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The Childhood of the Epic Hero:
Representation of the Child Protagonist
in the Old French Enfances Texts

Old French epic poetry enjoyed much popularity in the Middle Ages, as it celebrated the brave exploits of a popular hero. These protagonists also lived an extraordinary childhood, as demonstrated in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries by the appearance of full-length epic poems in all epic “cycles,” named by the authors as Enfances. These texts include: Les Enfances Guillaume, Les Enfances Vivien, Les Enfances Garin, Les Enfances Renier (Cycle of Guillaume d’Orange), Les Enfances Ogier, Les Enfances Doon, (Rebellious Vassal Cycle), La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne, and Les Enfances Godefroi (Old French Crusade Cycle). One interesting aspect related to the understanding of this type of epic poem is the nature of the enfances texts as a literary ensemble, including the fictional representation of the life stage of childhood as well as the characterization of the child hero as a puer senex, a topos that in these texts seems directly tied to a young hero’s extraordinary destiny and his selection by God to bring treacherous situations to their rightful conclusion.

Literary studies have investigated the theme of childhood and its representation in French medieval literature, often targeting specific child characters. For the Old French epic in particular, studies have also concentrated on those poems with enfances episodes composing a part of the narrative, often grouping and comparing such sections and studying their common structure and thematic traits.

However, medieval scholarship has placed little emphasis on the full-length epic poems that dedicate themselves exclusively to the
earliest years of the hero. Neither the role of such texts in epic cyclification, nor the literary functions and characteristics of these narratives, have been thoroughly examined by taking such texts as an ensemble. This is surprising, as these poems appear prominently in epic cycles. For example, amid poems that tell of the extraordinary lives of the main heroes of the Cycle of Guillaume d’Orange are texts focusing on their early exploits: the *Enfances Garin*, *Enfances Guillaume*, and *Enfances Vivien*. The lineage of Rainouart, whose role in several poems of the cycle established him as a popular hero, is also represented with the youthful adventures of his grandson in *Enfances Renier*. In addition, the two most popular heroes of the Rebellious Vassal Cycle, Ogier le Danois and Doon de Mayence, have their childhood told in the *Enfances Doon* and the *Enfances Ogier* in connection with the poems recounting their *chevalerie*. Finally, the Old French Crusade Cycle includes two poems dedicated to the origins of its main heroes, the legendary Swan Knight and his grandson Godefroi de Bouillon. As the historical leader of the First Crusade, the establishment of Godefroi de Bouillon’s lineage and early exploits was important to the cycle, and thus separate *enfances* poems were integrated as a major cyclical branch, as shown by the *Naisance du Chevalier au Cygne* (versions *Elioxe* and *Beatrix*) and the *Enfances Godefroi*.

Given the inclusion of such text in all epic cycles, those individual poems designed exclusively to isolate and describe a hero’s childhood became the focus of my research. Although it is true that the same themes might appear in both a full-length text of a hero’s *enfances* and a text that includes a limited section recounting this childhood, an episode of one hundred lines merely forms a part of a single poem that has the design of telling the entire life of a hero from birth to maturity. The development of entire *enfances* poems, on the contrary, reveals a design that is contained within the text itself and fulfills a role as a separate

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1 The hero of this text is Garin the Monglane, the grandfather of Guillaume d’Orange and of Garin d’Anseune; the latter is the father of Vivien.

2 As to the Cycle of the King, the *Enfances Charlemagne* and the *Enfances Roland* are not included in this corpus, for the former is found only in fragments, and the latter is found exclusively in the Franco-Italian tradition (*Berte e Milon, Rolandin*) or in episodes in *Aspremont* or *Girart de Vienne*.

3 This research can be found in my larger study entitled *The Childhood of the Epic Hero: A Study of the Old French Enfances Texts of Epic Cycles*. 