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Honourable Slave Traders and Aristocratic Slaves in Middle English "Floris and Blancheflour"

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Abstract

The Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour* idealizes slave trade and suggests that only the highly-born can be subject to enslavement. It disregards the oriental origin of the merchants who will trade in *Blancheflour*. The poem focuses on wealth and ignores the widespread nature of medieval poverty. Respect for the merchants in the text foreshadows the later high social status of slave traders in England. Slavery is romanticized in the poem and the reality of serfdom is not included. The text is similar to the later “mercantile romances” and it is a mercantile text responding to the worldview of merchants, who were probably the text’s audience and to whose expectations the plot was adjusted.

Keywords: Middle English literature, romance, slavery, wealth, the Orient

The thirteenth-century *Floris and Blancheflour* remains only one version out of many that were translations of the twelfth-century Old French romance *Floris et Blanchfleur*,¹ itself known in two versions – “aristocratic” and “popular”; the so-called *version aristocratique* was the basis for the Middle English *Floris*.² The versions in other languages were produced in Danish, Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, Old Norse, and Swedish (Kelly 102). The Middle English rendition draws its audience’s attention particularly to the question of opulence, ignoring destitution, even though at the time the latter was much more common than instances of wealth. The romance idealizes slave traders, which is perhaps not that incongruous if we view the socio-historical context of slavery at the time when the text was written, and it romanticizes the institution as the one afflicting the highly-born and ending for them with liberation. Furthermore, controversy may arise from the fact that the merchants are Babylonian, not English. This would question the orientalism of this romance set in Islamic countries, with orientalism understood here as the strategy of othering, exoticizing, and making unfamiliar. Those processes do not pertain to the merchants, who are made uncannily cultured through their helpfulness, gentility, and the motivations mirroring those of Western town dwellers. In the romance orientalism is nuanced, since it does not lead to stereotypical treatment

1 Donald B. Sands maintains that “the Old French original was probably current in France some seventy-five to a hundred years prior to its appearance in English” (280).

2 On the Old French *version aristocratique* see Krueger (65–70).

of the merchants. Instead, they are represented in neutral or even favourable terms. The reality of medieval serfdom as slavery is not broached in the plot, since perhaps it does not agree with the policy of privileging wealth and ignoring destitution that the romance follows. It needs to be stated, however, that *Floris and Blancheflour* does not “lack any direct engagement with the social world of [its] audiences” (Field 24). It rather attempts to please the town dwellers, who were, among others, designated as the audience, with the image of very decent slave merchants, and it shows slavery as temporarily afflicting the haves instead of involving mainly the have-nots.

The merchants that traded in slaves are important characters in other Middle English texts as well. In Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* they make the progress of the plot possible by being those who let the Sultan know about Constance, the Roman emperor’s daughter, which makes him interested in marrying her. The merchants are from Syria and, to quote Carol F. Heffernan, Syria is so significant for the whole plot that it is “named in the very first line of the *Man of Law’s Tale*” (28). The merchants are presented as not only rich, but honourable:

In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye
Of chapmen riche, and therto sadde and trewe,
That wyde-where senten hir spicerye,
Clothes of gold, and satyns riche of hewe.³
(II.134–137)

Their merchandise is “so thrifty and so newe” that they are widely respected, both in Syria and in Rome where they go on business and in order to entertain themselves (II.138). Heffernan, however, debates on whether they are of Syrian origin and she comes to the conclusion that they are not just Christian, but also very likely Venetian and only doing their business in Syria (28). That would be an interesting explanation of their respectability in the Christian world, but it is only a hypothesis. Otherwise Chaucer’s tale also presents a nuanced image of the people living in the Orient, and the Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour* is similar in this respect.

In *Floris* even the Muslim king at first shows no autocratic behaviour since he allows Blancheflour to study side by side with Floris. “She shall lerne, for thy love,” he tells his son (24).⁴ Then, once they have grown up, he is even described as the one who “understood the grete amour” (35). Yet, it turns out to be a superficial statement, since he understood that the love existed but wished to end it by executing Blancheflour or getting rid of her in another way. There is something in this behaviour that confirms the stereotype of Oriental people as emotive and sensuous, since the king understands erotic love very well. He is not free, however, from the autocratic quality that was attributed to the Orient by the orientalist discourse. The merchants who are to trade in Blancheflour, however, are free from such qualities and are presented as thoroughly positive characters.

3 The quotations from *The Man of Law’s Tale* and the line numbers in brackets come from Benson’s edition.

4 All the quotations from *Floris and Blancheflour* along with line numbers in brackets come from Sands’ edition.

Floris not only presents Babylonian merchants, but also Babylon itself. It is a Middle Eastern city whose flavour is captured, as Dominique Battles writes, through referring to the historical episode of the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade. Christians were helped then by Daire le Roux, the Pious Traitor, in the way *Floris* is helped by Daris the gate keeper (82). Then the idea that the inhabitants of the East do not have to be stereotypically bent on doing harm to the Westerners is extended there. Orientals can be helpers as well and the judgement who is honourable and who is wicked according to Franks does not depend on ethnic origin and religion.

Merchants that traded in slaves enjoyed a high social status in the epochs that followed the Middle Ages. Even though the topic of corruption through gain did not enter European culture with William Langland's *Lady Meed*, since already the Scripture condemned, as John A. Yunck summarizes it, "avarice, fiscal corruption, and the power of money in the world," not all examples of money-making and wealth inspired criticism (22). Especially in England merchants, originating from the class of town dwellers, were treated with noteworthy respect. As M. I. Finlay states, in the seventeenth-century England and later merchants trading in thralls were even thought to be people on the road to gentility (8). Before the twelfth century slavery was frequent, then the institution materialized itself in serfdom, only to return in its chattel form in the age of colonization.⁵ In the Middle Ages the moral dimension of the trade in which someone was involved did not matter as much as the pecuniary aspect of their activity: in the text in question the wealth generated from slave trade counted more than the type of goods which were traded. Merchants were usually perceived as enterprising citizens rather than cash-centred souls.⁶ They occupied a specific position in the society and knew how to generate profit in the social hierarchy within which they had been born. Gaining possessions denoted a movement upwards within their social class and the wealth they accumulated was usually widely appreciated, regardless of its source. *Floris and Blancheflour* suggests that the fact that merchants could be involved in trading in human bodies tended to be disregarded.

Medieval societies were highly hierarchical and merchants enjoyed a good social standing within them. Merchants were the ones who cherished a high position in the class of town dwellers, testifying to the diversification of that social class. We know more about the position of this social class in medieval England from the research conducted on the character of the Merchant in Chaucer's *Prologue*. He belonged "to the group of wholesalers who were also England's bankers and moneylenders," to quote Michael Murrin (49). They indirectly controlled the country's finances (Bowden 146), lent money at interest, and changed money (Mann 100). Chaucer knew such merchants, but they were not a social stratum newly formed in the fourteenth century. Their power had been growing for some time, hence it is not improbable that already the anonymous

5 See Samson for a discussion of early medieval slavery (95–124).

6 With time mercantilism in England developed so much that famous knights, such as the fifteenth-century Sir John Falstof, could be aristocrats and merchants at the same time. As Albert H.R. Ball notes in the introduction to *The Paston Letters*, Falstof "is mentioned also as a merchant, his ships trading between Yarmouth and London" (17).

author of the Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour* had a specific class of English merchants in mind when referring to the Babylonian slave traders and, even though the latter traded in people, the Babylonians would not be exoticized as a consequence. Obviously, not all merchants were very rich, which demonstrates the degree of financial diversification within social estates.

Social classes were also subdivided in accordance with their social position, which was also true of merchants. Wealth mattered, but the goods they traded in must have mattered as well in terms of their position in the hierarchy. One's legal position followed wealth and in legal terms the nobility also used to be further subdivided into the *de facto* and (later) *de iure* one (Bloch 332). As far as financial status and henceforth freedom or obligations towards the richer ones were concerned, even among the knights there emerged the class of *ministeriales*, the servile knights, so that they could play the role of "sergeants" towards their more privileged masters (Bloch 337). The divisions among peasants had an even more complicated structure, since "rustics" or "villains" were diversified primarily on the grounds of "servitude" and "freedom" that they respectively suffered from or enjoyed, with financial consequences of that status (Bloch 352). The entire feudal manorial system was based on the institution of serfdom, a form of slavery more historical and real than the slavery practiced in the remote lands (Bloch 448).

In medieval English society the relatively high social status of merchants influenced their aspirations. It seems that they were generally a class of social aspirants and that such romances as *Floris and Blancheflour* were composed not only for aristocracy, but also for them. Murrin gives *The Squire's Tale* as an instance of the Eastern stories whose audience was mixed, since "both the aristocracy and the commercial classes loved them" (43). Reception of literature reflected the merchants' social aspirations, since they became more and more interested in literature as entertainment and this must be true not only of the fourteenth century, but also of the thirteenth century in England, which is reflected in *Floris and Blancheflour* and the manner in which it addresses the mercantile part of its audience. Murrin traces the following association between romance and medieval merchants: the first travellers to Asia were not only missionaries, but also merchants, to mention Marco Polo, and they brought with them back to Europe fascination with the marvellous. Since earlier romance was primarily Arthurian, a new type of romance had to emerge in order to reflect the needs of the commercial audience. The new type included the exotic and the marvellous as stock elements of such travelogues as Marco Polo's *Divisament du monde*. This is how Murrin describes the process: "Not long after [the travels to Asia], the nature of heroic narrative began to change in the West, as Arthurian romance gave way to composite romance, a form that had 'an inexhaustible appetite for marvels,' and the chansons de geste similarly took over traits of Arthurianism" (9). It is not accidental that *Floris and Blancheflour* was firstly an aristocratic plot, which was later transformed into something that could please commercial audiences more fully. The presence of such marvellous objects as the ring that can save lives in the romance is another element that was to meet the expectations of merchants, who were a part of the text's mixed audience. Yet another element that agrees with how Murrin sees the transformation of romance as a result of meeting the expectations of mercantile audiences is the inspiration that the genre drew

from Eastern sources, where the mixture of love and heroism was common. Again, Marco Polo's *Divisament* included the stories he heard where the combination of the two could be found (Murrin 27–42). The story of the love lost and found in *Floris and Blancheflour* conforms to this pattern.

The text discusses not only wealth, but also its possible sources, since slavery and its pecuniary dimension surfaces in the plot early. In the Middle English romance the readers are even introduced into the plot *in media res* due to the truncated beginning of the text. They are immediately offered an image of Floris, a free Spanish prince, and Blancheflour, an enslaved Christian girl, growing up together. The manuscript known as the Trenthan or Sutherland one (MS Egerton 2862) begins with the lines “Ne thurst men never in londe/ After fairer children fonde,” without the important passage about the capture of a Christian aristocratic lady by Saracens and her giving birth to a girl, Blancheflour, at the same time when her Saracen lady has a son, Floris (1–2). Blancheflour is thus born into slavery, but her pecuniary value remains unspecified till the moment when the love between the two teenagers is disclosed and, as Floris's father maintains, has to be thwarted. The girl has the status of the Other in the world of Muslim Spain, since she is marked with difference through her ethnicity, religion, and also gender. Her status as a slave is confirmed when she is sold in exchange for profit. The difference that she is marked by in the kingdom of king Felix makes her eligible for either death or being sold, with slavery clearly indicated as the lesser of the two evils.⁷ Firstly, the king thus addresses Floris's mother:

“Dame,” he saide, “I tell thee my reed:
I will that Blanchefloure be do to deed.
When that maide is y-slawe
And brought of her lif-dawe,
As sone as Floris may it underyete,
Rathe he wille hur forfete.
Than may he wife after reed.”
(45–51)

Blancheflour becomes here an object that will easily be forfeited by Floris if he cannot find her when he returns from his voyage abroad; then he will resort to another, more eligible woman. Yet, the girl is sold instead of being slain, since the Queen makes the King consider the consequent financial gain:

At the next haven that here is,
Ther been chapmen riche, y-wis,
Marchaundes of Babyloin full riche,
That woll hur bye bletheliche.
(145–148)

The Babylonian merchants are presented as worthy of respect through their wealth, a characteristic emphasized by being iterated twice, and by their serious attitude to money-making. Blancheflour's life cannot be wasted if it is worth much to the opulent

7 For a discussion of the possible reasons for selling Blancheflour see Heffernan (101).

merchants. The slave traders (since they have to be named this way) deal with the king and his wife honestly, as they offer “twenty mark of reed golde / And a coupe good and riche” (162–163). Everything has its pecuniary value, even human life, according to the poem’s economy. The richness of traders guarantees fair deal and good business. Furthermore, the business of trading in slaves is transparent and free from any abuse. No ill treatment of Blancheflour by the Babylonian merchants is ever mentioned. Only her economic value increases with time, which perhaps testifies to the right handling of the commodity she constitutes. In return they are paid “sevin sithes of golde her wight” by the Emir, who searches for beautiful virgins he could marry (196). The merchants merely do their work, functioning well in the money economy of the romance which reflects that of later feudalism in Europe. This economy is no longer the natural, agrarian one, even though what is traded in is really something entirely natural, a human body. The European money economy reveals here its inhumane face of tolerating profit from human misery.

Not surprisingly for such a popular text, the romance author does not include any criticism of the institution of slavery or of the manner in which merchants accumulate their enormous wealth. On the one hand, it needs to be noted that the entertaining dimension of the genre dominates here, pushing aside the more serious issues, called by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen “some uncomfortable home truths” which were often expressed in medieval romance (79). On the other hand, the fact that the romance presents the issue of slave trade leading to opulence in a specific manner testifies to the importance of the topic of wealth, but its treatment is clearly biased. The merchants are represented as neither money-obsessed souls nor money-worshippers, who would be committing the sin of idolatry through such conduct. Their activities seem to be detached from the outcome of their work: Blancheflour is sold to the Emir who slays the brides he firstly chooses, but the slaughter is disconnected from the slave trade itself. Furthermore, Kathleen Coyne Kelly emphasizes the nobleness of the merchants (107) and the sympathy they have for Floris (108), which makes them even more humane. They are gentle and kind regardless of their social origin as though they were indeed approaching gentility. The orientalism of the romance appears complex then, since it visibly limits itself to exoticizing the Islamic kingdom of king Felix and of the Emir’s land, but it omits any indication of otherness in the characterization of Babylonian merchants. Instead, it renders them as decent and honourable as merchants were generally thought to be at the time.

The matter complicates itself if we consider the Arabic provenance of slave systems. Orlando Patterson even propounds the view that Islamic expansion in the world would not have been feasible without the manpower that was exploited in the slave systems of Muslim countries. “Even more than the Western states, the Islamic world depended on slaves for the performance of critical administrative, military, and cultural roles,” Patterson argues, indicating slavery, a type of social death, as a phenomenon widespread in both of the cultures (viii). Conversely, Pierre Dockès states that Arabs enslaved only those who did not agree to conversion to Islam (238). This may be the reason for the enslaving of Blancheflour, who stayed Christian, even though conversion would be more beneficial for her in terms of her legal status.

The orientalism of the romance does not share many qualities with Edward Said's idea of a scholarly discourse adopted by Westerners in order to gain power over the colonized lands, developing the idea expressed by Michel Foucault that knowledge of the Others is tantamount to holding power over them. Nor does the text perform the act of negatively characterizing the Others in order to attribute to them qualities which form the mirror image of the Western world.⁸ Apart from the negative characterization of the lustful and callous Emir (but not tyrannical, since he follows the advice of his nobles), the orientalism of the tale is limited to fantasizing about the East as the sphere of the exotic and the marvellous. It is something that John M. Ganim terms "Said's paradigm of an imagined East," but without its negative dimension (45). Naturally, the fantasy also touches on the question of merchants, their comportment, and motivation, since maintaining that both the Eastern and the Western traders were honourable and respectful is a meaningful fallacy. Perhaps desistance from orientalizing the Babylonian merchants resulted from the identity of the romance's audience, who may have been merchants themselves. The positive image of Babylonian traders would have pleased an audience who enjoyed a relatively high social status. The fictitious merchants' ethnicity or religion did not determine their characterization, as their wealth proved stronger than any other identity markers. If they were as wealthy as the real English merchants, they deserved comparable respect and a relatively high position in the world of this romance. The lack of negative orientalizing guaranteed the text's popularity, understood here, after Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, as "accessibility to a wide audience" (5). After all, the audience of popular romance was "lower or lower middle-class [...], a class of social aspirants who wish[ed] to be entertained with what they consider[ed] to be the same fare, but in English, as their social betters [...] a new class, an emergent bourgeoisie" (Pearsall 12). If such indeed were the recipients of *Floris and Blancheflour*, the "whitening" of the Babylonian merchants, understood as not presenting them as oriental at all, was fully justifiable.

The identification of the text as "popular romance" also ensues from analyzing its focus. The author clearly centres on the narration and adventure rather than introduces some symbolic issues or those of more philosophical nature. If we adopt Radulescu and Rushton's definition that popular romance are "those texts in Middle English [...] which show a predominant concern with narrative at the expense of symbolic meaning," the meagreness of the text's symbolic dimension becomes justifiable (7).⁹ Lack of any criticism of the manner in which the Babylonian merchants acquired their riches may be attributed precisely to the text's unsophisticated nature and to the emphasis that is laid here on adventures at the expense of more tangled issues, such as whether people should accumulate their wealth by selling other human beings. Rosalind Field confirms this diagnosis when she states that *Floris* "is a simple courtship romance with no aim beyond the achievement of the union of the couple" (23).

8 According to Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, Said distinguishes between the eighteenth-century orientalism and the earlier one, constituting rather "the style of thought" operating in negative terms (57).

9 It cannot be plausibly argued, however, that there are no symbols in the romance; see, for example, Reiss (339–350) and Wentersdorf (76–96).

In the light of the above, it is not surprising that in this popular romance also Floris, originally an aristocrat, willy-nilly adopts the discourse of trading when searching for Blancheflour, a girl firstly thought by him to be dead when he returns from his voyage abroad. His conversation with a burgess reveals a lot about how infectious the language related to chattel slavery may become:

“Ow, child, me thinketh welle
That muche thou thinkest on my catelle.”
“Nay, sir, on catel thenke I nought”
(On Blancheflour was all his thought),
“But I thinke on all wise
For to finde my merchaundise;
And yit it is the most wo,
When I it find, I shall it forgo.”
(459–466)

Floris verbally undermines Blancheflour’s status of a chattel, a piece of property, but he does not question her position of a subject to trading arrangements in the money-oriented world. The discourse of economy triumphs over the discourse of love regardless of who the interlocutors are. Being aristocratic ostensibly does not free one from calculating loss and gain. Wealth does not seem suspicious, even if it is generated by dealing in human beings rather than in inanimate objects. Floris unwillingly agrees to the world order according to which access to one’s beloved has to be paid for, as when “he gaf his ost an hundrid shelling” or when he pays the bridge keeper Daris with “the ringe” for the information about Blancheflour’s whereabouts (492, 515). The romance does not go to such lengths as to analyze the importance of wealth in the way *Sir Amadace*, “a commercial romance,” does, but it clearly suggests that even aristocracy should not refrain from being economically-minded, but rather adapt to the requirements of the surrounding world (Radulescu 45). The Middle English author does not go to such lengths as Konrad von Fleck in High German *Flôre und Blanscheflûr*, where the money economy and that of love go hand in hand through the prince transforming himself into a noble merchant (Altpeter-Jones 6). Still, even the Middle English character definitely has to adjust himself to the commercialized world he was born in.

Floris finally gains access to the girl when the Emir’s porter “is Floris man bicom / For his gold and his warisone” after having defeated the prince in the game of chess (707–708). Floris ultimately learns about Blancheflour’s status of a trophy at the Emir’s court. The oriental ruler elects his wife under the Tree of Love, when flowers fall onto one of the girls he holds captive in his *seraglio*. The relatively high value of enslaved Blancheflour acquires confirmation here, as she is eligible to be chosen as the Emir’s bride. Slavery appears here as a condition affecting only those girls who are beautiful and, because of their good manners, fit to be chosen by rulers. Furthermore, Blancheflour’s education alongside Floris makes her his equal in terms of sophistication and intellect. As a child Floris vehemently objected to being separated from the girl and sent to school:

“Ne shall not Blanchefloure lerne with me?
. . .

Ne can I in no scole sing ne rede.
 Without Blancheflour," he saide.
 The King saide to his soon,
 "She shall lerne, for thy love."
 To schole they were put;
 Both they were good of witte.
 (18–26)

The effect produced by the girl's origin, revealed in the original beginning of the narrative that is presently missing from the Middle English manuscript, is enhanced through the royal education that she is granted access to. Blancheflour's mother undoubtedly had aristocratic roots, as her manners revealed to the Saracens who captured her. Consequently, the mother entered the royal household as a part of the Queen's retinue and nursed the two infants, Floris and Blancheflour. The girl started to be treated as a property once she was put up for sale, but her predicament was the lot of an aristocratic slave, highly valued for her origin, manners, and beauty, rather than the drudgery of a low-born slave. The romance author creates an illusion that all slavery occurs in the exotic lands and affects the highly-born, who are liberated in the end, as Floris is, when the Emir mercifully frees the young lovers. The medieval reality of slavery, in which the agrarian economy was grounded in the feudal toil of peasants, is not alluded to even remotely here. Even if the text represents its popular variety, the genre is not conducive to dwelling on the dreadful life of serfs, exploited beyond all possible limits and suffering starvation despite their toil. It rather portrays slavery as a condition affecting the rich and their life always has considerable value.

Floris and Blancheflour fairly directly addresses its audience, town dwellers, in that it avoids criticizing and desists from orientализing Babylonian merchants. As for slavery, its aristocratic variety needs to end well. It turns out that Floris's mother gave him a ring with the words: "Thou shalt not die while it is thin," but the boy wanted Blancheflour to have it so that she was saved (969). The ring undoubtedly functions as a marvelous object, so something the poem's commercial listeners or readers would recognize as an element of romance that they knew and accepted. As Floris and Blancheflour cannot settle who will be saved, they are both caught, but the Emir realizes how close to perfection their mutual feeling is. Touched by the selfless youthful love, he liberates Blancheflour, while the aristocratic lineage of the girl grants her the position of the queen once Floris's father is dead. Floris "was crownid within a short day," which also constituted a reward for Blancheflour and compensated for her suffering (1083). Slavery proves to be temporary and ending in power and wealth being granted to the aristocratic heroine by her lover.

The existence of destitution in the medieval world has not been implied by the anonymous poet, interested rather in portraying the life of the rich for his audience, which consisted partly of merchants aspiring to improvement of their social position by doing good business and focusing on finance. *Floris and Blancheflour* foreshadowed the later advent of the so-called "mercantile romances," which presented mercantile English success from the romantic and moral perspective, as Ania Loomba writes about Fletcher's *The Island Princess* (68–108). Already the Middle English romance

is a mercantile text in presenting merchants and the world surrounding them in the manner it does, which catered for the needs of the middle class sections of its audience.

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