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ARTICLE

Blandin de Cornoalba, Yet Another Look

Sometimes, a romance is more than a romance. *Blandin de Cornoalba*, composed in Occitan during the fourteenth century is such a tale. The author of the work is unknown. It exists in a single manuscript, which the scholarly world agrees was copied by an Italian native-speaker who may or may not have known what he was doing (see, e.g. Galano, 202). Scholars have discussed the language of the author¹ and the genre of the work². Scholars have tried to figure *Blandin* out, but we have not yet found the answers.

Keith Busby finds *Blandin* a parody, but not with respect to any particular text or texts; he suggests that the work is a parody of features of the received romance tradition (3), a fairly easy conclusion, for, as Margaret Burrell has noted, the “received romance tradition” is an ample source of parodic topics (email of 22 May 2013; see also De Caluwé, *passim*). Burrell notes further that *Blandin* has many of the “expectable ingredients of a romance, all cleverly skewed” (email 22 May 2013). The specific butt of the joke is still unknown, however.

One response is that scholars have not yet considered all the possible targets of parody; I would like to suggest a different approach to *Blandin*, less literary and more historic. If we can associate the work with a specific fourteenth-century court, its ruler and those courtiers could well be one specific target of the author. Furthermore, if this hypothesis is correct, then it may allow scholars to identify a known poet as a possible author.

1 The detailed analysis by Sabrina Galano is the best to date; she believes that the language of the text is a *koiné*, with influences of French, Catalan, and several different dialects of Occitan itself (205).

2 While generally considered a courtly romance, one may question whether it is seriously an Arthurian romance. Zulema Jiménez Mola suggests that the work is actually a *dictat*, an Occitan genre that has not been much studied to date. Assigning the work to the genre of *dictat* helps explain the short length of *Blandin*.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This investigation centers on the fourteenth-century lands of the Foix-Béarn family. The county of Foix (whose capital is the town of the same name) and the viscounty of Béarn were the largest elements of the non-contiguous territories controlled by the family, in what is today southwestern France³. On the death of Gaston II in 1343, his son, though somewhat tender of years (he was 13 at the time), became count and viscount.

This next Gaston, Gaston III, was raised by his mother to be a very model knight and ruler. Among his exploits, we can count participation in a crusade in the Baltics in the year 1357 (Pailhès 43). More important for his reputation was his rescue, the following year, of several French noblewomen, including Jeanne de Bourbon, wife of the Dauphin Charles, as Gaston and his company returned from their northern travels. The women had been sequestered in a castle in Meaux that was besieged by a mob. Gaston and his men rescued the women; he was hailed as a hero (Pailhès 46–47). Interestingly, after his grand tour of the North, Gaston rarely fought in battle, preferring politics and negotiation to warfare.

Gaston III had a remarkably effective public relations team working to advance his fame. He adopted the name Gaston Febus after the triumph at Meaux (Pailhès 47), signing documents “Febus” and marking castles such as Montaner with “Febus me fe” (see Tucoo-Chala, *Montaner* 6). The choice of this cognomen was with reference to Phoebus, god of the sun; it is not farfetched to think of Gaston as a precursor of Louis XIV, both in his use of this name and in his behavior.

Gaston’s modern reputation, well-documented by the scholar Pierre Tucoo-Chala and others, rests, first, on his success in increasing the size of his domain, mostly by dint of what can be dubbed the tactic of collecting ransoms. After a fourteenth-century battle, significant sums

3 The family lands included the viscounty of Béarn (today, in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques), the lands of Marsan and Gabardan (in the Landes and Gers departments, respectively), the county of Foix (in today’s Ariège), parts of the Albigeois and Lautrec (in the Tarn) and the Nébouzan, near Saint-Gaudens (in the department of Haute-Garonne).

could be gained by capturing prisoners and collecting their ransoms (see Ambühl, *passim*); Gaston used this technique to become very rich, both in property and in cash, particularly after the 1362 battle of Launac (see Pailhès 58–59; Tucoo-Chala, “L’Histoire tragique” 745). As Claudine Pailhès observes, “C’est par le montant des rançons que Fébus écrasa véritablement le parti armagnac” (59). Gaston’s second legacy is literary, as he is known for his *Livre de la chasse* and for his collection of poems, the *Livre des oraisons*. These last two works were written in middle French, though Gaston’s first language was Occitan, in which he also composed⁴.

Gaston’s success with women, aside from the rescue at Meaux, was not great. He married Agnes of Navarre in 1349 (she was fifteen, he nineteen at the time of the wedding), and with her had one son, whom I will call Gaston the Younger, born in 1362⁵. Shortly after the birth of their son, Agnes was sent home to her family in Navarre, never to see territories north of the Pyrenees again. Ostensibly, the argument was that Agnes’s dowry had not been fully paid (Pailhès 217; Tucoo-Chala, “L’Histoire tragique” 745–747). It is more likely that Gaston III and Agnes never got along—consider that during the thirteen years they were married and living more or less under the same roof, she became pregnant only twice. Once she had provided a legitimate heir, and he had made his fortune through the ransoms of Launac, he could dismiss her. In truth, this action remains hard to explain, for in 1362 Gaston’s only legitimate heir was but three months old (Pailhès 221); Pailhès suggests that only psychoanalysis might explain the deed (223). We know that several of Gaston III’s bastard sons were raised at his court⁶; his legitimate heir’s upbringing took place there as well, though Pailhès suggests that the Young Gaston was somewhat ignored by his father (223–224).

4 A discussion of Gaston Febus as Occitan poet would go far from the topic at hand. However, troubadour chansonnier Sg (Barcelona, Biblioteca Central de Catalunya 146) attributes one lyric to “Guasto compte de Foysh,” an attribution more easily linked to Gaston Febus, than to his father, Gaston II (see Ventura 60). Popular belief attributes the song “Se canto” to Gaston, though his composition of this lyric is highly unlikely.

5 Pailhès and Tucoo-Chala (“L’Histoire tragique” 744) report that Agnes had a pregnancy in 1359 that resulted in a still-born birth.

6 Gaston Febus had at least three illegitimate sons, Bernard (ca. 1350–ca. 1381), Yvain (ca. 1360–1393), and Gratien (d. 1394).

BLANDIN DE CORNOALHA

The anonymous author opens the story of *Blandin de Cornualha* by announcing that he will tell us a story of love, chivalry and friendship. The tale itself has been described as a romance, though it is very short by romance standards—only 2405 lines long. Whereas in other romances, knights who seek adventure are ill-fated because adventure is supposed to come to you, Blandin and his buddy Guilhot have no difficulties finding a series of adventures (see Busby 5). As Keith Busby notes, in *Blandin*, “adventure has clearly lost its primary purpose of restoring the *ordo*, except on a basic narrative level, and has the sole function of contributing to the knight’s reputation, of his *visibility*” (6–7, Busby’s italics).

THE FIRST ARGUMENT

Is it possible that the anonymous author of *Blandin de Cornualha* used his story to comment on Gaston Febus and his court? There are several arguments for this suggestion, starting with Busby’s observation that visibility was what mattered to the “good knight” who was Blandin. Visibility was a key feature in Gaston Febus’s public relations endeavors, as he tried to maintain the independence of Foix and Béarn in the period of the Hundred Years’ War, fighting pressure from the King of France and from the King of England. I am not suggesting that Febus commissioned the work nor do I think the author hoped Gaston would reward him for it. Nonetheless, there are several points where the story of *Blandin de Cornualha* and the life of Gaston Febus seem to cross.

During the third quarter of the fourteenth century, a likely date for the story based on research by Stefano Asperti, Gaston had few, if any women present at his court⁷. His wife had been banished to her brother’s court in Navarre. Was there not a need for a new countess, who could

7 Pailhès calls a section of her book, “Une cour sans femmes” (248).

assure the succession of Gaston's growing domain? The tale of *Blandin de Cornoalha* is, at heart, the story of a wife search. Can we see the story as a strong hint to Febus? Certainly he needed a female to provide him with more legitimate heirs, a reality especially true after the death of the only legitimate son, Gaston the Younger, in 1380.

The adventures of Blandin are par for the course of medieval romance, no more than might be expected. However, after 1358, Febus himself never went on "adventures." Professionally, he preferred politics; his hobby was hunting, which he would pursue in all seasons. Might the author be suggesting that Febus is not as good a knight as he portrayed himself to be, since the count did not seek adventure nor participate in knightly activities such as jousts or tourneys? Perhaps not, for it was the job of a good ruler to manage his realm, which Gaston actually did fairly well.

Busby and Arsenio Pacheco see Blandin as a remarkably "middle-class" hero (Busby 14; Pacheco 153)—a contradiction to how Febus presented himself. Specifically, he considered himself an equal to the kings of France and England; he would do homage to the king of France for parts of his domain, but claimed that for Béarn he owed fealty to no one (see Pailhès 155 and 167–168). Blandin and Guilhot are singularly unattached to any court—they do not evoke King Arthur; they do not send their vanquished opponents to any specific court. In truth, they appear to serve no lord, much as Gaston preferred to avoid his suzerain, the King of France, and never paid homage to the King of England for his Gascon holdings.

There are other possible ties between Gaston Febus and the story of *Blandin de Cornoalha*. At an early point in the story, Blandin introduces himself and his friend Guilhot by saying, "we are knights from the Orient," ("car nos sem cavalliers d'Orien," l. 517)⁸. But we know from the introduction to the tale that Blandin and Guilhot are from Cornwall. His name is, after all, Blandin de Cornoalha! This reference to the Orient may be pointing to the crusading activity (or grand-tourism) of Gaston Febus in the Baltic regions. As Febus returned from Königsberg to rescue ladies in France, so too Blandin and Guilhot have earned something of a Crusader's merit badge that they are proud to

8 All citations and translations of the *Blandin* text are to the forthcoming edition by Pfeffer and Burrell.

display. “We are knights from the Orient” suggests they, like Febus, have been on Crusade.

Busby and Norris Lacy both note that one of Blandin’s and Guilhot’s preferred activities is sleeping (Busby 11; Lacy 177–178)—this may point towards Gaston Febus’s well-known nocturnal habits. Froissart speaks of Gaston’s habit of dining late, often calling people to table around midnight. Febus was notorious for his night-owl habits, though the French chronicler did not note that Febus slept in or took a lot of naps. People at his court, however, may well have suffered from sleep deprivation, as their lord would call them out of bed to serve him his late evening meals.

As noted earlier, Gaston Febus made a fortune through ransoms; does the *Blandin* author poke fun at this practice? In the romance, Blandin and Guilhot both engage in combats and could take prisoners, as many a knight of romance does. But what does Blandin do with his captives? His first two combats are with giants, both of whom are killed. No ransom here. When Guillot kills the Black Knight, he disposes of the body by tossing it into a fishpond, ostensibly so that dogs or other animals won’t eat the corpse—another lost opportunity for booty. In other romances, after a knight is defeated in battle, he is often sent by the winner to report the defeat to King Arthur and Arthur’s court. But in *Blandin*, the losers are usually dead, unable to report the battle to any court. Killing one’s enemies is bad for the public relations machine because it leaves no one to provide the positive PR. Blandin actually asks for advice as to what to do with the few prisoners he has to deal with:

... *Donzella, che porrien far
de questos malastrucz cavaliers
che jou tene per personiers?
Playra vos che los deslieurem?
O my digas che en feren.* (ll. 1806–1810)

“Lady, what can we do with these unlucky knights that I hold as prisoners? Would it please you to release them? Tell me what to do with them.”

The heroine, Brianda, tells him to release the men, demonstrating that neither she nor he understands their monetary value. We will come back to this ignorance shortly.

Another scene in which the romance seems to rebuke the behavior of Gaston Febus also touches on the question of wealth. One of Brianda's striking gestures is her willingness to show Blandin her treasure; she has a fortune stashed in a room of her castle:

*“car jou, senhor, vos vullh mostrar
tot mon tesaur et mon afar.”*

* * *

*e Brianda, senssa mantir,
trestotz sos cofres va hubrir,
e puis apelet Blandinet
e aqui ela li mostret
tot son tessaur e sos joels,
che eran mot nobles e bels, (ll. 1839–1841; 1845–1850)*

“For I, Lord, want to show you all my treasure and my wealth.’ . . . and Brianda, without lying, quickly went to open all her chests and then she called Blandin and she showed him here all her treasure and her jewels which were very noble and beautiful.”

This behavior is in striking contrast to that of Gaston Febus. At Febus's court, everyone knew he had a treasure stashed in the tower of Montcade in the town of Orthez. However, he never showed this wealth to anyone. In fact, when Gaston died suddenly in 1391, his beloved, albeit illegitimate son, Yvain, tried to access the treasure, but did not have the necessary key to enter the room or open the coffers (Pailhès 247). The author of *Blandin* may be implying in Brianda's behavior that Febus's avarice was not a positive trait.

Blandin's own generosity is signaled at the end of the romance. When he is offered a treasure, he declines the gift; all he seeks is his lady's love. Such behavior is, again, in total contrast with that of Gaston Febus, who was known for his avidity⁹ and whose interest in his own wife was colored by her dowry and/or that the dowry was never paid in full.

9 Tucoo-Chala states, “Certes, Fébus aimait l'argent de façon immodérée, toutefois ce n'est qu'en vieillissant qu'il prouve d'une avarice sordide” (“L'Histoire tragique” 747).

THE DOG ARGUMENT

Gaston Febus was renowned for his large pack of trained dogs and for his skills as a hunter. His authorship of *Le livre de la chasse* is unquestioned; his knowledge of the hunt was accepted throughout late medieval Europe. This interest is noteworthy, for dogs have an interesting role in *Blandin de Cornoalba*. In other courtly romances, we find dogs mentioned or trained as pets (Tristan's Husdent, Arthur's Cabal, for example) and we know that romance heroes and heroines do hunt with dogs. In *Blandin*, Blandin and Guillot see a dog in the woods (l. 39) which leads the knights to adventure—perhaps the only dog in medieval romance literature to do so (Lacy, “Looking for Dogs in Medieval Romance,” email 24 June 2013). At a court where dogs were perhaps more important than people, such a plot development might carry special meaning¹⁰.

Another dog reference in *Blandin* is less straightforward. The hero swears by St Christopher (l. 1508, “per saint Cristal”). Such an invocation would not be exceptional, save that this is the only reference to this saint in the entire corpus of the *Concordance de l'occitan médiéval*, parts one and two. We think of Christopher as the patron saint of travelers, a reasonable saint to invoke before heading towards the next adventure, but he was not a saint medieval Occitan authors mentioned in their works. St. Christopher is noteworthy in connection with the canine interests of Gaston Febus because there is a tradition of Christopher as having had a dog's head; he is cynocephalic. Might Febus have known this and appreciated the reference?

10 The *Blandin* author uses several different words for dogs in his text—*chins*, *brachet*, *can*, *mastins* and *alans*—remarkable variety in a work in which a single dog is important for the plot but where other dogs do not really appear.

A SECOND TARGET

There exists, however, a different angle: perhaps the story was composed not for Gaston Febus and his courtiers, but for his son, the Young Gaston. This youngster, unappreciated at home where his father showed clear preferences for his illegitimate sons, might well have benefitted from a tale about how to be a perfect knight. As an instructional story, the parodic elements still hold their place, for Young Gaston would have known, first hand, that not all rulers are fair (witness his own father's behavior) and that not all marriages are perfect (witness that of his parents). Nonetheless, the repetitions throughout *Blandin de Cornoalba* of the refrain "com bon cavalier," "as a good knight" (ll. 22, 80, 170, 612, 678, 988, 1108, 1024, 1210, 1457, 1968, 2210) point to one clear message of the story: this *is* how good knights behave¹¹. To return to an earlier example, the author may be suggesting that displaying one's wealth as does Brianda, is a good thing. And Febus, however strong a lord he may have been, was no longer a model for how a good knight behaves. Arsenio Pacheco observed that all of Blandin's adventures have socially positive results (153). The story of *Blandin de Cornoalba* can serve as a lesson for a youth whose parents are not available to educate him.

If the story was not composed as a lesson for Young Gaston, it might have been written in celebration of the youth's marriage, which took place in 1380. The marriage was one of political convenience for both families, a pact that would settle decades of feuding between the Armagnac and Foix families. The contracts were signed with some ceremony, but the wedding itself was celebrated with a remarkable lack of pomp—Gaston Febus did not attend the church ceremony of his heir nor was Beatritz's family present (Pailhès 224)¹². While the father may not have cared for the son, it is possible that someone in the Younger Gaston's entourage may have composed *Blandin de Cornoalba*

11 Lacy points to this argument as well, though he takes it in a different direction ("Halfway to Quixote" 175–177).

12 The details are related by Michel du Bernis, a fifteenth-century chronicler of the Foix court. He notes that only eight knights and sixteen squires were with Young Gaston, remarkably few for someone whose father considered himself the equal of the king of England or of France (see Pailhès 224).

as a celebration of a good knight who seeks adventure and finds a wife, as Young Gaston was about to do.

Furthermore, though there is very little documentation on the life of Young Gaston, one senses that his was a very lonely existence. His illegitimate older brothers received much more of their father's attention. Gaston's mother, banished from the court, was not even a memory. Would it not please this prince to receive a romance that told of best friends and their adventures together, a story that ends, as all romances should, happily ever after?

Connecting the story to the Young Gaston allows consideration of how this Occitan romance landed in Turin, home of the unique manuscript. Young Gaston married Beatritz d'Armagnac; could she have taken the story, one small but very portable part of her late husband's possessions, with her to Italy when she married Carlo Visconti in 1382. How the *Blandin* story landed in its manuscript (Turin, Biblioteca nazionale universitaria G.II.34), where it is anomalous, a vernacular romance in a collection of texts of historical and/or geographic interest¹³, is the topic for a different essay.

If this hypothesis is correct, that the targets of *Blandin de Cornoalba* can be found in the court based in Foix and in Orthez, then we can begin to look at the household of Gaston Febus and the circle of Gaston the Younger for possible authors. Knowing who was present in the young Gaston's court is difficult as the historical record is very slim, complicated by Gaston Febus's control of information. For example, for the summer of 1380, when the young man was killed, scholars of the court are struck by the absolute silence of the historical record (see Lamazou-Duplan, "Le Drame d'Orthez" 276 and "Froissart" 112n; Tucoo-Chala, "L'Histoire tragique" 750).

13 *Daurel et Beton*, another Occitan tale, is found in an equally curious manuscript context. It is a reality of Occitan romance studies that a good number of the texts exist in unique manuscripts (cf. *Flamenca*).

CONCLUSION

The collection of criticisms of *Blandin de Cornoalba* is large; scholars have dismissed it for the past two hundred years. Even translators and editors, those who have spent a good deal of time with the work, find it easy to denigrate. For example, Ross Arthur has written, “Both as a poetic and a scribal product, it is a rather poor affair” (3). However, criticism of the scribe should be moved from the amanuensis to the person who commissioned the extant manuscript; criticism of the poet is unfair, because we have not fully determined what he was actually writing about. If we do not incorporate current events and contemporary personalities into our understanding of the romance, it will always seem second-rate. Setting aside the evaluative literary judgments, the romance of *Blandin de Cornoalba* may provide an excellent window on the world of a particular Gascon and Fuxeen court in the second half of the fourteenth century.

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