Project: The Domestic and the Exotic in *Flor y Blancaflor*

As my project for the Barcelona seminar, I set out to explore the connections between 16th-century maurophilia and the earlier circulation of “Moorish” themes in French and Iberian texts. I was particularly intrigued by the translation of exogamous romance plots such as *Floire et Blancheflor* into Iberia, as complex instances of cultural hybridity. Like the original, the translations represent unions between Christians and Muslims, but they also allow us to glimpse how Mediterranean cultures triangulate difference across confessional lines with national or regional differences. I wanted to explore how the dynamics of alterity worked in translation, to see what kind of place Iberia represented in the texts, when translated into a Spanish context. I anticipated that my focus would be on the elements of aristocratic culture shared by Moors and Christians, such as the luxurious brocade with which the prince Flores, the protagonist, is welcomed by his uncle, or the juegos de cañas (Andalusi-derived chivalric games) that celebrate his arrival, or the game of chess through which Flores befriends a harem guard in Cairo when he sets out to rescue his beloved Blancaflor from slavery.

Instead, the Institute opened up for me a whole new realm of approaches. First, it alerted me to the possibility that I may be oversimplifying the notion of a French original and an Iberian translation, and, in the process, exoticizing Iberia myself. In the wake of our discussions with Cynthia Robinson, I now have more of a context for thinking about an argument that Marla Segol has recently made about *Floire et Blancheflor*. Segol analyzes the communal and local identities created by material culture in the text and proposes to read the romance as a Provençal and Mediterranean alternative to “the encroaching powers of Church and monarchy.” After carefully tracing how receptive the original text seems to Muslim cultural forms and how knowledgeable it is about then, Segol argues that Flor’s conversion at the end of the story—which “solves” the difference between the lovers—makes him the scourge of all enemies of Christianity, evoking in the narrative a violent Christian past. This past, Segol suggests, is uncannily like the “violence perpetrated against southern French Albigensians” at the time of the story’s redaction.

I now suspect that the national or even geographical categories that I am importing post-facto (French original/Iberian translations) may be an oversimplification of the medieval Mediterranean, in which the real dichotomy may have been between a more porous cultural and religious situation in Occitan and parts of Iberia, and a Northern, more repressive religious apparatus. I want to delve further into the problem of the (Northern) French
construction of a deviant Iberia, and the gradual Iberian reaction to that construction.

I also realize, after our readings on relations among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim women that I need to look far more closely at the relationship between the two mothers in the story. Briefly, in the text a Muslim king of Iberia leads a raid on a party of Christian pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela. A noble lady is enslaved and presented as a slave to his queen (who will be Flor’s mother). The two share a remarkable intimacy, crowned by the birth of their children on the same day, the Pascua Florida, for which they are named Flor and Blancaflor. I am intrigued by the representation of this intimacy, for how it complicates the notion that what crosses confessional lines is most often eros. The intimacy of the mothers is domestic in every sense, and poses no problem for the narrative. As such, I would aver, it complicates the titillation of the exogamous romance, which eventually needs to be “solved” in the story through the conversion of Flor to Christianity.

I am also rethinking the idea that translation is necessarily the most significant vector along which to consider different versions of the story. I was absolutely fascinated by Judith Cohen’s rendition of “La reina Xerifa mora,” one of the ballads (romances) that picks up the story of “Flor y Blancaflor,” and which Patricia Grieve also reproduces in her *Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance*. The popular genre of the ballad seems to “normalize” the earlier moment of affinity in the romance by making the mothers of the two lovers Christian sisters, one of whom had been married to the Muslim king, and one of whom became his slave. There are multiple variations on the ballad, recorded by ethnomusicologists working in Spain, North Africa, and beyond. The variants are fascinating, in that many make the story more “exotic,” setting it in Turkey, so that Iberia is no longer a Moorish space, and the (second) captured sister, when she refuses to marry a Muslim, is sent home to Spain.

The ideological freight of the ballads remains elusive: is it a conservative move to say that these women love each other because they are “the same,” and that their children, the central characters in the original narrative, love each other because they are “the same,” or is it a radical reminder that behind the veil of otherness lies similarity, in that everything is always already mixed? Second, I am struck by the fact that this popular romance turn, while heavily dependent on coincidence, does not challenge verisimilitude: that is, it is quite likely that a Muslim ruler would have married a Christian first, and perhaps enslaved her sister as well.
It behooves us, I think, to investigate in the ballad, and others like it, a different kind of exogamous desire: what does it mean to say that la reina “dize que tiene desseo de una quistiana cativa”? Is it merely loneliness, a desire for one like her, which will then be explained by the end of the ballad: “Y de allí se conocieron las dos hermanas queridas,” or is there a more complicated cultural operation going on, where the documented desire for things Islamic among Christians is reversed in the wishful thinking of the Christian ballad?

Finally, what is the significance of this text as a “Judeo-Spanish” ballad? Grieve mentions a Moroccan version in which the line “que no es mora ni judía,” to describe the newly captured slave-woman, becomes “que ni es mora ni cristiana.” The change leads Grieve to speculate that the identification of the women as Jewish sisters then renders the whole story one of “yearning for the homeland,” but only a few versions of the ballads move from the reunion of the sisters to the rejection of Muslim spouses and their return to their community. This is why it is both so interesting and so frustrating to work with ballads: one wants to attribute ideological significance to a corpus that also depends on the chance workings of collection and dissemination. As I continue working on this project, I hope to make an argument based on a ballad that sees this topos of nostalgia through, but it is not clear that I will be able to find all the significant variations in the same text. Perhaps then the challenge is to think in terms of the entire ballad corpus, acknowledging all the while that it will be full of internal contradictions.