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Military Courage and Fear in the Late Medieval French Chivalric Imagination

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Extrait de l'article

Medieval chivalric literature celebrated courage and bravery as defining characteristics of the worthy knight. The central importance of courage and bravery often suggested that losing a battle or even one's life was preferable to the shame of cowardice. In *La Chanson de Roland*, the eponymous hero called upon his men to fight bravely in the battle of Roncesvalles so that no one would sing a shameful song about them afterwards. Moreover Roland was true to his own advice, even refusing to blow his horn to summon aid when the tide of the battle turned. Though his refusal to act led to the death of both himself and his men, the Christians ultimately won the battle and Roland himself was carried to heaven by Saint Gabriel. The bravery and self-sacrifice of Roland and Olivier became one of the touchstones of chivalry. In *Les Vœux du héron* (c. 1346), Jean de Hainault, count of Beaumont, accused his fellow knights of believing that they were the equals of Oliver and Roland. Not long afterwards, the *Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin* (c.1380) reported that the Constable of France had earned more honour than any "chevaliers puis le temps de Rolant" and repeatedly compared Bertrand with his illustrious predecessor.

Amongst late medieval knights, perhaps the epitome of chivalric bravery was Jean of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, who died while fighting for King Philip VI at the battle of Crécy on 26 August 1346. In Jean Froissart's famous account, the blind Bohemian king rode into battle, led on either side by his retainers. Together they fought most bravely but all died and were found the next day lying around their leader, their horses still bound together. Of course, Froissart neglected to mention that the Bohemian king may have had a very personal reason for sacrificing his life, as he sought to redeem himself after he had abandoned the field at the battle of Vottem against the Liègeois on 19 July 1346, just a month before Crécy.

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