

**The Middle English Poem of
Floriz and Blauncheflur and the *Arabian Nights*
Tale of "Ni'amah and Naomi,"
A Study in Parallels**

by

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Very little has been written about the Middle English romance, *Floriz and Blauncheflur*, apart from suggesting that it may contain "Oriental influences" in its narrative pattern.¹ Although numerous analogues in the literature of almost every European country throw faint light upon the history of its transmission,² McKnight concludes that, while its route from East to West would be difficult to trace, it was undoubtedly a work influenced by the Crusades, the agents of its transmission being the Provençal poets.³ Believing in two versions ("A" and "B"), Herzog argues that "B" took root in Italy and thereafter spread into Spain, Greece, and neighboring countries over ancient trade routes. He thinks that "A" was probably imported into France, perhaps transversing the same ancient trade routes through Italy or, possibly, through Spain into southern France, where the Provençal poets eventually shaped its present form.⁴ Some think that the ". . . tolerance and spirit of humanity [in the poem] bear traces of influence from some land where Christian and Moslem often lived in amity."⁵ And, finally, McKnight proposes a Byzantine influence: "It was one of the first of these oriental tales to

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¹ A. J. Arberry, "Persian Literature," in *Legacy of Persia*, p. 212, notes as a possibility that the poem may have been derived, in part, from a major work of the Persian poet, Abul' Oasin (Firdausi), the work being the epic, *Shah-nāma*.

² The tale most often associated with this Middle English romance is *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the closest parallel to *Floriz and Blauncheflur* short of a direct translation of the poem. Cf. Richard E. Chandler and Kessel Schwartz, *A New History of Spanish Literature*, pp. 161-162; also, Clifton J. Furness, "Interpretation and Probable Derivation of the Musical Notation in the 'Aucassin and Nicolette' MS.," *MLR*, XXIV (April, 1929), 144; Edwin B. Williams (ed.), *Aucassin and Nicolette and Four Lais of Marie de France*, p. x; and Eugene Mason (tr.), *Aucassin and Nicolette, and Other Mediaeval Romances*, p. 2.

³ George H. McKnight (ed.), *King Horn, Floriz and Blauncheflur, The Assumption of Our Lady*, p. xxx.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

⁵ Richard Garnett and Edmund Gosse, *English Literature: An Illustrated Record*, I, 117. Deno J. Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, p. 29: "Byzantine poets translated into their own language French and Italian narratives of love and combat and also, perhaps to an even greater extent, created their own works of this genre, examples being 'Floire and Blanchefleur,' 'Lybistros and Rhodamne,' and 'Belthandros and Chrysantza.'"

be retailed in the Occident and had a wide circulation in all the countries of Western Christendom."⁶

These theories, of course, concern the literature and customs brought back to Western Europe by returning Crusaders, many of whom were not in the least motivated by religious zeal or an interest in doing penance for their sins. For example, history reveals that many medieval noblemen traveled into the Near East in search of great wealth.⁷ Often within their parties were persons instrumental in transmitting the literature of the East to the West, namely, clerics or minstrels or traveling story-tellers.⁸ Undoubtedly, clerics were interested in preserving a record of religious activities encountered along the way, perhaps noting the success or failure of crusading warriors or recounting legends or stories exemplifying the heathen nature of the Saracen.⁹ Occasionally, they expanded some tales to incorporate aspects of Christian belief, identifying the hero as a Christian knight or prince and describing at great lengths his triumphs over a pagan enemy.¹⁰ On the other hand, minstrels and traveling storytellers recounted the exploits of ancient heroes renowned in legend, often identifying them as Christians, locating them in Eastern settings, and pitting them against an ever-popular Saracen foe.¹¹ Thus, Crusade literature, especially epic tales of chivalry, flourished in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, depicting Christian victories and heroic feats in the Crusaders' struggles with the Saracens until, gradually fiction became so fused with history that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other.¹² In one respect, the East had become an area of the world that provided ". . . an inspiration for the French romancers who pioneered romantic literature in the West."¹³ It also provided the traveling minstrel with new settings for his stories and new foes for his Christian heroes to conquer.¹⁴ Moreover, returning pilgrims, representing every social class from the nobleman to the runaway serf, were also great tale bearers. Having survived the hardships and dangers of a journey to the Holy Land, they possessed firsthand accounts of the pagan world and were experienced in its customs. Out of their adventures was fashioned a treasury of magnificent stories brought home to "civilized" Europe, many of which were derived from ancient tales of the Middle and Far East well known for centuries before the time of the Crusades. Finally, the guides who attached themselves to these pilgrims also contributed to a growing stock of ancient legends.

⁶ McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. xxx.

⁷ Lynn Thorndike, *The History of Medieval Europe*, p. 331.

⁸ Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe, 1100-1350*, p. 141.

⁹ Thorndike, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹ Zoé Oldenbourg, *The Crusades*, p. 587. It is this Eastern influence that Oldenbourg detects in the "charming oriental touches" in *Floriz and Blancheflur*, p. 590.

¹² Lady Duff Gordon, *The History and Literature of the Crusades*, p. 321.

¹³ Oldenbourg, *op. cit.*, p. 589.

¹⁴ John E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1400*, pp. 139-156, cites the following works as referring either to the Crusades or the Saracens: *Apollonius of Tyre*, *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Titus Vespasian* or *The Destruction of Jerusalem*.

New trade routes in the Middle Ages were a further means of transmitting Eastern legend and myth to Western Europe. The demands of the Crusaders for supplies and transportation reopened ancient, decaying trade routes. Records show that the period between 1245 to 1345 was especially noted for bringing the East into contact with the West through trade.¹⁵ Merchants themselves often carried Eastern lore into Europe in their exotic merchandise and letters and reports sent back to families or business associates.¹⁶ Italian merchants who, in transporting the many crusading pilgrims and knights, took advantage of these religious zealots, brought back many of the luxuries of the East. Their warehouses were filled with spices from Ceylon, silk from China (by way of Persia), precious stones (jewels, diamonds, corals), carpets from Persia, and exotic fruits.¹⁷ In listing objects with names derived from Oriental places of origin, Cheyney includes the following: muslin from Mosul, calico from Calicut, damask from Damascus, and buckram from Bokhara.¹⁸ Moreover, John of Salisbury records the details of an Italian banquet to which he had been invited, where he experienced such delicacies as lemons, bitter orange, citron, and sugar cane (the latter apparently being a popular sweet enjoyed by the Crusaders on their marches to Jerusalem).¹⁹ The Italian merchants who traded as far afield as China and the Indies kept their trade routes a carefully guarded secret, seldom revealing them even on their deathbeds.²⁰ These routes extended far across the Near East, stretching from the shores of Portugal and Morocco, along the coast of North Africa and Egypt, to Palestine and Syria, even into the Mesopotamian area.²¹ Of course, one of the great trading centers of the world (apart from the major Italian cities of Venice and Genoa) was the Byzantium city of Constantinople, a metropolis that combined the cultures of the East and the West as the ". . . intellectual and industrial clearing-house between Europe and Asia."²² It had maintained its domination for approximately five centuries, from the time of Justinian onward.²³ Through its walls passed more trade than from any other city known to merchant, Crusader, minstrel, or pilgrim. As the ancient meeting place of merchants from the East and West, it served as the ". . . nurse of the arts, of manufacture, commerce, and literature to Western Europe."²⁴

The Arabs also exerted a powerful influence in the West at this time and turned the tides of history when they opened their ancient trade routes between Europe and Asia.²⁵ The Arabic tongue became a kind

¹⁵ A. P. Newton, *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages*, p. 124.

¹⁶ Edward Cheyney, *The Dawn of a New Era, 1250-1453*, p. 286.

¹⁷ Newton, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁸ Cheyney, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ T. A. Archer and Charles L. Kingford, *The Crusades: The Story of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, p. 299.

²⁰ Newton, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²¹ Archer and Kingford, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

²² Frederick Harrison, "Byzantine Empire and Its Significance," in *Readings in Medieval History*, p. 96.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

²⁵ Douglas Barrett, "Islamic Art in Persia," in *Legacy of Persia*, p. 118.

of passport, as it were, between merchant and trader, and many Arabic words and numerals were absorbed into the English language itself.²⁶ Their scholars also contributed to the growing literature of the Crusades.²⁷ Moreover, they had their own group of storytellers at court, known as *rāwīs*, each a walking, living history.²⁸ As professional tellers of tales, they committed to memory large numbers of poems and stories to relate to generous patrons or citizens who provided them with shelter, food, and money.²⁹ Moreover, caliphs and emirs and women of the court were active in writing, often revealing remarkable poetic skills.³⁰ Thus, with the appearance of Arabic letters in the Western World, there occurred in European fiction

. . . a glow of Oriental imagination, lighting up romance with sparkling gems, powerful talismans, magic unguents and balsams, graceful fairies, rich palaces and enchanted gardens.³¹

There is no doubt, therefore, that Oriental literature had an ample opportunity to find its way into the medieval literature of Western Europe. The religious pursuit of the Crusades, the devout and, often-times, selfish zeal of the pilgrims, the founding of new merchant trade routes, and the reopening of ancient ones brought to light an Oriental culture, vestiges of which may still be detected in such Middle English romances as *Floriz and Blancheflur*. The poem is extant in four manuscripts, none of which supplies a complete text. The Trentham MS, believed to have been written around 1440, is preserved in the library of the Duke of Sutherland at Trentham Hall, Staffordshire, and contains 1083 lines.³² A second, probably composed at the end of the thirteenth century, is known as the British Museum MS Cotton Vitellius D. III. (or Cott. MS) and contains 451 lines; however, because the MS was damaged by fire, only 180 are legible. A third, the Auchinleck MS, preserved in the Advocates Library at Edinburgh, is the most noted of the four, containing the texts of additional romances of a wide variety, ranging from tales of an Eastern interest (*Floriz and Blancheflur*) to those dealing with the matter of France and Britain, and one that ". . . blends romance with didactic content."³³ Loomis suggests that all but five of these works were originally derived from a French text and considers them ". . . thoroughly conventionalized and pedestrian in

²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷ Harold S. Fink, "Crusades," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, VI, 834. Cf. Ibn al-Qalanisi's *Continuation of the History of Damascus* (c. 1140-1160) and Ibn al-Althir's *Complete Book of Chronicles* (early thirteenth century).

²⁸ James Kritzeck, *Anthology of Islamic Literature from the Rise of Islam to Modern Times*, p. 151.

²⁹ *Loc. cit.*

³⁰ H. M. Gwatkin and Others (eds.), *The Cambridge Medieval History*, III, 434.

³¹ A. R. Hope Moncrieff, *Romance and Legend of Chivalry*, p. 29.

³² McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. xlii.

³³ Laura H. Loomis, "The Auchinleck MS. and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-40," *PMLA*, LVII (September, 1942), 606.

style."³⁴ This manuscript of the poem contains 861 lines.³⁵ A fourth, preserving the final 824 lines of the poem, is the Cambridge University MS, Gg. 4. 27. 2.³⁶

The major characters in the poem are two young lovers, Floriz, a king's son, and Blancheflur, a Christian slave girl, reared at court as brother and sister and educated together until they reach the age of twelve, when the king decides that his son should marry. By this time, Floriz has fallen in love with Blancheflur and desires to marry her. However, since she is the daughter of a slave, she is not qualified to become the wife of a king's son.³⁷ Consequently, Floriz is sent to his aunt's castle for two weeks, during which time his parents sell Blancheflur as a slave to merchants in exchange for a gold and silver cup and twenty marks of "reed gold."³⁸ A false grave is dug to convince Floriz that Blancheflur has died in his absence, but this plan goes awry when he threatens to take his life upon learning of her supposed death. His parents, then, confess their plan and urge him to search for Blancheflur, to bring her back to court. The queen also gives Floriz a magic ring, explaining, "While it is þyne, douȝt no þyng / Of fire brennyng ne water in þe See; / Ne yren ne steele shal dere thee" (*Tr.* 376-37). Floriz is accompanied on his mission by many loyal subjects and takes with him the cup of gold and silver given by the merchants in exchange for Blancheflur. Eventually, he learns that she has been sold to the Amyral of Babylon, who intends to make her his bride. After swooning in desperation, he discovers a friend in Daris, a porter stationed at the entrance to the city of Babylon. Daris suggests that Floriz make the gatekeeper at the harem his aide who, in turn, conceals Floriz in a basket of flowers to be conveyed to the women's quarters in the tower. However, the basket is delivered to the wrong room. When Floriz leaps out, he confronts a frightened maiden, who is Claris, a friend of Blancheflur. It is she who then brings about the reunion of the lovers. However, suspecting trickery, the Amyral enters Blancheflur's chamber and discovers her sleeping with a strange man. In his anger, he almost kills the two, but, when they cry for mercy, he imprisons them until they may be judged by his barons. Before the court, Floriz attempts to give the magic ring to Blancheflur so that no harm will befall her, but she refuses the gift, demanding that she alone receive the punishment intended for both of them. An earl discovers the magic ring, takes it to the Amyral, explains that the lovers would have sacrificed their lives for one another. The Amyral is moved, spares the lovers, and marries them with the magic ring. Floriz becomes a knight, and the Amyral marries Claris, impressed by her display of fidelity to Blancheflur. Upon learn-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 607.

³⁵ McKnight, *op. cit.*, p. xliii.

³⁶ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷ Many romantic tales containing the fortunes of Christian maidens and their offspring were popular in stories of the Crusades: Dana C. Munro, "Christians and Mohammandans in the Holy Land," in *Readings in Medieval History*, p. 282.

³⁸ *Floriz and Blancheflur*, Trentham MS, l. 162, hereafter referred to by the abbreviation. *Tr.*

ing of his father's death, Floriz and Blancheflur return to Spain and claim the throne.

In its Oriental flavor, the poem shows an affinity with the ancient collection of tales, *Hazār Afsāna* (*The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*) or the *Arabian Nights*, as it is better known. The tales preserved in this work are derived, in turn, from numerous ancient sources, probably having taken on their present form in Egypt during the fourteenth century.³⁹ Many were ". . . translated by the Arabs from the Persian, when the caliphs of Baghdad were at the height of their power."⁴⁰ Moncrieff feels certain that, at Venice ". . . more than one of the Arabian Nights stories were current long before [they] seem to have been known to the rest of Europe."⁴¹ There are obvious parallels between a particular story in this collection and *Floriz and Blancheflur*. The story in question is that of "Ni'amah bin al-Rabi'a and Naomi His Slave-Girl," and the principal parallel characters are Ni'amah and Naomi. The plot, concerning a slave girl, resembles in many respects that involving Blancheflur. At the beginning, a slave with an infant daughter is purchased by a wealthy man of Cufa. The slave's daughter and the wealthy man's son grow up together, marry, and live together as man and wife for a span of two years. One day, when the Viceroy of Cufa hears Naomi singing, he is convinced that she must be as beautiful as her song. He decides, therefore, to abduct her and sell her to the Commander of the Faithful, Abd al-Malik bin Marwan, the local caliph. With the help of an old hag, he kidnaps Naomi. Eventually, she is sold for ten thousand dinars to the caliph and placed in a harem. When Ni'amah discovers his loss, he becomes ill, and the physician summoned devises a plan to recover Naomi. In short, he establishes a shop in Damascus, the city to which she has been taken, and makes Ni'amah his assistant. In the meantime, Naomi has been pining away for her husband, and the caliph is seeking a cure for her love sickness. When an old woman, assigned to Naomi, hears of the skill of a physician newly arrived in Damascus, she decides that he is the one to save her mistress. Ni'amah, upon learning for whom the old woman seeks a cure, enlists her aid in gaining entry into the harem. Disguised as a woman, he is taken to the harem but mistakenly ushered into a room in which the caliph's sister resides. She agrees, however, to help him and tricks her brother into listening to a song that Naomi is asked to sing, one alluding to a set of circumstances similar to those which Naomi has experienced with Ni'amah. The caliph is enraptured and admits that there is justice in the story, agreeing that all such lovers should not be punished. At once, Naomi reveals Ni'amah and identifies herself; the old woman and the physician are richly rewarded; and the two lovers return to the house of Naomi's father to spend the rest of their lives in happiness.

³⁹ Kritzeck, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

⁴⁰ J. H. Robinson, *The Ordeal of Civilization: A Sketch of the Development and World-wide Diffusion of Our Present Day Institutions and Ideas*, p. 79.

⁴¹ Moncrieff, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

At once, it is clear that the young men in both tales are twelve years old. For example, one learns that Floriz and Blancheffur were "of elde of seuen zere" (l. 6) upon entering school where they studied together for five years before the king decides that his son must marry. Since the events that follow appear to take place within a period of a few months, one concludes that the two are twelve years old at the time of their marriage. In the case of Ni'amah and Naomi, a similar calculation is possible. For example, one is told that the children had married at the age of ten, but had lived together for two years before they had separated, at which point in their lives the narrative actually begins.

Secondly, in both tales, the young women are sold into bondage to foreign rulers by intermediaries. For example, Blancheffur is purchased by ". . . marchaundes of babylyne ful ryche [for] xx mark of reed golde / And a Coupe good and ryche." Later, she is sold to the Amyral of Babylon for "Seuyne sythes of golde" (Tr. 147; 162-163). Similarly, Naomi, abducted by the Viceroy of Cufa, is sold into slavery to the caliph for ten thousand dinars. Moreover, in both works, the heroines are described as having been well educated for young ladies of their time. As for Floriz and Blancheffur, "So wel þey had learned þoo, / Inowz þey couþ of latyne / And wel write on parchemyne" (Tr. 32-34). Similarly, Naomi had "learnt the Koran and read works of science and excelled in music and playing upon all kinds of instruments."⁴²

In both narratives, when the young men set out in search of their respective wives, each receives help, eventually, from wiser individuals. For example, Floriz is aided, initially, by Daris, a porter attending the gate to the city of Babylon, who formulates the plan whereby Floriz disguises himself as a freemason and engages the guard at the harem tower in conversation. Actually, Floriz is responsible for very little of the planning that succeeds in bringing him to Blancheffur. Once inside the harem, however, he is forced to rely upon his own ingenuity. Ni'amah, on the other hand, is taken into the care of a skilled physician who travels with him to Damascus. It is through this physician's great reputation that Naomi is discovered, wasting away with love sickness. Ni'amah also enlists the aid of an old woman who seeks the physician in behalf of Naomi, her mistress. Moreover, once inside the harem, both young men are further helped by women mistakenly encountered. Floriz is taken to the chamber of Claris, who at first ". . . bygan to schrelle and to grede" (Tr. 756), but upon learning that the intruder is Floriz, she informs Blancheffur of his presence, in the following play upon words: ". . . suete blancheffur, / Wiltu seo a wel fair flur? / Hit ne greu nozt on þis londe, / Pat flur þat ich bringe þe to honde" (Cam. 481-484). Having brought the lovers together, she is able, momentarily, to postpone the Amyral's discovery of Floriz. Ni'amah arrives at the harem, disguised as a woman, and enters the wrong room where he encounters the caliph's sister. Fortunately, she is willing to serve him and intercedes in his behalf with her brother, saving the lives of the

⁴² Richard F. Burton (tr.), *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*, IV, 2.

young couple. Hence, one justice is rendered in both tales by the Amyral and the caliph. Thereafter, it is time to reward the faithful. The caliph makes the physician one of his chief officers, bestowing upon him robes of honor and handsome presents. He also rewards the old woman who assisted Ni'amah. In *Floriz and Blancheflur* the rewards are, perhaps, more personal. Claris becomes the Amyral's queen, and the gatekeeper receives from Floriz the gold and silver cup and is forgiven by the Amyral for having allowed a man to enter the harem, an act usually punishable by terrible torture and death.

Between these two works, then, one has noted the following parallels: (1) both couples are quite young when they are married (between the years of ten and twelve); (2) they are reared as brother and sister in court; (3) they are educated together; (4) they are separated, the girl sold into bondage to a foreign ruler; (5) the young men receive help from wiser individuals; (6) they enter the harem in disguise; (7) they are conveyed to the wrong chamber in the harem; (8) a woman within the harem befriends each; (9) the rulers forgive the lovers and sanction their reunion; and (10) the faithful are rewarded. Although other features of this Middle English poem reflect Eastern influences or, at least, interesting Eastern backgrounds, these parallels to the story of Ni'amah and Naomi are sufficient to suggest that *Floriz and Blancheflur* had its roots in Oriental sources.

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