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THE DICTION OF THE EARLIEST CHANSONS DE GESTE.

SINCE the first appearance of the *Chançon de Willame* some dozen years ago the literature on the subject of the *Chansons de Geste* has considerably increased and the *Chançon* itself has given rise to much diversity of opinion. It is a far cry from the opinion of M. Weeks (*Romania* xxxiv, 241), who places the *Chançon de Willame* by the side of the *Chanson de Roland*, and considers that in some respects it even surpasses it, to that of M. Ph. Aug. Becker, who characterizes it as 'l'œuvre d'un chanteur ambulant de la dernière catégorie, qui s'efforce de raconter d'après d'autres ce qu'il a souvent entendu réciter...'¹

A recent writer in *Romania* (M. M. Wilmotte in an article entitled *La Chanson de Roland et la Chançon de Willame*²), although dissociating himself from the extreme view taken by M. Becker, has nevertheless followed in his wake so far as to see in the author of the *Chançon* nothing more than an 'imitateur patient,' who employs without scruple the exact words and phrases of his more gifted predecessor—the author of the *Chanson de Roland*—'notre jongleur avait les vers de son modèle dans la tête; il était accoutumé à les réciter—ils lui venaient au gré de ses besoins' (cf. *op. cit.* p. 60). M. Wilmotte has been at pains to place side by side a series of passages from the *Chançon de Willame* and the corresponding lines—often widely separated in the actual text—of the *Chanson de Roland* which he believes the author of the former work to have remembered and introduced into his own descriptions, and for M. Wilmotte this investigation confirms 'l'antériorité et aussi l'éclatante supériorité de ce dernier' (*Roland*).

Quite apart from the question of the soundness of the particular method of selection employed in this investigation, a wider question may be raised as to the degree of reliability to be placed on any comparison of this sort based on the verbal similarity of two of these Old French

¹ *Grundriss d. altfrz. Literatur*, i. Teil, Heidelberg, 1907, p. 55.

² *Romania*, Janvier 1915, p. 5 f.

poems. It is well known that, in the later *Chansons de Geste*, when the seeds of decadence are already bearing fruit, the vocabulary of these poems and their whole phraseology and character became more and more conventional¹. The descriptions of single combats, etc., became just as stereotyped as the descriptions of springtime, birds and flowers in the conventional lyric of that epoch. But, although the 'moule épique' is as yet barely evolved in the earliest *chansons*, one cannot study them carefully without realizing that already, at this early date, a common stock of expressions and a more or less fossilized vocabulary of conventional phrases existed, which give even these most ancient poems the appearance of having had a considerable tradition behind them. It is possible, for instance, to take practically all the passages of the *Chançon de Willame* quoted by M. Wilmotte as convincing proof of the influence of the *Chanson de Roland*, and find parallels for them in *Gormund et Isembard*—the *chanson de geste* perhaps the most nearly contemporary with these two poems. Some of the most striking parallels occur in the description of what M. Wilmotte calls 'le premier corps à corps,' concerning which he remarks that the description in *Willame* 'n'est guère qu'un centon de Roland.' But in each case we find almost the identical phrase in *Gormund et Isembard* also. Unfortunately we possess only a fragment of *Gormund*, otherwise the comparison might be more complete; but the following examples (for all of which M. Wilmotte cites corresponding lines in *Roland*) suffice to show how familiar these expressions must have already become.

Fiert un paien sur sa doble targe
Tute li fent del un ur desqu'a l'altre.
(*Will.* 321—2.)

Sur sun escu li dona grande
d'un or a l'altre li fist fendre.
(*Gorm.* 71—2.)²

Parmi l'eschine sun grant espie li passe.
Tut estendu l'abat mort en la place.
(*Will.* 324—5.)

Parmi le cors l'espie li mist
...del bon cheval mort l'abati.
(*Gorm.* 458, 460.)

L'escu li fruiisset e Valberc li rumpist
e treis des costes en sun cors li malmist
pleine sa hauste del cheval l'abatit.
(*Will.* 421—3.)

L'escu li at frait e malmis
l'alberc desmaillet et rumpi:
...tant que la lance li tendi
del bon cheval mort l'abati.
(*Gorm.* 456 f.)

Tant li lancerent guivres et trenchanz
darz.
(*Will.* 769.)

Gormunz li lance un dart trenchant.
(*Gorm.* 25.)
Gormunz li lancet une guivre.
(*Gorm.* 149.)

¹ Cf. Léon Gautier, *Les Epopées françaises*, I, pp. 153—4.

² *Gormund et Isembard*, *Les classiques français du moyen-âge*, Paris, 1914.

Ce fut damage quand si prudome chiet.

(*Will.* 922.)

Willame fiert le paien en le healme
L'une meitie l'en abat sur (la) destre
 Del roiste colp s'enclinet vers (la) terre
E embracad del bon destrier (le) col e
 les resnes.

(*Will.* 1919—1922.)

Ce fut damages e pechiez
 Car mult par ert bons chevaliers¹.

(*Gorm.* 324, cf. also 414.)

Gesqu'al braiel le purfendiet
 qu'en pre en chiecent *les meities* ;
 ...a bien petit que il ne chiet,
quant sur le col del bon destrier
s'est retenus...

(*Gorm.* 395—400.)

It is clear from these and many other examples that might be given that a regular set of phrases existed for the description of single combats in the *Chansons de Geste*. These phrases occur over and over again in the same poems, and it is obvious that they often became mere tags, used to fill out a line or furnish an assonance. Nor is this fact confined to descriptions of battle-scenes, although these seem to have become the most conventional in character from the earliest times. Many other phenomena have their stereotyped character and recognized form of description. M. Wilmotte calls attention to the fact that both in *Willame* and *Roland* 'les paiens...s'enfuient sans ombre de raison,' and that they are designated in both poems as 'la gent averse.' But in *Gormund et Isembard* also they are constantly fleeing without reason², in this poem also they are spoken of as 'la gent averse' (238). In *Gormund* the same mode of expressing praise is employed with regard to the heathen as in *Roland*: 'si creissiez en Damne Deu | hom ne pouüst meilleur trover³.' In all the oldest *chansons* they make strange noises like animals (braire, crier, hennir, huchier, glatir, etc.), and the same words and expressions are used to describe them. The phraseology used in connection with them has become as conventional as their character.

It is not so surprising that a fixed institution such as the 'regret funèbre,' found in all the older *Chansons de Geste*, possessed its own particular formulae. These are well known and have often been noticed. M. Wilmotte, however, sees in these also an influence of *Roland*, and compares Guillaume's discourse to his horse with that of Roland to his sword.

Ha Balcan, bon destrier, *tant mar*
fustes.

(*Will.*)

E Durendal, bone, *si mare fustes.*

(*Roland.*)

But these identical words occur in practically every one of the

¹ The parallel in this case is more striking than in the line of *Roland* cited by M. Wilmotte: Or est grand duel quant l'archevesque chiet, 2082.

² Cf. v. 604, a tant s'en sunt fuiant turné; 610, si s'enfuirent cil d'Irlande; 613, Paien se fuient tut a un.

³ Cf. *Roland* 899, Fust chrestien asez öust barnet, etc.

funeral orations that we know, and had become almost a part of the ritual. Needless to say they occur in *Gormund* :

529. Mult franchement l'at regreté :
Ahi ! dist il, reis amirés.
Tant mare fustes, gentilz ber.

or again :

540. *Tant mare fustes, reis baron.*

The form of lamentation was fixed long before the date of the earliest *Chanson de Geste* known to us. In *Saint Alexis* already the institution, with its similar form of expression, occurs: 'sempres regretet: *mar te portai, bel filz,*' etc. (437). There, too, we find the epithet 'juvante bele' which M. Wilmotte mentions as occurring in both *Willame* and *Roland*¹; and its presence in *Saint Alexis* is interesting in this connection because the style of this poem more nearly approaches that of the *Chansons de Geste* than that of the majority of religious or didactic poems.

But it is unnecessary to multiply examples. Practically all those cited by M. Wilmotte could be taken as proof of an existing common stock of expressions familiar to most of the rhymers of that day, rather than as evidence of the imitation of one *Chanson de Geste* by the author of another. These phrases were in the air, and no jongleur needed to go to the *Chanson de Roland* or to any other particular model to borrow the phraseology for his own poem. These formulae were rendered necessary by the repeated descriptions of familiar episodes which would have taxed the vocabulary of the most gifted author to describe in ever-varying terms. The formulae themselves might vary in some slight detail. For instance, one jongleur may prefer 'pleine sa lance,' another 'pleine sa hanste,' or again another 'raide sa lance.' 'Parmi le cors' may be varied by 'parmi l'eschine' or 'parmi le dos' (sun grant espie li passe), etc.—the exact form being often simply dictated by the number of syllables required in the line or by the vowel of the assonance. If the formula occurs in the first half of the line the second half may allow room for play of the imagination. A conventional description of a valiant fighter, for instance, may be varied as follows:

Aliscans 276. Cui il consuit ne puet de mort garir
180. Cui il consierent tous est de la mort fis.

In *Gormund*, where we have the 'vers octosyllabe,' the phrase is necessarily shorter:

580. Qui il consuit, ne s'en ala.
616. Qui il consuit, tut es vaincus.

¹ Cf. also *Aliscans* 790.

In *Garin le Loherain* a slightly different version appears :

6. Qu'il aconsuit malement est baillis.

In the Provençal epic, *Girart de Rossillon*, owing to the fact that the *pause* occurs after the sixth syllable, the formula itself has to be modified :

Cui esconsec a coup, pois ne vit goute

(l. 82 of the extract in Appel's *Provenzalische Chrestomathie*).

A favourite description of severe wounds in the poems of the *cycle de Guillaume* differs only in detail :

Aliscans 353. De la menor morust uns fors roncis.
 720. De la menor morust uns amires.
Willame II, 1993. De la menur fust morz uns amiranz,
 etc.

Examples might be multiplied. Gormund has his shield broken in halves five times in as many successive single combats described in hardly varying language.

50. sil fiert sur la targe novele
 qu'il la li fraint e eschantele.
 122. sil fiert sur sun escu bendé
 qu'il la li at fraint e quassé,
 etc.

Here obviously the similarity of language is necessitated by the frequent repetition of the episode. These repetitions are a well-known feature of the style of the Old French Epic¹; but we are not here concerned with the style of the *Chançon de Willame* but merely with its diction. As regards style (as distinguished from diction) the author of the *Chançon* cannot possibly be accused of having imitated, or even been greatly influenced by, the author of the *Chanson de Roland*. Its diction, on the other hand, does closely resemble that of *Roland*; but this does not prove that its author was an unscrupulous plagiarist or a laborious imitator. The reason simply is, as we have tried to show, that the authors of both these poems, in common with the author of *Gormund et Isembard* and many another jongleur of that day, drew from a common stock of expressions and epithets.

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¹ Suchier has pointed out how effectively these repetitions have been employed by the author of the *Chançon de Willame* to mark a gradual change of sentiment in the three lines :

Plurat Guiburc, confortat la Guillelmes, 1304.
 Plurat Guillelmes, dunc lacrimat Guiburc, 1317.
 Plorat Guillelmes, Guiburc l'at conforté, 1352.
 (Cf. *Bibl. Norm.*, VIII, Introd. p. xxv.) Cf. also P. Meyer, *Romania*, xxxii, 598, 599.