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Reconsidering Medieval Orientalism: Religion and Gender in *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*

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The western and Christian medieval imagination ran rife with various views on the East and Islam. A medieval orientalism becomes apparent through an examination of various texts that focus on contacts between the West and the East. These texts contain interesting, inaccurate, and problematic portrayals of Saracen characters. For instance, the sizeable topos of Saracen princesses who betray their culture in favor of helping the French is telling of a particular attitude toward the conquest and assimilation of the female Other. Male Saracen bodies do not appear to be subjected to the level of literary scrutiny that their female Saracen counterparts endure. This is what makes the romance *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur* a compelling point of study.¹ The titular protagonist, Floire, is a male Saracen whose attributes are feminine until his vital conversion to Christianity. His new religious status appears to confer masculine qualities. However, this shift develops over the course of the text, particularly as Floire travels throughout the Orient and strives to reunite with Blanchefleur. This curious observation allows one to read *Floire et Blanchefleur* through a lens of medieval orientalism that considers representations of multicultural contact, gender, and religion.

WEST-EAST CONTACTS

The notion of a medieval orientalism draws heavily from the influential work of Edward Said. However, the portion of history that Said addresses in his work does not explicitly make a case for medieval orientalism. Said notes in *Orientalism* that he limits his “set of questions to the Anglo-French-American experience of the Arabs and Islam, which for almost a thousand years together stood for the Orient.”² Yet, Said is imprecise with the origins of Orientalism, which Suzanne Conklin Akbari critiques in her work

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Idols in the East. Akbari notes that in Said's 1994 afterward to *Orientalism*, there is a gesture toward periodization that suggests "the overall discourse of Orientalism, which dates back to Antiquity, can be distinguished from 'the modern global phase' that began 'with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.'"³ While Said's work in *Orientalism* focuses on this later "global phase," his nod toward Antiquity raises the question for the possibility of a medieval orientalism. A glaring absence in *Orientalism* is a discussion of the Islamic East's intellectual, cultural, and militaristic dominance over Europe during the Middle Ages. Akbari advocates for a consideration of medieval orientalism, since this "inferiority played a crucial role in the development of Orientalism."⁴ This shift in power certainly has discursive implications, and one must consider this when studying premodern Orientalism in medieval cultural productions.

In *Idols of the East*, Akbari argues that medieval orientalism emerges from the views regarding the Orient as a geographic space and the Saracens as a religious group. Such an imagination and means of regarding the Other may be part of the inspiration behind various medieval cultural productions. Akbari works to reveal how medieval writers and readers come to deal with perceived differences between themselves and the Muslim Other. Medieval textual representations of Islam and the Orient are bound up in various problematic notions that belie various Christian western anxieties and insecurities, particularly as contact between these two realms increased through travel and trade. The Christian West saw the Islamic East as something to conquer, and possibly even correct, because of the differences between them. These attitudes are further complicated when one considers the possibility (or impossibility) of assimilating the Saracen into Christian western society. Literature provides a testing ground for these particular attitudes.

GENERIC SHIFTS AND CONVERSIONS

Floire et Blanchefleur, which dates to around 1150, offers one of the earliest romantic lenses on Christian-Saracen relations. Love prevails after some difficult obstacles designed to keep the young lovers separate. Yet, packaged along with this romance is an interesting commentary on alterity and assimilation since the protagonist undergoes religious conversion, as well as a masculinization process, over the course of his journey to be reunited with his lover. *Floire et Blanchefleur* then is part of a complicated discourse on Christian-Saracen relations that takes hold in various generic forms. Floire is a compelling protagonist because his conversion seems to be a unique example of an inversion of the topos of the Saracen princess.

The topos of the Saracen princess appears throughout numerous *chansons de geste*. Of the twenty-one Saracen princesses who appear in these epic texts from 1150 through 1300, seventeen of them are represented as having white skin and European-like features such as blonde hair and blue eyes. Curiously, these princesses look vastly different from their fellow Saracen kin and community. The peculiar portraits of these characters reflect various cultural tensions and inconsistencies. As Jacqueline de Weever writes in *Sheba's Daughters*, such representation becomes “extensions of the binary oppositions of the culture of the time, the foundations of which are the oppositions of Latin Christian/Oriental page, white/black, orthodoxy/heterodoxy, truth/error.”⁵ Many of these white Saracen princesses betray their families in order to further the Latin Christian agenda of conquest. She may even end up betrothed to a French knight, but only after her vital conversion to Christianity. Indeed, the Saracen princess with her white skin is primed for domestication by the Christian West. The curious portrait seen throughout the topos of the Saracen princess is an articulation of a politics of conquest and assimilation. The *chansons de geste* and their treatment of Saracen princesses overwhelmingly suggest that alterity can be conquered, and this may be particularly true of individuals whose physical attributes signal them as good candidates for assimilation into Latin Christianendom.

Romance texts also offer an insight into attitudes on multicultural encounters that the *chansons de geste* cannot articulate. Feelings of longing and desire necessitated the emergence of a new type of writing, which in turn brought about different representations of the Muslim-Christian couple. Some texts, like *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*, point toward the possibility of assimilation but not without obstacle.⁶ In both texts, the parents of the titular young lovers oppose interreligious marriage and actively work to introduce physical barriers between them. However, *Floire et Blanchefleur* sets itself apart from *Aucassin et Nicolette* because of who converts for love⁷. Nicolette rejects her Saracen identity to be with Aucassin. As such, she is another example of a female Saracen who undergoes conversion for her male Christian lover.

On the other hand, Floire is a rare, if not unique, example of male conversion to Christianity in romance texts. Due to his male identity, he is an inversion of the paradigm set forth by Nicolette of *Aucassin et Nicolette* and her female peers in the topos of the Saracen princess. Like the Saracen princesses, Floire eventually converts to be with his Christian lover. In addition to adopting a Christian identity, it appears as though he

engenders a more masculine identity than the one he had as a Saracen. As a male Saracen, he faces feminization from the narrator and even other characters. This only ceases once he converts to Christianity, which suggests that with conversion comes masculinization. Both processes of conversion and masculinization can be traced throughout the text, though they are especially evident during Floire's travels in the East as he searches for Blanche fleur.

LE CONTE DE FLOIRE ET BLANCHE FLEUR AND MEDIEVAL ORIENTALISM

The romance tells the story of two young lovers who must overcome various obstacles in order to be together. Floire is a pagan (though presumably Muslim) prince who falls in love with Blanche fleur, the daughter of a Christian servant. King Felix, Floire's father, sells Blanche fleur to merchants heading east in an attempt to prevent a marriage between the two youths. The young prince voyages to the East to save his beloved from the clutches of an emir who desires to marry her. However, what is curious is the religious conversion that Floire undergoes as well as the resulting changes in his appearance and behavior from feminine to masculine as his journey unfolds.

Medieval orientalism is key in linking the representations of religion and gender in *Floire et Blanche fleur*. Floire hails from modern-day Spain, and, at the time that the romance was written, this region had been under hundreds of years of Muslim rule. The Iberian Peninsula was known for its critical position in trade during the Middle Ages, and these contacts may have influenced the Latinate Christian image of the Saracen soul and body. For instance, the narrator explains that Floire is pagan, yet given various historical and geographical contexts one could presume that he is in fact Muslim. This non-Christian religious status paints him as an Other to both the Christian West, and to his own beloved lady. As such, medieval orientalism has the capacity to project upon his body a problematic discourse on religious alterity and gender.

While Blanche fleur's journey to the East is involuntary, Floire takes it upon himself to attempt to trace her steps in order to retrieve his beloved. Floire's travels occupy the bulk of the text. Disguised as a merchant, he begins his rescue quest that serendipitously follows the same paths that Blanche fleur traveled. Based on various behavioral cues, hosts who aid Floire along his journey generally conclude that he is not a merchant but of noble lineage. These hosts then focus more on Floire and his physical

appearance. Soon after some initial impressions, they are able to make a connection between their young guest and Blanche fleur, their previous guest, based on various visual clues. For instance, Floire's first hostess astutely observes the striking similarity between her male guest and a certain young girl she encountered shortly before his arrival. She addresses Floire:

Autretel vi jou l'autre jor
de damoisele Blanceflor

...

el vos resanle, en moie foi,
bien pöés estre d'un eage,
si vos resanle du visage.

...

[I observed the other day a similar behavior in a certain Blanche fleur ... My faith, they resemble. You both have to be the same age, and your faces resemble one another.]⁸

The striking resemblance between the two youths involves not just behavioral similarities but facial ones, as well. Floire's face causes the hostess to make a comparison to that of Blanche fleur. This observation is the first in a series that allow Floire to continue his journey toward the East. His hosts function as checkpoints as a result of their prior encounters with Blanche fleur. Floire is able to trace and therefore follow Blanche fleur's path through these hosts who are able to identify similarities between the separated lovers. Travel reinforces the notion that Floire and Blanche fleur are an identical pair. By using Blanche fleur as a frame of reference, these encounters utilize the feminine as a basis of evaluation and comparison. Their twin-like quality finds basis not in androgyny or ambiguity but in female attributes. This serves to underscore Floire's femininity since he resembles his female lover whose travels precede his own.

Religious conversion—vital for the lover's success—is a continual process throughout the text. There are moments when Floire's utterances suggest sympathies with Christianity. However, the event of formal conversion takes place at the end of the text. After successfully reuniting with Blanche fleur in the emir's faraway lands, Floire learns of the passing of his parents and decides to return in order to assume the throne. The people of his homeland welcome the return of the two young lovers. Upon arrival, Floire decides to convert to Christianity before taking the crown. The conversion is of Floire's own volition. There are no societal or political pressures for conversion; nothing necessitates Floire's conversion to

Christianity. However, he publicly converts and ties this religious change to his ascension to the throne. By converting, Floire aligns himself even more closely with Blanchefleur, his Christian lover. He already looks like her, so a formal elimination of the religious difference between them serves to draw them closer together. Floire willingly crosses over into Blanchefleur's religious community. However, conversion extends beyond a public display of personal change. Floire also imposes a mass conversion upon his citizens. Those who fail to convert risk violent punishment. The narrative tells of the grizzly consequences: "Qui le baptesme refusoit/ne en Diu croire ne voloit,/Flores les faisoit escorcier,/ardoir en fu u detrencier" [Anyone who refused baptism and would not believe in God, Floire had him skinned live, burned, or quartered]."⁹ It is not enough for Floire to convert; he forces his newly acquired citizens to follow in his example or face severe punishment. To refuse conversion to Christianity means to relinquish one's life. In this way, Floire takes up the role of a virile and ruthless leader; these traits underscore an idea of masculine governance.

As such, Floire's transition from feminine to masculine throughout the text aligns well with his religious conversion. The text imposes femininity onto the protagonist up until the point of his public conversion. Other characters in the text complicate Floire's gender and even reinforce the imposition of femininity, prior to his public allegiance to Christianity. Floire's beauty, which is frequently described as feminine, is what allows him to remain relatively unnoticed in the emir's tower of virgins and to be eventually mistaken as Blanchefleur's female bed companion by the emir's chamberlain. The chamberlain tells the emir that Blanchefleur's absence at the court is for good reason. She is sound asleep with another woman, and the chamberlain did not have the heart to awaken them. He recounts the following sight:

« Ensanle dorment doucement,
 acolé s'ont estroitement,
 et bouce a bouce et face a face
 s'ont acolé, et brace a brace.
 De pitié nes voel esvillier,
 trop les cremoie a travillier.
 Moltlor siet a gesir ensanle. »

[They sleep tenderly together closely embraced: lips against lips and face against face and arms intertwined with arms. It was so moving that I did not want to awaken them with fear of disturbing them.]¹⁰

The chamberlain's reaction is suggestive of a voyeuristic element to medieval orientalism. While on duty, he mistakes Floire for Gloris. He assumes that it is Gloris sharing an intimate embrace with Blanche fleur. There are homosexual overtones to the heterosexual activities taking place between Floire and Blanche fleur. With their limbs tenderly intertwined and their lips pressed against each other, it is no wonder that the chamberlain communicates that he saw them in slumber. The Orient, home to the emir's tower of virgins and splendid palatial grounds, appears to facilitate this eroticism between what the character assumes to be two young women. The chamberlain's gaze allows one to peer into this fantastical realm, distorting the reality that Floire is in fact a young man.

Interestingly, the text suggests, rather than states, Floire's gender ambiguity. Nothing on Floire's face gives away his male identity. His lack of facial hair means that there is no visual assertion of masculinity on his face. Furthermore, his face is so lovely that it surpasses the beauty of all the young women in the tower. The exception, of course, is Blanche fleur. Female faces are the only grounds for comparison; male faces are not even taken into consideration when evaluating Floire's face. These statements suggest a feminization of Floire, but they also reveal how difficult it is to assign him a gender based on an evaluation of his face. His appearance escapes the binary of male-female. He queers gender, and this phenomenon is short-lived since the emir orders the removal of the sheets that cover the bodies of the young, sleeping lovers. Floire's ambiguous facial gender presentation is not tolerated, hence the removal of the sheets. The emir wants to shed light upon other bodily features to identify the person in bed with his prized Blanche fleur.

It is not until Floire's conversion that masculinization occurs. His personality changes upon return to his familial lands and overt conversion. The aforementioned imposition of conversion upon his people and the threat of violent punishments reveal a personality very different from that of the young man who sobbed before a gathering of the emir's colleagues after getting caught hiding in the tower of virgins with Blanche fleur. The possession and exercise of power is associated with masculinity and the fulfillment of patriarchal roles; Floire embraces the male gender identity upon his conversion to Christianity and accession to the throne. This masculinization in conjunction with Christianization is particularly important since the narrator of the text asserts that Charlemagne, a key figure in French history who holds a near-mythological status, is a descendant of Floire. The narrator notes in the beginning of the text that Floire and Blanche fleur

have a daughter together named Berthe, and she “fu mere Charlemaine,/ qui puis tint France et tot le Maine [was the mother of Charlemagne, who later reigned over France and all of Maine]”.¹¹ The masculinization and Christianization of Floire is imperative in bolstering the importance that Charlemagne holds in the Latinate Christian imagination. Floire’s prior identity cannot hold given such historically prominent progeny.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to various facets of identity, Floire occupies a space of inbetweenness. Floire does not neatly fit into binary categories of gender. Though he is a male character, he has various feminine qualities that cause others to mistake him for a woman. Floire is not quite a man, but he is not necessarily a woman either. His religious status is also ambiguous; for much of the text he occupies a space between Christianity and non-Christianity, which is presumably Islam. In examining Floire’s gender ambiguity and his religious status, the text points toward an overt association between Islam and femininity.¹² The text emasculates Floire throughout his journey to retrieve Blanchefleur, and this ceases only upon his conversion to Christianity. Until Floire explicitly becomes Christian, he queers gender. It is when his conversion ceases to be a continual process and finally galvanizes into a discrete event that he ceases to queer gender and begins to seize a masculine identity.

Conversion is a process by which Floire relinquishes his gender ambiguity in favor of taking up masculine gender roles. Latinate Christian society, after imposing femininity upon him, ultimately awards him honorary masculinity upon conversion. Once a male identity is forced upon Floire, he ceases to threaten and destabilize medieval French notions of masculinity. There is something peculiar about subjecting a male body to the processes that Floire undergoes. After all, Floire is the only known example of a male Saracen undergoing a conversion of this nature. In subsequent texts, one can see an overwhelming number of female Saracens who convert. Floire occupies a curious space not only in his home narrative, but also in the context of the topos of the Saracen princess, which is full of stories of conversion much like his own, but through the lens of a completely different gender.

Though earlier I mentioned that Floire might be considered the inverse of the topos of the Saracen princess, it is more accurate to say that he sets a precedent for what not to do. This may be due to an anxiety surrounding representations of masculinity, especially against the backdrop

of medieval orientalism. Floire's gender queerness is clearly unacceptable in the text. It is an issue associated with his non-Christian, in particular Muslim, status. This is evident in the cessation of his gender ambiguity upon explicit, formal conversion. Gender queerness posed a threat to notions of western masculinity. Female bodies were eventually deemed better suited for the projection of medieval orientalist fantasies. While Floire's journey offers an interesting avenue for tracking medieval orientalist attitudes, the male body becomes unsuitable as an experimental space in subsequent texts, hence the proliferation of texts that follow *Floire et Blanchefleur*, that feature a Saracen princess instead of a prince. Ultimately, it is the sizeable topos of the Saracen princess that bears the burden of medieval orientalism.

Notes

1. Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, trans. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Honoré Champion 2003).
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (Vintage Books 1994), 16-17.
3. Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Cornell University Press 2009), 6.
4. Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 9.
5. Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (Routledge 1998), xvii.
6. In the introduction to *Christian, Saracen and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, Lynn Ramey notes the difference between the relationship found in *La Prise d'Orange* versus those found in *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Aucassin et Nicolette*. She posits that Orable and Guillaume are able to wed without societal objection, whereas Floire and Blanchefleur as well as Aucassin and Nicolette face immense pressure not to be part of an interethnic marriage. Ramey writes that the "concept of harmony began to crumble as parody and nostalgia dominated literary treatment of the Muslim/Christian couple." See Lynn Ramey, *Christian, Saracen and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Routledge 2001), 5. While it is difficult to say with certainty whether *Floire et Blanchefleur* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* are nostalgic or parodic in nature, Ramey does point toward generic shifts and accompanying changes in the treatment of Muslim-Christian pairings. See *Aucassin et Nicolette*, trans. Gustave Cohen (Librairie Honoré Champion 1967) and *La Prise d'Orange*, trans. Claude Lachet (Honoré Champion 2010).
7. *Floire et Blanchefleur* is also different generically from *Aucassin et Nicolette*. As the only known example of the *chantefable* genre, *Aucassin et Nicolette* combines prose and lyric.

8. Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, trans. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Honoré Champion 2003), 62. Translations by the author.

9. Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, trans. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Honoré Champion 2003), 174.

10. Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, trans. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Honoré Champion 2003), 136.

11. Robert D'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, trans. Jean-Luc Leclanche (Honoré Champion 2003), 2.

12. Steven F. Kruger explores the feminization of Islamic and even Jewish men in Christian western texts throughout his work. See for instance "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?" in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffery Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (Garland Publishing, Inc. 2000), 21-43, and "Racial/Religious and Sexual Queerness in the Middle Ages" in *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 16(1) (1993), 32-36.