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Wine, Women and Song: Innovation in the Middle English Charlemagne Romances

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There are a number of counts on which my title might be thought to court controversy. The ten verse romances dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that are classed together as the 'English Charlemagne Romances', or alternatively, the Middle English romances of the Matter of France, are not usually credited with much innovation. On the contrary, they are often dismissed from serious critical consideration on the grounds that they are, as described by Rosalind Field, for instance, no more than 'derivative and feeble versions' of the original *chansons de geste*.[1] Such independence as they do show has been seen as misguided interference with the character of the Old French poems, to the extent that the Middle English texts 'displace their matter into an exotic, distancing, romance mode in which it can easily topple into absurdity or banality'.[2]

In this view, by failing to appreciate the essential ethos of the Matter of France as heroic epic, the Middle English Charlemagne texts deteriorate into emasculated and romanticized versions of the tradition. Strangely, however, in critical studies of the genre of medieval romance, this same group of texts, the Middle English Charlemagne romances, is sometimes denied the status of 'real' romance; for example, John Finlayson, in his definition of Middle English romance, excludes the whole group of 'Charlemagne romances' as insufficiently romantic and better described as 'largely heroic works'.[3] Like a hot potato, the texts seem to be passed around with nobody wanting to own them. At the very least, then, whether by accident or design, these works have had the distinction of disrupting conventional critical expectations; but, as I shall argue, the textual evidence in fact suggests a history of coherent, innovative change in the transition from insular *chansons de geste* to Middle English popular romances of Charlemagne. 'Wine, women and

song', however, perhaps implies a more extravagantly romantic approach than is normally associated with Middle English popular romances, which have been seen as much more typically focused on matters of chivalric prowess and masculine valour in battle. Yet as I shall show, where the original Old French narratives allow the possibility, the English adaptors seized the opportunity to introduce new notes of lyricism and romance into their retellings of the Matter of France.

Two Old French *chansons de geste* proved to be particular favourites in Britain: both *Fierabras* and *Otinel* were translated several times into Middle English, with three distinct versions surviving of each original text, in unique manuscript copies ranging in date from c. 1335 to c. 1485. Both stories involve a cross-cultural marriage: the Saracen champion Otinel -- or Otuel as he is called in the English tradition – converts to Christianity and marries the daughter of Charlemagne, Belisent; while in *Fierabras* (known as *Firumbras* in English), the Saracen hero's sister, Floripas, conceives a passionate attachment to Guy of Burgundy, one of Charlemagne's paladins, and her conversion to Christianity and their marriage occur at the conclusion of the narrative. Belisent's role is that of the conventional 'prize' to be won – not in battle, but as a reward for Otuel on converting to the Carolingian cause, and the three English romances are for the most part following the model of the French source, though there is a slight enhancement of Belisent's agency in one version, known as *Otuel and Roland*,[4] where she adds her own free and full consent to her father's giving her in marriage, and declares that she loves Otuel 'more in hert myn | thanne y do my fadyr and al my kyn' (611-12). In the case of Floripas, there is ample evidence of the Saracen princess's agency in all versions of the tradition: she single-mindedly pursues her own desires at the expense of any opposition, whether from her father's will, or from the doubts of the Christian knights whom she protects in order to gain access to Guy. What the English versions add to the tradition is an enhanced sense of Floripas's personal feelings of love and longing, an enrichment of the language of sentiment by exploiting the lexis of contemporary love lyrics, and a greater emphasis on the reciprocity of the love between Floripas and Guy.

Of the three versions, the *Sowdone of Babylone* belongs to a different branch of the tradition from the other two, the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and the Fillingham *Firumbras*,[5] and the Fillingham

Firumbras lacks the beginning of the story, as the unique copy has lost many folios; but all three make comparable interventions in the depiction of Floripas. In the Fillingham *Firumbras*, the presentation of Floripas and Guy of Burgundy as lovers is heightened by a few small but significant alterations. In the first of these, her father, infuriated by the knights' attack on his hall, vows revenge on his daughter, whom he here uniquely constructs as a martyr for love: 'And Florype for her loue schall be brent' (90). A similar alteration turns Guy's resolution to venture out of their prison in search of food from a desire to avoid shame if Floripas and her maidens should starve, to a willingness to die for his beloved: 'Me had leuer for her loue, that scho hole betydde, | To suffyr on my body an 100 wovndys wyde' (223-4). Most striking are the changes to Floripas' behaviour as she waits for news of Guy's escape: in the French source she watches with her maidens and shouts defiantly when she sees him, at which all the knights redouble their efforts; but in the English version the scene is reconfigured as an instance of private feeling. Floripas is alone, and her words are overheard by Guy:

> Mayde floryp loked out at the tour,
> So red as any rose was here colour.
> The teres for here lemman, sche let renne stylle.
> Thanne sey she where he com, y-armed at wylle.
> Tho sayde floryp, 'my ioye wexeth blyue,
> 3ut schal y haue my lemman to me a-lyue.
> 3ut for al the ameraunt, hym schal y nou3t mysse,
> That y schal my dere lemman bothe cleppe & kysse.'
> These wordys herde Gy, and sayde to oger denys,
> 'The mayde of here wordis ys ful curtays.
> By swete god of heuene, now y wyl asay,
> y wyl for here loue a lyte strokes paye!' (691-702)

The intimacy of the scene is enhanced by the detailed observation: not only her conventional rosy complexion, but the fact that she weeps quietly, without wiping her tears. Her joy at seeing her lover is here a personal joy that he is alive, and that despite her father's opposition she will have him in her arms: a love that Guy immediately reciprocates in his response. This is all quite different from the French source, which is much more focused on the collective exploits of the knights, for

whom Floripas' public words of defiance to her father serve as encouragement to the whole group. Finally, the English adaptor inserts a new ending to the episode of the knights' excursion. In place of lines expressing the knights' confidence that Charlemagne will come to their rescue, the English text supplies the conclusion anticipated by Floripas: 'Floryp the curtays, here tyme sche wyste | And went to here lemman and swythe sche hym kest' (731-2). A scene of male feudal solidarity has been reconfigured as a romantic episode of mutual love.

Romantic love in the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* is depicted within a new wider emphasis on matters of courtesy. The Ashmole version as a whole is marked by added references to the courtly behaviour and 'gentle' rank of the protagonists, both Christian and Saracen. For instance, Oliver appeals to Floripas for help as a gentlewoman: 'damesel as þov art gent ; 3yf ous sum what to dyne', while she demonstrates her gentle heart by her response: 'Florippe tok wel gret pyte ; of þys iantaile kny3te' (1277-8). His answering promise to fight two hundred Saracens on her behalf produces a feeling of admiration for his valour in her private thoughts (1291-2). As Helen Cooper points out, the romance genre is marked by its 'increasing interest in individuals' inward lives ..., especially in its treatment of love',[6] and these insights into her emotions and thoughts, which are a significant departure from the adversarial replies of the epic Floripas,[7] prepare the way for new notes of lyricism and courtliness in the depiction of male-female relations. Indeed, the whole scene in the Ashmole version has resonance more of the courtly, witty 'luf-talkyng' between hostess and guest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than of the fierce verbal sparring between Floripas and the knights in *Fierabras*, as can be seen in the handsome Berard's gallant reiteration of Oliver's pledge to fight for love of her:

> 'Comly mayde of kynges kende ; þe corteyst þat i knowe,
> Fayr of face now beo our frende ; and we schul ben þyn owe;
> & For þy loue þat art so hende ; we schul boþe ryde & rowe,
> & þylke þat buþ to þe ounkende ; þay schulleþ be bro3t ful lowe.'
> 'Certis', saide þat faire flour ; 'y þanke þe swete wy3t,
> þow couþest wel louye paramour ; me semeþ a lady bri3t.'
> (1298-1303)

The same courtly social milieu is invoked again in a later scene,

where the Ashmole version adds new material that creates an impression of aristocratic leisure and entertainment among the knights and maidens in the tower:

> To þe soper þan wente þay alle þen,
> þe lordes & eke þe ientail wymen,
> And made hem murie þat niȝt.
> amorwe wanne þe sonne hure schon,
> Togadre þay assemblede hem euerechon,
> Lordes and burdes briȝt. (3415-18)

The love between Floripas and Guy is represented within this courtly context. Floripas describes to Oliver how she fell in love with the 'manlich' prowess of the 'iantail kniȝt' Guy (1407-24), with far more detail than in the *chanson de geste*, and uniquely, her whole account is repeated almost verbatim to Roland as a prologue to the scene of her betrothal to Guy (2072-89), including a poetic trope of their exchanging hearts:

> 'Riȝt fro þat day into þis ; myn herte haþ he y-raft.
> ynow y hadde of ioie & blys ; were his to me-ward laft.' (2084-5)

Similarly poetic amatory idioms embellish her lament when Guy is captured:

> 'Alas! loue, wo dost þou me ; þov sturest al my blod.
> Alas! Guyon þe loue of þe ; wil do me waxe wod.' (2795-6)

A further small but significant innovation marks the betrothal scene in both the Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* and the *Sowdone of Babylone*. In the epic tradition, Guy initially follows feudal protocol and refuses to accept Floripas as his wife unless she is given to him by Charlemagne, but the knights persuade him to save them all by agreeing to Floripas's demand. The two Middle English romances follow this narrative outline, but unlike the French epic, they show Floripas and Guy enacting a ceremony before the knights, with hand-fasting (*Sir Ferumbras*, 2105) and troth-plighting (*Sowdone*, 1925-34), and finally sealing their betrothal with explicitly mutual kisses. In the French

tradition, Gui remains silent and passive while Floripas embraces him; but in *Sir Ferumbras* we read:

> Loueliche þay wente togadre þo ; & cussede i-same an haste,
> To fermye loue bytwene hem two ; & to makye hem stedeuaste. (2112-13)

Similarly, in the *Sowdone of Babylone*, 'Thay clipped and kissed both in fere | And made grete Joye and game' (1935-6). This detail speaks to the pronounced concern with reciprocal married love that has been noted as characteristic of medieval English romance;[8] a concern that is further highlighted in the *Sowdone of Babylone* when Floripas, in a newly added speech, gives herself to Guy in words resembling the marriage service: 'Myn herte, my body, my goode is thyn' (1929), and drinks a pledge to him 'As to my worthy hosbonde' (1934). The Ashmole *Sir Ferumbras* makes a comparable intervention in the later scene of Floripas's baptism and wedding to Guy, where a speech (now partly illegible) is added in the margin: 'To wham y pliȝte my trouþe ȝore | To haue & holde for eueremore | On wedlak fre' (fol. 77v). We may also infer a similar reference to the verbal formulations of marriage in the romance of *Otuel and Roland*, as noted before, with its addition of Belisent's explicit consent to the marriage and her declaration of exclusive love for Otuel. This emphasis on romantic love and marriage, in stories that are otherwise so heavily focused on violent combat between men and nations, perhaps indicates a new, later-medieval recognition of the interests of female readers in the inherited narrative traditions. One might even speculate that the English romances are sanitizing the love relationships, bringing them into line with law and custom, and thus making them fit aspirational models for young Christian men and women.

The last instance of innovation I want to consider is an episode in the Middle English translation of the *Song of Roland* that prominently features wine and women, but in a very different context from the romantic love scenes in the *Fierabras* tradition.[9] As I have argued elsewhere,[10] the Middle English *Song of Roland* is an extremely free version of the Old French *chanson de geste*: a reorientation of the inherited story, away from its focus on Roland's heroic *démesure* and towards a greater emphasis on his role as good leader, whose tragic

inability to save his men is entirely caused by Ganelon's treachery. Ganelon's role in the English *Song of Roland* is unequivocally confirmed by the poem's constant reference to his treachery, naming and blaming him as the evil cause of the loss of the Peers at Roncevaux more often than in the French texts, with other added details such as Charlemagne's assertion that Ganelon acts out of hatred towards him as well as Roland (155-6),[11] and the Saracen leader's indication, when instructing his troops, that the Saracen strategy has been masterminded by the traitor Ganelon himself (261-2).

Innovations in the narrative structure support the English poem's emphasis on Ganelon's treachery. In one of the most striking of these interventions, material taken from the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* to supplement the epic tradition is interpolated into the poem's account of Ganelon's return from negotiating with the Saracens at Saragossa. The chronicle material, concerning the Saracens' duplicitous gifts to Charlemagne of wine and women, has been selected and carefully interwoven into the epic narrative at three separate points (at lines 1-3, 28-30, 59-76), not to prepare for a moral judgement on the fate of the Peers as in the *Pseudo-Turpin* tradition, by justifying the deaths at Roncevaux as carrying out God's will, but to amplify Ganelon's role as traitor and tempter. The first two insertions occur in the scene of Ganelon's arrival at Charlemagne's encampment. As in the French texts, it is all told with dramatic irony: Ganelon's report of his successful mission and of the Saracen Sultan's willingness to submit to Charlemagne and convert to Christianity is known to be false by narrator and audience. The English poem, however, heightens the seductive appeal of Ganelon's 'flatring speche' (6) with the addition of the Saracen women whom he conducts into Charlemagne's presence.

> Then lightid gwynylon and com In in fer,
> And brought in the madins bright in wedis. (2-3)

After setting out the Saracens' political proposal, Ganelon offers the women, together with wine for a further inducement, all sent by the Sultan for Charlemagne's enjoyment, as an additional guarantee of the Saracens' good faith and peaceful intentions.

> 'Of Saragos the cete he [the Sultan] sent the the key

And all thes faire ladys with the to pley:
echon of them is a lordis doughtur.
And her ys good wyn; drink therof after.' (27-30)

The third inserted passage creates a new scene in the narrative when Charlemagne pitches camp on his way back to France, and the opportunity arises to enjoy the Saracen gifts.

They be not gone ferr on ther way,
But x myle, in a medew, as I you say,
When they se vnder the son aloft
It was tym to pight tentis ofte.
Then mad them redy the knightis right,
To fetch food for foilis with all ther myght.
The king set hym to his soper that tid,
Seruyd hym semly and his men by his sid
With euery thinge that myght glad his hert:
Wyn went betwen them, non did astert. (59-68)

So far, the added material gives substance to Ganelon's temptation. The poem elaborates the details of the Saracen ladies' attractions: 'madins bright in wedis' (3), 'echon of them is a lordis doughtur' (29), and indicates the courtly delights offered both by feminine company – 'all thes faire ladys with the to pley' (28), and by the 'good wyn' (30) which is enjoyed at a supper where the king is served 'semly', 'with euery thinge þat myght glad his hert' (66-7). All this contributes to the appeal of Ganelon's enticement, playing on Charlemagne's weary desire for peace after long years of war: an appeal that might have been all too understandable to the poem's fifteenth-century readers and listeners.

Of course, the episode ends badly, when the knights drink too much and find themselves in bed with the Saracen women.

wyn went betwen þem, non did astert,
þat gwynylon to toun brought, euyll hym betid!
It swymyd in ther hedis and mad hem to nap;
they wist not what þey did, so þer wit failid.
when they wer in bed and thought to a restid,
they went to the women þat wer so hend,

that wer sent fro saragos of sairsins kind. (68-74)

In the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, this incident leads up to a long moralizing explanation that connects the Christians' sinful fall into drunkenness and fornication with their subsequent deaths. This is not the case at all in the *Song of Roland*, where the narration comments instead on the knights' contrition and their cursing Ganelon:

they synnyd so sore in þat ylk while
that many men wept and cursid þat vile. (75-6)

Indeed, the bias throughout the episode is all towards blaming Ganelon while excusing the knights, who are represented as if drugged by the wine and unaware of their sinful actions: the wine 'swymyd in ther hedis and mad hem to nap; | they wist not what þey did, so þer wit failid' (70-1). At this early point in the narrative, while the reader or listener knows of Ganelon's betrayal and perjury, Charlemagne and the Peers do not, and this instance of their weakness and vulnerability on account of the wine brought by Ganelon creates an ominous foreshadowing of the tragedy to come at Roncevaux.

The unique copy of the Middle English *Song of Roland* dates from the latter end of the fifteenth century, a period of frequent dynastic upheaval and switching of loyalties. At the same time, Caxton was making his own translation of the Matter of France in the *Lyf of Charles the Grete* and despite the extreme literalness of the translation, a few tiny additions serve to highlight the already prominent theme of treason which, as Megan Leitch argues, is the unifying thread that links all Caxton's prose romances of the 1480s.[12] It seems likely that the English adaptor of the *Roland* tradition in this new verse romance was equally attuned to the anxieties of the fifteenth-century reading public, and chose to highlight Ganelon's treasonous behaviour with a coherent set of carefully constructed interpolations.

To conclude, then, as I hope these few examples indicate, the Middle English Charlemagne romances are by no means devoid of creative innovation. Indeed, the writers show considerable versatility as they respond to the demands and concerns of new audiences by adapting and rewriting the Matter of France for insular readers of romance in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Notes

1 'Romance in England, 1066-1400', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. D. Wallace (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 152-76 (p. 172).
2 Ibid.
3 'Definitions of Middle English Romance', *Chaucer Review*, 15 (1980/81), 44-63, 168-81 (p. 46).
4 *Firumbras* and *Otuel and Roland*, ed. M.I. O'Sullivan, EETS OS 198 (London, 1935).
5 *The Sowdone of Babylone*, ed. Emil Hausknecht, EETS ES 38 (London, 1881); *Sir Ferumbras*, ed. S.J.H. Herrtage, EETS ES 34 (London, 1879); *Firumbras* and *Otuel and Roland*, ed. cit.
6 H. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*: *Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 241.
7 *Fierabras*: *Chanson de geste du XIIe siècle*, ed. M. Le Person, CFMA 42 (Paris, Champion, 2003), 2215-18, 2224-6.
8 See F. Riddy, 'Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. R.L. Krueger (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 235-52; G. Mathew, 'The Heroine and Marriage', in *The Court of Richard II* (London, Murray, 1962), pp. 129-37; Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, pp. 241-51.
9 *'The Sege off Melayne' and 'The Romance of Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne'... with a fragment of 'The Song of Roland'*, ed. S.J.H. Herrtage, EETS ES 35 (London, 1880).
10 P. Hardman, 'Roland in England: Contextualizing the Middle English *Song of Roland*', in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. R. Purdie and M. Cichon (Cambridge, Brewer, 2011), pp. 91-104.
11 This is contrary to the case in the French tradition.
12 M. Leitch, 'Thinking Twice about Treason in Caxton's Prose Romances: Proper Chivalric Conduct and the English Printing Press', *Medium Ævum* 81 (2012), 41-69.