns to Gautier's work, severely criticizing Gautier for his naiveté, excessive enthusiasm, and patriotism and for his lack of knowledge concerning

52 Gaston Paris, *Histoire poétique*, 433-34.

53 See Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 850, and Lenient, "La poésie patriotique," 38.

54 Digeon, *La Crise Allemande*, 24.

55 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 852.

56 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 852.

antiquity. Boissier does not comment upon Gautier's claim that the spirit of the French epic was German in origin, but agrees with Gautier and others that the French epic was born from German *cantilènes*. However, he believes, as does d'Héricault, that it is only with a change of language that the *cantilènes* evolved into something more poetic: "A mesure que les Francs oubliaient le tudesque et que de leur mélange avec les vaincus naissait un idiome nouveau, la chanson changea naturellement de langage, comme en passant le Rhin elle avait déjà changé de patrie."⁵⁷

Boissier hastily leaves the subject of the Germanic origin of the songs to explain that the *Chanson de Roland*, "le chef-d'œuvre de la poésie épique du moyen âge," was a very early expression of the French *esprit*.⁵⁸ His praise of the French realistic style includes a veiled criticism of the *Nibelungenlied* and the German people:

N'est-il pas remarquable que la première fois qu'il [l'esprit français] produit une œuvre digne de lui il soit tout à fait lui-même, et qu'il se révèle si clairement du premier coup? [...] La grandeur n'y a rien de démesuré. Malgré tous les excès de leur héroïsme, les personnages restent vrais. Les événemens sont extraordinaires, jamais romanesques. Le merveilleux y est employé sobrement; il occupe à peine quelques vers. Le ton est partout celui de l'histoire, sans mélange de bizarrerie mythique ou légendaire. On voit bien que le peuple pour lequel il est composé n'est pas de ceux qu'on amuse avec des contes, qui veulent qu'on les étonne, qui ne sont sensibles qu'à l'extraordinaire et au surnatural. Il a le sens et le goût de la vérité.⁵⁹

He maintains that the *Chanson de Roland* must be French because it announces the defining characteristics of what will become French literature: "Ce qui rend pour moi le *Roland* si curieux, c'est qu'il est, comme l'*Iliade*, le premier ouvrage d'une grande littérature qui révèle d'avance ses principales aptitudes, et dès son premier pas laisse prévoir ses destinées."⁶⁰ Boissier praises the French epic, pokes fun at the German, and further enhances the status of the *Chanson de Roland* by comparing it to the *Iliad*. Ironically, in spite of his own chauvinistic words, he concludes by asking that readers rise above nationalistic concerns when reading a work of poetry:

Gardons-nous d'adopter ces théories systématiques et exclusives; prenons la poésie de toutes mains, et tâchons d'en jouir, quand nous la rencontrons, sans lui demander son origine. Faisons-nous, autant que nous le pourrons, un goût large et flexible,

57 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 857.

58 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 863.

59 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 863-64.

60 Boissier, "Théories Nouvelles," 865.

capable de comprendre les poètes de tous les pays et de tous les temps, aussi bien ceux des époques civilisées que ceux des époques primitives.⁶¹

In “Le Génie français dans la *Chanson de Roland*,” Siméon Luce, professor of medieval studies at the Sorbonne, also examines Paris’s and Gautier’s books. Like Boissier, he devotes few words to Paris’s work, though he praises it as being, in “l’avis des meilleurs juges, une des oeuvres les plus judicieuses dont s’honore notre pays.”⁶² Proceeding to Gautier’s, he takes issue with what he terms Gautier’s only fundamental error which consists “à prétendre, et M. Gautier y met une insistance vraiment déplorable, que tout est germanique dans nos poèmes chevaleresques et en particulier dans la *Chanson de Roland*.”⁶³ Luce first attacks Gautier’s Germanic thesis of the origin of the *cantilènes*, agreeing with Paris that there were parallel *cantilènes* in German and *Roman*, and that it was only logical that the French epic evolved from the *Roman*: “Telle est la solution qu’il est impossible de ne pas donner en bonne logique au problème de l’origine de nos poèmes chevaleresques; cette solution met en pleine lumière la provenance toute romane de l’épopée française.”⁶⁴

Luce turns to the origin of the spirit of the epic, contending that the *génie* responsible for the epic was born from four elements, the Celtic, the Neoceltic, the Roman, and the Germanic, and that “Il n’est aucun des quatre éléments indiqués [...] qui prédomine exclusivement dans la *Chanson de Roland*, type de notre épopée nationale.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he devotes the rest of the article to demonstrating the insignificance of the influence of the Germanic element on the French epic:

Je comparerais volontiers ce qui subsiste de germanique dans le chef-d’oeuvre de notre poésie épique à ces débris qui restent, après une inondation, à la surface du sol un instant submergé ; notre pays, lui aussi, a été inondé par les flots des invasions barbares, et la plus originale de nos épopées a gardé çà et là la trace superficielle de cette inondation.⁶⁶

Like Boissier, but more overtly, Luce contrasts the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Nibelungenlied*. He agrees with other scholars that the *Chanson de Roland*’s reliance on history, in contrast to the *Nibelungenlied*’s dependence on mythology, proves the former

61 Boissier, “Théories Nouvelles,” 879.

62 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 632.

63 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 632.

64 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 633.

65 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 634.

66 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 635.

not to be Germanic: “Cette absence complète d’un mélange mythique prouve avec une force irrésistible [...] que notre épopée nationale n’a nullement subi, dans sa partie essentielle, l’influence germanique, et qu’elle est de formation purement romane.”⁶⁷ He believes that the general sentiment of the two epics also differ: “Nulle idée générale, religieuse ou autre, qui anime les divers personnages de l’épopée germanique; nul mobile d’un ordre vraiment élevé et supérieur qui les fasse agir. Rien que des appétits, des passions, des vengeances, des exploits d’un caractère étroitement individuel.”⁶⁸ However, in the *Chanson de Roland* “les personnages [...] depuis Charlemagne jusqu’au plus humble de ses guerriers, sans excepter les Sarrasins eux-mêmes, rapportent toutes leurs pensées, toutes leurs actions, à une seule idée, à un seul sentiment, qui est leur foi religieuse.”⁶⁹

For Luce, another proof that the *Chanson de Roland* is not Germanic in origin is Charlemagne’s role in it. According to Luce, Charlemagne’s popularity, which was evident in France during his lifetime as well as after his death, did not manifest itself in Germany until much later; therefore, the image of Charlemagne in the *Chanson de Roland* could be nothing but French.⁷⁰ Further evidence of the French and German epics’ distinct origins is, according to Luce, provided by the characteristics of their female characters:

Rien n’est plus éloigné de l’esprit et des mœurs germaniques que la femme telle qu’elle apparaît dans notre épopée nationale, sous les traits de la belle Aude [...]. Kriemhilt et Brunhilt ne le cèdent en rien aux guerriers pour l’intrépidité et aussi pour les mœurs sensuelles, brutales, sanguinaires et féroce­ment vindicatives [...]. L’héroïne française est aussi chaste et modeste que les heroines germaniques sont impudentes et dévergondées.⁷¹

Luce’s last argument in the attempt to divorce the *Chanson de Roland* from German influence rests upon the claim that the characters in the *Chanson de Roland* are stereotypes, and since stereotypes will prevail in the classic age of French literature, the *Chanson de Roland* must have been the model. He says that in the *Roland* one finds only

des types généraux et un peu abstraits, des figures excessivement simples et réduites à une ou deux grandes lignes, mais fort soutenues, bref des créations logiquement idéales. Qui se serait douté que, par cette conception élevée et sévèrement classique des héros dont il trace la peinture, l’auteur inconnu de notre épopée nationale est le précurseur et comme l’ancêtre naturel de nos grands poètes du XVII^e siècle?⁷²

67 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 640.

68 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 635.

69 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 636.

70 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 641.

71 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 638.

72 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 642.

The *Nibelungenlied*, with its “individus d’une réalité barbare ou triviale [...] dont la physionomie morale se modifie plus ou moins au gré des événements,” has no relationship to the *Chanson de Roland* whose characters remain constant from beginning to end.⁷³ Luce concludes that the extremes of the French literary stereotype are not just a fictional invention, but are part of the French national identity:

La poursuite de l’absolu, dans l’action encore plus que dans la poésie, a toujours été le tourment, pour ne pas dire la chimère de la France des croisades comme de la France de la Révolution [...] et la patrie de Saint-Louis, de Jeanne d’Arc et de Napoléon n’a pas plus connu les moyens termes dans ses entreprises politiques que dans ses créations poétiques.⁷⁴

Luce begins his article stating that all four racial elements were equally represented in the French epic, but thereafter systematically discounts the Germanic contribution. While he does not mention Sadowa by name, it is undoubtedly on his mind when he states,

Avant les événements de ces dernières années, les descendants des vieux Germains étaient restés fidèles, à tous les points de vue, à l’esprit d’individualisme qui a inspiré leur épopée nationale. Cet individualisme [...] avait empêché ce grand pays de constituer son unité politique. C’est d’hier seulement que cette unité semble enfin sur le point de se réaliser; on sait au prix de quelles luttes!⁷⁵

Luce is on the defensive, evidently threatened by Gautier’s German thesis. He moves from critiquing Paris’s and Gautier’s books on the epic to drawing conclusions about the German and French peoples based on their epics.

In 1867, Paul Meyer, philologist and professor of the Languages and Literatures of Southern Europe at the Collège de France, and a contemporary of Gaston Paris, also critiqued Gautier’s and Paris’s works in *Recherches sur “L’Épopée française, Examen critique de L’Histoire Poétique de Charlemagne” de M. G. Paris et “Des Épopées françaises” de M. L. Gautier*. Meyer disagrees with Paris on a variety of issues, but appreciates the latter’s attempt to be scientific in his findings, and is generally complimentary. He agrees with Paris that the *cantilènes* from which the French epic was born were in *Roman* and concurs with Boissier, Luce, and Paris that if the French epic were Germanic in origin, it would contain more mythological elements.

Meyer is much more critical of Gautier’s work and what he believes to be Gautier’s subjective judgements. He examines Gautier’s ideas on the spirit responsible for the

73 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 643.

74 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 644.

75 Luce, “Le Génie français,” 645.

epic, which, he admits, is a controversial topic: “Les uns pensent que notre épopée est purement romane; les autres la confondent à ses débuts avec l’épopée germanique.”⁷⁶ Instead of grouping the Romans, Gauls, and Germans into three separate entities, he postulates that these three races had already mixed, and that by the ninth century there was a new nationality, which could only be identified as *Roman*. This nationality owed its language to the Gallo-Romans and its institutions to the Germans, thereby forming “un nouveau milieu.”⁷⁷ He attacks Gautier’s ignorance of the existence and importance of this mixed race, which was likely responsible for the French epic:

A priori, il n’y a aucune invraisemblance à supposer que notre épopée soit sortie de ce milieu, [roman] et, dans ce cas, il serait tout simple qu’elle présentât des traits germaniques puisque le milieu lui-même en contenait. L’hypothèse d’une épopée sortie du milieu roman a même d’autant plus de probabilité que la nationalité romane occupait plus d’espace sur le territoire de la Gaule. M. Gautier ne l’a point aperçue, et par là son raisonnement se trouve vicié.⁷⁸

Meyer dismisses Gautier’s conclusion that Tacitus’s and Einhard’s testimonies prove the French epic to be Germanic in origin: “M. Gautier en tire les conclusions qu’on en a toujours tirées: à savoir, que les Germains étaient ‘un peuple poétique,’ que leur poésie ‘était avant tout nationale,’ que ‘ces poésies remontaient pour la plupart à une époque fort reculée, etc.’”⁷⁹ Meyer also takes issue with Gautier’s claim that without Charlemagne, France would have no *chanson de geste*. He admits there would be fewer, but that other heroes would have been sung. Meyer declares that Gautier is attempting to put into practice the theory of the Germanic origin of the epic, confirming his system with shaky evidence.

Meyer concludes by saying that he has tried to show that the French epic “est sortie d’un milieu roman, d’où par conséquent l’élément germanique n’était pas absent, mais où il ne dominait pas.”⁸⁰ In refuting Gautier’s claims for a Germanic French epic, Meyer uses only the criteria of language, refusing, along with Gaston Paris, to engage in a debate over the inspiration of the epic. Meyer believes great progress was made in the study of Romance languages when it was recognized that Germanic languages had influenced only a few hundred words. This discovery resolved the question of the origin of the French epic for him, and he expected other scholars would follow his lead: “la confusion qui règne

⁷⁶ Meyer, *Recherches sur l’épopée française*, 56.

⁷⁷ Meyer, *Recherches sur l’épopée française*, 58.

⁷⁸ Meyer, *Recherches sur l’épopée française*, 58.

⁷⁹ Meyer, *Recherches sur l’épopée française*, 59.

⁸⁰ Meyer, *Recherches sur l’épopée française*, 75.

encore aux origines de notre littérature aura singulièrement diminué quand il sera reconnu que jamais, à aucune période de son existence, notre épopée ne s'est confondue avec celle des peuples germaniques."⁸¹

If, after Sadowa, many French scholars had feared German military power, at the advent of the Franco-Prussian War they no longer doubted German ambitions. A few scholars wrote blatantly patriotic articles on the nationality of the French epic immediately after 1871, but in general, scholars turned away from the topic of its origin, and there was a reticence to continue to emphasize the importance of Charlemagne's relation to the French epic and to France.⁸² As Robert Morrissey explains,

France no longer recognized itself in the figure that had for so long dominated the multiple visions France had of itself. Stuck in the crossfire of different nationalisms and penetrated by the multiple and specialized gazes of the human and social sciences, the discourse on Charlemagne lost its cohesion and its identifying power. Suddenly, Charlemagne's relationship to France began to be questioned as he began to be considered too close to the German Other, seen henceforth as a people, an ethnic unit.⁸³

Although near the end of the century some scholars restated the Germanic influence on the epic,⁸⁴ French scholars who had stressed French racial connections to the German people no longer insisted on them, and the quest for the "spirit" that had inspired the epic came to an end in the aftermath of the war.

Nineteenth-century French literary history and criticism are fraught with references to Germanic and Gallo-Roman heritages. These peoples who inhabited France in the Middle Ages left a legacy which evolved into a disputed heritage during the course of French history that took on a new significance in the nineteenth century. Literary historians, medievalists, and critics made value judgements concerning not only the literature but also the "races" involved. Medieval French literature had been transformed: having earlier been a subject which was of interest almost exclusively to antiquarians, in the late nineteenth century it became an issue of national importance. For many scholars, the origin of the epic explained the origin of the French people, a matter of the greatest significance in nineteenth-century France. Ironically, at the same time that French nationalism reached its peak, France was losing its status as the cultural and intellectual leader of Europe, and a perception of decadence was entering the French

81 Meyer, *Recherches sur l'épopée française*, 63.

82 See Gautier, "L'idée politique," 79-114; Lenient, "La poésie patriotique," 35-42; Gaston Paris, "La Chanson de Roland et la nationalité française"; Sepet, "Le drapeau de la France," 156-63.

83 Morrissey, *Charlemagne and France*, 293.

84 Gaston Paris, *La littérature française*, 22-26; Rossel, *Histoire des relations littéraires*, 11-15.

psyche. After the discovery of the *Chanson de Roland* and its publication in 1837, the determination of the race responsible for the spiritual origin of the epic came to be at the centre of a scholarly controversy. Some members of the French intelligentsia, discouraged by France's lost of prestige, wished to underscore the French link to the Germanic people, an Aryan people, and posited a Germanic origin for the French epic; others, reacting to what they perceived as a German threat, supported the theory of a Celtic origin; still others stressed French nationality and asserted a French origin. The question of the origin of the spirit of the French epic had thus become a cultural and political issue, and revealed a serious lack of consensus over French national identity during the Second Empire.

Tennessee Tech University

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