

The classification of *Blandin de Cornouailles*: the romance within and without

M.A. Burrell

The romance of *Blandin de Cornouailles* is one of the very few works in Provençal with a narrative form of octosyllabic rhyming couplets. It has thus been considered to belong to the general genre of *roman courtois*. A study by Jacques de Caluwé has attempted to categorise it further as a parody of that genre because of some of the convolutions of the plot (de Caluwé 63). A more recent work by Jean-Charles Huchet has called into question the appropriateness of the term *roman* and, in speaking of the author of *Flamenca*, remarks: “il appellera roman...ce qu'on considèrerait plus volontiers comme un conte ou une nouvelle” (Huchet 30). Generic identity is not secure and Huchet points out that the authors of both *Jaufré* and *Flamenca* refer to their works as *novas* (31). Given this change in nomenclature, one might ask: to what extent is this work a romance?

The elements of romance in *Blandin de Cornouailles* have been the subject of a number of studies, all of which are reluctant to come to any definite conclusion about its classification.¹ Ironically, though the internal aspects of this narrative piece may delay precise definition, the external features raise a series of questions and the answers provide a romance *récit* by themselves, which might perhaps be termed “the romance without.”

The only known manuscript of the romance of *Blandin de Cornouailles* is MS G-II-34, in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin, in a collection donated by Duke Vittorio Amadeo of Savoy when the library was founded in 1720. The ducal crest and signature are on the front binding of the manuscript. Paul Meyer first published an edition of the work in 1873 from a transcription he received from Léon Gautier. Because the manuscript was extensively water-damaged after a fire in the library in 1904, Meyer's

must remain the definitive edition despite the errors in Gautier's transcription. These were later corrected by Giulio Bertoni in an article in 1921. The 1974 edition by C.H.M. van der Horst adds little to Meyer's transcription of the text; references throughout this paper will be to the earlier 1873 edition, with Bertoni's corrections.

The first question to resolve, then, is the date of the manuscript. It contains 131 folia and Pasini's catalogue of 1749 places it in the fourteenth century. Is this the correct century? The fourteenth century is attested by a notation on folio 17 which dates the contents of folia 1 to 91, the *Secunda pars cronice libri ymaginis mundi* by Jacobus de Aquis, as "anno 1328." On the other hand, the script and the paper on which it is written date from the fifteenth century.

The script of the *Blandin* is an Italian cursive textual Gothic hand of the first quarter of the fifteenth century. It is an assured hand, possibly under the influence of the early humanist writing. This form of stylised cursive hand first appeared in northern Italy in the mid-fourteenth century, with its distinctive features found in this manuscript, such as the regularity and rotundity of the letters, the presence of the open initial A, and the diminished use of the fusion of curves.² The entire contents of the collection are written on paper of a thick, heavy quality which is slightly greasy to the touch. There is a diagram on the back binding of the manuscript which indicates that the folia containing the *Blandin*, folia 90 to 99, have been made of paper bearing the watermark of a hand with a gauntlet cuff and a star extending from the middle finger. According to Briquet's dictionary of watermarks, *Les Filigranes. Dictionnaire historique des marques du papier dès leur apparition vers 1282 jusqu'en 1600*, the paper with this particular watermark was fabricated in the south-west of France and the earliest sample found by him dates from the early fifteenth century.

Thus far, the actual manuscript would seem to date from the fifteenth century. But what of the author? Is there any indication of authorship, and if so, by whom was the text composed and when?

Despite the lack of factual evidence to support it, there exists a supposition that the romance was written by Eleanor of Provence, who married Henry III of England in 1236. The prevalence of this literary myth has resulted in the *Blandin* being listed under her authorship in several reputable bibliographies.³ What has led to this supposition?

The earliest mention of the romance is found in *Les vies des plus célèbres et anciens poètes provençaux*, written by Jehan de Nostredame in the late sixteenth century. In his entry about “Richard, Roy d’Angleterre,” Nostradamus states:

Richard, surnommé Coeur de lyon, qui fut filz de Henry, roy d’Angleterre, et esteu empereur des Roamins, en sa jeunesse frequentant la cour de Remond Berenguer, comte de Provence dernier du nom, fut surpris de l’amour de Leonore ou Helyone, l’une des quatre filles du dict comte de provence, que depuis il epousa:..Quelcun a escript que l’infante Leonore luy envoya un beau romant en rithme provensalle, des amours de Blandin de Cornaille et de Guilhen de Myremas, des beaux faicts d’armes qu’ils firent, l’un pour la belle Bryanda et l’autre pour la belle Irlanda, dames d’incomparable beauté (85).

Nostradamus is known more for his imaginative flair than for the accuracy of many of his statements, and there are several reasons to doubt this one. To begin with, he has the wrong Richard: Richard the Lionheart died in 1199 and the Eleanor in question was not born until 1222. Furthermore, the spelling of the names, and in particular “Myremas” for “Miramar,” and the reference to the heroines being “dames d’incomparable beauté,” would indicate that Nostradamus was using a secondhand source. In the text, there are references to Brianda’s beauty (vv 1379-82, 1390, 2296), but Yrlanda is not even described.

What is most significant about Nostradamus’ statement is that he mentions Eleanor as the sender of the romance, not the author. However, when interest was shown in the romance in the late 1870’s, Fauriel wrote an article in the *Histoire littéraire de la France* in which he acclaims Eleanor as the author of the romance and corrects Nostradamus’ chronological error by positing Richard of Cornwall as the recipient:

Mais la méprise de Nostr[e]damus sur ce point tient à peu de choses, et n’est point difficile à rectifier. Un prince anglais, neveu de Richard Coeur de Lion, Richard de Cornouailles, allant en Syrie, à la tête d’une croisade, en 1240, s’embarqua effectivement à Marseille; et il n’y a rien que de très-vraisemblable à supposer qu’il s’arrêta quelque temps à la cour de Raymond Béranger, et qu’il y vit la princesse Eléonore, qui put aisément lui offrir le roman dont il s’agit. Nous irons même plus loin, et nous avancerons, comme une conjecture assez plausible, que ce roman était l’oeuvre de l’infante, et avait été composé par elle en l’honneur d’un jeune prince de

sang de Richard Coeur de Lion, qui, plus encore par sa bravoure que par sa naissance et par son nom, rappelait ce héros de la chevalerie (235).⁴

Unfortunately for this hypothesis, by 1240 Eleanor had been married for four years to Richard's brother, Henry, and is unlikely to have sent a romance to her brother-in-law.

In spite of the lack of evidence to support Eleanor's supposed authorship of the romance, Fauriel's fancy was accepted by the historians, and from the time of Agnes Strickland onwards, fancy was promoted as fact. Citing Fauriel as her major source, Strickland goes so far as to say, in her account of Eleanor's life as a queen of England, that:

The composition of this romance was the primary cause to which the infanta Eleanor of Provence owed her elevation to the crown-matrimonial of England (357).

She explains further on:

Richard of Cornwall, to whom the young infanta sent, by way of a courtly compliment, a poem she appropriately furnished with a paladin of Cornwall for a hero, was then at Poitou, preparing for a crusade, in which he hoped to emulate his royal uncle and namesake, Richard I. He was so highly flattered by the attention of the princess...but as it was out of his power to testify his grateful sense of the honour by offering his hand and heart to the royal Provençal beauty in return for her romantic rhymes...he obligingly recommended her to his brother Henry III for a queen (358).

Strickland's other source, far more prosaic and less romantic, is Matthew Paris who, in his chronicles of the thirteenth century, mentions nothing about Eleanor's literary talents or lack of them. But to give further credence to her enthusiasm for having Eleanor as the author of the romance, Strickland in the 1872 edition of her *Lives* makes the assertion that Eleanor has inherited her poetic prowess from her parents:

Berenger was the last and most illustrious of the royal Provençal counts; and even had he not been the sovereign of the land of song, his own verses would have entitled him to a distinguished rank among the troubadour poets. His consort, Beatrice, daughter of Thomas, count of Savoy, was

scarcely less celebrated for her learning and literary powers. From her accomplished parents the youthful Eleanor inherited both a natural taste and practical talent for poetry (244).

Strickland quotes as her source for this piece of information Simonde de Sismondi's *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*. But Sismondi does not share Strickland's acclaim of the literary prowess of Eleanor's parents. He confines himself to saying that, "[a]mongst the Troubadours, some were raised above their fellows, less by their talents than by the distinguished rank they held in society." He mentions that there are poems by the last Count and Countess of Provence and remarks dismissively:

The works of these sovereigns merit our observation as historical monuments, which throw a light on the interests by which they were governed, on their personal character, and on the manners of the times in which they lived. In a literary point of view, however, there were but few Troubadours, whose names were still renowned, at the period when Dante and Petrarch flourished (129-30).

However seductive may be the theory that Eleanor wrote *Blandin de Cornouailles*, there is a lamentable dearth of verifiable facts to support it. Yet it is intriguing that the court of Provence was linked to that of Savoy through Eleanor's mother and that the only extant copy of the romance belonged in the collection of the dukes of Savoy.

If the external facts surrounding the romance do not assist in identifying its provenance, what about the internal evidence? To begin, has it been written in a dialect which might limit the scope of the inquiry? Paul Meyer reached the conclusion that the poet was Catalan. In the introduction to his edition, he says:

[J]e n'induis pas absolument que le poème de Blandin de Cornouailles soit proprement catalan: je ne crois pas qu'il y ait assez de traces de l'idiome catalan pour autoriser cette conclusion; mais j'admettrais volontiers que l'ouvrage a été composé par un Catalan qui s'est efforcé d'écrire de son mieux en provençal (172).

This conclusion was attacked by both Chabaneau and Alart. The former maintained that the language used was acceptable Provençal and that the faults seen by Meyer to be the result of Catalan provenance could all be attributed to the fact that the author

was not a literary sophisticate. The text was one “où l’influence du parler vulgaire se marque le plus sensiblement” (46). Alart published a very lengthy article on the language of the *Blandin* and reached the conclusion that the only place where a possible Catalan rhyme might be detected was in the couplet of vv 47-8: *dich/nuech*. In Catalan this would be *dit/nit*, but given that the text has also many Old French influences, there is no reason not to assume that this rhyme could equally well have been the French *dit/nuit*. In 1961, Père Bohigas published a synthesis: he agrees with Meyer’s conclusion, but then says that the equivocal rhyme could simply be due to the author’s lack of sophistication. He concludes by placing the language as Provençal in the second half of the thirteenth century. Van der Horst in his edition mentions Italian influences only to dismiss them later, but concludes that the language, as revealed by the rhymes, displays characteristics which place it “plus précisément dans une région qui embrasse le bassin du Rhône et la partie méridionale du département des Basses-Alpes” (63). He further states in his conclusion that, “Le dernier copiste de BdeC a certainement été Italien, probablement Piémontais” (64), though the argument he has presented earlier to support this assertion lacks conviction.

If the language does not permit a firm conclusion concerning the provenance, what about the geographical location of the action? The origin of the two knights is said to be Cornwall: they are introduced as *dos cavaliers / de Cornualha bons guerriers* (vv 3-4). Later on, it appears that only Blandin is from Cornwall, while Guillot is from Miramar, implying perhaps that it is a separate region (vv 10-12). Furthermore, they introduce themselves at the end of their first combined adventure as *cavaliers d’Orien / sercans aventura veramen* (vv 515-16). How may these apparent anomalies be reconciled?

The mention of the East may be seen as an attempt to inject glamour into the tale. The enormous influence of the Crusades in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries resulted in a number of heroes of romance connected with “the east.” The best-known is probably *Cligés* by Chrétien de Troyes, but there is an entire sub-category of adventure romances which have a Graeco-Byzantine setting.⁵ Moreover, there are two Spanish romances of this period in which heroes acknowledge that they come from the east. The *Gran Conquista de Ultramar* is set in the near east and Cifar, in the *Libro del Caballero Cifar*, claims that he comes from the east.⁶

A more difficult reconciliation is Miramar with Cornwall. There is no Miramar in either Cornwall or France, but it is a fairly common place-name in Spain, and was especially known in the thirteenth century as the site of the monastery built by the

Catalan philosopher and mystic, Ramon Llull. The form given in Nostradamus' account of the origin of the romance is "Myremas," and this was explained by Paul Meyer as the attempt by Nostradamus to insert his own birthplace into the biographies. Alternatively, there is still a town called "Miramas" at the northern end of the Etang de Berre in Provence and it is possible that the author may have had this in mind.

More likely, however, is the probability that, like its category as a *roman courtois* though no court is actually present, the setting of *Blandin* is considered to form part of that body of romance called the *matière de Bretagne*, a vague and vast landscape which can easily accommodate the actual geographical anomaly of two knights who are great friends yet who come from areas separated by hundreds of miles.

Given that romances are fanciful creations, what may we conclude about the romance of *Blandin de Cornouailles*? While so many questions about its provenance, authorship, language and setting remain unresolved, it can be said that *Blandin de Cornouailles* is distinguished from others of its ilk because there are as many fanciful ingredients external to its fabric as there are within.

University of Canterbury, Christchurch

Notes

1 Previous literary studies include: Arseni Pacheco, "El Blandin de Cornualha," in *Catalan Studies (estudis sobre alà)*. Volume in Memory of Josephine de Boer, eds Joseph Gulsoy and J. Maria Sola-Solé (Barcelona: Borràs, 1977), pp. 149-61; Jacques de Caluwe, "Le roman de Blandin de Cornouailles et de Guillot Ardit de Miramar: une parodie de roman arthurien?" Actes du VIIe Congrès international de langue d'oc et d'études franco-provençales *Cultura neolatina* 38 (1978): 55-66; M.A. Burrell, "Blandin de Cornouailles, a late example of *conjointure* between *sens* and structures," *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* 5.2 (1984): 33-50; Keith Busby, "Blandin de Cornoalha and romance tradition," *Tenso* 8.1 (1992): 1-25.

2 I am indebted to the late Professor L.E. Boyle, former Archivist of the Vatican Library, for his help with the dating of the script.

3 *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1908), VI: 597. Also D.C. Cabeen, gen. ed., *A Critical Bibliography of French Literature* vol. I *The Mediaeval Period* ed U.T. Holmes, Jr (New York: Syracuse UP, 1952), p. 111,

col. 2. More recent is Anne Echols and Marty Williams, *An Annotated Index of Medieval Women* (New York & Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1992), pp. 158, 528.

4 This statement is repeated in in his *Histoire de la poésie provençale* (Paris, 1846; Geneva: Slatkine, 1969), III: 93-4.

5 U.T. Holmes Jr, *A History of Old French Literature* (1947; rev. ed. New York: Russell, 1962), ch. 15.

6 The *Libro* has been dated between 1299 and 1305 by Northrup in *An Introduction to Spanish Literature* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1925), p. 92.

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