

of the (former) provinces of the Roman "lands of Syria" (including Mesopotamia), and Mesopotamian or Edessene explicitly for speakers of Syriac living in the former province of Mesopotamia. Similarly, see Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Wahshiyya and his Nabatean Agriculture*, Islamic History and Civilizations: Studies and Texts, vol. 63, ed. Wadad Kadi and Rotraud Wielandt (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 33–45 on references to Syrians and "Nabateans," who were the Aramaic-speaking populations of modern day Iraq and Syria in early Islamic Arabic sources.

¹¹³Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* 12.16, 522–24.

¹¹⁴Greek speech and writing nonetheless persisted into the eighth century. For the uses of various languages among the so-called "Melkites," see Sidney Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic," 11–31; "'Melkites,' 'Jacobites' and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in the Third/Ninth Centuries," in *Syrian Christians under Islam*, ed. David Thomas (Brill: Leiden, 2001), 9–56; and "John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 11.2 (2008), pars. 1–32. For Greek, Aramaic, and Arabic after the Arab invasions, see also Robert Hoyland, "Language and Identity: The Twin Histories of Arabic and Aramaic (and: Why did Aramaic Succeed where Greek Failed?)," *SCI* 23 (2004), 190–99.

Hellenism, Islam, and Exoticism in French Medieval Romance

Megan Moore

The romances I study are of the west, and though the west is not usually at the centre of discussions about Hellenism and Islam, it shapes our views of both. In fact, the west forcibly associates Hellenism with Byzantium (despite Byzantine disagreements) and thus forces an examination of what it conceives to be Hellenic culture next to Islam. In the romances I study, the west names both Byzantium and Islam as pagans, thus creating a level of affinity that forces us to consider the significance of the relationship between the two.

Lesser-known texts springing from an unexpected perspective (in this case, French medieval romances) often provide an ideal staging ground for thinking outside the critical and textual box in which eastern and western medieval studies have been distinctly separated, their concerns and complications rendered distinct and irreconcilable. One such text, *Floire et Blancheflor*, is the mid-twelfth century Old French story of two children (one a Christian, one a pagan) who fall in love and eventually marry, the husband converting to Christianity out of love for his wife. *Floire et Blancheflor* begins with a knight and his recently-widowed but pregnant daughter, who are en-route on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella. In a particularly bloody frame narrative about crusade and conversion, the pilgrims are attacked and the knight is slaughtered

by pagan marauders; his daughter is spared and brought as a gift to the wife of King Fénix, the local pagan lord. Fénix's wife, curiously, is due to give birth on exactly the same day as the recently-widowed Christian woman, and after the births, the children are raised and educated together in the pagan court. Floire, the son of the Pagan king, falls in love with his Christian companion, Blancheflor, and they are inseparable. King Fénix is dissatisfied with this match for his son, and he and his wife try all sorts of schemes to separate the lovers; finally they choose to sell Blancheflor to some merchants who are on their way to Babylon (Cairo). Floire then sets off on a quest to find his love.

Disguised as a bumbling merchant, Floire stays with several kindly couples who direct him to Babylon (modern day Cairo), where he learns that his love has been sold to an emir who has a tower full of maidens. After bribing a guard to smuggle him into the palace hidden in a basket of rose petals, Floire finds Blancheflor and convinces her of his love. The two lovers are discovered asleep together, and though the emir decides to execute them, his advisors and court counsel him to forgive them because of their unparalleled beauty and true love for each other. Floire and Blancheflor return to Floire's kingdom and eventually become the rulers of Hungary and go on to found the lineage of Charlemagne. Floire converts willingly to Christianity and he forcefully converts his people as well.

While the most recent essays on *Floire et Blancheflor* offer important insights into the text, as I have noted elsewhere, this scholarship tends to collapse the terms "pagan" and "Muslim" by analyzing religious conversions and interpersonal relationships in the cadre of Islam (that is, Saracen Spain), when in fact, the romance refers to non-Christians exclusively as "pagans."¹ A more nuanced reading that is attentive to the ambiguity of the category of "pagan" reveals that "pagan" should be read as much more than Muslim, in fact incorporating elements from Hellenic Greece and Byzantium, as well as Islam, in ways that point to complicated and interwoven western medieval imaginings of a broadly generic east in the twelfth century.

The tendency to collapse the terms "Muslim" and "pagan" is easily understandable within a medieval literature that did not seek to differentiate between eastern cultural or religious traditions. Consider, for example, the ways in which Muslims were visually depicted with horns in illustrated chronicles of the Crusades—hardly a realistic or sympathetic portrayal of non-French, non-Christian cultures.² The lack of precision regarding and knowledge about foreign religious practices rampant in medieval texts has no doubt led medievalists, until very recently, to assume a general lack of differentiation among non-Christian cultures.

Yet this romance—and, I would argue, Old French romance in general—resists the easy binaries which critics have overlooked until now and which would suggest the existence of a seamless and unified Christian, European west, opposed to a kind of degenerate and disorganized pagan east.³ Turning away from these ideological *telois*, end points, of the crusader world, toward a liminal space of interaction and conversion staged in a world neither specifically eastern nor particularly Muslim, permits an examination of just what it is that (at least in literary imaginings) may unite Hellenic Greece, Byzantium, and the medieval Muslim middle east.

Floire et Blancheflor begins with a seemingly straightforward series of dyadic descriptions of its protagonists; they are pat descriptions destined to define the characters in ways that a listening—and not reading—audience could remember and quickly identify:

Floire was engendered by a pagan king, and Blancheflor, whom he loved so dearly, was engendered by a Christian count. Floire was born of pagans and Blancheflor of Christians. Floire had himself baptized during his life for Blancheflor his lady . . . [and] because Floire became Christian, great honors and goods came to him, and . . . he became the kind of Hungary and all of Bulgaria.⁴ (13–26)

Overtly this is a story about a pagan boy and a Christian girl; it is a story of lineage and love, of conversion and redemption. The narrative moment, we are told, will be a voyage from paganism and its

courtly context, towards redemption in the arms of western women and western religion. This movement is justified as a result of religious conversion. It is, after all, "because Floire became a Christian" that he gains honor and territories. Christianity becomes territorially and ideologically remunerative, and the pagan court falls away from sight by the end of the story, or so the movement of the prologue suggests.

Yet while *Floire et Blancheflor* is certainly *primarily* a story about an emir who may be a Muslim, about the love between a pagan boy named Floire and a Christian girl named Blancheflor, it is not a story *exclusively* about the differences between Islam and Christianity. This is signaled by the use of the term "pagan" rather than the more precise term "Saracen" or "Muslim" consistently throughout some manuscript versions of the story. The etymological origins of the term "pagan" suggest that its medieval usage ought to be nuanced to include, at the very least, other non-Catholic—but still Christian—cultures like Hungary, which appears overtly in the prologue, and Byzantium, to which I claim the text itself makes several little-concealed intertextual references, and which would indicate a far greater reach for its purported story of conversion than previously suspected, in ways that elide Hellenic cultural products and Byzantine religious practices with medieval Islamic culture.⁵

By the time *Floire et Blancheflor* was written, Byzantium was a place of contested meaning and semantic value to westerners—especially contested political and religious values. The Byzantine court was represented in French literature as both a highly-valued place of exotic gifts and a treacherous location for regicide and disloyalty. While representations of Byzantium shifted according to the winds of friendship and enmity blowing throughout the Crusades, whether depicted in a state of war or as a site for trading fantastic goods, the representation of and meaning assigned to Byzantium was characterized by exoticism, by immense riches and awe-inspiring architecture.

Perhaps nowhere were goods more traded, envied, and stock-piled than in that in-between city of Constantinople, a city neither Christian nor Muslim, neither purely East nor purely West, a city of

hybridity and *mélange*. Robert de Clari's pseudo-historical account of Constantinople on the eve of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 suggests that the kinds of goods carried by Floire on the way to barter for Blancheflor resonate strongly with the wondrous merchandise still on display in Constantinople after the composition of *Floire et Blancheflor*. Robert, writing as a crusade chronicler, concedes that Byzantium is a site of enormous wealth, and that:

In the palace of Blachernae also was very great treasure found, and very rich. For here were found the rich crowns that belonged to the emperors who dwelt there aforetime, and their rich jewels of gold, and their rich raiment of silken cloth, and their rich imperial robes, and rich and precious stones, and other riches so great that one could not number the great treasure of gold and of silver that was found in the palaces and in many places elsewhere in the city.⁶ (LXXXIII)

At first glance, the paratactic repetition of the word "rikes," or "rich," seems to underline how laughably hyperbolic Robert de Clari's descriptions of Byzantine exoticism must be. Yet these descriptions are given weight and credence by the depictions of royal life in Constantinople provided within not just other crusader accounts, but also within the *Byzantine* historical sources themselves. Anna Komnena writes of her native court as one in which gifts and riches were overflowing, often employed to the emperor's advantage. She describes one encounter between the Byzantines and the crusaders:

The Emperor . . . filled the chamber with garments and stamped gold and silver, and other materials of lesser value, so that one could not even walk because of their quantity . . . Bohemund was amazed at the sight and exclaimed, "If all these treasures were mine, I should have made myself master of many countries long ere this!" and the attendant replied, "The Emperor makes you a present of all these riches today." Bohemund was overjoyed and after thanking him for the present he went away to rest in the house where he lodged.⁷

The descriptions of both Robert de Clari and Anna Komnena, however much steeped in hyperbole, celebrate a vision of Byzantium rooted in riches, in ways that resonate with or even supercede other contemporary descriptions of Mediterranean grandeur in Muslim territories. The former, as an outsider, conflates Byzantine riches with magical and supernatural experiences throughout Constantinople; the latter, a *porphyrogenita*, dryly describes the ways that the riches can be used to bribe western loyalty. Such descriptions serve not only as a memory of Byzantine glory, but also as an ideological agenda in which riches, rather than geographic expansion, were the markers of Byzantine grandeur, and the sought-after trophies of war. It is no doubt for these reasons that medieval romances deployed the conquest of Byzantine objects—from silks to relics to gold to dye—as a way of engendering powerful western noble subjects, clad in and instantiated through eastern splendors.

Floire et Blancheflor relies on many of these same tropes of riches described in overt detail within the romance and other contemporary French historical sources like that of Robert de Clari. Yet *Floire et Blancheflor* seems to have other, more direct influences from Byzantium, specifically through intertextual references to descriptions of luxury found in quasi-contemporary Byzantine fictional narratives like *Velthandros and Chrysandza*. Though there is little likelihood that there are any direct connections between medieval French and Greek romances—they are composed far apart, written in different and often mutually incomprehensible languages, and, at best, only considered oral contemporaries—it does, however, seem likely that some of the wonders of Byzantium, seen by crusaders and pilgrims since the eleventh century, resonate strongly in medieval French narratives in ways that have not yet been fully explored.⁸

Velthandros and Chrysandza is the medieval Greek story of a young prince who leaves home on the quest for adventure and instead discovers a marvelous stream in the center of which flows liquid fire, bubbling forth from a wondrous castle. In this castle Velthandros is assaulted by cupid's arrows, and he falls in love with Chrysandza by some magical tricks and quirks of fate. They are

separated briefly and then come together in a garden and make love the same night; Chrysandza's maid offers her assistance after Velthandros is apprehended in the garden, and together they convince the king that Velthandros bedded Chrysandza's maid. In this way the lovers are able to hide their several trysts until they are discovered, at which point they marry and move away to Velthandros' homeland to take up a position there within his household.

Medieval French romances about Byzantium echo some key elements found in *Velthandros and Chrysandza*, and the similarities between the two types of writing extend beyond their common narratorial interest in issues like lineage, inheritance, and love. The most obvious similarity occurs in the descriptions of magical, luxurious, or fantastic things within the romances. Medieval French descriptions of whistling, animated figures atop castle walls, for example, closely echo the descriptions found in *Velthandros and Chrysandza*, in which Velthandros is surprised by magical figures atop the Castle of Love:

For ten whole days [Velthandros] traveled and finally came to a mighty castle, vast in appearance, wonderfully constructed from chiseled sardonyx. On top of the shining edifice, placed together instead of battlements, were a lion and the heads of dragons made with variegated gold. An artist had constructed them with much skill, and if you looked you could see from their mouths there came a wild and terrible whistling.⁹

The whistling *automata* were specific to the Byzantine court, as Robert de Clari testifies in his eye-witness account of Manuel I Komnenos's jousting stadium:¹⁰

Lengthwise of this space ran a wall, full fifteen feet high and ten feet wide; and on the top of this wall were images of men and of women, of horses, and oxen, and camels, and bears, and lions, and all manner of other beasts, cast in copper, which were so cunningly wrought and so naturally shaped that there is not, in Heathendom or in Christendom, a master so skilled that he could

portray or shape images so skillfully as these images were shaped.
And these images were wont erstwhile to play, by enchantment;
but afterward they played no more at all.¹¹

An earlier, fictional account of Charlemagne's voyages to Jerusalem and Constantinople, *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, foreshadows Clari's interest in Byzantine automata, and describes the imperial palace in terms of a melding of luxurious, exotic goods and advanced technical and scientific skill:

The palace was decorated with blue edgings, and pleasing to behold . . . and there was a molded figure of two children in copper and metal, each carrying in its mouth a horn of white ivory. If any winds, blowing in from the sea, strike the palace on the west side, they make it revolve quickly and repeatedly, like a chariot's wheel rolling downhill. Their horns blare and bellow and thunder, just like a drum, a clap of thunder or a huge, hanging bell. One looks at the other as if they were smiling, so that you would have sworn they were actually alive . . .¹²

These dancing and whistling figures, first found in historical sources about the Byzantine court, are echoed in *Floire et Blancheflor* in the magical garden of the Babylonian Emir:

All about the wall is enclosed, all painted with gold and azure and on top of each battlement is a bird, each one different from all the others. When there is wind, they make such a loud cry, each bird in his own manner, that there were no beasts, however wild, leopard nor tiger nor lion, who did not sit down when they heard this sound. (1748–57)

Not only are wondrous warbling and whistling statues a motif stemming from the Byzantine court and common amongst French and Byzantine romances, but so are enchanted streams endowed with magical powers. In *Floire et Blancheflor*, for example, the emir's gardens are near a magical stream which predicts the state

of a woman's virginity. The stream flows full of wondrous jewels and gems. The narrator relates:

On the other side, so I've been told, flows a river from Paradise; Euphrates it is called . . . and in this river there are precious stones, no man has ever seen such glorious ones: saffire and jade and sardonyx and jacinth and chalcedony, and jaspers and crystals; and also there are such rich enamels and other things that I cannot name; I could never tell you about all of it. (1767–79)

The descriptions of magical, gem-studded streams are striking, especially if one considers them in tandem with representations of Byzantine splendors. The passage resonates strongly in more subtle ways with the elaborate description of the river of sardonyx flowing through the castle of love found in *Velthandros and Chrysandza*, a stream so sparkling that Velthandros is temporarily mesmerized while staring at its many gems and the fiery streaks of light coursing through its currents.

Skillfully represented, [Velthandros saw that] the figure was sighing and kept its gaze fixed on the ground. It was very distressed and serious as it stood there sadly. The spring of the flaming river ran from the eyes of this statue, and also from its mouth; but it was only its sighs, blazing like raging fire, that brought on the flame . . .

Another Byzantine romance, *Kallimachos*, offers a comparably fantastic description of a love garden's river:

Inside the enclosure with its lovely garden there was a delightful pool, completely and absolutely beautiful [. . .] Through another remarkable and skillful device the thick, cloudy steam of the warm pool did not fog these up at all, nor did it blur the gleam of the precious stones. The material of the mirrors was not affected by the mist, which also did not dim the loveliness of the rubies.¹³ (43)

While we shall not point to *Velthandros and Chrysandza* and *Kallimachos and Chrysorroi* as textual exemplars for the passages found in *Floire et Blancheflor*, it is nonetheless clear that Byzantine wonders held a certain currency in western literature.

Byzantium's presence in the "pagan" world of *Floire et Blancheflor* begs a more attentive reading of the text's place within a context of Mediterranean stories, and it forces a reconsideration of just how Byzantium, Hellenic Greece, and Muslim Spain and Egypt, differ, and in what ways they are put into an unexpected dialogue by being collapsed into a pagan Mediterranean east.¹⁴ In fact, the presence of automata in these romances points well beyond the influences that Byzantine culture and must have had on western medieval literature, channeling instead the ever-present wow factor of Hellenic technology and Muslim scientific supremacy. As Bedini and others have pointed out in the last half-century, many of the wonders Crusaders saw in Byzantium were actually vestiges of a carefully-muffled Hellenism, deftly produced reproductions of more ancient structures, often translated and transmitted by other cultures.¹⁵ That Byzantium becomes an influence upon western romances during the period of the Crusades may be a new (but intuitive) critical insight, but the ever-present undercurrent of Greek influences may point beyond Byzantium, towards a kind of neo-Hellenism coursing throughout not only romance but especially in the *romans antiques*, in ways that underline a kind of literary geography instantiated in the projects of *translatio studii* and *imperii*.

Reading *Floire et Blancheflor* in terms of its connections to the larger contemporary intellectual project of *translatio* and the cultural imperialist project of the Crusades may help explain the bloody narrative frame of conversion and death in which the central themes of the poem—love, romance, and wondrous whistling statues—are shaped, and perhaps explain the forcible connections between Hellenism and Islam. The prologue sets up a formulaic frame narrative of pagan marauding, one in which brutality and bloodshed are closely associated with the non-Christian other. Floire's father, for example, is described as a brutal, pillaging pagan king, one who takes pleasure in cruel raids on Christian towns.

Fenix was his name and he was a pagan; he had embarked by sea to the land of the Christians to take away booty from the land and turn the villages into embers. For a whole month and a half did the king stay in that land; never a day went by in which he, with his household did not ride and rob villages, take goods, and bring it all back to his boat. (61–70)

This passage opens a narrative frame for the poem, a frame in which violence brings riches. At the beginning of the romance Fénix is depicted as a marauder whose brutal behavior is singular in the romance, and it is behavior underlined by the force of the Old French plosives like "païens," "païs," "praie," "prendre" that pepper the introduction. The repetitive 'p' of these plosives invokes a tight association between the initial word "païens" and the rest of the plundering activity, an activity that paints a stark picture of pagan brutality, conflating religious difference with moral inferiority.

What the frame narrative certainly does, if nothing else, is form an interpretive framework for understanding the poem, one that forms a journey *away* from pagan brutality *towards* Christian love. The prologue itself casts this journey as redemptive and profitable; remember that Floire's conversion brings him "the love of his life as well as new territories." In a nutshell, the redemptive nature of the marriage/conversion package seems to point to an ever-more peaceful life in which western Christianity—not paganism—is the key to all things good. In many ways, this seems to be the ideological work of the romance.

Yet if western Roman Christianity is associated with blissful scenes of lovers' trysts in enchanted gardens throughout the romance, it is also equally—and puzzlingly—associated with bloodshed and death. The epilogue of *Floire et Blancheflor*, in particular, is the story of forced conversion to Christianity, a story of persecution and merciless slaughter in the name of Christianization. When Floire became Christian

... he called to all of his barons, and asked them that for love of him they believe in God our Lord and ... right away many of his

barons were baptized on that same day; few of them refrained or hesitated to do what their lord asked them to do. The baptism of the common folk took more than a week. Whoever refused to be baptized and did not want to believe in God, Floire had him flayed and burned in a fire and beheaded.

Here, the military vocabulary of the narrative frame suggests that part of the ideological work of the conversion romance is recuperating—by force, when necessary—wayward pagans. If pagans include not *only* Muslims, who were, of course, the over referent to which such a story pertains, but also, on a more nuanced level, to include the non-heterodox Byzantines, who were beginning to turn away from the cultural and monetary work of crusading with their French neighbors, then *Floire et Blancheflor*, in its narrative frame based on crusader-like conversion narratives of blood and violence, can be read as a subtle account of the necessity of bringing Byzantium back into the fold, of returning it to the “right” kinds of beliefs, both ecclesiastical and political; it is, in the end, a literary representation of the colonial project of conversion. By referencing all sorts of Byzantine images in the palace, by repeating tropes of Byzantine glory like the merchandise carried by Floire and the wondrous whistling statues around Babylon, this romance offers a subtext of Byzantine—as well as pagan—conversion to western ideals and beliefs, both religious and courtly, and it stages this conversion as ideologically charged in favor of Western values and religion. In reality, the very fact of forcible pagan conversion; the very wonder expressed before eastern goods, technology, and social structures; and the very threat from the east that merits military conquest by the west, suggest that the west had a very deep appreciation for—and perhaps a jealousy of—a kind of fantasy world of conflated eastern glory. More importantly, by examining Byzantines and Muslims as two mercantile and marvelous facets of the term “pagan,” the text reveals at least one writers’ understanding of both Islamic and Byzantine cultures as deeply rooted in the trade and exchange of expensive and rare goods, in ways that somehow can be associated with religious difference.

Translatio and the Project of Rewriting and Untangling the East in Floriant et Florete

The French writers’ perhaps unintentional ideological anti-Hellenistic agenda, in which contemporary medieval French literary genius reinterprets and replaces Hellenist narrative glory, is even more starkly present in later romances written after the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204 and after the crusaders’ colonial projects had failed. In the thirteenth-century romance *Floriant et Florete*, King Arthur himself invades Sicily to oust none other than the Byzantine emperor, claiming Sicily for his loyal vassal and in the process effectuating a crushing defeat of not only the Byzantines’ military strength, but also robbing them of their daughters. While the themes of cross-cultural marriage, reproduction, and warfare so typical of the Byzantine romances and in French romances like *Cligès* or *Floire et Blancheflor* are clearly prevalent in *Floriant et Florete*, what is missing is a celebratory exoticism. Twelfth-century romance, in all its ambivalence towards Byzantium, still focused on Byzantium as an empire of treasures—from gold to silks to spices to women. By the late thirteenth century, however, perceptions of the Byzantium as an exotic other seem to be waning.¹⁶

Given the extensive textual borrowings by which scholars characterize *Floriant et Florete*, it should come as no surprise that in the few passages in which *Floriant et Florete* describes Byzantium, it borrows passages from other romances, or at least describes things in ways that resonate strongly with—and, of course, alter—the descriptions of Byzantium in earlier romances.¹⁷ What is more surprising, however is that unlike in the earlier romances, in *Floriant et Florete* there are very few amplifications of Byzantine glory, no borrowing of passages of Byzantine splendors, no elaborate passages on Byzantine grandeur. Although this romance is often called a “Byzantine romance,” perhaps for its setting and material content, it does not contain the same elements of description found in other romances about Byzantium, descriptions of objects, architecture, and clothing.¹⁸ There are, however, a few passages of extraordinarily long descriptions, and in their very anomaly, they are worth

examining, for they bear insight into the weaving, the *translatio*, of eastern motifs themselves.

One such passage is a long description of the boat on which Floriant embarks from Morgan's fantasy-island; it is a boat constructed of beautiful and strong ebony wood and it is magically enchanted to take Floriant to find adventures, and eventually, to Arthur's court itself, where he will learn his true identity and, he hopes, win renown. This boat is filled with wondrous tapestries, and the author takes care to describe them in detail in ways that resonate with the descriptions of other didactic tapestries and wall-coverings in medieval romance.

There is something odd about this choice of passage for an elaborate description within *Floriant et Florete*; nowhere else is architecture awarded so many careful verses, and the elaboration of the tapestries on the ship may remind readers of the passage of *Le Roman de Thèbes* in which the tent of the Greek Emperor is described in lavish detail.¹⁹ *Floriant et Florete* offers a tapestry in which elements of *mappaemundi* are present: the heavens, the skies, astronomic and planetary devices in combination with traditional tapestry scenes depicting literary and biblical tales with didactic messages.

... the ship was hung with a tapestry; there was never more beautiful one made, to my knowledge. The ship was hung with a tapestry of four panels. In the first part was described the firmament and the stars correctly, water, fire, the heavens, the Earth, as well as how the oceans cling to her and hold her tight, as well as the moon and the sun, which were both very clear and red; the seven planets were there from which the wise clerics know that they have deduced about astronomy. After that, in the next part, came Adam and Eve as well as how God formed Paradise, and for their pride kicked them out of it.²⁰

Compare this passage from *Floriant et Florete*, above, to the description of the mappamundi found in the Greek Emperor's tent in *Le Roman de Thèbes*, which is written in the last half of the twelfth century:

It was neither of cotton nor of linen, but of foreign silk, of indigo and red silk, and there were many marvels painted upon it. Across it was a mappamundi painted, all round, [...] there are antique cities with their walls, their towers, and their defenses; the towers are decorated with gold leaf, as well as the doors and the draw-bridges. All of the kingdoms and all of the legitimate kings are there, represented in their places, and the seventy-two languages, and the Frozen Sea and the Wild Sea; the Red sea, encrusted with black email, the passage to the sons of Israel, the four rivers of Paradise, and Etna who burns and spews smoke.²¹

While of course these two objects—one a tapestry and the other a mappamundi—are not similar in function, they are both visual descriptions of decorative objects, and they are both descriptions that seem lengthy and out of place in the texts in which they were inserted. Both offer glimpses of how description of something exotic—in this case, a kind of prototypical astronomy—can enact glory, how the process of *translatio*, the elaboration of metaphors about wealth (gold, jewels, architectural features) can actually name, through amplification, and mythologize Greeks as possessors of wondrous wealth, whether in the forms of goods, or of knowledge and science.²² While the descriptions are of two essentially different objects, certain similarities emerge from the way they depict their relations to the world in terms of literary stories. The *Roman de Thèbes*, as a *roman antique*, invokes its glory by pointing to Hellenic literary sources:

Afterwards the king had painted there the punishments and the laws established by his ancestors, the former masters of Greece. One could find there the stories of the kings of Greece—of those who had left a good impression—their prowess and the combats that each one had had in his day. On a circular hanging were painted leopards, bears, and lions.²³

As we read on, the descriptions dovetail with each other better, and it is easy to see how the principles of *inventio* and amplification of

detail are being employed as the author of *Floriant et Florete* elaborates on the literary works that are depicted within the boat:

And in the next panel there was depicted how Troy was founded, which was so rich and *aisé*, as well as how Paris ravished Helen, for which those of Troy had such great pains, as well as how Hector and Achilles and Troilus and Diomedes comported themselves in battle and the great blows they suffered there. On one side was depicted the great swords with which they gave each other great blows. After that came how the horse was made and then dragged into the city, how King Priam was killed and all the others betrayed; how Eneas escaped from it and went away to Carthage, as well as how Dido kept him with her, from which shame and damage came to him, because for love of him, she killed herself, for which she did a very great marvel.²⁴

The *mappamundi* of *Le Roman de Thèbes* only depicts scenes from biblical literature; it cannot depict the range of tales shown in *Floriant et Florete* because they have not yet been (re)written into medieval French by the time of its composition. Yet by the time *Floriant et Florete* is written, about a century later, the *romans antiques* have been so widely circulated that some of their *matiere* makes it into this new romance. Here, the wondrous tapestry no longer depicts merely the heavens, the world, and the rulers thereof, but it also depicts the story of *Le Roman de Thèbes*, as well as other stories from antiquity. The passage shows a clear interest in the movement of literary *matiere* from Greek to Roman to French stories, with the movement from the story of *The Iliad* to *The Enead* to, later, *Tristan et Yseut*. The movement of literary influence is directional and political, moving specifically westwards, echoing Chrétien de Troyes's sentiment that "talk of the [Greeks] is over" by moving beyond the Greek stories to talk about the *Aenead*, and finally, the romance of *Yseut la blonde*.²⁵

The tapestry thus becomes a stand-in visual artifact that traces literary history in much the same way that *translatio* does: it traces the theme of any given literary work, selecting an important scene

to amplify, work through, and rewrite to have meaning in a new context. Here, it is the theme of Greek origins and literary transfer that is being amplified to create a sense of cultural literacy and knowledge underlying the heavily rewritten text of *Floriant et Florete*. Yet unlike in the *Thèbes*, the wonder and exoticism of the object itself is completely overlooked. Nowhere to be found are the elements of Greek artifacts present in texts like those of Robert de Clari or *Floire et Blancheflor*—there are no wondrous silk threads, bejeweled carvings, or fabulous cloths so typical in earlier depictions of such objects in medieval romance. The critical minutiae of exoticism are conspicuously absent from the amplification and rewriting of the *Thèbes*-like tapestry and the stories highlighted in the new setting of *Floriant et Florete*, and this is a remarkable absence.

While a tapestry is the object of one of the only long passages of description in *Floriant et Florete*, the few other places in which Greece is qualified by adjectives, and where it would normally figure as a mythical, awe-inspiring source of wealth are very short. Architectural description is a particularly good example of this lack. Fabulous whistling statues (in texts like *Floire et Blancheflor*, Robert de Clari's *Conquête de Constantinople*, and *Velthandros and Chrysandza*) and magical chambers (in texts like *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne à Jerusalem*) are found throughout twelfth- and early thirteenth-century texts. In this later text, however, the description of Constantinople and its splendors is really quite cursory:

Floriant goes out from the boat and quite simply and happily holds Florete by her naked hand that was not lacking anything. The barons were going to meet them, and on two palfreys they were mounted. Thus they went into the city all the way to the antique palace built by King Constantine, who founded Constantinople. There Floriant got off his horse and donned imperial garb. Florete appeared well dressed, as an empress should be. The barons made them go straight into the church of Saint Sofia, which was of great dignity, and then they blessed and anointed them, then they went away back to the palace. But you will not

hear me ever tell you of the great joy that they had nor the rich gifts that they gave, nor of the court do I wish to speak, but I can tell you enough that never his equal was found since the time of Alexander.²⁶

Unlike in *Cligès*, *Erec et Enide*, or several other twelfth-century romances, *Floriant et Florete* systematically and programmatically remains silent about the descriptions of wondrous and rich items in eastern courts. Whereas Byzantium and Muslim Spain and Egypt used to offer a home for many of the wonders found in Arthurian courts of the twelfth-century—from exotic plants to spices to cloths and relics—by the time of composition of this late thirteenth-century text, Byzantium's treasures are systematically silenced. These rewritings, these obfuscations—of tapestries and clothing, at the very least—suggest that Byzantium's status as a mythical place of wondrous textiles and fabulous architecture is somewhat waning. Though Arthur and his court still hold a fond place within the thirteenth-century romances—one worthy of yet another rewriting and re-narration through *Floriant et Florete*—Byzantium is no longer worthy of description. Taken together, *Floire et Blancheflor* and *Floriant et Florete* may be read as different ways of rephrasing and retooling Hellenism for a new cultural historical and political climate, one centered squarely in the power of high medieval French literary production.

Conclusions

One of the things we learn from *Floire et Blancheflor* and from *Floriant et Florete* is that while Byzantium and Muslim Spain might be exoticized in ways that are consistent with the project of Orientalism, the myths of Byzantine and Islamic splendor which circulate within French romances like *Floire et Blancheflor*, *Cligès*, *Athis et Prophlias*, or *Floriant et Florete* are not merely tropes used by Westerners to describe, classify, and often belittle Easterners. Rather, the exotic themes I have considered here, when read not only within

medieval French romances like *Floire et Blancheflor*, but also from within the perspective of the Byzantine romances themselves, reveal that French sources which seem to colonize Byzantine wonders instead in fact celebrate Byzantium's own splendors through their tight association with Muslim easts, and rely on these tropes as always already present markers of glory, certainly invoking and reformulating the glory of Hellenic Greece as a way of instantiating and promulgating contemporary French culture.

The exoticism embraced by these romances is one that interrogates Edward Saïd's assumptions that the Orient—which I am using here to reference the ways that medieval texts collapse both Muslim and Orthodox Christians under the rubric “pagan”—is both a product of post-enlightenment discourse and, more importantly, that that Orient is a pejorative concept. While the frame narrative of *Floire et Blancheflor* may, ultimately, seek to reinstate the hegemony of all things western, the tropes used to describe wonderful things at the Emir's court should, I think, be read as a celebratory enjambment of a kind of medieval Hellenism with a deep interest in Islamic cultural production, an interest which has at its base a desire to incorporate seemingly disparate traditions of science, exoticism, riches, and wonder and appropriate them for a new audience in medieval France. In short, the new Hellenism of western medieval sources is one that, in all its inaccuracies and assumptions that collapse eastern expressions of Islam with Byzantine history and Hellenic stories, points to their potency and currency millennia after their instantiation, and suggests that, as much as French writers like Chrétien de Troyes might try to deny it, “talk of the Greeks” is *not* over, and is greatly furthered by being paired with the contemporary achievements of medieval Muslims.

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Notes

¹Megan Moore, "Boundaries and Byzantines in the Old French *Floire Et Blancheflor*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 29(2007). See also the recent work of E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Karen J. Taylor, *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature* (New York: Garland, 1998); Patricia E. Grieve, *Floire Et Blancheflor and the European Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jane Gilbert, "Boys Will Be . . . What? Gender, Sexuality, and Childhood in *Floire Et Blancheflor* and *Floris Et Lyriope*," *Exemplaria* 9, no. 1 (1997); Huguette Clain-Legros, *La Rose Et Le Lys: Étude Littéraire Du "Conte De Floire Et Blancheflor"*, vol. 31, *Sénéfiance* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence CUERMA, 1992); Norris Lacy, "The Flowering (and Misreading) of Romance: *Floire Et Blancheflor*," *South Central Review* 9, no. 2 (1992); William Kibler, "Archetypal Imagery in *Floire Et Blancheflor*," *Romance Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1988); *Le Conte De Floire Et Blanchefleur: Roman Pré-Courtois Du Milieu Du Xiiie Siècle*, ed. Jean Luc Leclanche, vol. 34, *Traductions Des Classiques Français Du Moyen Age* (Paris: H. Champion, 1986); Roberta L. Krueger, "*Floire Et Blancheflor's* Literary Subtext: The Version Aristocratique," *Romance Notes* 24, no. 1 (1983); *Floire Et Blancheflor: Edition Du Ms. 19152 Du Fonds Français Avec Introduction, Notes Et Glossaire*, ed. Margaret Pelan, Second ed. (Paris: Editions Ophrys, 1975).

²*Chanson de Roland*, illustrations in manuscript BNF Fr. 2813, folio 160v.

³Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*.

⁴Quotations taken from *Le Conte De Floire Et Blanchefleur: Roman Pré-Courtois Du Milieu Du Xiiie Siècle*. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

⁵The word "pagan" is derived from the Latin term "paganus," which was used to refer to country people, or the unlearned "rustique," and originally, it carried little sense of religious alterity. In ecclesiastical Latin, the word was often used to refer to people who, in contrast to Christians, were less enlightened, and thus it came to have the meaning "non Christian," which is certainly how it is employed in most medieval French texts. In one of the earliest French dictionaries, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, "pagan" had come to refer not only to Muslims, but to all people of non-Christian religions who are "idolâtre[s], adorateur[s] des faux Dieux, des Idoles." While Muslims were often depicted as idol-worshippers by medieval theologians and authors alike, Byzantines of course were at one point iconophiles; Pope Leo III, an iconoclast, began a long campaign against the worship of any images within Christianity, thus setting up one of the main conflicts between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. It is possible, if one reads "pagan" as a label that connotes not only non-Christians, but in particular, *image-worship-*

ping non-Christians, to see a strong reference to non-Muslim cultures like Byzantium, even if it is a reference to a Byzantium long past. Whatever the etymology of the term "pagan," the text itself points us further towards Byzantium.

⁶Robert de Clari, *La Conquête De Constantinople*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Champion, 2004).

⁷Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, ed. Edgar Robert Ashton Sewter (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

⁸It is the tropes themselves—how the east is thematized and represented through figures in literature—which is of interest, not the establishment of a pattern of influence or of its lineage or directionality.

⁹Gavin Betts, *Three Medieval Greek Romances* (New York: Garland, 1995).

¹⁰Silvio Bedini, "The Role of Automata in the History of Technology," *Technology and Culture* 5, no. 1 (1964); Gerard Brett, "The Automata in the Byzantine 'Throne of Solomon,'" *Speculum* 29, no. 3 (1954).

¹¹Robert de Clari, *La Conquête De Constantinople*. Here it is interesting to note that Clari does not specify to what realm Byzantium, or its artisans and products belong, to "Heathendom," or "Christendom."

¹²*Le Pèlerinage De Charlemagne*, ed. Glyn Burgess, British Rencesvals Publications (Edinburgh: Société Rencesvals British Branch, 1998).

¹³Betts, *Three Medieval Greek Romances*.

¹⁴Moreover, these references to specifically Byzantine descriptions of automata, architecture, and treasure in *Floire et Blancheflor* might also point to the ways this romance attempts to contain and recuperate (albeit on a subtextual level) the wayward and uncontrollable Byzantines of the historical period in which the romance was written, and this points us in turn towards reconsidering France in a more Mediterranean context.

¹⁵Bedini, "The Role of Automata in the History of Technology," 24; Brett, "The Automata in the Byzantine 'Throne of Solomon,'" Oleg Grabar, "Islamic Art and Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18(1964).

¹⁶Keith Busby makes a similar remark in his article, yet he phrases this differently, choosing instead to cite the waning place of the "merveilleux" in this romance. While I would like to acknowledge Busby's insights, I also want to think about the differences between the "merveilleux," which I take to mean the magical, enchanted nature of Arthurian romance, and the "exotic," which connotes, to me, a sort of fanciful imagination of the "other" in terms of its production of marvelous goods, specifically the production of wondrous architecture, foods and spices, textiles, and gilded and bejeweled objects of treasure in Byzantium.

¹⁷See Keith Busby, "The Intertextual Coordinates of *Floriant Et Florete*," *French Forum* 20, no. 3 (1995).

¹⁸See the description of the romance in the *Grundriss*. Hans Robert Jauss and Erich Köhler, *Le Roman Jusqu'à La Fin Du Xiiie*, ed. Jean Frappier, vol. IV, *Grund-*

driss Der Romanischen Literaturen Des Mittelalters (Heidelberg: Universität Konstanz, 1978). For more on the description of textiles and exoticism within Old French literature, see Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*.

¹⁹*Le Roman De Thèbes : Édition Du Manuscrit S* (Londres, Brit. Libr., Add. 34114), ed. Francine Mora-Lebrun (Paris: Livre de poche, 1995).

²⁰Com la nef iert encortinne
D'une cortine; au mius ovree
Ne fu, par la mien escient.
La nef aloit avironnant,
De .iiii. coulors ert partie.
En la premerainne partie
Avoit escript le firmament
Et les estoiles ensement,
L'aigue, le feu, le ciel, la terre,
Si com la mers la clot et serre,
Si ert la lune et li solaux
Qui molt par ert clers et vermaux;
Les .vii. planetes i estoient
En quoi li sage clerc savoient
Ce qu'il oevrent d'antrenomie.
Et après en l'autre partie
Iert Adan et Evain escrits
Si com Dex forma paradis,
Par lor orgueil les jeta fors,
²¹Ne fu de chanv[e] ne de lin,
Ainz de porpre d'oltre marin.
De porpre fu ynde et vermeille,
Et painte y ot meinte merveille.
A compass y fu mapamunde,
Enlevee, tout roonde, [. . .]
Illoec sont les citees antives
Que murs, oue tors et oue eschives;
A or batu sount li torreil
Et li portal et li torneil.
Tout li realme et li dreit rei,
Chascuns y est, la sus par sei,
Et li septante dui language,
Et mer Beté et mer Salvage;
La mer rogist, fait [a] niel,
Et les pas as filz Israel,

De Paradis li quatre flum,
Ethna qui art et gette fum.

Aimé Petit, *Le Roman De Thèbes*, Traductions Des Classiques Français Du Moyen Age, 44 (Paris: Champion, 1991).

²²By wondrous, I refer to the way Caroline Walker Bynum describes the sense of awe at something that is at once a natural phenomenon (nothing created by the Gods, for example, or anything magical), but at the same time foreign to the observer. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (1997); Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, eds., *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, vol. 42, Studies in Medieval Culture (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002). I also want to make the association between speech acts and description, the way that description itself might be a way of enacting Byzantine glory in these passages, a way of transporting the reader to the site of exotic wealth, of recovering for the reader the actual process of *witnessing* wealth. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Second ed., William James Lectures. 1955 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Shoshana Felman, *Le Scandale Du Corps Parlant: Don Juan Avec Austin, Ou, La Séduction En Deux Langues* (Paris: Seuil, 1980); Judith P. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

²³Après y fist peindre li reis
Et les justices et les leis
Qui menerent si ncessor,
Qui de Grece furent seignor.
Des reis de Grece y fu l'estoire,
De ceux qui orent bone memoire,
Les proescs et les estors
Que chascuns d'els fist en sez jors.
En la cortine d'environ
Ot painte leparz, ours et leon. (4352–69)
²⁴Et en l'autre partie avoit
Ensi com Troies fu fondee
Qui tant fu riche et asazee,
Si com Paris ravit Elaine
Dont cil de Troie orent tel paine,
Si com Hector et Archilés,
Troilus et Diomedés
Em bataille se maintenoient
Et les grans cols qu'il i sousfroient.
D'une part iert li lanceïs
Et d'autre par li fereïs

Com il traioient les espees
 Dont se donoient grans colees.
 Après com li chevaus fu fais
 Et puis dedens la ville trais,
 Com li rois Prians fu occis
 Et tuit li autre desconfis,
 Com Eneas s'en eschappa
 Qui en Cartage s'en ala,
 Si comme Didoz le retint
 Dont delz et damage li vint,
 Quar ele por s'amor s'ocit
 Dont molt tres grant merveille fit. (858–92)

²⁵Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*, ed. Charles Méla, Olivier Collet, and Marie-Claire Gérard-Zai (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994). See the prologue for his description of the literary genealogy and talents of the “modern” medieval writers, and the ways that the torch of literary inspiration has been passed from Greeks to Romans to the French. Luise von Flotow-Evans explains that translation is necessarily political, in that it takes place in a climate of historical and cultural interaction: “Most writing can be shown to be ‘political’ in some sense, conforming to the context in which it is produced, deliberately transgressing it, reflecting upon it, or aiming at a particular readership in order to convince, seduce or otherwise exert influence. [...] Texts that reach the public, as well as those never published, are embedded in the social, political and cultural processes of their day. Translation, the careful reading and deliberate rewriting of a text, can be viewed as doubly political; not only was the first text embedded in and influenced by certain political configurations, but the second text, the rewritten version, adds yet another layer of politics, that of the new, translating culture and era.” See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Luise Von Flotow-Evans, and Daniel S Russell, eds., *The Politics of Translation in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 2001). See especially the first chapter, p. 9.

²⁶Floriant ist fors de la nef
 Tout simplement et tot soef,
 Florete tient par la main nue
 Qui n'estoit de riens esperdu.
 Li baron encontre aus alerent,
 Sor .IJ. palefrois les monterent.
 Ensi s'en vont en la cite
 Jusqu'au palais d'antiquité
 Que rois Coustantins compassa
 Qui Coustantinoble fonda.
 La fu Floriant descendus

Et d'emperiaux dras vestus.
 Florete refu bien paree
 Com empereris atournee.
 Droit el mostier Sainte Soffie
 Qui molt est de grant seignorie,
 Les ont fait li baron aler
 Et puis beneïr et sacrer,
 Puis retournerent el palais.
 Mes ne m'orrez conter hui mes
 La grant joie qu'il demenerent
 Ne les riches dons qu'il donerent
 Ne de la cort ne voil parler,
 Mes tant vous puis je bien conter
 C'onques sa pareille ne fu
 Des le tens qu'Alixandre fu. (8101–26)