Reading Charlemagne in Medieval England

Marianne Ailes (University of Bristol)
marianne.ailes@bristol.ac.uk

and

Phillipa Hardman (University of Reading)
p.m.hardman@reading.ac.uk

Carles li reis nostre emperere magnes…

So begins the Oxford MS of the *Chanson de Roland*, copied in England sometime around the middle of the twelfth century. What was the Anglo-Norman scribe thinking when he copied these words? In what sense could Charlemagne be considered **our** emperor in England? The great man had never set foot in these islands, let alone ruled here.

Line 1 of this Anglo-Norman redaction of the most famous *chanson de geste* epitomizes one of the key questions behind the Charlemagne in England project. This material is also known as the Matter of France; what has **Charlemagne** (unlike **Arthur** in the Matter of Britain) to do with English or wider insular culture? What Charlemagne narratives were being read in medieval England? Who was reading about Charlemagne and how was his myth appropriated in an insular context? While it might not be possible to know who was actually reading Charlemagne texts, we can ascertain, to some extent, who **owned** Charlemagne texts, which texts were in circulation in medieval England in which languages, and at least make some tentative suggestions about how they were being used. These answers may in turn take us some way to addressing the question: in what sense was Charlemagne **our** emperor in medieval England?

What Charlemagne texts were circulating in medieval England, and in what languages?

Relatively few Charlemagne narratives are found in Middle English, though some narrative traditions occur in several different texts. There are three main narrative strands in the Middle English Charlemagne texts, coming from: 1) the Roncevaux narrative, which is the core of the *Chanson de Roland* and a major element in the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, and is found in translations of the *Pseudo-Turpin* and the fragmentary Middle English *Song of Roland*; 2) the *Fierabras* tradition, from the *chanson de geste* about the converted Saracen Fierabras, a narrative that was widespread across

Europe and, although much less well-known today than the *Roland*, was probably second only to that great masterpiece in its reach, and is found in no fewer than three independent Middle English verse translations; 3) the *Otinel* tradition, from the *chanson de geste* about the converted Saracen Otinel, which also survives in three independent Middle English versions. There are strong intertextual links and allusions across these three traditions. The traditional thinking about the reason for this restricted range of material has been based on the supposition that **only** these texts were known in Anglo-Norman. Looking behind the extant Middle English texts to the source texts, and reaching back from extant manuscripts, including the evidence of sometimes ignored or previously unknown fragments, to medieval library catalogues and inventories, our research has rewritten the narrative of the reception of the *chanson de geste* in England to demonstrate a much larger number of French epic texts circulating, and to this we must also add Charlemagne narratives circulating in chronicle or pseudo-chronicle form.

Charlemagne texts circulated in England in all three of its major languages, Latin, French and English, and in two main forms: chronicle history and *chanson de geste*. Monastic libraries in particular sometimes had copies of Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*, still recognized as 'real' history, but Charlemagne was much better known through the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and many copies are recorded. Medieval library catalogues were written in Latin, so it is not always possible to know the actual language of a text, although catalogues do sometimes tell us if a particular item is *in gallice*, or give the incipit or first line of the second folio, which might allow us to distinguish the French and Latin texts. The *Pseudo-Turpin* is found frequently in Latin and a significant number of institutions, among them Dover Priory and Peterborough Abbey, held French copies. Additionally, in the early thirteenth century an Anglo-Norman translation was commissioned by William Fitzgerold and his wife. The translator, William de Briane, was a cleric and can probably be identified with a clergyman who held the living of St Mary's Whitchurch.

The *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* survives in more than 200 manuscripts and in several versions, classified by C. J. Meredith-Jones. (Perhaps digital editing will make possible a re-investigation of the whole tradition, but until that happens we depend on the work of Meredith Jones for the Latin tradition and Ian Short and Ronald Walpole for the French.) It seems that the C group of texts had particular currency in England and Northern Europe, and it is to this group that William's Anglo-Norman version belongs. However, there is little evidence of its becoming widely known: it survives in just one copy, BL MS Arundel 220. The *Pseudo-Turpin* was also translated into Middle English in the fifteenth century, and again survives in only one manuscript copy. Thus by the fifteenth century

the *Pseudo-Turpin* existed in England in Latin, continental French, Anglo-Norman and Middle English.

The other vehicle for Charlemagne material was, of course, the *chanson de geste*. Surviving manuscripts suggest that in the twelfth and into the thirteenth century the genre was popular in England, with all the oldest *chansons de geste* surviving only in Anglo-Norman manuscripts: *La Chanson de Roland*, the oldest extant *chanson de geste*; *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, recounting Charlemagne's mythical voyage to Jerusalem and Constantinople; and two texts set in the time of Charlemagne's son, Louis: *Gormond et Isembard* and the *Chanson de Guillaume*. Of these early texts, only the *Roland* was translated into Middle English, but clearly, other narratives about Charlemagne were circulating in England. The late twelfth-century *Aspremont*, set in Italy and including an account of Charlemagne's conflict with the Saracen Agoland, was another text which seems to have found favour in an insular context, as no fewer than 7 MSS and fragments in Anglo-Norman are extant, although it too was not translated into Middle English.

Both *Otinel* and *Fierabras* are found in Anglo-Norman as well as continental manuscripts. The so-called 'Vulgate' version of *Fierabras* dates from the turn of the twelfth century, though the manuscripts are later; in addition to a number of continental manuscripts, it is found in one Anglo-Norman manuscript (Hanover Landesbibliothek IV 578); another was lost in the fire at Louvain library in 1946; an insular fourteenth-century abbreviated redaction of the narrative is found in BL MS Egerton 3028. Manuscript evidence suggests a continuing place for the *chanson de geste* in élite culture. The luxurious Shrewsbury Book, BL MS Royal 15 E VI, made as a wedding gift for Marguerite d'Anjou on the occasion of her marriage to Henry VI, is not strictly Anglo-Norman, because copied in France, but it was certainly designed to be read in England, and it includes a *livre de Charlemagne* containing *Aspremont, Fierabras* and *Simon de Pouille* (not otherwise known in England). The early thirteenth-century *Otinel* is found in one Anglo-Norman manuscript (Cologny, Fondation Martin Bodmer, MS 168) and a fragment; this amounts to half of the manuscript witnesses, as there is one continental manuscript and one very short fragment of uncertain origin.

All these Charlemagne texts belong to the *cycle du roi* celebrating the achievements of Charlemagne, but the myth of Charlemagne was also expressed in another group of poems, the *cycle des barons revoltés*, also known as the *cycle de Mayence*. These poems present rebellion as almost justifiable. The best known is *Renaud de Montauban*/*Les Quatre Fils Aymon.* It is usually thought that this cycle was not well known in England, though an early reference to *Renaud de Montauban* is found in *De naturis rerum* of the English scholar Alexander Neckham (d. 1217), and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hatton 59 consists of three unconnected fragments of

Renaud, at least one of which is in an insular hand.[1] Though not Anglo-Norman, a bifolium fragment of another text of the cycle, *Maugis d'Aigremont*, now serving as a simple wrapper or folder for some documents relating to rents owed to Henry VII and bearing the name Thomas Wode in a fifteenth-century hand, suggests that this text was also circulating in England. An investigation of medieval library catalogues reveals several other instances of *Renaud de Montauban*, though it does not seem to have had the popularity of *Fierabras*, *Otinel* or *Aspremont*, or the *Pseudo-Turpin*.

A study of wills and inventories has contributed further to our picture of texts circulating in England. The famous Beauchamp donation of romances to Bordesley Abbey in 1305 by Gui de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, includes several Charlemagne texts, though not all the texts listed can be clearly identified.[2] The donation included a copy of *Fierabras*, apparently bound with a copy of the *Estoire de Guillaume le Marechal*;[3] no codex containing both these texts has survived. Beauchamp's library of *chanson de geste* material was quite extensive with, in addition to the *Fierabras*, a volume containing several texts: 'Un volume qe parle des quatres principals gestes de Charles e de dooun de Meya[n]ce e de Girard de Vienne et de Emery de Nerbonne'. This codex included some Charlemagne narrative, though not all the texts can be identified with certainty: of the individuals named, Aymeri de Narbonne and Girart de Vienne are eponymous heroes of texts of the Monglane, or Guillaume d'Orange, cycle,[4] and Doon de Mayence belongs to the Mayence cycle. Another volume in the donation contains the 'romaunce [de] Emmond [e] d/e/ Ageland e deu roy Charles dooun de Nantoile e le Romaunce de Gwyoun de Nantoyl'.[5] The first of these may well be another copy of *Les Quatre Fils Aymon*; the other items have been identified as *Aspremont, Doon de Nanteuil*,[6] and *Gui de Nanteuil*; the Nanteuil texts form a sub-cycle of the geste de Mayence.

---

[1] Marianne Ailes, ''Témoins fragmentaires de la geste de Maience et la reception du cycle en Angleterre," in *Le geste de Doon de Mayence dans ses manuscrits et dans ses versions*, ed. Dominique Boutet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), 115–36, at 125–28.

[2] London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 577; David N. Bell, *The Libraries of the Cistercians, Gilbertines and Premonstratensians* (London: The British Library in association with The British Academy, 1992), 4–10, at 5; Madeleine Blaess, "L'abbaye de Bordesley et le livres de Guy de Beauchamps," *Romania* 78 (1957): 511–18, at 518 commented that the list "porte la marque des goûts littéraires d'un très grand seigneur anglais du début du XIVe siécle."

[3] Bell, *The Libraries*, 9: "Un volume del Romaunce des Marschaus er de Ferebras de Alixandre." There is no reason to assume, as Bell does, that this refers to a prose version of *Fierabras*.

[4] Aimeri is one of Girart's uncles.

[5] Bell, *The* Libraries, 6; Blaess, "L'abbaye de Bordesley," 513.

[6] A lost *chanson de geste* linked to the cycle des barons revoltés; see Marianne J. Ailes, "Doon de Nanteuil and the Epic of Revolt," *Medium Aevum* 52 (1983): 247–57.

Two final manuscripts should be mentioned here as they re-introduced to England in the late fifteenth century texts which had been known in other forms, plus at least one text for which there is no evidence of early circulation. One has already been mentioned, the prestigious Shrewsbury Book (MS Royal 15 E VI). Following the *livre de Charlemagne*, it contains a copy of *Renaud de Montauban* in the more fashionable prose format and a verse *Ogier le Danois*, another Mayence cycle text. The second, BL manuscript Royal 16 G II, came from the same workshop in Rouen. It contains a prosimetric version of *Renaud de Montauban*. It cannot be proven to have had an English patron but it was certainly in the Royal Library at Richmond by 1535.

Without going into all the detail of every text found in medieval catalogues and book lists and evaluating the certainty (or otherwise) with which they can be identified, we can give you our general conclusion: all the evidence adds up to show a much wider range of *chanson de geste* material circulating in England than had previously been thought, and most of it, though not all, was concerned with Charlemagne. When we add to the tally of French *chansons de geste*, the Latin, French, and later English *Pseudo-Turpin* chronicles, and the Middle English texts in the Roncevaux, Fierabras and Otinel traditions, it becomes clear that a great deal of Charlemagne material was available. It cannot therefore be argued that the reason only a few narratives were translated into Middle English is that only a few texts were circulating in England in French or Anglo-Norman. But it is a striking fact that all the *chansons de geste* to have been turned into English had also been adapted in Anglo-Norman versions, strongly suggesting an insular preference in both vernaculars for certain narratives over others. The preferred narratives all focus prominently on instances of Christian-Saracen conflict, and portray Charlemagne in largely heroic terms; whereas all the texts that circulated only in French or Anglo-Norman, that is *Aspremont*, *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* and texts of the Mayence cycle, present at best an ambivalent attitude towards the emperor, if not actual revolt.

Who was reading about Charlemagne in medieval England?
While ownership of a book does not necessarily imply reading, it is indicative evidence. The catalogues of ecclesiastical foundations provide much of the evidence: there are better records for such institutions than for private individuals, even royalty and aristocrats. It is not surprising that monastic houses had copies of Einhard, or indeed the *Pseudo-Turpin*: these narratives had a place among the histories and chronicles which were part of their normal holdings. Many monastic houses also had material in the vernaculars, which until the very end of the Middle Ages would more commonly be in French than in English. Some had rich holdings: romances and *chansons de geste*, as well as saints' lives in French. These may have

been acceptable reading material because of their exemplarity: in *Renaud de Montabaun* the eponymous hero ends his life in the odour of sanctity, labouring in the building of Cologne Cathedral; *Fierabras* has a major focus on Passion relics, as well as a narrative based on Christian-Saracen conflict, which can also be read as Christianity triumphing in the world and good triumphing over evil. The famous Oxford Roland manuscript, MS Digby 23, may have been in the library of the Augustinian Abbey of Osney in the thirteenth century.[7] Again, it is impossible to know how much these vernacular texts in monastic houses were read, but it is worth noting that the French texts of the thirteenth-century monk and chronicler Matthew Paris of St Albans Abbey show clear evidence of familiarity with epic as well as romance verse forms, suggesting that this particular monk knew the *chanson de geste* tradition.

French romances and epic were clearly a staple of aristocratic and royal circles throughout the Middle Ages. The Beauchamp donation is often taken to give some indication of the reading of an English nobleman of the fourteenth century (even though Madeleine Blaess surmised that the donor Earl of Warwick was trying to get rid of unwanted books).[8] The wording of the donation is, however, clear. Members of the family who wish to read the books will have access to them. It seems that the reason for the donation is more probably to be found in the unstable times: Gui de Beauchamp has placed valuable books in the safekeeping of the monastery.[9] In doing so he also made the books available to a wider readership: not just the monks, but those who borrowed books from them.

We know only a little about the ownership of surviving manuscripts, and very little indeed about the earliest Anglo-Norman manuscripts. Determining the geographical provenance of Anglo-Norman manuscripts is notoriously difficult as it cannot be done on the basis of dialect alone. The fourteenth-century BL MS Egerton 3028 contains two Anglo-Norman Charlemagne texts, *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierenbras*. It has been suggested that this manuscript may have come from the Gloucestershire area,[10] but of its medieval owners we know nothing, apart from the political stance of this codex, to which we shall return. It was in the library of the annalist Narcissus Luttrell (d. 1732) by 1693: his monogram and this date

---

[7] The text with which it is now bound, a Latin version of Plato's *Timaeus*, certainly was, and we do not know at what point the two were bound together.
[8] Blaess, "L'Abbaye de Bordesley," 518.
[9] Marianne Ailes and Philip E. Bennett, "Deux nouveaux fragments de poèmes sur Guillaume d'Orange," in *Epic Connections: Proceedings of the Oxford Congress of the International Société Rencesvals*, ed. Marianne J. Ailes, Philip E. Bennett and Anne E. Cobby, 2 vols (Edinburgh: British Rencesvals Publications, 2015), I, 87–105; Keith Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript*, 2 vols (Amsterdam and New York: Rudopi, 2002), II, 749.
[10] Vernon Philip Underwood, "An Anglo-Norman Metrical *Brut* of the XIVth Century," unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (1937), 28–38.

are found on f. 1v. Though not of the quality of continental manuscripts of the period, it is a richly illuminated manuscript and must have been commissioned by someone wealthy. Another Anglo-Norman manuscript of similar date containing the same two texts, Hanover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek MS IV 578, is also extensively illustrated, and the similarities in the pictorial programmes of these two manuscripts suggest that they are closely related. The 'royal wedding present', BL MS Royal 15 E VI, remained in the royal library from the time John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, gave it to the Queen, though whether it was read or just kept as an object of display is harder to tell.

The first known patrons of a translation of Charlemagne material are the Fitzgerolds who commissioned a French *Pseudo-Turpin*. Warin Fitzgerold (b. 1168) came from a distinguished Norman family; in 1197 he married Alice de Courcy. He held office as Chamberlain of the Exchequer and took part in the Third Crusade and, as Ian Short has established, went on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, so the crusading ethos of the text and its connection to St James would have appealed to him. The text itself, written early in the thirteenth century, is adapted for a lay audience: for example, religious material is sometimes explained. It is worth pausing for a moment on the dedicatory preface:

> I, William of Briane, the clerk of Warin Fitz Gerald, by his command and by the command of my lady Alice, his wife, have proposed and translated this book which Turpin the archbishop wrote by his own hand in Latin; I have put it into the romance tongue so that all those who hear it will take example from it and take pleasure in hearing of the high deeds and great miracles and also that those who understand letters will take pleasure in it, those, I say, who like to hear about God…

Most noticeable here is that Alice is as important as Warin. This is consistent with what we know about the importance of women in the early development of French as a vehicle for more serious writing such as saints' lives, with women as patrons or co-patrons of translations from Latin into French; it seems that the 'high deeds' of knights were not just entertainment for male members of a household. Another important point is the implication that the text was to be listened to as well as read.

The Anglo-Norman *Pseudo-Turpin* probably did not circulate widely beyond its original sponsors. It survives in one copy, BL MS Arundel 220, dating from the first third of the fourteenth century: about a hundred years after the translation was made. This manuscript is a miscellany, containing mostly chronicles and material connected to the Cathedral priory of Norwich. The text probably found its way to Norwich, as Ian Short's

research has shown,[11] through a connection between the Fitzgerolds and the Despenser family (Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich, being a known collector of French romances).

The other insular translations of Charlemagne texts are from French to English. These survive, in some cases, in well-researched manuscripts, yet still little definite is known about owners, and even less about original commissioners. The Auchinleck MS (Edinburgh, NLS MS Adv. 19.2.1), which includes both *Otuel* and *Roland and Vernagu*, is one of the best known Middle English manuscripts, yet all the research surrounding it has not produced hard evidence regarding its original patron. The scholarly consensus has been outlined by Alison Wiggins:

> Palaeography, style of illumination and internal references indicate that Auchinleck was most likely to have been produced between 1331 and 1340 but the identity of the earliest readers and owners remains unknown. Dialect and the apparently commercial and collaborative nature of this manuscript's production, imply that it was most likely to have been produced in London. As this is a large (and therefore costly) manuscript, professionally produced and with a carefully executed design scheme, it would seem that it must have been produced on commission for a specific purchaser.[12]

The purchaser of the Auchinleck MS required reading matter in English, not French, but the cultural context for its production seems not far from that of the Anglo-Norman manuscript tradition. The autograph *Sir Ferumbras* (Bod. Lib. MS Ashmole 33) is dated on palaeographic and watermark grounds to the late fourteenth century.[13] It has no evidence of ownership, though the parchment wrapper which originally protected the manuscript, constructed from reused documents dated 1357 and 1377 relating to the diocese of Exeter, on the reverse of which the scribal author drafted over four hundred lines of text, indicates that it was likely to have been produced in or near Exeter, and this accords with the linguistic evidence. It has thus generally been accepted that the scribal author of *Sir Ferumbras* was a member of the clergy in the vicinity of Exeter. Indeed, it is not impossible

---

[11] *The Anglo-Norman Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle of William de Briane*, ed. Ian Short (Oxford: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1973), 11.

[12] *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. David Burnley and Alison Wiggins (National Library of Scotland, 5 July 2003), version 1.1, http://auchinleck.nls.uk/editorial/history.html. [accessed 21 February 2018]. A full description of the manuscript is available here.

[13] Richard Beadle has dated the unusual watermark of the paper stock used in Ashmole 33 to the last decades of the fourteenth century, in the Lyell Lectures 2013 (lecture given at Merton College, Oxford, 30 April 2013).

that a library in that area was the source of the French-language text(s) on which this translation was based: it is known that the library of Exeter Cathedral, for example, contained (unspecified) manuscripts in French in the fourteenth century.[14] The question of the intended recipient of the new Middle English version is less clear.

British Library, MS Additional 31042, copied *c*. 1440, contains both the *Sege of Melayne* and *Rowlande and Ottuell* as a sequential pair. This manuscript was produced by the North Yorkshire gentleman Robert Thornton of East Newton for his own use. Ralph Hanna and John Thomson have both studied the two compilations known as the Lincoln and London Thornton MSS which together indicate the library of a well-to-do gentleman: works of literature, religious reading and medical tracts. The *Sowdone of Babylone*, preserved in a later fifteenth-century, single-text, modestly prestigious manuscript (Princeton University Library, MS Garrett 140), and written in an East Midlands dialect, was probably copied for use in a similar social milieu, among gentry or elite urban readers, though the manuscript provides absolutely no evidence as to their identity.

The manuscript containing *Turpines Story*, the Middle English translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* (Huntington Library MS HM 28,561), does have evidence of ownership. On f. 1r are the arms of Mull of Harescombe, Gloucestershire and on f. 88r those of Mull quartering Rous of Harescombe. As Stephen Shepherd, the editor notes, this points to Thomas Mull (1400–1460) as the commissioner of the manuscript, and quite possibly the commissioning patron of the translation.[15] The Mulls were a locally important wealthy gentry family, fitting the pattern of ownership of Middle English translations of Charlemagne texts. The other contents of the manuscript: Trevisa's English translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* with some shorter Trevisan works and Latin documents relating to English history, provide a coherent context for the new work.

All this evidence taken together shows that the readers of Charlemagne texts in medieval England encompassed the range of the literate classes, and the vernacular texts were evidently intended to be heard as well as read, so could have had an even more extensive textual community.

---

[14] The extant inventory of the Cathedral's library in 1327, after listing and valuing numerous works of divinity and service books, adds: "Multi alii libri vetustate consumpti Gallice, Anglice, et Latine scripti, qui non appreciantur, que nullius valoris reputantur." See George Oliver, *Lives of the Bishops of Exeter and a History of the Cathedral*, 2 vols (Exeter: William Roberts, 1861), I, 301–10, at 309.

[15] *Turpines Story*: *A Middle English Translation of the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd, EETS 332 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xviii–xix.

The way these texts were read/appropriated

An examination of the texts in their manuscript and cultural contexts reveals that they were almost certainly appropriated, in some cases, for political as well as cultural or religious uses. The two Charlemagne texts in the Auchinleck MS, *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel*, are presented as a sequential pair, intended to be read together, for *Roland and Vernagu* ends with three lines designed as a bridge leading to the following story of Otuel: "To Otuel also 3ern, | Þat was a sarrazin stern, | Ful sone þis word sprong" (878–80). The story of Roland's unsuccessful attempt to convert the unregenerate Saracen Vernagu is completed and corrected by the story of his combat with Otuel, Vernagu's nephew, which ends in the divinely inspired conversion of the "sarrazin stern" and his new identity: "Otuel is my cristine name" (1154). The placing of the two romances one after the other, as well as common concerns in both narratives, revealed in departures from their French-language source texts, seem to indicate a programme of reinforcing the Christian and chivalric cultural values they represent, with new emphasis on Charlemagne as head of Christendom, opposed by a powerful heathen king, and increased stress on the Saracens' violent hostility to Christians, and on the role of miracles in the narrative. Both also give added emphasis to the display of chivalrous behaviour, conveyed through the exemplary conduct of the hero confronting his enemy in one-to-one combat. Indeed, it has been suggested the Auchinleck MS as a whole was intended to provide suitable reading for the young, and the two Charlemagne texts play their part in an informal programme of education in the Christian and knightly values of their elders for any young readers in the household.[16] The Charlemagne material has thus been recontextualized within the cultural agenda of the Auchinleck Manuscript.

Consistent with the likely religious milieu in which the Ashmole MS was produced, small changes in *Sir Ferumbras* show an interest in religious matters. There is also, however, a real concern with matters of chivalry and courtesy which, taken together with the author's evident concern to perfect details of his translation and the formal patterning of the poem, could point to the possibility of an intended recipient for a finished version of the text among the noble or gentry families of the South West, not entirely unlike the circumstances proposed for the production of another late fourteenth-century provincial romance (though on a different poetic level), *Sir Gawain*

---

[16] See further, Phillipa Hardman, "Domestic Learning and Teaching," in *Women and Writing, c.1340–c.1650*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: The York Medieval Press, Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 20–21. For Auchinleck romances as texts for the young, see Nicole Clifton, "*The Seven Sages of Rome*, Children's Literature, and the Auchinleck Manuscript," in *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 185–201; Phillipa Hardman, "Popular Romances and Young Readers," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Cory Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 150–64, at 156–60.

and the Green Knight. This combination of interests in matters religious and chivalric would place it in a similar cultural milieu to the somewhat earlier Auchinleck MS.

Cultural appropriation is implicit in the process of translation, but perhaps less self-evident is the use of the texts for possible political purposes, and here the strongest evidence concerns three of the manuscripts previously discussed: BL MSS Egerton 3028 and Royal 15 E VI, and Huntington Library MS HM 28,561. Royal 15 E VI, known as the Shrewsbury Book, is the most celebrated of the three. The political weight of the manuscript as a whole is clearly evident: its royal genealogical tree stresses Henry VI's right to the French crown and the Frenchness of the Plantagenet dynasty; the marriage which occasioned the manuscript was supposed to shore up the already shaky dual monarchy; the collection of romances and treatises was possibly intended as instructional material for the hoped-for son. Our concern here is with the specific use of the Charlemagne material: the three Charlemagne texts united in the *livre de Charlemagne*, followed by the prose *Renaud de Montauban* and *Ogier*. It seems that these two groups provide an exemplary diptych, with the *livre de Charlemagne* showing a positive image of kingship as seen in the person of Charlemagne, and *Renaud* and *Ogier*, the two Mayence texts, apparently showing how rebellion can follow unworthy acts of a king. Meanwhile, the pictorial programme depicting Charlemagne in *fleurdelisé* robes and wearing an imperial crown, with banners of both *fleur de lys* and the imperial eagle, seems to emphasize the dual role of Charlemagne, at once emperor and king, with an implied parallel to the role of the king of England, ruler of the dual monarchy of France and England.[17]

The Huntington MS containing *Turpines Story* is one of the most interesting in terms of possible political appropriation. As noted above, its other texts are mostly historical, so the cultural context is that of someone with an interest in history accepting the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* as history. The political context has been analysed by Stephen Shepherd, who points to a Lancastrian bias in the manuscript's Latin documents concerning the kings of England, including a genealogical table derived from one commissioned by the Duke of Bedford (*c.* 1423) to bolster Henry VI's claim to the French throne: the same genealogical tree that lay behind Talbot's in Royal 15 E VI. Shepherd warns against reductively reading the motivation behind any new translation or copy of the *Pseudo-Turpin*:

> Even a cursory glance at its content reveals the potential for a
> wide range of receptions: readers might have found it

> historical, hagiographical, didactic, catechistic, martial, marvellous, humorous, tragic, or any combination of these.
>
> (xlix)

This is undoubtedly true of all the texts under discussion and should be borne in mind in relation to one possible reading, suggested in part by the Latin texts and the genealogical tree. The Latin texts have a Lancastrian bias, while the tree itself, as noted above, supported the dual kingship. The Mulls were prominent Lancastrian sympathizers: Thomas's son and heir William met his end fighting on the Lancastrian side in the Battle of Towton in 1461. They also supported Talbot in an infamous lawsuit against the Berkeleys. Shepherd suggests a Lancastrian interest in including (or possibly adding) the *Pseudo-Turpin* because of its glorification of Charlemagne: "A Ballade by John Lydgate, presented to the young king [Henry VI] on the occasion of his French coronation in 1431, cites Charles the Great as one of the king's worthy ancestors."[18] Thus glorifying Charlemagne was no doubt also glorifying Henry, as certainly Talbot, and possibly Mull would have been aware.

If the heraldry is significant in Royal 15 E VI, where the *fleurs de lys* dominate the genealogical tree, it is crucial for our reading of Egerton 3028, copied at an earlier stage in the Hundred Years War. Its programme of illumination is rare among insular manuscripts of historical writing, with extensive use of heraldry in the shields held by the knights. The two Charlemagne texts, *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierenbras*, follow on from an abbreviated version of Wace's *Brut*, sometimes described as an 'Epitome' of the *Brut.* The manuscript was clearly constructed as a whole, with the same hand and the same style of illumination throughout. The *Brut* is acephalous so we cannot know if, like the other two texts in the manuscript, it began with a full-page miniature and similar first folio, but it is probable. A date of 1338–40 has been proposed for the manuscript, based on the date of the version of the *Brut*,[19] but the heraldry may suggest a slightly later date. For Alison Stones, the sequence of texts, *Brut*, *La Destruction de Rome*, *Fierabras*, links "the history of England and its kings and the beginning of the Hundred Years' War and France with the triumph of Right – Christianity over Islam – on the Continent under Charlemagne."[20] The argument can be supported, indeed taken further, by an analysis of the heraldry of the codex. In the *Brut* a scene (f. 41r) shows Arthur defeating Frollo; Arthur carries the arms of England, as one might expect: Frollo carries France modern, as adopted by Charles V *c.* 1365 (some scholars suggest that he may have been using this coat from an earlier date). By

---

[18] *Turpines Story*, XXVII.
[19] Underwood, "An Anglo-Norman Metrical *Brut* of the XIVth Century," 5–6.
[20] Alison Stones, "The Egerton *Brut* and its Illustrations," in *Master Wace: A Celebration*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Judith Weiss (Jersey: Société jersiaise, 2006), 169.

contrast, in the full page miniature of Charlemagne at the beginning of the *Destruction de Rome*, Charlemagne is bearing France ancient, which had been formally adopted as part of his arms by Edward III in 1340 but had possibly been in use since his accession in 1327;[21] indeed it is generally considered that it was in response to this that Charles V adopted the three *fleurs de lis* of France modern, to differentiate his arms from those being used by Edward III of England as part of his claim to the throne of France. Charlemagne is thus depicted here bearing a coat of arms which was part of the arms used by the king of England. The heraldry of the manuscript seems to be supporting the claim of the English king to the throne of France, associating the king of England with the arms carried by Charlemagne. Returning to the content of the codex as a whole, this makes sense: the story of Charlemagne is part of the History of Britain. The Matter of France here has been appropriated by England, and the manuscript as a whole supports the Plantagenet cause.[22]

It remains to consider the possible political readings of the earliest text of this corpus, the *Chanson de Roland*, and the twelfth-century scribe's invocation of *nostre emperere magnes*. This narrative, which seems to have been circulating in some form from about 1100, has since the first edition of the Oxford manuscript text in the nineteenth century, been seen by the French as **the** national epic; and yet it survives in this, its oldest, assonance, version, only in an Anglo-Norman manuscript. It is impossible to know exactly how much *remaniement* had taken place in the insular context, but there are aspects of the text which were certainly open to political readings. Several manuscripts of different versions of the *Roland* survive, but the Oxford text stands alone on one side of the stemma; the nearest manuscript, V$_4$, being in Franco-Italian. All other manuscripts have a reworked rhymed version of the text.

There are two references to England in the Oxford *Roland*, one of which is unique to this version of the narrative. Early in the story the pagan Blancadrin admires Charlemagne for his successes, among which he includes:

> Vers Engletere passat il la mer salese,
> ad oés seint Perre en cunquist le chevage.   (372–73)

Including England with other conquests, contrary to historic fact, is consistent with the *nostre emperere* of line 1, and the implication that

---

[21] William M. Hinkle, *The Fleurs de Lis of the Kings of France 1205–1488* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

[22] Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman, "Texts in Conversation: Charlemagne Epics and Romances in Insular Plural-Text Codices," in *Insular Books: Vernacular Manuscript Miscellanies in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Raluca Radulescu, British Academy Publications (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 31–47.

England was a part of his empire is found in several *chansons de geste*.[23] Line 373 refers to Peter's Pence, an annual amount paid to Rome by the English church. This tribute, or tax, was a cause of friction at times, but also indicated a special relationship between the Vatican and England. It seems that it was already an established, even ancient, custom by the eleventh century.[24] Its origins remain obscure but in the thirteenth century the monks of St Albans (who claimed exemption from the payment) said it had been instituted by Offa, King of Mercia. The Oxford manuscript, about a hundred years earlier, is claiming that it was instituted by Charlemagne, thus giving the emperor the credit for England's particular status with the Vatican. For the scribe/poet/*remanieur* of the insular *Roland* this would appear to be an acceptable payment. As Ian Short, one of the modern editors of the *Roland*, has said, "it is not difficult to read William the Conqueror between these lines, given the reference to the Peter's Pence tribute which the Conqueror explicitly re-established."[25] Of the other *Roland* manuscripts only two have this *laisse* at all, and they lack the reference to England. The Oxford version is thus aligned with Norman interests in England.

The second reference to England is found also in other manuscripts but with variant readings. When Roland is enumerating his victories, the service he has brought to Charlemagne, he includes different parts of the British Isles:

> Jo l'en cunquis e Escoce e Irlande,
> E Engletere, que il teneit sa cambre.   (2331–2)

A reviser at work on this manuscript, probably in the thirteenth century, also added Wales to the list of conquered territories.[26] All the other versions

---

[23] It is, for example, explicit in *Aspremont*, which, as noted above, was also popular in England, as well as in the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle;* see *Aspremont*, ed. François Suard (Paris: Champion, 2008), 814–17; *The Anglo-Norman Pseudo-Turpin*, 59. It is also listed among Charlemagne's territories in *Roland and Vernagu*.

[24] For a useful summary of the nature of this payment, see Frank Barlow, *The English Church 1000–1066*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1979), 295–7; see also idem, *The English Church 1066–1154* (London: Longman, 1979), 105–6.

[25] Short, in Joseph J. Duggan, La Chanson de Roland – *The Song of Roland: The French Corpus*, 3 vols (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), I/I, 286, note to lines 372–3; David C. Douglas, "The *Song of Roland* and the Norman Conquest of England," *French Studies* 14 (1960): 99–116; Jules Horrent, *La Chanson de Roland dans les littératures française et espagnole au moyen âge* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1951), 290, eliminates consideration of this line because "il n'était pas connu du *Roland* primitif ;" Jean Dufournet *Cours sur Roland* (Paris: Centre de documentation universitaire, 1972), 32.

[26] See Short's note to 2331 (Duggan, *French Corpus*, I/I, 312) and the greater detail given in his note to lines 372–3 (I/I, 286). On the competence (or otherwise) and date of the reviser, see Gerard J. Brault, "Le Réviseur du manuscrit d'Oxford de la *Chanson de Roland*," in *Essor et fortune de la chanson de geste dans l'Europe et l'Orient latin*: *Actes du IXe Congrès International de la Société Rencesvals, Padoue-Venise 1982* (Modena:

which have this line have it in a slightly different form, including V$_4$ which offers a simpler reading, with England merely one of a list of conquests:

> Si li conquis Ysorie et Irlande,
> Et Ingeltere, Sinoples e Garmaise.   (V$_4$ 2481–2)

The Paris MS lacks any reference to Scotland and Ireland, but does include England in its list of conquests, as one among others:

> Et Engleterre et maint païs estraingne.   (P 2650)

This is similar to the readings of the Cambridge text and that of Lyon:

> Et Angleterre et maint pais lontaigne.   (T 1959)
> E Engleterre qui soet en lue estrange.   (L 1524)

For each of these continental scribes, England is a far-away place, to be classed alongside other strange, foreign lands. The Oxford MS reading of line 2332 is not easy to translate. According to the Anglo-Norman Dictionary,[27] "cambre" could mean *private domain* or *treasury*. If England was the private domain of Charlemagne, again this is clearly a Norman perspective on the status of England. This more obscure reading must be either the *lectio difficilior,* suggesting an insular or Norman origin for the text, or a scribal alteration by a writer for whom England is not strange but familiar, and for an audience for whom England is home.

These references to England as a place which may have been under Charlemagne, however loose, are unlikely to have been simply copied unthinkingly by the Anglo-Norman scribe who wrote in his first line "*nostre emperere*." This phrase, also found in V$_4$ (*nostre inperer*, line 8), may well have been in his source manuscript, but the scribe retains it. The references to England seem to be deliberately tying England more closely to the empire of Charlemagne. Charlemagne is "our emperor" in that England is not one of the foreign lands but one with a particular (albeit fictive) Carolingian history. The tradition, which seems to have developed early, that the *Chanson de Roland* was sung at the battle of Hastings, would reinforce this sense that the Normans in England regarded Charlemagne's men as their own heroic ancestors.[28]

Mucchi, 1984), 828–62. Brault considers the revisions could be as early as the late twelfth century, but see Short, ed. cit., I/I, 103–4.

[27] *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, http://www.anglonorman.net/gate/index.shtml?session=SL0116901T1412952797 [accessed 21 February 2018].

[28] The narratives of William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Gaimar, Wace, Benoît de Sainte-Maure and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, all recount the singing of a song of *Roland* at Hastings (Ian Short, "Literary Culture at the Court of Henry II," in *Henry II: New*

If, in the reference to Peter's Pence, we find a Norman perspective on the Conquest, in the role of Geoffrey of Anjou we seem to have an Angevin one. The house of Anjou has a significant role in all versions of the text: the fictional Thierri d'Anjou is the warrior who takes a stand against Ganelon and defeats his champion. Geoffrey is the standard bearer of the king, carrying the oriflamme (C4):

Gefreid d'Anjou portet l'orïeflambe :	Geoffrey of Anjou carried the oriflamme:
Seint Piere fut si aveit num Romaine,	it belonged to Saint Peter and was called Romaine
Mais de Munjoie iloec out pris eschange	but this was changed for the name Mon joie.

(3093–95)

The only other version in which Geoffrey is the standard bearer is manuscript V_4 and here there is no allusion to St Peter.[29] Again, this may be linked to William the Conqueror who, as is well known, invaded England under the *vexillum Sancti Petri*.[30] The reputation of Geoffrey in England was not always positive but would have been at its height in the years following his marriage to the widowed Empress Matilda, and in particular, following the birth of a son, the future Henry II, in 1133.[31] A text *remanié* in England at this time, giving such a role to a 'Geoffrey of Anjou', would certainly speak into the political situation in England during the civil war.[32] Furthermore, the partisan nature of the text may have been reinforced in a *remaniement* dating from around 1150: the presence of a Henry, nephew of

---

Interpretations, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 351); Susan Crane, "Anglo-Norman Cultures in England 1066–1460," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35–60, at 35 comments on this as a borrowing of Charlemagne's men as their "heroic predecessors" by relatively recently acculturated Norsemen.

[29] The Lyon MS lacks this line; in the Paris and Cambridge MSS, Charlemagne carries the oriflamme: P, 3559–60 (*French Corpus¸* III/IV, 241); T, 2669–70 (*French Corpus*, III/V, 202); in CV_7 5099, "Monjoie" is the warcry and there is no mention of the oriflamme (*French Corpus*, II/III, 703).

[30] The papal banner can be clearly seen in the Bayeux Tapestry; see Donald Lindsay Galbreath, *Papal Heraldry* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1930), 2.

[31] Jim Bradbury, "Geoffrey V of Anjou, Count and Knight," in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood* III, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Ruth Harvey (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1986), 21–38.

[32] The original "Geoffrey of Anjou" was no doubt the semi-mythical Geoffrey I: see John of Marmoutier, *Chronicles of the counts of Anjou*, extracts in English in Elizabeth M. Hallam, *The Plantagenet Chronicles* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), 19–24; Louis Halphen, *Le Comté d'Anjou au XIe siècle* (Genève: Slatkine reprints, 1974), 6–8.

Richard of Normandy (171) may allude to the creation of Geoffrey and Matilda's son Henry as duke of Normandy in 1150.[33]

In the wider French tradition Charlemagne serves as a model for Christian unity, bringing together many peoples under one rule and purpose. Charlemagne's men in the *chanson de geste* tradition hail from geographical areas which were not historically under Charlemagne's direct rule. This presentation of the great emperor as the supreme secular Christian ruler in the struggle against the infidel, the sense that the Emperor unites Christendom in its opposition to the Saracen threat and is 'ours', emphasizes Charlemagne's role. Charlemagne is "our Emperor" in the Anglo-Norman *Roland* manuscript because he is *the* secular Christian leader. His appropriation as part of insular history is therefore desirable. Peter Haidu has discussed this first line in the context of Northern France and its relationship with the Empire, distinguishing between the ideological and the political. The absence of the Pope in the Roland tradition (with the exception of the reference to Peter's pence) allows Charlemagne to unite the functions of *rex* and *sacerdos*. As Haidu comments, "as ideologeme [Charlemagne] represents the fusion of divine devolution and the military component of kingship in the narrative of the poem."[34] If we transfer the focus from Northern France to England, the ideological more clearly outweighs the political simply because Charlemagne was not a historical ruler of England. Charlemagne can thus, apparently, combine the function of head of church and head of state in a conflict, whether literal or ideological, against those who oppose or are opposed by Christianity.

Charlemagne in the Oxford *Roland*, indeed in the wider *Roland* tradition, has been much studied, and the depiction of the king-emperor in this narrative tradition is almost certainly behind his portrait in both *Otinel* and *Fierabras*. For the most part, analyses of Charlemagne in the *Chanson de Roland* do not deal with differences between versions, and much of the depiction of Charlemagne is determined by the narrative. It is quite a complex image, with Charlemagne required to listen to his barons, and sometimes apparently unable to take action; yet also a ruler with a special relationship with God, not only seen praying to God, but with God communicating with him in dreams and directly enabling him to defeat Baligant in single combat.[35] All this is largely constant in the different versions. The endings of the texts, however, vary, and the final *laisse*,

---

[33] We are grateful to Professor Philip E. Bennett for drawing our attention to this line and the link to Henry. Dufournet, *Cours sur Roland*, uses this as evidence to date the *remaniement* to before Henry II became king in 1152.

[34] Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 112.

[35] Brault, *The Song of Roland*, II, 93–6 is concerned largely with the characterisation of Charlemagne outside and beyond the *Chanson de Roland*; on the king and the supernatural, in the context of the sacral function of monarchy, see Dominique Boutet, *Charlemagne et Arthur ou le roi imaginaire* (Paris: Champion, 1992), 211–48.

unique to the Oxford version, focuses on two aspects of this special relationship with God. In the Oxford MS the whole narrative is open: it begins *in medias res* and in the last *laisse* Charlemagne is called by God to undertake another 'mission' and go to the rescue of king Vivien, attacked by pagans (3996–97). The battles of Roncevaux and indeed the whole of Charlemagne's campaigns in Spain, are thus placed in a wider context of an ongoing struggle against the forces of the pagans; as in life so in history, victory against evil is never complete. Charlemagne's response also presents the cost to the emperor of his commitment to God: '"Deus", dist reis, "si penuse est ma vie"' (4000). Roland and his companions have paid the ultimate price with their deaths, but in life Charlemagne also continues to pay a price. His response is very human and nuances our reading of the character, reminding us, at the end of the text, that the emperor suffers, too.

It is clear that there were some developments of the text after it was imported into the insular context. While it is not possible to prove how much the text was adapted at this early stage, as no detailed evidence of any previous version survives, it is worth noting that some characteristics of the Oxford *Roland*, notably its brevity and concern for narrative cohesion, are characteristics found in later Anglo-Norman texts in *chanson de geste* form.[36] This throws into question some of the general assumptions made about the Oxford *Roland* in its critical history, notably its adoption as a 'national' epic, a concept that is surely anachronistic for a time when cultural and linguistic boundaries were not co-extensive with polities.

The ultimate appropriation of the material of Charlemagne in England was turning Charlemagne's great warrior Roland into an Englishman. The first suggestion of this is in the Middle English *Pseudo-Turpin*: Roland's father Milo is on two occasions identified as English (though a third reference correctly identifies him as French). Shepherd concludes that "the former two errors were in fact deliberate and that the third correct instance represents an oversight in a plan to anglicize the greatest of French heroes."[37] It is possible there was a personal interest here as the Mulls had a distinguished ancestor called Milo. This anglicization of the French hero was to reach its apogee at the end of the Middle Ages, when in the sixteenth-century *Heralds' Debate*, a response in English to the fifteenth-century *debat des herauts*, the English herald claims that Milo, and therefore Roland, was English.

Conclusion
So, to return to the opening questions: What Charlemagne texts were being read in medieval England? Who was interested in reading about

---

[36] Ailes, "What's in a Name? Anglo-Norman Romances or *chansons de geste*?," in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Context*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 61–75.
[37] *Turpines Story*, XXXIX.

Charlemagne? How was this material being used, and in what sense therefore was Charlemagne "nostre"?

First, it has been established that a wider range of narratives were being read in England than has been thought in the past. Though only a limited selection of texts circulated in Middle English, other texts were being read in French.

Almost anyone who was literate in the modern sense may have read about Charlemagne. If William de Briane is to be believed, others listened to the tales. It seems that the texts were available to those in monastic houses, the aristocracy, the upper gentry: even lesser gentry. In their continental French forms the texts were politically and ideologically charged (the *chanson de geste* is a politically engaged genre); this continued to be the case in medieval England, and it is in this ideological framework that an answer can be found to the question of how Charlemagne could be considered *nostre*, 'our great emperor', for he is 'ours' in the late medieval Middle English texts as well as in the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland*: the shared Norman French tradition is not sufficient to explain this. Ideologically Charlemagne was emperor of the West: this can be seen in, for example, the pictorial scheme in Royal 15 E VI, and in small but significant verbal changes in Middle English texts where Charlemagne's men are predominantly identified as "cristen kniȝtes." Culturally, this accepting of the Germanic emperor as the great Christian emperor made his conflicts those of Christendom against the Others of the East. The prestige of being an inheritor of Charlemagne (in the later Middle Ages one of the nine worthies) could only enhance the reputation of an English king. While this reached its apogee in the *Heralds' Debate*, when Roland himself becomes an Englishman, in political terms Charlemagne's identity as king of France would make him all the more significant as **our** emperor in a time when the kings of England were also claiming the throne of France.