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## Introduction

### THE LEGEND OF FLOIRE AND BLANCHEFLOR

Upon the death of her husband, a countess and her father set out on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in order to give thanks for the unborn child that the countess is carrying (in the *Filocolo*, the French popular version and the Spanish prose romance it is the father and mother who go on pilgrimage). A pagan King, Felix, and his soldiers kill the grandfather and take the mother, Berthe, prisoner. The pregnant Saracen Queen befriends the Christian captive, and the two women give birth on the same day, Palm Sunday (Pentecost in some versions), the Queen to a boy, Floire, Berthe to a girl, Blancheflor. The children fall in love, and they use their study time to write love poems in Latin and to daydream about each other. The King is dismayed, in some versions because he considers Blancheflor socially inferior to his son, in others because her Christianity poses a threat to his kingdom. The parents devise schemes to separate the children: they accuse Blancheflor of trying to poison the King, and then they sell her to slave merchants, who take her to Cairo, where she quickly becomes the favorite in the Emir's harem. The King and Queen order the creation of an elaborately decorated tomb so that Floire will believe that she has died. When the Queen realizes that her son may die of melancholy and despair, she admits that Blancheflor still lives, and Floire vows not to return to his father's kingdom until he has found Blancheflor. Floire finally reaches Cairo, and discovers that Blancheflor is one of the many maidens kept in a tower by the Emir. There is a magic tree in the garden within the tower, the maidens walk beneath the tree each day, and the Emir takes to bed each night the maiden upon whom a flower has fallen that day. The next day the Emir has the maiden beheaded and the process continues. Floire challenges the tower's porter to a game of chess. In order to bolster

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978-0-521-02767-0 - Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance

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the porter's confidence, Floire lets him win the first time, then roundly defeats him in subsequent games. The porter has agreed to help Floire enter the tower if he wins the chess game, so the porter carries Floire into the tower in a basket of flowers, or, in some versions, the basket is hoisted up outside the tower. Floire is discovered in the basket by Blancheflor's friend Claris or Gloris, which leads to much merriment in the harem and joking about knowing this flower well. While Floire and Blancheflor enjoy each other in bed, Claris tries to deflect the Emir's attention from Blancheflor's absence by telling him that Blancheflor is tired because she had been up late reading the night before. However, the Emir soon tires of the excuses and goes to Blancheflor's quarters, where he discovers the lovers in bed. He calls his advisors together, and after a lengthy trial, the lovers are vindicated, and they head for Spain. In most versions, Floire converts to Christianity, which removes the obstacle to their marriage, and the lovers live happily ever after.

In 1661 Roman authorities added to the Index of Forbidden Books the *vita* of one Rosana, who was captured by pagans, and her daughter, also named Rosana, whose militant steadfastness to Christianity and chastity – while living in a lustful Sultan's harem – earned her a heavenly crown. The earliest hagiographical text of her life is a play, one of the fifteenth-century Florentine *Sacre Rappresentazioni*, lavish and brilliant spectacles sponsored by wealthy and fashionable brotherhoods that captivated the public imagination for weeks at a time.<sup>1</sup>

The art form itself, that is the *Sacra Rappresentazione*, appears not to have survived the sixteenth century, but the same cannot be said for the religious heroes and heroines celebrated by these elaborate productions.<sup>2</sup> Devoted followers of these saintly figures so provoked the Roman Catholic Church that some of the saints were expunged

<sup>1</sup> According to d'Ancona (*Sacre Rappresentazioni* and *Origini del teatro*), who edited forty-three dramatic religious works, these extremely popular plays stem from the last thirty years of the fifteenth century, derived from a combination of civic pageants and Umbrian *Divozione* and were performed in the oratories of the local confraternities or in the refectories of convents.

<sup>2</sup> The popularity of the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* waned in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but a different kind of religious theater appeared: the *commedie sacre*. As Elissa Weaver tells us, these works were more sophisticated than the *sacra rappresentazione* and were designed specifically for monastic and lay organizations of piety (*Amor di virtù* 181). One of them, *Amor di virtù* or *Virtù di Amore*, by Beatrice del Sera, a Florentine nun, borrows the love story of Florio and Biancifiore from Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, changes the lovers' names to Florido Febo and Aurabeatrice, and interprets the story as "an allegory in

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978-0-521-02767-0 - Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance

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from the calendar of feasts. However, the seventeenth-century injunction against the worship of Saint Rosana results from rather unusual circumstances. Hippolyte Delehaye's classification of hagiographic documents proffers one small, curious category: saints whose only provenance is literary texts. The case of Saint Rosana demonstrates the dangers of reading, for her *vita* tells not only about a completely apocryphal saint, but about one who is recast from a medieval romance, the story of the lovers Floire and Blancheflor.<sup>3</sup>

The example of Saint Rosana demonstrates one aspect of its profane source, the importance of which underlies this entire study: the hagiographic potential inherent in the tale, exhibited primarily through motifs and episodes of pilgrimage and conversion. While we will see that various versions develop hagiography within the story, and that the story itself gives rise to other literary works of religious overtone, such as Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Saint Rosana most strongly attests to the power of the hagiographic potential in the legend of Floire and Blancheflor. As the example of Saint Rosana demonstrates, that potential influenced not only other literary texts, but real life, with a force so great that the intervention of Rome was necessary to dismantle the cult of a saint whose origin was a purely fictional tale.

The popularity of the legend of the lovers Floire and Blancheflor has endured: one may still find modernizations and retellings of the story, and it appears to be well entrenched in contemporary Spanish folklore as a narrative model for courtship patterns.<sup>4</sup> Versions of the story abound in Europe, clearly attesting to its power to engage audiences from several centuries and many countries. While the

which the lover's quest for his beloved is said to signify the soul's search for God" (*Amor di virtù* 186).

<sup>3</sup> Delehaye cites *Floire et Blancheflor* as an example of a literary figure who gave rise to an imaginary saint, along with the better-known example of the *chanson de geste* of Amis and Amile (87). Reusch (*Der Index* II: 227), Symonds (*Giovanni Boccaccio* I: 354), T.R. Jackson ("Religion and Love" 24) and d'Ancona (*Origini* I: 437, II: 60 and *Sacre Rappresentazioni* III: 362) all mention the affiliation of Saint Rosana with Floire and Blancheflor. D'Ancona published an edition of the tale, *La Legenda della Reina Rosana e di Rosana sua Figliuola*. See also the 1909 English translation of the legend by Mildred Mary Blance Mansfield, *The Tale of Queen Rosana and of Rosana her Daughter and of the King's Son Aulimento*.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Marchand (*La Légende de Floire et Blanchefleur*) and Suzanne Hannedouche (*Floire et Blancheflor*) have produced modern French editions of the legend. And in Spain, for example, "the production of cheap printed versions of medieval courtly romances is not a specially recent development. *Flores y Blancaflor* was issued throughout the nineteenth century in editions aimed at the widest Spanish public" (Deyermond, "Courtly and Popular Elements" 35). I discuss in the epilogue the relationship of the medieval love story to modern courtship patterns in the region of Cáceres, as examined by the anthropologist James Taggart.

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names of the lovers may not be as recognizable to a modern public as those of Tristan and Isolde, for example, *Floire and Blancheflor*, by virtue of its continuing appeal throughout the centuries, must rank as one of the most important of medieval romances. Moreover, unlike *Tristan and Isolde*, which (in spite of the presence of distinctive features in France, Germany and Italy) remains a somewhat static romance of an adulterous couple, *Floire and Blancheflor* exhibits generic diversification.<sup>5</sup>

The present study has two main parts, and an epilogue. Part One (“*Floire and Blancheflor as Peregrinus*”) discusses the origins of the story and the manuscript transmission of *Floire and Blancheflor*, much of which dates from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. With the rediscovery of the fourteenth-century Spanish chronicle-version of *Flores y Blancaflor*, many of our assumptions and conclusions about the provenance of the European versions must be revised. This section describes the relevance of the Chronicle to the other European versions, especially Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*, and proves that *Flores y Blancaflor* in Spain represents the only extant witness to support Gaston Paris’s hypothesis that there must have been a “third strain” of *Floire and Blancheflor*.

Paris was convinced that the two French tales, the aristocratic and the popular, represented only part of the history of the story’s origins. Some features found in the anonymous Italian *Cantare di Fiorio e Biancifiore*, Boccaccio’s *Filocolo*, the sixteenth-century Spanish *Historia de los dos enamorados Flores y Blancaflor*, and references in Spanish literature that do not correspond faithfully either to the French popular or aristocratic poems suggested to Paris that there must have been a version known in early Spain that differed from the above-mentioned French ones, hence an Italo-Spanish

<sup>5</sup> As with any kind of broad categorization, there is a risk of overgeneralization in claiming for *Floire and Blancheflor* a generic diversification that does not mark the Tristan legend. For example, in Spain, *Tristán de Leonís* (1501) incorporates some specific material and the tone of the Spanish sentimental romance, a subgenre of romance that was indigenous to Spain (see Waley, “Love and Honour” and Grieve, *Desire and Death*), so *Tristan* was certainly not immune to change. But my point becomes clear, I think, when we consider the character of the image projected by the lovers. *Tristan and Isolde* were always portrayed as models of secular love, while this is not the case with *Floire and Blancheflor*. As we will see in the Epilogue, “Poetics of Continuation,” the lovers are models of secular love and, at times, pious models of Christian love; beyond that, we need think only of the tonal difference between the lovers in the French aristocratic version and the Old Norse, for example, to realize that the main story remains the same but the context and circumstances of the lovers’ story do not.

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version or “third strain.”<sup>6</sup> The proof of Paris’s hypothesis is housed in Madrid’s Biblioteca Nacional in the form of an almost-perfectly preserved manuscript, a late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth-century reworking of an Alfonsine chronicle, which I call *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* in order to distinguish the love story from the Spanish prose romance, *Flores y Blancaflor*.

Part One, then, is a traditional, historical approach to the study of the legend. It makes its contribution to the ongoing process of classifying the web of manuscripts that tell the lovers’ tale and, more importantly, it sets the scene for the subsequent chapters. Throughout the study, the findings – and the continuing questions – presented in the first part in the chapter on “Texts and Origins” are recalled, as we compare the works and suggest areas of common sources in an effort to determine provenance, to note subtle differences and surprising concurrences that help to distinguish the links in the European chain of texts.

Part Two, consisting of four chapters, is entitled “The Road to Conversion.” In his quest to rescue Blancheflor, Floire can be said to embark on a love-pilgrimage in all the versions of *Floire and Blancheflor*. Added to the episodes of love-pilgrimage are an emphasis on the more traditional view of pilgrimage as a religious journey, and on episodes of religious conversion found in, especially, the Spanish Chronicle, Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* and the Old Norse *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr*. And if, to borrow Freccero’s comment on Augustine’s *Confessions*, “conversion is always a literary event, a gloss on an anterior text” (“The Fig Tree and the Laurel” 36), then the versions of *Floire and Blancheflor* represent such a literary event, for the love story concerns itself with multifarious aspects of conversion, both thematic and textual, in its individual literary experimentalism and as part of a European chain of texts. In my analyses of the versions of *Floire and Blancheflor*, I consider pilgrimage and conversion both as themes in certain texts – as part of the plot – and as tropes. In the story’s pilgrimage throughout Europe and in its movement from secular love story to combined love story and religious tale, the

<sup>6</sup> Paris noticed references in Spanish literature such as Juan Ruiz’s praise of the lovers in his mid-fourteenth-century *Libro de buen amor*, “ca nunca fue tan leal Blancaflor a Flores, / nin es agora Tristán con todos sus amores” (st. 1703) (“for never was Blanchefleur so true to Fleur, nor is Tristan these days with all his loving” [trans. Willis 472]), but it was, in particular, the short description of the story of Flores and Blancaflor in the early fourteenth-century *Gran conquista de Ultramar* that caused him to postulate the third strain of *Floire and Blancheflor*.

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versions change and adapt earlier material in a way that makes the texts seem to be converts themselves, formerly concerned only with amatory matters and the personal gratification of two lovers and now concerned with how those lovers and their story fit into a Christian providential scheme.

Those who caused the conversion of some of the texts – that is, the translators and refashioners of the legend of Floire and Blancheflor – are also readers: readers of at least one version of the romance from which they then sculpted their own, new, modified or faithful version of the text. In the act of reading across the centuries, the contemporary critic/reader can attempt one of the following procedures: to reconstruct the medieval readership or to isolate the features, keys or clues that indicate how a text wants to be read. When we, as critics, insist on analyzing a work by selecting the features that we have declared to pertain to a particular genre, are we not perhaps neglecting important features that held meaning for the author and historical audience?

In his study on medieval literature and genre theory, Hans Robert Jauss advocates the recognition of a generic dominant in works (such as romance or hagiography) rather than the determination of rigid rules that cling to the outmoded notion of pure genres as standards or models of excellence:

If in place of the naturalistic concept of genre [...] one poses the historical concept of a continuity, “in which every earlier element extends and completes itself through the later one” [...] then the relationship between individual text and the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the continual founding and altering of horizons. The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and “rules of the game” familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced. (88)

One of the goals of this study, then, is to determine the reception of the tale by the medieval audience and to suggest, as far as possible, an author’s reading of an earlier version by discovering what changes were employed in subsequent versions. *Floire and Blancheflor*, in all its versions, is a tale that lends itself to transformation – to telling and retelling, to refashioning, to generic flexibility.

Another goal is to discover why the chronicle-version of the love story remains such a captivating story (which cannot necessarily be said for all the other versions). What enables this text to engage the

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modern reader? What does this text contain that so successfully mediates between the past and the “horizon of expectations” of a twentieth-century reader?

*Floire and Blancheflor* is the ideal medieval tale, from my point of view, in that it opens up many avenues of exploration. It must have been an ideal tale to the medieval writer, who, as literary critics are becoming increasingly aware, was not as paralyzed and transfixed as the contemporary critic by boundaries of genre. In its own European *peregrinatio*, the story emphasized, depending on the translator or refashioner, the country and the time period, exactly what the situation called for: romance, chronicle, hagiography, epic. *Floire and Blancheflor* functions as a kaleidoscope of medieval narrative: one easily sees the main currents of medieval forms in the varying versions, but, as in a kaleidoscope, they achieve prominence in different ways.

The legend of Floire and Blancheflor provides us, I believe, with a unique opportunity to determine, both synchronically and diachronically, the horizon of expectations inherent in this work’s generic dominant, the romance, by comparing the European versions from the twelfth through the sixteenth centuries against each other and against the canon of romances for those periods. The simple fact of the multiple reworkings of the tale tells us something about how these texts were read. We are already well aware of the concept of medieval originality, that contest between poet, language and pre-existing literary traditions. The differences between the Old French and Middle English versions of *Floire and Blancheflor* may attest to a poetic bid for superiority by the later poet(s), or to social, moral, ethical or historical intentions. Rather than limit the discussion to features, or elements, that belong to a particular genre (as twentieth-century critics have codified it), such as romance or hagiography, I have isolated topics that seem to me important because they may be prominent in one text and then modified, or even eliminated, in another country’s version: the story constantly undergoes recontextualization.

One example is Boccaccio’s transformation of the episode of the poisoned fowl, allegedly prepared for the King by Blancheflor, into a political transformation of the chivalric “vows of the peacock.” In so doing, Boccaccio not only expands the episode, as found in other versions, for his own narrative development of *Floire and Blancheflor*, but he recontextualizes a traditional romance banquet into a contemporary political allegory.



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Another example is the Spanish chronicler's treatment of the encounter between the Christian prisoner (pregnant with Blancaflor) and the pagan Queen (pregnant with Flores). The historical context of the Spanish text finds one aspect of its uniqueness in the simple fact that battling with the Moors could not be portrayed as anything but a confrontation with the present: hence the historical immediacy and realistic detail of the chronicle-version, unparalleled in any other version. When Blancaflor's mother meets the Moorish Queen, the narrator includes the detail that Berta and the Queen instinctively understood each other even though their languages differed: "E auien grandt sabor vna de otra. La condessa Berta fablaua françes e la rreyna algarauia e vna a otra se mostrauan su lenguaje" (f.7ra). ("And they took to each other immediately. Countess Berta spoke French and the Queen Arabic, and they taught each other their language.")

This small but logical point of the different languages – insignificant in the larger scheme of the story and non-existent in the other versions – would probably be overlooked by critics who would have no reason to include it in a study on genre, yet it indicates the Spanish chronicler's awareness of what the public would question immediately: the linguistic barrier was clearly a familiar problem and not one to be glossed over without narratorial comment. It tells us something, too, about the chronicler's view of his role and his text: such details attest to the quest for veracity, for historicity, for realistic truth instead of a simple moral truth through an exemplary story.

Along the same lines, but in a more subtle way, the refashioners of *Floire and Blancheflor* make distinctions even while employing the same details; we must be aware of tonal changes, of emphasis – indeed, of differing interpretations of the same word. Instead of seeing endless repetition in our many versions of the tale, we need to be attuned to the distinguishing features that become obvious only after careful reading of the texts, and often only after the texts are read in a comparative manner. Certainly this approach is not unique to a study of *Floire and Blancheflor*; for example, Leclercq's findings on Gregory the Great's recognition and development of patterns of pilgrimage, that resulted in a vocabulary of religious experience for later writers, could apply just as efficaciously to the approach I suggest for *Floire and Blancheflor*: "According to Leclercq, the more we read medieval texts, the more sensitively we can chart the shifting nuances of medieval Latin styles from century to century, from one cultural center to another, even though the language remains highly



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traditional – even, in some cases, formulaic” (Gardiner 7–8). The present study is, in many ways, a charting of the shifting nuances of the tale of *Floire and Blancheflor*, nuances that rejuvenate the story as it passes from country to country and century to century.

The first chapter of Part Two, entitled “Cunning and Ingenuity or Divine Intervention?” and composed of sections arranged according to the chronology of the story, discusses the issues that engender distinctions in the works: major episodes and images whose treatment of *engin* and *conseil* and God’s role in human experience varies in the different European versions. As a standard of measure we can use the concept of *engin*, its presence in the texts and how it affects and interacts with the presence of a Supreme Being. The chapter explores especially the handling of the material in the Spanish chronicle, Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*, the French aristocratic and popular versions, the Middle English version and the Spanish prose romance from the sixteenth century. References to the Middle Dutch, Old Norse-Icelandic, Greek, Italian and Middle High German texts are included, either to indicate the popularity or commonplace quality of some of the material in the episodes, or to show a unique contribution by one of the author/translators, but these are not the main focus of the study.

Chapter Three, “Signs, Wonders and the Telling of the Tale,” explores the narrative strategies at play in the texts that reveal an awareness and treatment of the acts of reading, writing, narrating and storytelling, on the part of both the author and the characters. Some of the narrative strategies that help to define the texture of the works include inscribed texts – references within the work to other texts – and what I term implied texts, that is, those texts, oral tales and narrative images with iconographic dimensions that are not necessarily overtly evoked: some of the images in *Floire and Blancheflor* resemble images in literature and the visual arts which were popular enough to have occurred to readers and listeners of the tale. For this section I owe much to Rosamund Tuve’s pioneering study, *Allegorical Imagery*, and the exemplary work of V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*.

An implied text, for example, would be the use of the sea as the preferred means of travel in all the versions of *Floire and Blancheflor*. Apart from the sea voyage and the shipwreck as conventions of medieval literature, *Floire and Blancheflor* adds another dimension: inscribed as the Mediterranean versions are within the larger context of pilgrimage literature, the reader or listener would not fail to make

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the metaphorical equation between Saint James the Apostle – Santiago de Compostela – set adrift in a boat and Floire’s own sea journeys that represent both a pilgrimage and a road to conversion. Boccaccio complicates and enriches the sea motif by mingling both Christian and pagan iconography: Venus, who is responsible for much of the activity in the work, is linked with the sea; yet, at one point in the story, Filocolo beholds a vision of maidens on the sea that is clearly meant to evoke the extremely popular iconographic image of the Ship of the Church.

Another example – the Emir’s garden – is one of the most richly orchestrated images, infused as it is with both pagan and Christian elements. While this is one of the more widely discussed images of the tale, with its multivalent significance, it is important for this chapter because it conjures up for the reader or listener a variety of implied texts. This section demonstrates that literary and iconographic subtexts pervade all the versions, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Chapter Four, entitled “Routes of Conversion: Time and Space,” has two parts. The first, “Moral Geography and Spiritual Redemption,” examines how geography exhibits a moral dimension and parallels the road to spiritual redemption. Within this section, I examine the question of journey, the use of the garden within the larger time-frame of the Lenten season, and the concept of genealogy, both within the story and as a means of textual lineage. The second part concentrates on the closing scenes of *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* and *Il Filocolo* in order to demonstrate the provenance of the *Filocolo* from the Chronicle, and to offer interpretations of both texts that are possible only when they stem from comparative analysis. *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* is indeed a chronicle. Although it retains much of the flavor and details of the love story, it is nonetheless a strongly moralizing text, a history of how Christianity came to southern Spain with the help of Saint Augustine and sundry miracles.

*Il Filocolo*, on the other hand, retains the basic storyline of the lovers and their conversion, but the sheer quantity of additional material and the way the author treats it make it a totally different kind of work. Ostensibly a moralizing tale of Christian history, it is actually a work that posits the power of writing and the power of a good story over less organized means of communication, and the instability and chance happenings that this power can generate.