

Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the *Fronterizo* Influence in *Aucassin and Nicolette*

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Abstract

Bakhtin's carnival, hero of gay deceit and framing genres, Anti Arne's typology of the folktale, and Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale are the main theories employed in this analysis of the anonymous poem *Aucassin et Nicolette*. It is against the backdrop of thirteenth century Arab Spanish Provençal Mediterranean that power struggles are held, pointing to the strong presence of the Arabic world in European territory and culture and producing interesting hybrids.

Key words: the carnival, medieval popular literature, hybrid cultures

Resumen

Las teorías bajtinianas del carnaval, el héroe de la mentira alegre y los géneros intercalados, así como la tipología del relato de Antti Arne y la teoría sobre la estructura del cuento de hadas de Vladimir Propp han sido aplicadas al poema anónimo *Aucassin y Nicolette* con el fin de analizar las luchas de poder que se desatan en el triángulo comprendido entre el mediterráneo español, el provenzal y el árabe en el siglo trece, en una época en la cual la presencia árabe estaba bien arraigada en Europa tanto territorial como culturalmente.

Palabras claves: lo carnavalesco, literatura medieval, culturas híbridas

Written in a thirteenth-century dialect from northern France by an anonymous author, but set in Provence and Tunisia, *Aucassin and Nicolette* is endowed with a carnivalesque quality produced by a stratification of linguistic consciousnesses and socio-ideological issues. Even though the literary work is largely about two youngsters from a privileged class trying to overcome the obstacles of love in an elitist milieu, there are structural and thematic elements that express popular concerns and point at a double-voiced consciousness that permeates the work. The symbiotic combination of seemingly opposing genres and the ambiguity seem to point at the coexistence of opposite nationalistic and religious discourses in a tolerant, yet paradoxically xenophobic atmosphere. These inconsistencies bring up the question of whether the author—coincidentally unknown—purposely composed a work that expressed all those contradictions to denounce racial bigotry and, at the same time, pay tribute to the *fronterizo* culture that characterized the Mediterranean microcosm in that century.

The notion of carnival: uncrowning, grotesque realism and ambivalence

It is within Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and Rabelais and the popular culture of the Middle Ages that I will frame my analysis of this *chan-tefable*. Bakhtin's Rabelaisian carnivalesque vision of the world is composed of three fundamental elements: the setting of the world upside down, also called uncrowning or parody; the predominance of preoccupations of material and physical nature in the context of what he calls "grotesque realism": food, drink, sex, bodily functions; and ambivalence, the coexistence of contraries in the same space: life and death, abundance and scarcity, alehouse and palace, rabble and nobility, the secular and the divine, the marginal and the official, the low and the high.

In *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the setting of the world upside down is mainly achieved through the mocking of chivalric values. To Bakhtin, the "ennobled" discourse of the chivalric romance is "linked only with the highest and noblest associations, filled with references to lofty contexts . . . and aspires to provide norms for language in real life, to teach good style, *bon ton*, how to converse in society, how to write letters and so on" (*Dialogic Imagination* 384). That is, the romance mirrors the old-fashioned values and epic paradigms of a society where individual and collective are organically united and the language is charged with elitist ideologies. Such a polyphonic work as *Aucassin and Nicolette*, with its framing genres and heroes of gay deceit is capable of breaking through the lie of paths of centralized language. So, the gay deception of several characters throughout the work is opposed to the centripetal forces of official languages that hold the truth and signify power, in this case represented by chivalric discourse.

The central technique of the carnivalesque involves debasement of all that is elevated in a hierarchy, bringing it down to a concrete or material sphere. That is first expressed in Aucassin's symbolic uncrowning of his father and the chivalric world he symbolizes. As the head of his state, Count Garin de Beaucaire

speaks the language of social conventions and hypocritical values. Thus, he asks his son to “take up [his] arms, mount [his] horse, defend [his] land and help [his] vassals” (1232). But Aucassin refuses to do so as long as they do not give him Nicolette, thought to be “a slave girl . . . from a foreign land . . . purchased from the Saracens” (1232). That is, she can never marry the heir of Beaucaire and beget half-Arabic children, even if she has been baptized and raised as a Christian. Beaucaire tries to bend his son’s will in all kinds of ways from having Nicolette locked in a vaulted chamber to describing a grim picture of a future without anything to inherit. He tells him it is his duty to defend his land and his people, but Aucassin accedes to go to battle only after exacting his father’s promise to let him “say two or three words to her and give her just one kiss” (1237). Once in battle, despite an initial failure, he proves to be the most courageous and noteworthy of knights, only to find out that his father’s promise is worth nothing. So, he readily adopts the disguise of one of the heroes of gay deception. The category of gay deception serves the sole purpose of unmasking the falseness of official discourses, and three are its spokespersons: the merry rogue, the fool, and the simpleton. While the rogue’s language opposes the languages of those on the top of social hierarchies and reprocesses and parodies the pathetic lies of their centralized languages, the ingenuity of the simpleton defamiliarizes the world of social convention, lofty realities, and the canonical and inveterately false languages of poets, scholars, priests, and heads of state, and finally, the fool maliciously distorts inadmissible languages (Bakhtin 404-05). Power structures and linguistic authoritarianism are perspicaciously destabilized and defied with imitation, incomprehension, and distortion.

1. Gay Deception

Before openly opposing his father and making the enemy—Count Bougar of Valence—promise to shame and discomfort Count Garin de Beaucaire, Aucassin proves to be a Bakhtinian simpleton. In fact, early in the work, his mother calls him foolish boy. Like his romance equals, he is a perfect specimen of male beauty and nobility, but smitten by the love of Nicolette, Aucassin refuses his birthright: “he did not wish to become a knight, or to take up arms, or to go to tournaments, or to do anything he ought to do” (1232). He also rejects his Christian values when he questions Paradise and hedonistically prefers Hell with its handsome clerics, and handsome knights, and brave men-at-arms and noblemen, and beautiful courtly ladies with their lovers and husbands, and harpists and jongleurs and kings (1235). That is, the naïveté or incomprehension of our anti-hero runs counter to the lofty, pathetic discourses of the state and of the church. By not grasping the conventions of his society, Aucassin renders them useless and makes fissures in the hegemonic conception of the world.

As a knight, Aucassin is the antithesis of those values that made Lancelot, Yvain, Gawain and others the faithful exponents of the Romance. Although he has the physical make-up necessary to successfully subdue his enemies in

battle, he is also an emotionally weak simpleton who constantly weeps and laments the loss of the beloved or is oblivious to the danger around him because of his constant daydreaming. Because of his anti-heroism, he is mocked by the rabble twice: first by the shepherds and second by the ugly, black peasant. In his encounter with the young shepherds, Aucassin's pseudo-chivalry is the object of the children's jeers:

'My children,' he said, 'repeat the song you were singing just now.'
 'We shall not repeat it,' said the one who was more talkative than the others. 'A curse on anyone who sings it for you, fair Lord!'
 'My children,' said Aucassin, 'do you know who I am?'
 'Yes, we know that you are our young Lord, Aucassin, but we are not your men, we belong to the count.'
 'My children, do sing it, I beg you.'
 'Look here, by God incarnate!' he said, 'why should I sing it to you, if it does not suit me . . .'
 'May God help you, my children, do sing it; take these ten sous which I have in my purse.'
 'Lord, we shall take the money, but I shall not sing it to you, for as I have sworn not to do so. But I shall relate the story to you, if you wish.' (1247)

In a picaresque manner, the shepherd taunts his young lord, twisting the potential authority of Aucassin as the son of their Lord of Beaucaire. The tone of Aucassin's requests remains humble all throughout his pleading due to and despite the scoffing and playful, on one hand, and anti-service, on the other hand, attitude of the shepherd. Although disrespectful in a teasing way, the roguish shepherd makes sure he acknowledges the superior rank of Aucassin's by calling him Lord, and finally accedes to retell the song but in his own terms. Unlike the typically proud knight of chivalric romances, Aucassin does not elevate himself above others with pomposity or arrogance because his is also the language of gay deceit.

In the scene with the other lowborn subject, Aucassin's nobility is scorned again as he employs the characteristic discourse of his privileged social group. First, he employs an elegant metaphor to explain his dejection; second, he utters bombastic words: "I shall be happy to tell you. This morning I came hunting in the forest and had with me a white hound, the finest on earth, and I have lost it: that is why I am weeping" (1249). As an example of the third type of hero of gay deceit, the clown/jester, the Moorish man distorts Aucassin's lofty language. So instead of a "white hound," the creature that Aucassin supposedly loses is called "stinking dog" and "dunghill dog." The hound's empty beauty is also juxtaposed to the usefulness of the ox lost by the Moor. So, while Aucassin is weeping over a leisurely activity (hunting-courtly love) that only those in his station can afford, the Moor will not worry about such a serious matter as working and surviving in such a hard environment even when he can go to prison. Just like the shepherd, the Moor curses him and his privileges, to which Aucassin humbly answers: "You certainly are a great comfort, my brother; a blessing on you!" (1249) .

However, Aucassin's values are not consistent as shown in the episode with the king in childbed and in his declaration of love to Nicolette. While it is true that his vision is at first that of a hero of gay deceit and he opposes the obsolete discourses of state and church, he does not escape gay deception itself as he is mocked by the shepherds and the Moor. But by the time he arrives to Torelore, he has become as pathetic as the authoritarian figures he had mocked with his incomprehension. He strikes the king with a stick, beating him almost to death because of the reversal of sexes and gender roles in his kingdom. Aucassin cannot understand why the men of that land have to lie in childbed while women fight wars. His incomprehension is, in this case, as false and conventional as that of his parents and, therefore, does not prove to be as liberating as the gay type of incomprehension. In fact, his sword-swishing and swiping in the battle fought with food evinces the falsity of the chivalrousness he wrongly adopts in a display of male chauvinism. Just as chauvinistic is his dismissal of Nicolette's love vows since for him "A woman cannot love a man as much as a man loves a woman" (1242). According to his conventional logic, the man's heart can accommodate love, whereas a woman displaces that love not to one but to several parts of the body, thus, resulting in an inferior type of fervor. Did Aucassin mean that women's love is in the eye of the beholder, aroused by sexual desire (the nipple), and fickle because astrology tends to link specific parts of the body to zodiacal signs? That is, is women's love more material (linked to any part of the body but the heart) than men's?

2. Closed bodies versus open bodies

It is precisely Aucassin's preoccupations of material and physical nature the second fundamental element of the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that,

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. (281)

Preoccupations of material and physical nature are expressed not as big banquets where people gobble and guzzle, but as closed bodies (or rather their mouths) being transgressed. The female body is carnivalized several times as Nicolette is described not only with the typical feminine traits, but also as food. So Nicolette is sweet, fair, slender, and beautiful, but she is also "sweeter than a grape or than a sop dipped in wine" (1239), her lips are "redder than a cherry" and her "small, hard breasts pushed out of her dress as if they were two large walnuts" (1240). The effect is one of Arcimboldo's paintings, faces and bodies made up of

foodstuffs but that still retain a hilariously grotesque human form. Later, when running away from Beaucaire, she bemoans her fate:

If I go into the dense forest,
 I shall be eaten
 By the wolves, the lions, and the boars,
 Of which there are many;
 And if I wait until dawn,
 When I might be discovered,
 The fire will be lit
 To consume my body. (1244)

Either way, her body is torn open by the poet's vivid narration of her dilemma. If the wild beasts of the forest get hold of her, her flesh and blood will become the proverbial sausages and wine of Shrovetide, but if the count captures her, she will become the roast game of the banquet. In being rendered as edible matter, Nicolette contravenes another convention of the pathetic discourse of courtly love: she is not the usual, obedient, fragile creature whose unparalleled beauty is her only asset. Quite the contrary, in an adventurous manner she embarks on a journey of her own that leads her to northern Africa, recovers her birthright as a Carthaginian princess, and disguised as a heroine of gay deceit goes back to Provence to claim his beloved, not without testing his love first.

The kingdom of Torelore itself proves to be a microcosm that encapsulates another Rabelaisian preoccupation of material and physical nature. A fundamental violation of the body occurs to the men of Torelore: they can lie in childbed while their wives can fight wars for them. While Nicolette's materiality is associated to the bodily upper stratum, that is, everything that enters the body via the mouth, the king's materiality is related to the bodily lower stratum, everything that penetrates the body through the rectum or genitalia. In a way that reverses the natural order, rather than being the impregnator, the king ends up being impregnated, and so like his ancestors and all the men in Torelore, he will be in childbed until his month is up. As Bakhtin points out, "This downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside put, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements" (*Rabelais* 370). Curiously enough, the reversal of the male and female anatomies provokes yet another uproarious inversion in the ways the Toreloreans fight their wars. As the king states: "It is not our custom to kill each other" (1253) as the prototypical chivalric hero does. That is why instead of fighting with lances and swords, they fight with rotten crab-apples, eggs, fresh cheeses, and large mushrooms as if to parody the proverbial yearly battles between Carnival and Lent, fought by plump people enshrouded in a profusion of sausages and sitting on barrels of beer, on one hand, and starved, emaciated bodies on the other hand¹. That is, theirs is a mock-battle meant to downplay the gravity of the chivalric romance, the heroic knight, and his lofty speech.

3. *Fronterizo* culture

The third element of the carnivalesque vision of the world is the coexistence of contraries in the same space. In *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the ambiguity takes the shape of the *fronterizo* culture that characterized the exchanges between al-Andalus and Provence and between Arabic culture and European cultures. In *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, María Rosa Menocal argues that “everything we know about the geographic and political ties of what are now southern France and northern Spain shows clearly the extent to which the citizens of the area of Languedoc were in intimate contact with and tied to the *fronterizo* and the still strongly Arabized world of the late eleventh century” (31). Indeed, in discussing the possible influences on the first troubadour, Guillaume of Aquitaine, Menocal states that “the record of William’s direct ties with the culture of the *muwashshahāt* and of his own society’s life in the limelight of al-Andalus leaves little or no doubt that the birth of Provençal troubadour poetry occurred at a time and a place when the Arabic world and its culture were of immediate fascination and importance” (31).

In explaining the Mozarabic culture of Arabized Christians, H.D. Miller says that it thrived in Toledo “in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as Christians from al-Andalus fled north to avoid Almoravid religious repression” (“The Mozarabs” 418). Europeans who married Mozarabs or willingly adopted Arabic culture were different from Arabs or other Christians not only because of their strong cultural ties to all things Arabic, but also because they did not succumb to the economic, political, and social pressure and remained Christian. *Aucassin and Nicolette* epitomizes, to a certain extent, Mozarabism; as Miller claims, “It is best to see [it] not as the simple predominance over Latin culture, but as an arc of culture, in which the two principal elements are mixed in varying proportions at various points” (419). The polymorphous, hybrid nature of Mozarabic culture seems to have survived in the *chante-fable*’s diglossia. Although composed two centuries later in northern France, *Aucassin and Nicolette* condenses the love-hate relations between Islamic Europe and Christian Europe while mocking them through the subversion of the chivalric romance.

Characters, geographical sites, and love songs constitute the Arabic and Arabized elements that coexist with the Christian and Eurocentric elements in the *chante-fable*. Nicolette is “a slave girl who was brought from a foreign land, and the viscount of this town purchased her from the Saracens,” yet he also “baptized her and made her his godchild” (1232). Her skin is remarkably white and her hair blond, unbecoming someone whose origins seem to point to the African continent. Aucassin is white and blond too, and the heir to a European nobleman, but his name is of Arabic origin. Their relationship is based on an ambivalent type of friendship that borders on love. In the *kharjas* or the refrains of the *muwashshahāt*, the word *habib* stands for either friend or lover/beloved. In some refrains, *habib* is interchangeable:

Qué faré yo o qué serád de mibi?

Habibi,

Nonte tolgas de mibi.²

Even though the poet did not set the story in a specific time, he mentions that once Nicolette's origins are cleared out, her father, the king of Carthage, wants to "marry her off to one of the most powerful kings in all Spain" (1257), probably meaning in al-Andalus. As Carthage was also part of the original Umayyad empire that extended its territory until nearly all the Iberian Peninsula, Narbonne, and even coastal Provence, the links between the "kings in all Spain," or rather the Andalusian caliphs, and the king of Carthage were in those days strong, and so the desire to weave political connections through intermarriage. Supposing that the action of *Aucassin and Nicolette* occurs sometime between 711 and 1238, Count Bougar of Valence might be a Moorish leader from one of the main ports of al-Andalus, Valencia (taken by the Christians in 1238). The name of the fictional kingdom of Tolerore seems to derive from another Andalusian city, Toledo, seized in 1085. Yet, what is being debated here is more the etymology of the word than the certainty that in fact, Tolerore was Toledo since it is not a coastal city but an inland one.

The viol that a disguised Nicolette brings with her from her place of birth and plays throughout the land of Provence right after her disembarking, is a close relative to the lute or medieval fiddle that accompanied the songs of the troubadours. In arriving to the castle of Beaucaire, Nicolette poses as a jongleur and does what a troubadour would do (*trobar*), she invents a song about the ups and downs of herself and her loved one, a song that self-reflexively sums up the plot of the *chanteable*. Although produced in northerly Picardy, like other literary works composed in the thirteenth century, *Aucassin and Nicolette* could most likely have been influenced by troubadour songs from southerly Provence. When in 1137 Eleanor of Aquitaine, a native of Provence, married Louis VII, in her dowry was included the troubadour tradition initiated by her grandfather Guillaume IX of Aquitaine, a tradition that for some scholars represented a revolutionary break with the traditional forms of Christianity, but which for Arabist scholars like Menocal was the singular product of centuries of cultural exchanges with al-Andalus. The troubadours were at first copied by their northern counterparts, the *trouvères*, but after several decades the latter began to develop their own style. No doubt that with its singular structure, *Aucassin and Nicolette* is the product of that incipient northern tradition; however, it is in regards to theme that this *chanteable* irrefutably relates to the Mediterranean tradition, although in the interpolation of verse and prose there are also echoes of the Occitan *tenso* song, just as in the satirical or parodical characteristic of the *fabliau* there are echoes of the *sirvente*, both of which are song types of troubadour and *trouvère* tradition.

In contrast to other works that were written exclusively in verse form like the *Romances* of Chrétien de Troyes, the *Lais* of Marie de France, and *The Romance of the Rose*, *Aucassin and Nicolette* symbiotically combines both prose

and verse to parallel the necessary union of our hero and our heroine, Europe and Africa, Christianity and Islam. In this sense, the *chantefable* resembles the *muwashshah* brought by the Arabs. As Tova Rosen asserts, it “embodies the flexible and changing relation between the written languages . . . , as well as between these languages and the oral forms . . . it reflects life in the court and on the streets; the sociocultural relations between various ethnic groups, and between the sexes; and even the tensions and rapprochments between secular and religious interests” (“The Muwashshah” 166). If as some scholars thought, the *muwashshah* was an essentially Arabic poetic form that through strophization, Romanization, and vulgarization of the classical *qasida* embodied the coexistence of different languages and ethnic groups of al-Andalus (167-68), can it be alleged that our *chantefable* is the heir to the tradition of dialogic poetry initiated in the Iberian peninsula?

It can be argued that *Aucassin and Nicolette* expresses the struggles between the styles and languages of different literary genres, both high and low, as well as between and among social and religious concerns, and ethnic and gender issues in a society characterized by biculturalism. This cultural clash in turn resulted in a popular manifestation of the ongoing struggles between two empires and their ideologies that on some levels coexisted pacifically and depended on each other for survival. The evolution of the chivalric romance into more prosaic forms was just a matter of time. Bakhtin explains this process as a stratification of national languages and dialects, jargons and idiolects that results in the only genre to emerge after the written word, the novel, which he describes as a “phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (261).

Dialogism: double voiced discourse, polyphony, parody

In order to explain the “novelization” or prosification of such a hybrid like our *chantefable*, it is necessary to explain first the fundamental difference between poetic and novelistic genres:

in the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (uniqueness) of the poet’s individuality is reflected in his language and speech, which is directly realized in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. The novel, however, not only does not require these conditions but (as we have said) even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose. (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 264)

It is in the structure of *Aucassin and Nicolette* that the literary work most resembles the novel as studied by Bakhtin. The first prerequisite of the novel is polyphony, a number of social voices or speech types at a horizontal or synchronic level, coexisting in the same time and space. All of these voices orchestrate

different ideologies, themes, and ideas of not only the mainstream voices, but also of the marginal voices in a novel. Secondly, this variety of voices and speech types compete in an ongoing race for supremacy. As a result, the stratifying process of language spurs a never-ending struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language inherent in the various levels of the social voices and speech types, which, in turn, causes an internal stratification of national languages into dialects, professional jargons, and tendentious, generic, generational, and authoritarian languages. Next, a variety of dialects, jargons, and languages emerge to serve the different purposes of the different types of speaking subjects that make up society. The socio-linguistic strata, then, cause the emergence of heteroglossia since every single utterance is understood in a larger context that includes the social diversity of speech types and stratified languages. Finally, for heteroglossia to be incorporated and organized into literary texts some elements are needed: a story not from the author but from the character(s) or narrator, character speech and zones, and incorporated genres.

What makes a work like *Aucassin and Nicolette* polyphonic is the synchronic coexistence of the rabble and the nobility with their own languages and ideologies. The state and what is serious is rendered comic and so brought low through the contagion of the vulgar and lowly imagery of the grotesque. Such debasement commonly occurs in the uncrowning of a king who becomes a fool while the fool becomes a crowned figure. In this way, the intolerant, conceited count is mocked by his anti-chivalric son, just as his son is mocked by the lowly shepherds and the hideous Moorish man. Likewise, Aucassin's male chauvinism is subverted by the Toreloorean men's ability to be in childbed and his pseudo knighthood is ridiculed in the battle of the foods. Aucassin, the count, the shepherds, the black peasant, and the king and their worldviews and languages coexist in a heteroglossic universe where none is privileged over the other because both centripetal and centrifugal forces engage in a never-ending stratification. In an ongoing process, the ones who are on a high position are lowered and vice versa.

Nicolette's healing powers also encapsulate the low and the high as she is portrayed as a secular saint whose beauty and purity (like her white linen shift) heal the poor mad pilgrim. There is, however, a hint of lasciviousness in the way she restores him to health, by passing by his bed, lifting up her train, and letting him see her leg (1239-1240). That is, the healing neither occurs in a church or consecrated place nor is it the result of the pilgrim's prayers or fasting nor is faith involved, and more than the virtues of a patron saint, Nicolette exudes the wantonness of a milk maid. Another instance of the coexistence of rabble and nobility is the disguise of Nicolette, not as a high-born troubadour, but as a lowly jongleur whose skin is "black and swarthy" (1256). As a jongleur, Nicolette acts like one of those rogues who abounded in the marketplace or in taverns as she deceives Aucassin, extols her own virtues, extracts a confession of his love for her, accepts his money, and never tells him about the disguise.

Bakhtin explains that when the main poetic subgenres were tending towards "the influence of unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life," the novel was gravitating toward "decentralizing, centrifugal forces"

(*Dialogic Imagination* 272-73). Thus, poetry was endowed with “the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels” (273), while at the level of entertainment and merry laugh, the heteroglossia of the clown mocked languages and dialects. As a possible consequence of this stratification, the fabliaux and Schwänke of street songs, folksayings and anecdotes emerge, playing with the bombastic languages of poets, scholars, monks, and knights among others (273). The interpolation of prose in a work like *Aucassin and Nicolette* that opens and closes with poetry has this merry roguish effect, and the incorporation of heteroglossia in the centralized vision of poetry is set in motion through the parody of the romance through the use of framing genres like the folk tale and the adventure story.

At first glance, the work seems to pay tribute to courtly love, but after a close analysis the reader cannot help noticing that the work actually mocks the courtly love of Chrétien, Marie de France, and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun: “The melody is so sweet, the poem fair,/ Courtly and well ordered” (1232). In singing these lines, the poet, probably a trouvère, sets the poem in the elevated atmosphere of a royal court. S/he seemed to mean that this was not a poem for commoners, but a poem for ears habituated to the obsequious manners and bombast portrayed in chivalric romances. The “great suffering he endured/ And the acts of prowess he performed/ for his friend with countenance so fair” (1232) bring up other conventions of the romance: the unattainable, sometimes forbidden, love, the heroism of the knight, and the unparalleled beauty of the maiden. But as discussed earlier, the reader’s expectations of the genre are shattered and the conventions subverted.

***Aucassin et Nicolette* as folktale or fairy tale**

The analysis of the folk tale as one of the framing genres of the *chantefable*, will be framed within Antti Arne’s tale-type index and Vladimir Propp’s theories on the structure of the fairy tale. Arne created a system to identify, classify and locate versions of particular folktales (Georges 113). Under his classification, *Aucassin and Nicolette* is an ordinary folktale as opposed to animal tales, and jokes and anecdotes. Within the subset of ordinary tales, it fits into the description of the novelle or romantic tale as opposed to tales of magic, religious tales, or tales of the stupid ogre, which is consistent with two of the genres that are part of the concoction: the chivalric romance and the troubadour love song/*muwashshah*. So beginning with the premise that *Aucassin and Nicolette* has thematic elements of one type of folktale—the romantic tale—what structural elements according to Propp support this view of the *chantefable* as a type of folktale? In *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp explains the recurrence of a maximum of thirty-one functions in fairy tales. The fairy tale must always begin with an initial situation where “the members of a family are enumerated, or the future hero is identified by name and/or status” (Georges 102). Then the preparatory section precedes the inauguration of the plot, the struggle with villain and villainy, and the task and solution.

As *Aucassin and Nicolette* is predominantly a *chante-fable* that has some elements of the folktale, not all those conditions are necessary or follow the order that Propp conceived. First, there is not one but two heroes: at times, Aucassin performs the role of the hero, at other times, it is Nicolette the heroic one. Thereby, he is described first and presented as the hero, but as the plot progresses, Nicolette performs a less passive role and partakes in the heroic journey and quest as well. In the preparatory section, an interdiction is addressed to the hero (Count de Beaucaire prohibits his son to love Nicolette), which he violates because he cannot stop loving her “friend.” The villain, his father or rather the pathetic discourses he represents, try to trick Aucassin into forgetting Nicolette, but fails.

In what Propp calls the inauguration of the plot, the count imprisons Aucassin and threatens to kill his beloved if he insists on loving her. At this point, the poet twists the folktale and makes the heroine embark in what would have otherwise been a traditionally sexist journey exclusively for male heroes. In hearing that her beloved is locked in a tower like a helpless maiden, Nicolette breaks loose from the vaulted chamber. She fearlessly climbs down the chamber and enshrouded by the darkness makes her way to the tower, where Aucassin is “weeping and bewailing his fate and mourning his sweet friend” (1241). Foreseeing all the obstacles in their search for happiness, the brave heroine informs him of her plan to leave town: “For you I shall cross the sea/ And go to another kingdom” (1241). She then crosses the confines of the city, goes into the forest, and once there instead of being tested to be the recipient of some magic, prepares the first plan to test the love of Aucassin. Once reunited, the lovers undergo a spatial transference between two kingdoms as one, and in doing so, Aucassin becomes the hero again but fights a mock battle with the Torelorens, instead of struggling with villain and villainy (the third phase of the hero’s journey). Once again, the lovers are separated and like the folktale hero, they return to their places of origin, Aucassin to Provence (only to find out that the “villain” is dead and he is the new count) and Nicolette to northern Africa (where she finds the truth about her origin). This time, she becomes the heroine who arrives to her land unrecognized but gains recognition without going through any special tests. When her father and brothers’ intention of marrying her to one of the kings of Spain is disclosed, she goes back to Provence in disguise. Twisting the structure of the fairy tale again, the poet comes up with an uncommon task and solution. S/He makes, not Nicolette, but Aucassin solve the task of proving his devotion for her. In doing so, Aucassin is excluded from gaining recognition (as the folktale hero normally does) because he is not the one in disguise, yet even though Nicolette is, she does not gain recognition immediately but needs to undergo a makeover at her godmother’s to regain her white, blonde, maidenly beauty and return to court to become Aucassin’s lawfully-wedded wife and queen. So, the one who receives the reward and ascends to the throne is Nicolette. Once again, the chivalric romance at the core of the *chante-fable* is carnivalized as the poet introduces the languages and ideologies of other genres. As the folktale enters into the literary work, it not only dialogizes the genre at the core, but it also becomes dialogized itself.

Another disruptive component of our *chantefable* is the adventure genre imbricated in the threads of the chivalric romance it intends to parody and turn upside down. The heroic quest of the lovers becomes the adventures of the journey of the hero of gay deceit. Bakhtin postulated that “the adventure is organized around such a flickering, fading idea of a hero under test” (*Dialogic Imagination* 390). As both Aucassin and Nicolette take the shape of a hero of gay deceit, their experiences and tests are formulated within the conventions of either the merry incomprehension or the picaresque. While he is more the naïve simpleton type, his experiences are mostly characterized by openness, humility, and sincerity of expression. In his attempts to reach the object of his quest, Nicolette, it is almost a miracle that he makes his dream of marrying her come true. Because he cannot stop thinking about her, first he almost gets killed and second he falls down and dislocates his shoulder. His hilarious optimism and straightforwardness clash with conventions but are also laughed at by individuals who are below his station. Perhaps because of his constant and spontaneous manifestations of sorrow, which Nicolette might perceive as flaws or signs of weakness, is that she tests his love twice.

Nicolette, on the other hand, proves to have more common sense than Aucassin, and her roguishness proves to be a more valuable asset than his candidness. It is her craftiness what buys her ticket out of the vaulted chamber, her survival instincts what make her devise a plan to leave the town, her determination what gets her to the forest despite the moat, and her sensible love for him what restores her to him and makes her the new countess of Beaucaire. Her tests take more stamina than Aucassin’s but that is what determines the type of heroine she is: a *picara* that transgresses gender, religious, and ethnic boundaries. As she represents the heathen foreigner who must be burnt at the stake, her ways of subverting the centripetal forces that tend toward a centralized, Catholic, white Europe which speaks Indo-European languages, need to be the ways of the merry rogue who twists high-sounding discourses, deceives, and laughs heartily.

It cannot be denied that with its hybrid structural and thematic components, *Aucassin and Nicolette* expressed the syncretism that cryptic groups/subcultures needed to survive in the margins and participated in the popular dialogues going on in a medieval Europe where accepted ideological opposites coexisted with fear and intolerance. The *chantefable* amalgamates popular wisdom with real characters and the feelings of some people regarding the possible legacy of *fronterizo* and carnivalesque cultures on European song and literature. Once again, as it is an anonymous work, it presumably voices the underlying fears and anxieties of a people marked by xenophobia and bigotry, but it might also voice some poets’ contempt for the chivalric romance and other lofty poetic genres that only represented the nobility and their idle lives jousting in never-ending tournaments, feasting day and night, and being inhumanly beautiful, virtuous, and courageous. At the same time, the *chantefable* vindicates humble trades like shepherding, tending cattle, minstreling, or keeping watch, trades that made up the bulk of the social voices of the time. It creates a heterotopic

space for all those social voices that partook in the constant stratifications of meanings, languages and dialects, viewpoints of the *fronterizo* culture of the Middle Ages.

Notes

- 1 Peter Bruegel's painting *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* (1559) illustrates "the contrast between two sides of contemporary life, the one religious, stemming from the church, the other abandoned, inspired by the inn. The setting is a town square; well-behaved children and churchgoers giving alms make up meagre Lent's cortège; opposite her is obese Carnival astride a barrel of beer followed by a troop of masqued revelers emerging from the inn" (Martin 1).
- 2 What will I do? What will happen to me if you leave?
Friend/Love
Don't get away from me!

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