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Documentation for “The Song of Gareth”
Northern Lights Arts and Sciences Competition XVII
Shire of Glenn Linn

Introduction:

“The Song of Gareth” is my attempt to create a *chanson de geste* regarding an event I witnessed in the Woods Battle of last Pennsic. I was assigned to the Northern Army under Count Thorson, but after several resurrections I found myself running to where there was need. Maerek, a trooper from the Boreal Army (fighters from Atlantic Canada and Quebec) yelled for a group of us to rez together and follow him. I went and found a fierce combat.

There were three battles composing a 'u' shaped front. Boreal held the mobile banner while other Easterners held lines to the left and right of the Boreal. I saw one man, armed with a spear, dancing between trees and trails, impaling Midrealm soldiers as they attempted to get to the banner from their downhill rez point.

Over and over, I watched (and participated in the row) as Boreal troopers would dive in front of Sir Gareth, give him cover for a moment of two before being cut down. Sir Gareth was a dervish with a spear, and the troopers kept him alive. We traded our lives for his, doing a shieldman's duty.

The grace and power of Sir Gareth in that martial dance was something that not only impressed me, but I wanted to learn to do it. After meeting the man later, getting to know him over time, I eventually squired to him. From that one event, and much work after, great opportunities for me have come. I wanted to commemorate the event in which I saw Sir Gareth as an exemplar: an event that started me on a journey of my own.

I hope that this documentation will delineate the process I used to compose “The Song of Gareth”. With it, I trust that I have met the requirements of the competition. Additionally, it is my hope that I have constructed a valid *chanson de geste*.

Historical Models:

What is a *chanson de geste*? Despite my mundane education (an MFA in Poetry from Goddard

College), I had a passing familiarity with the form. The familiarity, however, was of a non technical nature. I first encountered a study of the form in the 67th Complete Anachronist. In it: *The chanson de geste (literally “song of deeds” is a poetic form which was popular in eleventh century France and died out in the twelfth century with the rise of troubadour poetry. It is especially used for the telling of epic tales of battles and deeds-at-arms; the Song of Roland being the most famous of these (Terry Sheehan, Ars Poetica Societatis, p. 26).*

Sheehan continues to define the genre, noting that each line is heavily end stopped, often by punctuation, and that the length of lines is 10 syllables. Upon investigation, however, I found that late chansons used longer lines. On another point of structure, Sheehan noted that assonance occurs at the end of all lines in a stanza. Though later chansons used hard rhyming at the end of lines, I had some options.

Trouble, however, came when reading period work. *The Song of Roland*, while noble in the simplicity of its language, is written in a style and tone that is sparse. There is not much overt description, nor are there concrete images prevalent; things that modern ears tend to listen for. *The Song of Roland* tends to alternate between summary like passages and more vibrant events, all told chronologically. Any construction of a chanson would need to follow a similar pattern.

There are several cycles of chansons to draw example from. A simple google search showed the Lorraine Cycle, the Crusade Cycle, and the Chanson du roi. An examination of the texts of those documents generated a few guidelines for me as I started drafting:

1. All lines are of the same syllabic weight – either 10 or twelve syllables throughout.
2. Assonance or hard rhyme are to be used throughout at the ends of lines
3. lines should be natural in themselves – i.e., end stopped, either by breath, grammar, or thought: enjambment should be minimal if present at all
4. the chanson needs to celebrate a deed of arms or heroic battle
5. the form is period for Sir Gareth, my knight

With these simple guidelines in place, I set to writing. As issues arose, I looked back to period examples to help resolve the difficulties in the most period manner possible, while allowing for the reality of modern ears hearing the work.

Process:

“The Song of Gareth” began as a series of notes. I first tried to outline the flow of the poem, hoping that a narrative structure would help the poem form. Instead, however, the narration would not take shape. I knew the sequence of events in the woods battle, but a simple rendering of the events in question would fail period examples. Knowing that humans emulated their heroes, and used poetry and other art to communicate them, I chose to focus on Sir Gareth's stand in the woods. Through it, I would be able to show what we should act like when fighting – with strength and honor.

I started by choosing words that I thought would fit the piece. I had a general narrative, and now I needed to find a scaffolding. The end words, the sounds of them, gave me that setting. I chose hard rhymed words that spoke of the battle. The words, once in place, helped the narrative take shape. Additionally, I chose to use a repeating rhyme pattern – the chanson unfolds with end rhymes, and refolds using the same rhymes in a reversed order. While not a period practice that I could document, I decided to work in such a structure to highlight the musicality of the language. The poems were meant to be performed in period – I chose to highlight the music to aid in vocal performance.

Once the structure was in place, real writing began. I had trouble, however, with the start. In “The Song of Roland,” the narrative begins by introducing the character of the king. This gives the poem its context. Our kings come and go, so a different introduction was needed. Since the battle was the context, I decided to introduce it and our hero – hinting about his exploits therein. This way, though slightly off from period practice, an authentic feel to the chanson could be achieved. In the same vein, the ending entreats listeners to action and memory. These two uses are slightly off from

period practice, but they serve the same contextualizing purpose.

When violence came, I had to turn to the “Song of Roland” again. How would I describe the violence, what details would I give? Roland shows in Laisses CXXIII and CXXIV:

CXXIII

Marvelous is the battle in its speed,
The Franks there strike with vigour and with heat,
Cutting through wrists and ribs and chines in-deed,
Through garments to the lively flesh beneath;
On the green grass the clear blood runs in streams.
The pagans say: "No more we'll suffer, we.
Terra Major, Mahummet's curse on thee!
Beyond all men thy people are hardy!"
There was not one but cried then: "Marsilie,
Canter, O king, thy succour now we need!"

CXXIV

Marvellous is the battle now and grand,
The Franks there strike, their good brown spears in hand.
Then had you seen such sorrowing of clans,
So many a slain, shattered and bleeding man!
Biting the earth, or piled there on their backs!
The Sarrazins cannot such loss withstand.
Will they or nill, from off the field draw back;
By lively force chase them away the Franks.

These stanzas show the action is narrated in general strokes, yet can be specific in some of the use of adjectives to create imagery. I tried to echo that same construction in my own chanson. The language is slightly elevated, sometimes twisting word order to highlight and accentuate assonance. I did the same.

Through a few drafts, the “Song of Gareth” has taken shape. Though it's not a form I've worked in before, I feel successful. I attempted the poem as a sestina and as a sonnet, but the event itself doesn't lend well to the thematic requirements of those forms. Instead, the *chanson de geste* became the form. I have much work to do with it, especially if I follow period examples for length. Perhaps, each Pennsic, a new dozen laisses or so!

I am most appreciative of the way the lines have formed. I was able to write without enjambment, something foreign to my training. Additionally, I am excited by the descriptions in the work. Using the sparing language of the period pieces, in an anachronistic setting, I was able to use period imagery that should be pleasing to the mundane ear. Sir Gareth, my knight, is also a 12th Century Crusader. He would have been familiar with some of the period tales. I am happy to have composed a piece that could have been period for his persona. I chose a complex form and complicated it further by adding the repeating stanza rhyming structure. It was a challenge, but I am pleased with the result. I appreciate the opportunity to study this form.

Were I to attempt this form again, I would do so – but it really needs to be a longer work. This submission is shorter than the period examples by many thousands of words. I would need to choose a war, perhaps, rather than a single battle. I think that the work should be longer.

Works Cited

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Bugeja, Michael. The Art and Craft of Poetry. Writer's Digest Books. Cincinnati, OH: 1994.

Sheehan, T. Ars Poetica Societatis. *The Complete Anachronist #67*. Society for Creative Anachronism: Milpetas, CA: 1993.