Floire et Blancheflor: the Magic and Mechanics of Love

> 'But so closely were all those organizing implements obscured in the corpulent trunks of the trees that every man there present renounced conjecture of art and said it was done by enchantment.
>
> Nashe, The Unfortunate Traveller

As medieval lovers of legendary status, Floire and Blancheflor are less well known than Tristan and Isolde or Lancelot and Guinivere. The story of a happy and successful love between two children is perhaps inevitably less gripping than the tragic and illegitimate loves of adults. Yet the story of Floire and Blancheflor was continuously and widely disseminated throughout medieval Europe and their names are often cited in medieval texts as a proverbial example of faithful and intense love. [1]

Modern criticism has, on the whole, received these child-lovers less generously than their medieval public evidently did. The earliest version of their story is the Old French romance Floire et Blancheflor and until recently, this text has been relegated to the status of a culturally marginal escapist fantasy. The tone of the discussion may be illustrated from Myrrha Lot-Borodine's 1913 study, when she included Floire et Blancheflor in 'le genre idyllique' and characterised the romance as 'une histoire d'amour d'un charme pénétrant et doux, placée dans un cadre exotique: tout y est naïf, sincère et touchant: seules les merveilles d'un Orient trop saturé de couleurs et de lumières effacent par moments le clair sourire de l'idylle'. [2] Later editors have accepted these terms, so that Taylor, for instance, in his edition of the Early Middle English version of the romance, worries that 'the details (as possibly to be expected in an Eastern story) make the romance too enervating, voluptuous and sentimental'. [3] Two interrelated assumptions have thus usually underlain discussion of Floire et Blancheflor: firstly, that the romance is, or ought to be, a naive and sentimental idyll of child-love, and secondly, that the 'merveilles de l'Orient' - the marvellous artefacts, locales and schemes of the romance - are an intrusion and a blemish. Both assumptions need revision in the light of more recent work on medieval attitudes to children and their literary portrayal and on Western knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the East. Even more importantly, the hidden link between these assumptions needs testing: can we assume that the Orient was an unfortunate and unconquerable distraction for an author who intended to write a 'pure' idyll? Can we not rather accept that the author of Floire et Blancheflor has self-evidently chosen either to link child-protagonists with the 'merveilles

de l'Orient' or to re-work a source that combined these two elements?

Debate has continued for over a century as to a possible source for Floire et Blancheflor, and though it has not been resolved by the discovery of an incontestable (or indeed any) single source for the whole structure of the romance, there is some agreement that Arabian analogues for discrete motifs are closer than the Western analogues that have been counter-adduced.[4] The question of the provenance of the 'merveilles de l'Orient', however, should not be pursued in dissociation from the question of their function in the romance, still less under the tacit assumption that they have none. We should accept the presence both of children and the Orient in the romance, and, without privileging the one element to the exclusion of the other, ask instead how the combination functions in the text.

The Emir of Babylon's tower and garden is a strikingly exotic setting for the reunited Floire and Blancheflor. The tower itself is an elaborate and luxurious construction of marble and crystal, surmounted by a huge carbuncle. Through ingenious engineering, a stream provides running water for each of its three floors and seven-score rooms. The Emir's suite is in the centre of the tower and he is waited on by the 140 nobly-born maidens who inhabit the tower, themselves guarded by eunuchs. The tower is enclosed within a walled garden which in turn is encircled by the waters of the Euphrates. Real and artificial birds sing in the garden; herbs, spices and flowering trees scent it. In the middle of the garden a stream flows, and over it grows a tree which 'par fisique est si engigniez' (v.1818) as to be perpetually in flower. In the Emir's annual ritual of bride-choosing, the maidens cross the stream (which remains pure if they are virgins and becomes muddied and turbulent if not) and walk beneath this 'Tree of Love'. The Emir's bride is the maiden on whom a flower falls from the Tree: she is crowned queen for a year, at the end of which she is beheaded. The choice of bride, however, does not depend on chance or destiny or the marvellous tree, for

> ... se il i a damoisele
> Que il milz aint ne soit plus bele
> Seur li fet par enchantement
> La fleur cheoir premierement. (vv.1848-51),

so that the happy Emir can control every aspect of his deliciously ideal situation.

Analogues for discrete elements of this locale in the romance have often been noted. The harems of the Thousand and One Nights have been adduced as sources for the tower, and its framing story as an analogue for the Emir's ritual of bride-choosing.[5] Parallels closer to home exist in Chrétien's and Wace's 'chastel' and 'ile as puceles':[6] the construction of the tower is

paralleled in Eneas and Alexandre[7] and its ingenious plumbing and the artificial birds have parallels both in literature and in aristocratic life.[8] If we attend to the total configuration of tower and garden, however, it is clear that the traditions of the ideal enclave provide the basic structure.[9] The features of the garden - stream, orchard, singing birds - are those of the traditional locus amoenus and the Earthly Paradise.[10] The Emir's tower is a variant feature, but is implanted within a paradise garden. Everything in this setting is redolent of a quasi-prelapsarian security: the maidens are maidens, the men are eunuchs, the tower is so well made that 'no serpent or viper or any evil worm can live there' (vv.1677-8).[11] The trees and spices of the garden bloom continually, the birds sing perpetually and idyllically, so that, as the author comments

> Il n'en a tent, mon escient,
> Entre orient et occident.
> Qui enz est et sent les odors
> Et des espices les flerors
> Et oit les oisiaux par doucor
> Chanter le lai qu'il font d'amor
> Par la douceur li est avis
> Du son qu'il soit en paradis. (vv.1790-99)

For all its paradisal connotation, however, the exclusiveness and security of the Emir's tower is obviously purchased at a price. The configuration of tower and garden is carefully designed to ward off all threats - from time, from growth, and from the uncertainties of a fully human choice. Rivalry, whether from other men or from the pre-emptive effects of previous possession of the maidens, is eliminated by the castration of other males within the enclosure and by the chastity-testing stream: 'Ne veult que clerc ne chevalier/La fame aient qu'avra eue' (vv.1735-6). The perpetually blooming spicy orchard defies time, but at the cost of denying change and growth at the same time as it pre-empts decay and alteration. In his excellent study of medieval allegory, The Visionary Landscape, Paul Piehler has drawn attention to the 'problematic relationship of the erotic hortus conclusus to the social and moral expectations of the world outside',[12] and to the subtlety with which Chrêtien and Guillaume de Lorris suggest the limitations and potential decadence, as well as the charm and the psychic centrality of their gardens of love in the tower and garden of Cligés and the garden of the Roman de la Rose. The Emir's tower and garden provide another example, closely contemporary with Chrêtien's Cligés,[13] of the potency of the ideal enclave and its rich suggestiveness in the hands of good poets. While expressive of central psychic aspirations, the Emir's garden also manipulates them to the point where they embody a grotesque and arrested fantasy rather than the sought-for stable ideal.

At the heart of this garden lies the Emir's attempt emotionally to have his cake and eat it; the entire enclave is designed to facilitate, protect and actualise the Emir's choice of love-object. The chief means by which the Emir secures his gratification is the duality of the Tree of Love. He can allow destiny ('le sort', v.1840) to allot him his bride: the falling flower chooses out for him the fairest, fated recipient of his hand and so consecrates his annual choice. The marvellous Tree of Love objectivises and validates his choice of bride. At the same time, if the Emir has already fastened on a particular maiden as his love-object (as is the case with Blancheflor), he can arrange for the flower to fall 'par enchantement' (v.1850) where he wishes. In this way, an artificial or mechanised version of the medieval romance experience of falling in love is allowed its part in the Emir's choice. The idealising imagination that would see love as a quasi-sacred force, invading the personality from outside (cf. Chaucer's Troilus, Chrêtien's Alexandre), is paid tribute in the marvellous Tree's apparently numinous capacity to choose for the Emir. But the risks and the surrender involved in falling in love are avoided by the Emir's ability to arrange the choice. Moreover, the Emir's choice is constantly revocable: at the end of each year he beheads his bride and selects another, thus avoiding the potential tedium and difficulties of more permanent relationships. This must be every twelfth-century seigneur's dearest fantasy when confronted by the potentially conflicting demands of lineage and personal satisfaction - an endlessly renewable choice of beautiful certified virgins in a structure of selection at once freely manipulable and 'objectively' authenticated, excluding all fears and exclusively gratifying the needs of its solipsistic central male figure. The Emir's tower develops the potentially decadent narrowness and exclusiveness of ideal courtly gardens noted by Piehler into the infinitely repetitive and arrested quality of naked fantasy.

None of the analogues proposed for Floire et Blancheflor combines or uses the elements of the ideal garden in quite this way. (The closest comparable thematic use of a tower and garden is in Cligès, where the carefully engineered tower, the high walls of the garden and a particular sheltering tree form an erotic enclosure for Cligés and Fenice.) Here the romancer is deliberately using conceptions of the East to tinge an essentially Western evocation of the paradise garden with the exoticism and fantasy thematically required by his treatment of love. A century of investigation has failed to disclose a specific source for the Emir's tower and garden, and direct literary transmission from the East would be surprising at this date.[14] But a skilful blending of Western traditions and Western ideas about the East is not at all impossible. The Saracens had long been familiar enemies in the world of the chansons de geste, and they were to have a continuing career in vernacular romance as bloodthirsty idol-worshippers. But by the late twelfth century new intellectual and imaginative rapprochements had complicated and enriched Western apprehensions of the East. For courtly romance the key note of the

idea of Islam is less the figure of the militant Saracen as chivalric enemy than the luxurious sensualism of the Islamic paradise.

> 'Paradise, that is, a garden of delights'; the flowing waters, the mild air in which neither heat nor cold could afflict, the shady trees, the fruits, the many-coloured silken clothing and the palaces of precious stones and metals, the milk and wine served in gold and silver vessels by angels, saying, 'eat and drink in joy'; and beautiful virgins, 'untouched by men or demons'. 'Whatever the blessed desired would immediately be supplied'. [15]

So Petrus Alphonsi in a standard medieval account of the Koranic paradise. The Koran itself was first translated into Latin by Robert Ketton for Peter the Venerable in 1143: this was part of a programmatic attempt to assimilate, confute and ultimately to convert Islamic religious thinking. But accounts of Islam from Mozarabic Christians like Petrus Alphonsi and from crusaders and travellers also circulated and helped conceptions of Islam to percolate beyond the circles of organised theological investigation and polemic. Theologians seized with relish on the Islamic paradise as useful and much-needed evidence of Islamic theological inferiority ('to eat gluttonously, to wanton and lie with women indefinitely' ... 'what will Paradise be but a tavern of unwearied gorging and a brothel of perpetual turpitude?'). [16] So carnal a paradise also epitomised for the West its own imperfectly understood conceptions of Islamic marriage laws and sexual mores and permitted a polemic vantage point on a civilization from which the West was in the (often puzzling and disturbing) process of imbibing major philosophical and scientific advances. As R.W. Southern sums it up in his Western Views of Islam, the existence of Islam 'was the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom ... As a practical problem it called for action and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, coexistence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mystery of its existence: what was its providential role in history - was it a symptom of the world's last days or a stage in the Christian development; a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect?' [17] In this context, the response of medieval romance to the idea of Islam is not readily dismissable as pure escapism. Romance both reflected and transformed - held up for imaginative assimilation - the cultural realities of the Islamic problem. The figure of the hostile Saracen, however caricatured, represents a physical threat with an historical as well as an imaginative lineage. [18] Similarly, the Eastern sensualism, luxury and ingenuity on which courtly romance focusses represents in part a response to reality and in part the imagination's ability to transform reality for its own purposes. The confrontation with the East is not an escape from, but part of Western experience.

It offers romance a mode of 'otherness' which can at the same time be used to assimilate and amplify elements of Western experience.

I do not wish to suggest that the Islamic paradise as encountered in Western theological enquiry or as disseminated in Western accounts of Islam, is a 'source' for Floire et Blancheflor, so much as to suggest the potential range and significance of the idea of the East for romance. The presence of 'Easternness' cannot be ascribed automatically to escapism or naivete. Of course, not all romance writers did anything other than absorb their 'Easternness' from a common pool of stock figures and types who come already freighted with standard connotations. But the author of Floire et Blancheflor is no ordinary writer and he uses the idea of the East to the full in the exploration of central imaginative concerns. The Emir's mutilated version of the ideal enclave is presented critically, its 'Easternness' underlining its distorting extremism.

The Emir's self-fulfilling and enclosed fantasy is breached by the discovery of Floire and Blancheflor in his tower. Here the conventionally androgynous beauty of literary medieval children is put to interesting use: the Emir, coming to inspect the newly-discovered pair of sleeping lovers, decides that after all, his Blancheflor is in bed with another maiden, and that he himself has been jealous and possessive in thinking otherwise.

> Ce est la jalousie:
> Tieus est s'amor, tieus est s'atoche,
> L'avoir dont crient toz jors s'enoch. (vv.2437-9) [19]

But Floire is quickly revealed as a male and the Emir flies into a passionate rage, torn between killing the lovers immediately and finding out how they got there. For all their tempting androgyny, Floire and Blancheflor remain resolutely unaccommodated to the Emir's fantasy, and their persistent assertion of their prior choice of each other and their preference for death over separation forces the Emir into one choice after another as he tries out the possibilities of tribunal, burning, mercy or beheading for them. Eventually he decides to grant mercy - in exchange for Floire's account of how he entered the tower. He then knights Floire, helps the two lovers celebrate their marriage, and himself marries Blancheflor's confidant Claris. This marriage, at Blancheflor's request, is to be for life and not to be terminated by beheading after a year, thus presumably rendering the Tree of Love and the chastity-testing well redundant and transforming the tower and garden from the scenario of a fantasy to a pleasant palace for the Emir's marital life.

Nevertheless, Floire and Blancheflor's corrective effect on the Emir's mode of life does not commit the romance to a simple opposition between the 'natural' love of the two children and a more cerebral and ingenious adult

fantasy. The Emir's tower and garden is an extreme version of the potential solipsism of the ideal enclave; similar dangers attend the ideal gardens associated with Floire and Blancheflor earlier in the romance.

The early environment of their love is Floire's father's orchard, and here, surrounded by singing birds, flowers and herbs (including the narcotic mandragora, singled out at v.240), Floire and Blancheflor eat and drink, gaze at one another, and convert their education (Ovid is specifically mentioned at l.226) into a private education sentimentale:

> Letres et saluz font d'amors,
> Du chant des oisaus et des flours,
> D'autre chose n'ont il envie.
> En seul cinc anz et quinze dis
> Furent andeus si bien apris
> Que bien sorent parler latin
> Et bien escrivre en parchemin
> Et conseillier, oiant la gent,
> En latin, que nus ne l'entent. (vv.259-268)

Like many children, they speak a private language, but in this case it is 'latin' - the means of access to educated adult culture - which they have turned into a private code. Converting one's study of Ovid directly into the emotional life is a vivid response to the educative process, but there are also limitations if an entire education is to become merely the food of a private idyll. However enticing the ideal enclave, the permanent occupation of gardens is necessarily tedious, and Floire and Blancheflor, though nurtured by this setting, can only develop so far in it. In his presentation of this paradisal childhood, the author again draws attention (though more gently than in the case of the Emir) to the way in which gardens connote both growth and arrest.

This first garden is lost to Floire and Blancheflor through the intervention of Floire's father, the King. Determined not to allow his son's love for the daughter of a Christian captive, he sends Floire away to school, promising that Blancheflor will follow. This is the first adult ruse against the children. On returning, Floire is to be told that Blancheflor has died for love of him in his absence. In fact she has been sold to merchants, an expedient suggested by the Queen as an alternative to the irritated paternal determination to solve the problem by chopping off Blancheflor's head (vv.297-300, 408-411). Interestingly, and for plot purposes, gratuitously, Floire's parents embody what could have presumably worked as a merely verbal ruse in an intricately elaborate artefact - a false tomb for Blancheflor. This tomb is the centre piece of the romance's second garden.

Like the Emir's Tree of Love, the trees surrounding Blancheflor's tomb are in perpetual flower:

> Cil qui les quatre arbres planterent
> Tretouz les dieus i conjurerent,
> Au planter tel conjur feisoient,
> Touz tens cil arbre florissoient. (vv.616-19)

and birds sing constantly in them. Amidst this setting, statues of Floire and Blancheflor adorn the elaborately bejewelled and inscribed tomb, so fashioned that when the wind blows, they turn to one another and embrace,

> Si disoient par nigromance
> Tretout lor bon et lor enfance. (vv.585-6)

The romancer's comment on this garden is that any youth or maiden ('jouvenciaus ... Ne pucele', vv.626-7) who heard the song of its birds would immediately be stirred to embrace and kiss if they were in love, while other people 'Que d'amer mes ne se penassent' (v.633), would be lulled to sleep 'De la douceur que il oissent' (v.634). Love and sleep are thus comparable responses: this memorial garden's sweetness intensifies experience in terms of a repose which is necessarily also a disconnection from experience.

Floire encounters this false death, naturally enough, as if it were real, and responds with attempted suicide. His logic is ruthless: Blancheflor is his life and he will therefore exchange life without her for death with her and they will have a new life together in the 'champs flori' of the Elysian fields (vv.779-789). His horrified parents have to deconstruct their own symbol, opening up the tomb to show the suspicious and persistent Floire that Blancheflor is not in there. They cannot arrest and memorialise Floire and Blancheflor's love as something belonging only to childhood. Their symbol suggests something of the arrested quality of an exclusive love, but it also leads Floire to contemplate the final end of that love and to assert its capacity to go beyond death. The Queen tries to persuade Floire of the reality of death's transforming power (vv.812-35); she denies the Elysian fields and evokes the underworld as the place where those who have died for love wander in pain. Death is not necessarily just another, more removed, paradise garden, and life is therefore valuable. The Queen thus maintains that Floire cannot secure Blancheflor in death, but he remains so intractable that she is forced to resurrent Blancheflor for him as alive. It is after this conversation that Floire begins to initiate schemes for recovering Blancheflor. The more he obstacle. Once he is aware of death, love ceases to be merely paradisal repose and the ingenious and scheming imagination is its best weapon. As Floire himself states in his monologue prior to entering Babylon '... qui aimne, ce sai ge bien/ Engingneus est sor tote rien' (vv.1457-8). His parents are as

helpless before this armed innocence as the Emir will later prove to be.

Floire accordingly quests and schemes his way into the Emir's tower. He reaches Blancheflor hidden in a basket of flowers and so appropriately literalises himself as that Floire/flower properly destined to her, pre-empting the Emir's manipulated bloom from the Tree of Love. Once re-united, the children simply eat and sleep. To be with each other is enough, and they treat the Emir's tower as if it were indeed a paradise designed especially for them. They have no further thoughts of escape and seem prepared to stay there for ever. It is, appropriately enough, over-sleeping that leads to their discovery.

Floire and Blancheflor's solipsistic love is, however, at least mutual, unlike the Emir's. Once they have decided that each is the world to the other, they can go on mutually confirming this perception of reality to each other with a strength that enables them to force external reality to accommodate them. Adult institutions can be defied, overturned or transformed, for the children have a counter-perception of reality and a world of their own of some substance through their love. In contrast, the Emir, like Floire's father, is inclined to deal with problematic love-objects by the short cut of beheading them. The Emir uses death to retain and renew the first pleasures of love: Floire is vulnerable to death (as his parents inadvertently teach him), for he insists on one irrevocable and irreplaceable love-object, but he does not fear time or personal mortality and death cannot be used to coerce him from Blancheflor. The Tree of Love grows in Floire's heart -

> Amours li a livre entente;
> El cuer li a plante une ente
> Qui en touz tans florie estoit ... (vv.377-79)

Though this, too, is ultimately the result of a subjective and private decision, the fruit of that act of the imagination by which we confer supreme value on the beloved while feeling that the very nature of things sanctions and compels our choice, it is nonetheless a state with more genuine possibilities of growth than the Emir's carefully engineered Tree of Love.

The romance's treatment of ideal gardens and the constructs of the human imagination for which they are the setting thus begins to suggest the complexity of this author's treatment of love. The children seem to inhabit these gardens as of right, partly because they are children and partly because their mutual love does make one garden 'an everywhere' and 'everywhere' a garden for them. In contrast with the Emir, they are 'true' lovers: his arrangements for a publicly displayed and authenticated choice which is nevertheless directed to private gratification, do not look as impressive a way of including and dealing with the constraints likely to be relevant in choosing

a love-object as the children's implacable indifference to the wishes of Floire's parents. Nevertheless, both the children and the Emir reveal the solipsism at the heart of love, its tendency to interpret experience through a single focus: Floire and Blancheflor make the world of each other, while the Emir arranges the world into a means of supporting his choice of love-object. In both cases love manifests its dual potential as an intensification of, and a disconnection from, experience, a means of growth and also of arrest. Central to love is the imagination which, in endowing the beloved with the capacity to represent life for the lover, can wholistically intuit and interpret the nature of reality, or which, in its unrestrained operation as fantasy, can pervert both love and the world into cloying facsimile.

The romancer, then, does not naively accept the impulse to idyllic love, either as represented by his Orient or as embodied in his child-protagonists. Nor does he have a naive or sentimental conception of childhood, odd as his use of children in a study of the workings of romantic love might initially seem. The question of why it should be children who penetrate and subvert the Emir's enclosed world needs answering in several ways - predominantly in terms of their function in the romance itself, but also in terms of medieval attitudes to children and the literary potential of the child.

It is necessary first to be clear that we are dealing with children here. Adolescence or youth is much more frequently represented in medieval epic and romance than infancy, and usually the 'enfances' of the epic or romance hero are of interest principally for their bearing on his adulthood or on the adult society to which he seeks entry. His exploits are precocious; a 'preuve que, précisement, l'on n'est plus un enfant', [20] for the adolescent hero hastens to imitate and replace the chivalric adults on whom he is modelled. The period between the first awakening to knighthood and acceptance as a fully-fledged knight normally constitutes the 'enfances' of the literary hero (his earlier history is only relevant if it sheds light on his finally-achieved status by way of such things as portents surrounding his birth). Historically, the concept of 'jouvence' in twelfth-century French aristocratic society is identified by Georges Duby [21] as indicating the period between knighting and fatherhood. Floire is five years old when his schooling begins, ten when he is first sent away to school, and fourteen when, at the end of his story, the Emir knights him. It is therefore most probable that he is to be seen as a child, rather than as a nascent chevalier or precocious adolescent.[22]

Philippe Aries, the prominent French historian of childhood, contends that the Middle Ages did not discover the idea of childhood until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when representations of children as children rather than as miniature adults begin to appear in paintings and illuminations. [23] Social historians dispute the accuracy and the implications of this thesis as

expounded by Aries, [24] for Aries sees the medieval child as living in a privileged state of nature, relatively unnoticed by the adult world of which he was merely a miniature and subsidiary reflection, and he contrasts this favourably with the modern child who is subject to the attention of constraints resulting from a specialised concept of the family. Nevertheless, it does seem to be true that the medieval child was a relatively marginal creature, living 'à l'extérieur de l'intérieur' of his family, if we take adult indifference to mean that there was no particular conception of childhood as a special state with its own different needs and rights, no 'sentiment de l'enfance'. But, as more recent researches have shown, [25] conceptual indifference no more precluded hostility and neglect than it conduced to a benign laissez faire. Infant mortality rates were high and the sheer tenuousness of children's hold on life may have made it easier not to be too attached to them. (For every Patient Griselda or Seigneur du Chastel sacrificing their children after a heroic battle with their parental feelings, there is a John Marshall, caring little if his son William 'were hanged, for he had the anvils and hammers with which to forge still better sons'.) [26] Infanticide and child-abuse were common, and normal child-rearing practices included viciously restrictive and prolonged swaddling, wet-nursing and the early farming-out of children. Evocations of a child's point of view are virtually unheard of, though there are some vivid and sympathetic accounts of remembered childhoods in monastic lives and autobiographies, by people who were not themselves parents, such as Guibert of Nogent. [27] More representative perhaps is Philippe de Navarre in his early thirteenth-century treatise Les quatre âges de l'homme. [28] In his section on the rearing of children he writes that infants have great need of the love bestowed on them 'de nature et de pitie' by those (not necessarily their parents) who bring them up,

> car, se ce ne fust, il sont si ort et si annieus en petitesce, et si mal et si divers, quant il sont .1. po grandet, que a painnes en norriroit on nul. [29]

At the same time,

> l'an ne doit pas mostrer a son anfant grant samblant d'amor; car il s'an orguillit, et en prant baudor de mal faire; et quant on voit que il commance a mal faire, l'an le doit asprement chastier et reprandre de langue; et se il por tant ne se retair, li chastiz doit estre de verge; et, se ce ne vaut, si soit en prison: po d'anfant perissent por chastier, et trop por soffrir lor males anfances. [30]

The fact that childhood is so rarely conceived from the child's point of view in early medieval thought cannot licence us to assume that adult attitudes were beneficent. Philippe de Navarre's testimony suggests rather that childhood

was regarded as an annoyingly inept and miniaturised version of adulthood, to be regarded with suspicion and remedied as quickly as possible by training and moulding into social usefulness.

Lack of interest in the child's view-point does not however preclude the existence of adult attitudes to children of some range and diversity. The very cultural marginality of the child produces some interesting roles for him in literature. Within the Old French epic, for instance, treatments of children as opposed to youths are isolable, and Mlle. Jeanne Lods has devoted an article [31] to those instances where the child is treated 'non en fonction de l'homme qu'il sera plus tard, mais en opposition avec l'homme fait'. These epic infants are notable for their 'logique implacable', their capacity to voice adult ideals in a startlingly intractable and absolute form, which, as Mlle. Lods notes, can be described either as 'la pureté, ou, si l'on veut, l'exigence de l'absolu'. 'L'impatience de l'enfant n'est pas seulement révolte et hâte, elle est refus de l'humanité moyenne, hésitante et timorée que représentent à ses yeux l'adulte et le vieillard'. Béatrix Vadin, in a study of material from many genres, [33] has shown how often the child's cultural marginality enables him to burlesque adults and to confront them with disconcerting truths via the rigorous logic of the naive and the excluded. Other literary responses to children, studied by René Cailliot [34] and Philippe Ménard, [35] range from showing their potential status as merchandise to pity (and sometimes impatience) for their physical vulnerability to the comic possibilities of the 'âge de déraison et turbulence'.

Floire et Blancheflor is truer to its own cultural conditions in its treatment of children than to the preconceptions of childhood as a sentimentally touching state displayed by its early modern readers. The Emir's court is moved by the vulnerability and beauty of these children as they are led to the stake, but this should not blind us to the implacable logic with which they pursue their ends and its effect on the adult institutions which they thereby cut through, ignore, by-pass or overturn. Floire is not susceptible to the tears of his mother or the rages of his father. He cannot learn without Blancheflor - she is educated with him. Sent away for further schooling he proves not that he can abandon Blancheflor, but that he cannot function without her. Presented with her 'death' on his return, he will not forget her, but simply die with her. Told that she is alive he will seek her out. His father has sold Blancheflor to merchants in exchange for an elaborate gold cup: Floire demands provisioning as a merchant so that he may seek Blancheflor in disguise, and his by now thoroughly subdued father throws in the cup as well. His parents now fear that they will not see him again, and they never do. Floire's determination to secure Blancheflor outruns their lives and news of their death appropriately reaches him as he marries Blancheflor in Babylon. Floire's quest for Blancheflor is in part a progression in the kinds of demands he can make on adults, either by his capacity to excite pity, his implacability

or his application of the ingenuity adults place at his service. His hosts and guides are moved by his resemblance to Blancheflor to give him the information he needs. His last host cannot dissuade him from the apparently suicidal attempt to enter the tower and has instead to give him a scheme for dealing with the Emir's porter. Once the porter has been won over, he in turn provides a scheme for entry into the tower. Meanwhile, Blancheflor, in the tower, plans to kill herself if the Emir's flower falls on her, a plan forestalled by the children's reunion in a final victory over the Emir and over the adult world.

Part of Floire's power comes from the fact that his parents require his well-being to fulfil their own ends. They want him to choose his bride in a manner appropriate to their need to pass on their kingdom and lineage. Floire's determined choice of Blancheflor subverts, in their eyes, the normal institutional means to this. Children are a double-edged possession: a child is both an extension of, and a replacement for, his parents. His potential for extending their life beyond their personal mortality may be exerted at the cost of mocking or transforming the most cherished values of that life. Analagously, love both nurtures and subverts considerations of lineage, especially in a society where love and marriage are not necessarily linked. Love can both conduce to, and remain quite apart from, the concern to procreate. Floire as a king's son must marry someone, but the natural impulses that might conduce to his marriage have led him to a love-object with whom marriage, in his father's eyes, is unthinkable. The use of child-protagonists is, in this respect, part of the romance's complex scrutiny of the romantic love with which its century was becoming increasingly preoccupied. As underlined by the child's ambiguous capacities with respect to his parents, love is both a mainstay and a threat with regard to social structures. Conversely, for the individual, social structures are both nurturing and hostile. Floire and Blancheflor ignore adult considerations of lineage: their triumph, and the end of their love story, is to marry and perpetuate the roles of Floire's parents in his kingdom. (Indeed, Floire's last act in the romance is to arrange a marriage for his mother-in-law.)

The children's power, however, stems not only from Floire's parents' needs, but from their own existence as children. Reunited with Blancheflor, Floire can make nonsense of the Emir's system of choice as easily as of his parents'. The Emir's ritual is related to Floire in two ways. On the one hand it is yet another system of institutionalised bride-selection that leaves no room for Floire's choice and so provides a kind of parodic escalation of the opposition he has encountered in his father. On the other hand, as the Emir's mode of choice aims at including and resolving the constraints that potentially make it difficult for love and a publicly acceptable choice to inhere in a single love-object, the Emir also provides a perverse facsimile of what Floire achieves in his union with Blancheflor. Like Floire's parents, the Emir fears

death: he seeks to by-pass time and decay where they seek to propagate themselves in Floire, and all of them seek to coerce Floire with death. But Floire and Blancheflor ultimately fear death only for each other; they transcend personal mortality without recourse to fantasy or institutions. In the end they survive the Emir's wrath precisely because they do not fear death in adult ways, and in this respect embody something to which the Emir - and all adults - want access. By this I mean that sense of pre-lapsarian wholeness which Floire and Blancheflor experience and emblematise and which is registered not only in their indifference to death, but in their androgyny and their constant association with ideal enclaves. They do not know, as adults know, time and mortality, sexual difference or any division of the will. In his study of the imagination in twelfth-century poetry, Winthrop Wetherbee has examined twelfth-century theological and philosophical conceptions of the imagination's ability to express 'intuitions inaccessible to reason in its fallen state', conceptions in which the concession of a certain intrinsic value to human love was possible.[36] 'At its heart, the natural bent of our emotion, though aroused by carnal and subjective motives, reveals the traces of a primordial state of psychological integrity in which human and spiritual feeling were one', and at the heart of the experience of love as it is seen in twelfth-century poetry is 'the intuition of an essential coherence, an integrity and harmony which are represented as potentially accessible through the fulfilment of human love, or as symbolised by it'.[37] Wetherbee does not include Floire et Blancheflor in his survey of twelfth-century poetry, but his words admirably fit this romance which devotes itself precisely to embodying and exploring the human need for such wholeness and the imagination's capacity to achieve it. The romancer's child-protagonists are, in a context not merely familial, the vehicle for adult projections.

A complex trade thus evolves between the adult and child worlds of the romance. For all its preoccupation with paradise gardens, the narrative is also honeycombed with images of buying and selling, trade and exchange. The adult world trades Blancheflor for a golden cup, though its beauty and its carvings of the kidnapping of Helen (vv.442-447) and the judgement of Paris (vv.454-475) suggest her more than commercial value. Floire is not only a lover, but in his disguises for dealing with the adult world and wresting her back from it, he is first merchant and then engineer-architect as he trades his way back to Blancheflor. There is much play between the commodities Floire is really and ostensibly trading in. He appears as a merchant, en route to the Emir's fête in Babylon, but his very bearing so evokes Blancheflor for his various hosts, that he is freely deluged with the information he really wants, and which he rewards with smaller golden cups from his store. In the case of the Emir's porter, Floire's generously-staked games of chess and gift of the beautiful cup for which Blancheflor was exchanged win the porter over and buy his love and fidelity to Floire. Finally, Floire trades his story in return for the Emir's mercy: the children, in the strength of their freely-given mutual

love, make their bargain with the adult world as they prepare to assume its forms of marriage and kingship.

If paradise gardens suggest the wholeness we want love to express, these images of exchange suggest the emotional horse-trading that is also part of our experience in a lapsed world. Parents love children - if their children do what they want. Romantic love is, for our imagination, an absolute ideal that alters not when it alteration finds, but is also and equally a bargain - I'll love you if you love me. Like all strong passions (compare vanity, curiosity), love compromises between the sentiment and the object. The imagination in a fallen world creates and must satisfy its own ideal needs and the intricacies of our emotional plumbing. The food of love is to have one's cake and eat it. The children unite the ideal and the real: not only are they persistently associated with and imaged as flowers, as Calin has shown;[38] they are food as well as flowers to one another. In the king's orchard where the birds sing of love,

> La vont li enfant deporter
> Chacun matin et por disner. (vv.245-6)

and they hear the birdsong 'quant il menjoient et bevoient' (v.247). Reunited in the Emir's tower, 'ensemble mengierent et burent' (v.2281). When they are separated, Floire can barely eat (it is this that alerts his hosts to his identity as lover). As they walk to their apparent death, the narrative frames them in formal portraits and focusses on Blancheflor's mouth (vv.2652-2663) to claim her kiss as food:

> De sa bouche ist sa doce alainne,
> Vivre en puet en une semainne:
> Qui au lundi la beseroit
> En la semainne fain n'avroit. (vv.2660-2663)

At their wedding feast Floire

> Pour detranchier pas nu lessast
> Que, voiant toz, ne la beisast. (vv.2934-5)

and the court delightedly tell him to hold to this dish:

> Floires, a cest mes vous tenez,
> Bien vous fera, se vous l'amez. (vv.2938-9)

In them the imagination grows by what it feeds on, while the Emir is trapped in perpetual consumption and disposal. His imagination is not as ferocious as Maturin's terrible parricide who has 'read all the French romances' and relishes

the swiftness of exchange between 'that appetite which cannot be supported without dainties and flattery for that which would barter a descended Venus for a morsel of food'[39] as two lovers starve to death in their dungeon, but the Emir is closer to imaginative cannibalism than to sustenance.

The dividing line between these two states is significant but thin. As I have earlier suggested, the romance's opposition of child and adult is not simple, and is as much concerned with the imaginative affiliation and trade between the two states as with contrasting them. The children and the Emir are alike in being solipsistic: both are images of the same human need, fulfilled in the one case of which the other is the obverse. In accounting for the co-presence of children and the 'merveilles de l'Orient' in the romance, the imagination (and hence the pervasive ingenuity of artefact, scheme and device so disturbing to earlier attempts to read the romance as a naive idyll) is central. The children utilise adults' ingenuity in preserving their alternative world, while for adults ingenuity is a means for co-opting external reality to their will and needs, for regaining a semblance of the lost paradisal wholeness. The concept of 'engin' pervades the text in these different ways and perhaps rightly disturbs, though it is not therefore inappropriate in the romance. As Robert Hanning remarks in his study of 'engin' in twelfth-century courtly texts, the very etymology and developing meanings of 'engin' in its career from Latin ingenium into Old French provide a 'strong tradition for linking together in the one word contradictory judgements on witty or ingenious problem-solving behaviour and its physical embodiment in artefacts'.[40] Our reaction to 'engin', Hanning argues, embodies a profound ambivalence: 'engin complicates our acceptance of straightforward chivalric values (love, prowess, herosim) because it often makes those values work in spite of themselves, or criticizes them by exposing their inadequacy'.[41] Hanning does not mention Floire et Blancheflor but his study is suggestive both for the way in which 'engin' works in this text and in providing yet another context in which the romance can be seen to be engaged with, rather than in flight from, the concerns of its sophisticated late twelfth-century culture.

In Floire et Blancheflor the word 'engin' is used both of generative and expressive aspects of the imagination and of human behaviour. 'Engin' is both construct and artefact (compare the ambiguity of English 'device'): 'par engin' stratagems are conceived and they are embodied in artefacts which are also 'engin', as in Floire's parents' idea that Blancheflors ought to be dead to Floire or that she should be exchanged. 'Engin' is central both to the 'merveilles' and to love in Floire et Blancheflor. No marvel in the romance can be unambiguously ascribed to the supernatural. Its single clearly magical object - the protective ring given to Floire by his mother - never has its magic drawn on. The children plead with each other to take the ring as they are led to the stake and a king is moved by this to plead for them and to prompt the Emir 'tretot l'engin Floire a savoir' (v.2785) rather than to kill them. The

children believe in the ring, but it is their love for each other that effectively saves them, not the ring's powers.[42] In every other case of the marvellous, the romancer is carefully ambiguous as to whether human ingenuity or the supernatural is at work. The trees surrounding Blancheflor's false tomb flower perpetually because there was 'tel conjur'(v.618) at their planting: the children's statues express 'par nigromance' (c.586) youth and love as they turn in the wind. The wonderful birds on the Emir's garden wall are each 'D'arein ouvrez tresgeteiz' (c.1752) and when the wind blows they sing so enchantingly as to tame wild beasts. In the creation of the Emir's Tree of Love

> De fisique ot cil grant conseill
> Quil planta, car en l'aseoir
> Fu fez l'engin, si con g'espoir. (vv.1811-3)

and the Emir controls its flowers 'par enchantement' (v.1850). These constructs are all human devices, depending on a combination of conceptual power and technical ingenuity. Similar devices figures in medieval courtly entertainments and feasts in real life as well as in romance.[43] The 'encanteor' whom King Fenix summons in two manuscripts of Floire et Blancheflor[44] is essentially a court entertainer and not a supernatural figure: he turns stones into cheese, makes oxen fly through the air, carries out apparent decapitations and exercises apparently incendiary powers, and effectively diverts all save the disconsolate Floire.

The marvellous in this romance is the idealising power of the human imagination and its ingenuity in finding ways of realising what it constructs to itself as desirable. The imagination is itself like a clever magician, dealing in both illusion and ingenuity. In good prestidigitation, the audience keeps a sharp eye for any technical failures, but delights if the illusion can be sustained. The truest magic is the magic that can convince us of the possibility of its own existence. (If the 'hors of bras' can convince us that it moves, this is our 'mooste wonder'.) So, too, humanity's illusions are very dear, sometimes valuable, and maintained with great ingenuity.

Like magic again, the imagination is also a power of dubious orthodoxy, and 'engin' and 'Easternness' are used in Floire et Blancheflor to usefully disturbing effect. The imagination emerges as a potentially pagan territory within the heart of Western culture, the East functioning metonymically in the romance as both as dubious and central to the West as its own imagination. In this respect the imagination also demonstrates its affinities with romantic love, that alternative religion whose burden of metaphysical experience as readily conduces to the illusions created by playing a beautiful game as to insights into Truth. Imagination can be a way of making up for, and so ignoring the effects of, that Fall 'par coi nos somes engignie',[45] as well as a

way of intuiting and attempting to recover what we have lost by it.

In Floire et Blancheflor these issues are treated seriously but not tragically: the romance is a comic Romeo and Juliet where consolatory comedic timing prevails so that no-one has to die a real death in response to an artificial one. The romance concludes in an image of wholeness as the pagan Floire marries the Christian Blancheflor, and it is itself a healing and unitary response to the human dividedness it explores. Its orthodox, twelfth-century humanist creator would probably have claimed no more than the status of an enchanter dealing in the illusions and ingenuities of art, but his mature and unchildish romance nonetheless finely embodies the responsibilities and the power of the creative human imagination.

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NOTES

1. See J. Rheinhold, Floire et Blancheflor, étude de littérature comparée, Paris 1906, for the different European versions and allusions. M. Pelan, ed., Floire et Blancheflor, Paris 1956, pp.xxii-iii, discusses 'La popularité de Floire et Blancheflor'. All quotations are from this edition. (The edition of Jean-Luc Leclanche, Paris, 1980, had not appeared when this article went to the printer.)

2. Le roman idyllique au Moyen Age, Paris 1913, p.268.

3. A.B.Taylor, ed., Floris and Blancheflour, Oxford 1927, p.19.

4. The debate is too long to be recounted here. F.C. de Vries, ed., Floris and Blauncheflur: A Middle English Romance, Groningen 1966, pp.62-6, gives a convenient summary.

5. G. Huet, 'Sur l'origine de Floire et Blancheflor', Romania, 28, 1889, 348-59 and 'Encore Floire et Blancheflor', Romania, 35, 1906, 95-100.

6. Pelan, ed. cit., p.160, note to v.1700.

7. Ibid., p.159, notes to v.1624 and vv.1656-66.

8. M. Sherwood, 'Magic and Mechanics in Medieval Fiction', Studies in Philology, 44, 1947, 567-592, and J.W. Spargo, Virgil the Necromancer, Cambridge, Mass. 1934, pp.125ff. On medieval technology see J. Gimpel, The Medieval Machine, London 1979.

9. For a magisterial study of the ideal enclave in Western art, see John Armstrong, The Paradise Myth, Oxford 1962.

10. E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, tr. W. Trask, New York 1953, pp.195-200.

11. Armstrong, op. cit., p.53, pp.66-7 notes the affinity between children and snakes as formless and hence marginal creatures. The Emir's tower is proofed against serpents, but actually penetrated by children.

12. London 1971, p.100.

13. Floire et Blancheflor cannot be dated precisely, though it is usually considered to have been written between 1155 (probable date of Enéas, which the author of Floire knew) and 1170 (date of a low German adaptation, but see E. du Meril, ed., Floire et Blanceflor, Paris 1856, pp.xxviii ff.). M. Delbouille, 'A propos de la patrie et de la date de Floire et Blanchefleur', Mélanges Roques, Paris 1952, pp.53-98, and J. Leclanche, 'La date du conte de Floire et Blancheflor', Romania, 92, 1971, 556-67, have argued respectively for a date after 1160 and for 1147-62, but inconclusively. Cligés (ed. A. Micha, Paris 1970, p.viii) is usually dated as probably 1176.

14. Rheinhold, op. cit., p.145.

15. Quoted from N.A. Daniel, Islam and the West, Edinburgh 1958, p.148.

16. Daniel, p.149. See also J.W. Sweetman, Islam and Christian Theology (part two, vol.1), 1955, London, ch.5.

17. Harvard 1978, p.3.

18. Southern, op. cit., pp.16 ff., and D. Metlitzki, The Matter of Araby in Medieval England, Yale 1977, p.248.

19. See Pelan, ed. cit., p.165, note to vv.2436-39. A. Jeanroy's proposed variant reading from MS A ('l'amour prêsage [seneke < significat] toujours les maux qu'il craint') also suggests that the Emir is shocked into articulating his condition to some extent here.

20. Jean Subrénat, 'La place de quelques petits enfants dans la littérature mediévale', Mélanges Lods, Paris 1978, vol.1, 549.

21. 'The "Youth" in Twelfth Century Aristocratic Society', repr. in F.L. Cheyette, ed., Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe, New York 1968, p.199.

22. A. Mikhailov ('La structure et le sens du roman Floire et Blancheflor', Mélanges Charles Camproux, Montpellier 1978, vol.1, 417-27) argues that the romance is a 'démythification de l'idéal chevaleresque', but Floire's age and the fact that his enfances are not a matter of exploits but as P. Haidu ('Narrative Structure in Floire et Blancheflor', Rom. Notes, 14, 1972, 384) remarks, a 'state' would seem to militate against this interpretation. 'Démythification' is best done by protagonists within the chivalric world (cf. Dinadin's role in the Tristan story): Floire et Blancheflor is courtly but not chivalric.

23. Centuries of Childhood, 1960, Peregrine Books English edition 1979, ch. 2.

24. D. Hunt, Parents and Children in History, New York 1970, repr. Harper Torchbooks, 1972, ch. 2.

25. Lloyd de Mause, ed., The History of Childhood, Psychohistory Press 1974, London reprint 1976.

26. de Mause, op. cit., p.33.

27. See M.M. McLaughlin, 'Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents from the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries', in de Mause, op. cit., pp.101-181.

28. ed. M. de Freville, Paris 1888.

29. ed. cit., pp.2-3.

30. Ibid., p.6.

31. 'Le thème de l'enfance dans l'épopée française', Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Roncesvals, Fasc. no. 2, Paris 1960, pp. 58-9.

32. Ibid., p.60.

33. 'L'absence de représentation de l'enfant et/ou du sentiment de l'enfance dans la littérature mediévale', in Exclus et systèmes d'exclusion dans la littérature et la civilisation mediévales, Senéfiance no. 5, Univ. de Provence, Paris 1978, pp.365-82.

34. 'Perspective sur la condition familiale et sociale de l'enfant dans la littérature mediévale', in Morale pratique et vie quotidienne dans la littérature française du moyen âge, Cahiers du CUER MA, Senéfiance no. 1, Univ. de Provence, 1976, pp.20-30.

35. Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au moyen âge (1150-1250), Genève 1969, pp.148 ff. et passim.

36. 'The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry and the Allegorical Figure "Genius"', Mediaevalia et Humanistica, 7, 1976, 45-64.

37. Ibid., p.50.

38. W.C. Calin, 'Flower Imagery in Floire et Blancheflor', French Studies, xviii, 2 (1964), 103-111.

39. Melmoth the Wanderer, Harmondsworth 1977, p.291.

40. ' "Engin" in Twelfth Century Courtly Texts', ch. 3 of The Individual in Twelfth Century Romance, Yale 1977, p.107.

41. Ibid., p.105.

42. Cf. Helen Cooper, 'Magic that Does Not Work', Mediaevalia et Humanistica, 7, 1976, 131-146.

43. See Sherwood, art. cit., and L.H. Loomis, 'Secular Dramatics in the Royal Palace, Paris 1378, 1389, and Chaucer's "Tregetoures"', in J. Taylor and A. Nelson, eds., Medieval English Drama, Chicago 1972.

44. See Pelan, ed. cit., pp.102-5.

45. Ibid., p.104: the line occurs in MSS A and C of Floire et Blancheflor.