María Rosa Menocal

SIGNS OF THE TIMES: SELF, OTHER AND HISTORY IN *AUCASSIN ET NICOLETTE*

"Femmes et argent: voilà Ganelon ensarra-
siné, voire embourgeoisé"
(Alter, 265)

"... this failure to address the question of
permanent value and unweakened impact is
especially serious in the case of ancient and
medieval literature, since they seem so bound
to a past alien to us."
(Riffaterre, 164)

An explicitly Other world is evoked and continuously re-evoked in the only known example of the Old French *chantefable*. From the name of the male protagonist, first enunciated in the title "C'est d'Aucasin et Nicolete" to the origins of the female protagonist, thought to be a Saracen slave girl (but later revealed to be a Saracen princess), to the pivotal trips in and out of Other lands, that Arabic Other is rarely far from view in this work written at what was perhaps the moment of most feverish cultural and economic exchanges between Arabized Europe and the rest of the continent, the beginning of the thirteenth century. Much of the tension that underlies the movement of the apparently simple story, as the reversals of names and "real identities" of the two lovers and would-be spouses succinctly reveal, is that very confrontation between two worlds (the partially obscured one that Nicolette comes from and the "homeland" Aucassin is heir to) — and the not-so-subtle undermining of apparently clear-cut differences.

The issue is not, transparently, whether "Aucassin" is an Arabic word/ name but rather why the impeccably — at least in terms of heritage — old-guard Frenchman has a name that sounds Arabic while the blonde Nicolette, whose every external marker no less misleads, is in fact the abducted *sarasine*.[1] It is no less relevant to ask why it is that the tradi-

1. A number of early philological studies of *Aucassin et Nicolette* deal with the pseudo-question of whether the name "really" is Arabic or not and in certain cases these studies are also concerned with either denying or affirming that the textual models for the *chantefable* are themselves Arabic (via, for example, the *Floire et Blanchefleur* tradition). See

tional formula of romance is here encrusted with a palpable layer of historical allusion — and of the especially specific allusion to the Spain of the Arabs — and how the reversals and dialogues between inner and outer selves, between lyric and narrative, between old order and new order (all these themes readily explored by other critics) come to be associated, at the level of most conspicuous identification, with the apparent dichotomy between French Self and Saracen Other. Having thus formulated the critical issue, however, (at least) two metacritical problems come to the fore: firstly, why almost all contemporary readings of the work (most of them not strictly New Critical) have been largely oblivious to this specific historical tension both implicit and explicit, overwhelming I would argue, in the text. Secondly, even if we read the historical text such that a preponderant Arabic presence were a major contingency for both twelfth century Europe and its texts, the question will still remain of whether this has any real relevance to our reading of this — or any other comparable — literary text. Or, to put it in Riffaterrian terms, can this reading shed any light on the typical double bind of history versus analysis?[2]

But this restitution of this historical-cultural contingency to a reading of *Aucassin et Nicolette* will show — perhaps more clearly than other texts might because all analysis of this text ultimately falls back to a version of that dominant Self/Other dichotomy — is how much analysis takes place within a specific historical context although it may often remain unspecified. In the case of medieval texts, a largely unreconstructed nineteenth-century philology/medievalism has actively obscured both major and interrelated ways in which (many) medieval texts could and should remain relevant, thus transcending history: They are the astonishingly polyvalent and relativistic products of a culture critically more pluralistic and culturally (and ideologically) diverse than our cultural institutions have wished to see in our own "heritage." This observation, in turn, brings us full circle for the example of *Aucassin et Nicolette* illus-

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Scheludko, for example. But the positivism of such studies in this particular case is rendered problematic by the text itself which is exploring, as I will elaborate below, precisely the question of whether Arabic names are "authentic" and whether Arabic origins can, in fact, be neatly identified. Nevertheless, for a full annotated bibliography of these (and other) studies see Sargeant-Baur and Cook. The fullest study exploring the issue of Arabic names and identities is Williamson which, although accurate and useful in its identification of textual allusions to the Arabic, sees the whole lot as being used for nothing more than comic effect (which she calls irony) because the hero and heroine are "misnamed." Thus, Aucassin's infamous tirade on Heaven and Hell is a literal-mindedness that is typical of the Saracens of the Old French epic (408), and the effect here, too, is a comic one. This kind of single-cause, single-effect analysis of the issue is, despite its seemingly "positive" stance, a rather typical version of the reductionist approach almost invariably taken towards questions of Arabic "influence" in "mainstream" medieval European literature.

2. "Relevance of Theory . . ." 164, although it is only fair to note here that most traditional modes of dealing with the question of Arabic presence(s) in medieval Europe more often than not fail to make any but the most rudimentary (i.e. a rather simple form of "influence") connections between the historical and the literary texts.

trates that as long as the historical-cultural axis remains unexplored and unspecified we do not (at least in the case of medieval texts) function in a historical vacuum that *more* clearly reveals transcendent aesthetic properties. Instead. within that "vacuum" one reads in the throes of the historical vision of the medieval Europe inherited from the intellectual and ideological institutions of nineteenth century Europe that invented this "default" medieval Europe. It was, and to a remarkable extent it continues to be, canonically, a medieval Europe of simple paternity and unambiguous truths and meanings, both exemplified, of course, in its literary texts.

Indeed, not long ago, *Aucassin et Nicolette* was considered a naive and straightforward literary text. The simple charms of "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy regains girl after surmounting obstacles and they live happily ever after" were apparent, and virtually the only problem presented by the text was its anomalous generic form, that alternation between *récit* and *chanter*, dubbed *chantefable*, of which this text appears to be the only example. In what one is tempted to say is a trope of the text itself, the critical consensus evolved into essentially the reverse: that it is a text, beginning with those very visible alternations in form, keyed to revealing and exploiting a number of reversals and inversions, and characterized more by duplicity than simplicity.[3] In most cases, however, this revised canonical reading tacitly accepts the older, simpler, less complex reading of "medieval Europe," although in virtually every case the newly-revealed "aesthetic" complexities and contradictions are ultimately dependent on a far more complex cultural model.

One can well see Leo Spitzer's early (1947) reading of the *chantefable* as a clash of generations as the forerunner of this newer canonical view, although, unfortunately, his reading is cast in the then *de rigueur* philological mode that had been virtually the only critical posture adopted vis-à-vis this and other medieval texts, and Spitzer's aesthetic reading was evaluated, negatively, on the basis of a problematic textual lesson.[4] But

3. The only major hold-out in the last several decades is Hunt, who sees neither meta-literary nor parodic/ironic elements in the work, but his own literal-mindedness is quite remarkable and especially apparent in his lengthy review, almost completely negative, of the substantial body of previous scholarship that has posited readings other than the straightforward or naive. I note, for instance, that he considers Williamson's position objectionable because "Nicolette, d'origine sarrasine, a bien été convertie et baptisée." (376)

4. Spitzer "based" his reading of the clash of generations, which is in fact abundantly apparent throughout the text, on reading *deport* in the initial section as "behavior attitude" and on the paleographically problematic *mel* versus *viel antif* (1947-48). Both textual lessons are refuted by Grace Frank, 1949, but it seems to me a meaningless rebuttal since the thrust of Spitzer's reading, undoubtedly "instinctive" in the first place (Spitzer being a stellar Crocean) in this instance, at least, needs neither problematic textual reading as support. It is worth noting that this exchange between Spitzer and Frank takes place just a few years after their comparable and parallel exchange (quite famous now) over a reading of Jaufré Rudel's *amor de lohn*, an exchange in which Spitzer (1944) had been particularly devastating in his criticism of Frank's (1942) astonishingly positivist reading of Rudel's paen to necessarily unobtainable love.

his instinctive reading, as was often the case, is revelatory and insightful and stands with or without the interpretation of the *viel antif* he offers as "proof": The *chantefable* does indeed pit generations against each other in a number of ways. It is abundantly clear from the outset not only that Aucassin is the son who is refusing and repudiating his parents' generation's views of appropriate behavior but, in fact, that the causative emblem of this generational parting of the ways is Nicolette herself, both as the object of a love that makes our erstwhile hero turn to love (lyrics) rather than knightly behavior (epic) and as a mate consistently described as unsuitable precisely because she is a Saracen and a slave girl — essentially one and the same thing as far as they are concerned.

The fact that this is a generational difference (rather than, say, just that Aucassin's parents happened to be unduly and uncharacteristically prejudiced) is ratified in a number of crucial ways: Nicolette's own step-father is in full agreement that his adoptive daughter is unsuitable because of her Arab blood — despite her other merits and the fact he had her baptized and raised a Christian. Thus, the first mention of Nicolette (after the general presentation of the work in the opening lyric segment) is followed by Count Garin's judgement of his son's choice of lover: "Fix, fait li peres, ce ne poroit estre. Nicolete laise ester, que ce est une caitive qui fu amenee d'estrange terre, si l'acata li visquens de ceste vile as Sarasins . . ." (II, 27-31)[5] The subsequent *récit*, IV, is an encounter between Garin and Nicolette's adoptive father, each of whom rehashes and re-states her impossible condition of Saracen and in which the vicomte is as incomprehending of young Aucassin's blindness to the obstacle involved as is the old Count, Aucassin's father. Throughout the dialogue there is an unremitting insistence on her origins as an obstacle: "Sire quens, car ostés Nicolete vostre filole! Que la tere soit maleoite dont ele fu ame-nee en ceste païs!" (IV, 4-5) and there is considerable further tension involved given the wealth of the adoptive father, a fact also made prominent.

In the subsequent recit, the third, the whole discussion is repeated once again, this time between the Vicomte and an Aucassin in distress because his Nicolette has disappeared (the Viscount having shut her away hoping that for Aucassin the "out of sight out of mind" cliché would hold true). Here, once again, the formula for why the match is unsuitable is presented, this time by the Viscount: "Nicolete est une cai-tive que j'amenai d'estrange tere, si l'acatai de mon avoir a Sarasins, si l'ai levee et bautisie et faite ma fillole, si l'ai nourie si li donasce un de ces jors un baceler qui del pain li gaegnast par honor: de ce n'avés vos que faire." (VI, 14-18) The rich Viscount, then, intended to marry her to one of "her own kind," someone who would make money, and when he tells Aucassin that he has "nothing to do with that" the "that" is both

5. This and subsequent references, by section and line number, are to the Mario Roques edition.

the making of money and Nicolette herself — and Aucassin is in danger of becoming, if we follow Alter's recent reading of the Roland, a very unsubtle Ganelon: *femmes, argent, ensarrasiné, embourgeoise.* . . . It is at the end of this little speech of the Viscount's to Aucassin that the girl's father notes that taking Nicolette as his mistress is not a suitable alternative to the blocked marriage since such a path would only gain him Hell, and this in turn provokes Aucassin's (in)famous Heaven-Hell speech in which he says, in sum, that he would rather go to Hell because that is where all the admirable and amusing people are certainly going to end up. This is a bit of the text that has been variously, and often furiously, interpreted, and the critical impasse is in great measure due to the deeply held critical belief in the absolutes of the medieval universe, one within which the only possible interpretations for such a speech are "irony" (he doesn't really mean any of those things) and/or misguidedness (he doesn't know any better yet). The problem of either interpretation, of course, in the context of the felicitous outcome of the work, is readily apparent — as should be the fact that Aucassin's little speech is a pointed case of the type of reversals and pointed literalism, both mockeries of any concept of absolutes, which is hard to perceive, let alone explain, if our historical "vacuum" presupposes an ideologically hegemonous Europe at this time.[6] We will return to these subjects shortly, but one further point must be made about the lining up of generations against each other: the last relevant paternal figure, Nicolette's royal family, discovered at the end, in fact lines up with the other families: "Baron li vourent doner un roi de paiiens, mais ele n'avoit cure de marier . . . Ele se porpensa par quel engiens ele porroit Aucassin querre; ele quist une viele, s'aprist a vieler, tant c'on le vaut marier un jor a un roi rice paiien." (XXXVIII, 9-13)

What we see then, at both beginning and end of the work is that the objections to Nicolette are far more than the "mere" conventional obstacles necessary for the blocking of the romance, although it is *also* true that her background serves that archetypical role.[7] In fact, if we accept

6. The impasse in interpretation here is certainly reminiscent of that which has plagued studies of texts such as the *Sendebar* or the *Decameron*, where striking lack of a "suitable" correspondence between good/evil behavior and good/evil outcome for a character, within a supposedly absolute truth-bound universe and culture, has created quite a conundrum for most critics.

7. It may simply be that a formalist (or an archetypical) reading works far better, perhaps, for a "modern" text, by which I quite specifically mean one which is tied to our own reading experience by virtue of a historico-cultural background that is not grossly different. Thus it is all well and good, and for most readers no doubt a far more enlightening and crystallizing reading, to say that *Madame Bovary* is not about adultery but rather about boredom, but one could argue that to a very great extent that is only because *we already all know*, it is part of our basic historico-cultural baggage, that adultery was a major historical preoccupation. When a major historical context or reality is ignored (not even known about), conversely, the ways in which the artist has aestheticized elements of his reality can be perceived only dimly, if at all, and the richness of the work of art can thus be commensurately diminished for the reader. A case that certainly comes to mind is the

as the unspoken historical backdrop of the text that medieval Europe represented, *grosso modo*, by both the epic and the vast majority of canonical sources — a medieval Europe with a frontier at the Pyrenees and dark foreigners (albeit often rich and talented at translation) temporarily loose in a corner of Europe thus no longer Europe, at least until they are battled back across the straits of Gibraltar — then the doings and opinions within this text, especially as they regard the obstacle, are difficult to make sense of, precisely because the lines are drawn, not as one would expect across the French/Saracen battle lines but rather more emphatically across the generational ones. The fact that Nicolette is a Saracen is as irrelevant for the younger generation as it is an absolute obstacle for the older one. The fact that Nicolette's own expect her to marry one of theirs, another *paiien*, and one who is marked as *rice*, and that her (equally rich) adoptive father, who both baptized her and raised her as a Christian still sees her as "foreign", indicates the depth of the chasm for all parents involved, for an entire generation, one wiped out, both figuratively and literally by the happy and "lived happily ever after" ending. By the time the happy marriage takes place, and Nicolette has been revealed to be a Saracen princess, rather than just some ordinary *caitive*, Aucassin's parents and Nicolette's stepfather are dead — and we are left to wonder whether perhaps that wrinkle about royalty would have made much difference, whether we have a sleeping beauty case at hand. Quite unlikely, we must conclude, both because the parents have, in fact, been eliminated to avoid the embarrassment of the recurrence of the issue of race, which is what was at stake and which remains the same, and since their substitutes, Nicolette's blood-kin, are as tied to traditional hierarchies based on race/blood/class lines as their now-dead counterparts in Provence. (Aucassin's ecstasy at the outcome is of no relevance, of course, since he never cared about her lineage in the first place: he is thrilled to have her back regardless of whose daughter she turned out to be.) The only adults, in fact, who see Nicolette as Aucassin sees her, i.e. blind to the defect posed by her birth, are those of Torelore — who see the whole world upside-down anyway and behave in general in a pattern of clear-cut, at times hyperbolically so, reversals of traditional roles.

Thus, Spitzer's insight that generational conflicts are central to the drama of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, ratifiable along a number of different parameters, has at its core the irreconcilable difference of opinion both triggered and symbolized by the question of Arabic heritage and whether or not that makes Nicolette an appropriate mate for Aucassin —

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remarkable and powerful *Celestina*, written in a compelling and devastating historical moment that, when known about and recognized as a necessarily potent element, provides the kind of difference in tone and texture — through often grim and veiled allusion, of course — that critically, aesthetically, distinguishes this love story from its archetypical counterparts. Otherwise, it is a text that is largely reducible to a version of the ill-fated love story.

or vice-versa, as the framing and accentuation at the beginning and end of the piece make clear. That such a difference in attitude should emerge as generational is apposite enough, historically as well as in meta-literary terms, since relations with the decendants of the eighth-century Arab settlement of the Iberian peninsula — not so far from Provence, after all, as the text makes abundantly and pointedly clear — had undergone considerable transformations in the previous century. In a number of critical ways the *chantefable* has thematized a telescoped version of some of the salient historical transformations: the epicine warfare of the earliest period had subsisted, on and off, for a considerable time, even while much more productive and pacific interaction was becoming entrenched as a way of life. The most famous of all Southern French involvements with the "Sarasins" had certainly been that culminating in the defeat of the Muslim armies by Guillaume de Montreuil, fighting for Guillaume VI of Poitiers (father of William of Aquitaine) at Barbastro in 1064, and the allusion to it in *Aucassin et Nicolette* is apparent enough: the episode was and remains famous for a number of reasons not least of which was the fact that the victors made a great deal of having taken back with them an enormous number of captured women who went on to live out their lives in the culturally ascendant courts of Provence.

But outside of literary texts such as these the writing of the most basic history of the medieval period has, for a number of complex reasons I have explored further elsewhere, radically obscured the extent to which what we label — and thus distance — as "Arabic" or "Oriental" was functionally and contextually no more alien or foreign or distant than the baptized and flawlessly assimilated Nicolette. As a result, the greatest of the ironies of the text is hopelessly lost, for we are largely unaware that, as readers who also (along with all the adults in the text) see the "Arabs" as outsiders, we too are ultimately left outside the consummation of the story. It is not that the text is "incomprehensible" without this critically different understanding of this chapter of medieval history I am suggesting is desirable here but rather that *as a literary text Aucassin et Nicolette* is almost obsessively concerned with that relationship between history and literature — and with the difficulty of a clear-cut dichotomy between the two. Given the history we have written and largely accepted in the past two hundred years, a history that will be the potent unspoken web framing the text, the dilemma is not text versus history but rather one historical text versus another. And within that context, if we are largely unaware of the other possible major interpretation of medieval culture — the one with which the parents' canonical view is at odds — the remaining readings of the other levels of dichotomies and conflicts within the text remain as isolated "themes."

The *chantefable* itself suggests the heart of the dilemma: the effacement of history in the face of literature, in this particular case, can only

take place once narrative, or history, has been substantially redrawn, for until it is thus retold, at least as an alternative reading, we are only dimly able to perceive the nature of the conflicts at hand and the degree to which assimilation, as in the case of Nicolette herself, cannot ultimately be mistaken for identicity. Again, the apparently simple romance is telling these other stories: the "reconquest" of Toledo, too often seen as a pivotal turning point in the "Reconquista" was ultimately more significant, at least for the subsequent several hundred years in Europe, for the massive amounts of translations that poured out from that city in the aftermath of its thus being opened up to traffic from the rest of Europe. Both the economic and the cultural upheavals that made the twelfth century a revolutionary one were in numerous instances, perhaps the majority, derivative of the impact of such massive cultural "trading" — activities that ultimately led to a degree of assimilation of previously foreign material that would have seemed remarkable, indeed, to earlier generations. Those riches, then, came to replace, textually as well as historically, the earlier ones concretely symbolized in the appearance of Saracen slave girls in the courts of Provence.

Moreover, and hardly surprisingly, the absorption of both kinds of riches ultimately produced the sort of hybridness and, I believe, cultural relativism, that *Aucassin et Nicolette* embodies and illuminates at so many different levels. Thus, while the first astrolabe was built at Lièges in 1025 under fairly direct Arabic tutelage, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, less than two hundred years later and at about the time our text was being composed, Héloïse was giving the once-novel, once-foreign name to Abélard's son. (In such a context, and by comparison to Astrolabe, Aucassin's own name seems considerably less bizarre an appellation for a young Frenchman.) A correlative sign of the times and texts is certainly that occasional but distinct association between wealth, material welfare, trading and, ultimately, the nascent bourgeoisie, with the Arabs. We have already noted that the man who adopted Nicolette, a Nicolette, he repeatedly tells us he *bought* from the *paiiens*, defined both his class and hers as one that would earn a living. Traders and sailors alike are tied, directly and indirectly (as indeed, they were historically) to the Arabs. The king to whom Nicolette's father would marry her is *un roi rice paiien*, the rich being emphasized once again when a disguised Nicolette tells her story to Aucassin: ". . . si li veut on doner cascun jor baron un des plus haus rois de tote Espaigne; mais ele se lairoit ançois pendre u ardoir qu'ele en presist nul tant fust rices." (XL, 9-11) The cultural tension is again complicated by the emblem of Saracens and their like — those who cultivate wealth, an activity far beneath the values of the older aristocracy.[8]

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8. A recent provocative article by Jean Alter, alluded to above, suggests that the nascent and emergent bourgeois spirit, found in the interstices and *non-dit* of the *Roland* itself, is rigorously identified with the Saracens. This fresh reading of the text details the existence

Although *Aucassin et Nicolette* provides, in the perhaps surprising context of what at first glance is a light romantic comedy, a trenchant and often prescient analysis of the largest cultural-historical problems of its times, it is never in danger of being reducible to a straightforward allegory of that same history. The text's multiple patterns of reversals and its dialogic emphasis throughout allow it to call into question the neatness of the very Self-Other distinction overtly and structurally created in the *chantefable* — that paradigmatic distinction blindly accepted by the parents and just as neatly rejected by Aucassin. The original surface question of Arabic versus French heritage thus becomes enmeshed with the other conflicts apparent in the text, none more so, perhaps, than that of the male/female dichotomy and the correlative genre conflict that other scholars have explored more fully. In an important study Kevin Brownlee, much influenced by Eugene Vance's significant discourse analysis of *Aucassin et Nicolette* (to which we shall return below), clearly establishes how Nicolette, in one of the most striking of the many reversals for which the text has recently become famous, appropriates both male and epicine characteristics and, consequently, both textual and authorial power and authority. It is she, ultimately, who affects the lovers' reunion(s), marvelously emblematized by her final trip from Cartage to Provence disguised, classically, as a jongleur. But one must further complicate the observations — and reversals — by noting that the disguise in question has entailed that she make herself appear dark — Saracen-like, obviously: "Et ele s'enbla la nuit, si vint au port de mer, si se herbega ciés une povre femme sor le rivage; si prist une herbe, si en oinst son cief et son visage, si qu'ele fu tote noire et tainte." (XXXVIII 13-16) And in the process of "restoring" herself she needs to have recourse to an herb with the opposite effect: ". . . si le fist laver et baignier et sejorner uit jors tous plains. Si prist une herbe qui avoit non esclaire, si s'en oinst, si fu ausi bele qu'ele avoit onques esté a nul jor . . ." (XL, 33-35)

Thus, a Nicolette who was generically to be the passive female love object is revealed — reveals herself, really — to be the active authoritative figure, and thus a marked contrast with Aucassin. This reversal of sexual and authoritative roles, of such critical identities, had already been tagged and signalled by the no less disrupting reversal of names and "national" identities. But the physical transformation engineered at the end by the Nicolette now clearly in charge of her own destiny (as well as that of Aucassin, sitting passively back at home crying over his spilt milk) reminds us of how tricky the question of physical semblance and appearance was from the outset of the text — and how important

of a largely suppressed tension created by a new class that, a hundred years before, was already both textually emblematized by the Saracen and associated with him in a perspicacious internal analysis of history. A hundred years after the *Roland* the emblem of the Other would remain the same but the exorcising that had taken place in the earlier text is, in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, replaced by marriage, *malgré* the objections of the old guard.

the question of illusory appearance continues to be. For, certainly, most readers/listeners should have been struck from the start by the incongruity of the beautifully blonde and white Saracen slave girl/princess — and if somehow we remained oblivious to it, or assumed that an undifferentiated generic description of physical female beautiful was regnant, Nicolette's disguising herself as dark in the immediate aftermath of realizing just who she really is, a Spanish-Arab princess, should bring us back to the issue pointedly. It is all of a piece: we expect a woman to be passive but she need not be, we expect a man to be authoritative but he may not be, we expect an Arab to have the "appropriate" outer markings, skin color and name, but that too need not be. To affect the necessary reunion at the end Nicolette must appropriate the *appearances* of the things she *really is* but does not, perhaps cannot, on the ordinary surface appear to be: Arab, manipulative, authoritative. And the reverse, of course, has been true all along for the weepy Aucassin.

This combination of reversals, the underlining of the conspicuous differences that may separate appearances or surface structure from a "reality" or deeper structure (or expectations from results, in the case of readers) takes us back to the linguistic issues raised by both Vance and also Bloch — and these in turn reflect back on other layers of historical allusion and thematization encoded in the text's dialogism. The conflict or dialogue so clearly present between lyric and narrative forms, this contest, as Vance calls it (1980, 61) literalizes and thematizes the historically critical shifts and conflicts taking place among generic and linguistic forms, that challenge to the vernacular primacy of the oral, lyric, musical, largely self-referential disjunctive lyric by the conjunctive narrative of the written text. As was the case with the "history" of relations with Arabic Spain, a telescoping takes place within the text as the lovers move from the static and largely inactive mode of the love lyric to the ascendant prose form that, once appropriated by Nicolette, allows resolution of the impasse to take place. (In this regard, *Aucassin et Nicolette* is curiously reminiscent of another prose-poetry text, Dante's *Vita nuova*, which also constitutes a primer in literary developments from the solipsistic courtly lyric to a wholly different poetic mode, that which will appear full-fledged in the *Commedia*, outwardly turned and "progressive.")

Once again one notes the reversal of stereotypical expectations as the female is the one to grasp the significance of the shift from the oral-lyric code and its attendant transfer of authority and control while Aucassin is left literally behind, in Provence (what place better?) in the solipsistic self-gratification of a lover's complaint. And once again, this Self-Other dichotomy and contest lies quite close to the heart of History, in this case a literary history perhaps more closely tied to other kinds of history than we have so far recognized. And at least two other kinds of history are clearly correlated. The critical difference between the theories of linguistic and economic arbitrariness, called nominalism in both cases, and

their counterparts, those older notions of realism or direct representation and value, has been convincingly identified as a major struggle in *Aucassin et Nicolette* by Howard Bloch. What Bloch's study demonstrates amply, among other things, is the intractable overlap in the text of historical and textual realities, that the meta-literary concerns so apparent in the text are *also* meta-historical. In this case the correlation is apparent and dovetails perfectly with the multiple other historically immanent conflicts we have identified: linguistic and economic nominalism are strictly tied to the lyric condition and, in turn, the broadest "lesson" of the text, that relations between outer form and inner substance is arbitrary.

Realism, in all of these same fields of discourse, posits the contrary belief, that of the possibility of direct representation. It is fitting, in such a context, that an Aucassin who is repeatedly associated with the solipsistic discourse of the lover, the self-referential (and self-generating) lyric, should fail so absolutely to see the significance, for those "elders" — who seem to have sprung from the epic mode of representation and "realist" social values — of Nicolette's Arab origins. It is thus fitting, in the ironic mode of the text, that it is the Nicolette who is at once the perfect literalization of the nominalist principle (being not at all what she is named to be and what she looks to be) who firmly grasps the fundamental realist principles and uses language to affect desired results. Once again, an aesthetics of textual self-sufficiency, while practicable, yields a reading that is far less complex than one that incorporates the historical specificities that — at least in this case and in most others that involve this largely obscured aspect of medieval history — complicate and, in a number of significant ways, make self-reflective and ironic a text which otherwise runs the risk of being read as "straightforward" and largely unconscious of itself, certainly incapable of a number of the "modern" properties of literature.[9]

It is apparent that the tie that binds these multiple discourses together, and that thus renders it a far more complex and open text than it once appeared, is that which the text itself tells us from the outset, and in no uncertain terms, is the crux of the problem: the Arabic heritage, the question of whether such a "background" or birth is assimilatable in

9. I would argue, moreover, that the multiple failures to account for lasting aesthetic value in medieval literatures is not because of a failure in a (new) historicism but because a lack of a sensible, non-mythological historicism has yielded a concept of medieval literature where it is too often accounted for as if it were a sort of *pre*-Literature, i.e. not yet fully developed and thus incapable of the subtle self-reflections, multiple ironies vis-à-vis History, explicit denials of apparent surface "meaning" and other characteristics we take for granted in post-deluvian literature. In great measure these attitudes, held as much by medievalists as modernists, are created and/or buttressed by more or less equivalent and equally simple and homogeneous conceptualizations of history and culture in that interregnum between the Greeks and the Renaissance. I would argue further that a richer historicism could eventually frame the aesthetics of at least some medieval texts so that they would, indeed, seem far less "alien" to the modern reader.

French society and whether it is even clearly identifiable or representable. But ironically, and this too is already encoded in the text and tropes its lessons, most modern critics continue to deal with this issue, if at all, as marginal. What virtually all the studies of *Aucassin et Nicolette* that have identified these dialogues and conflicts and ironies of reversals in the text have concluded is that, as Bloch has put it, this particular text provides the forum or performative space "in which the question of margins, of boundaries between distinct geographical and social spaces was articulated and probed." (20) He goes on to conclude that the "resolution" of the differences thus explored lies in the romance genre "which *Aucassin et Nicolette* parodies but whose underlying mechanism it makes explicit through reversal, *at the mid or mediatory point* between town and countryside, between noble and non-noble, and between the economics of war and cultivation and an economics of the marketplace." (31, emphasis mine) Vance too, in a different but comparable fashion, concludes that it is reconciliation rather than the possibility of sustaining distinct differences that is the textual result of the exploration of differences through dialogue and reversals: "Though we may be tempted to see this text as an instance of the 'dialogic' ... I would suggest that this text remains within the realm of a monologism at its most 'liberal,' that is, one whose model is that of a law which allows for transgressions of itself ... *Aucassin et Nicolette* is a story that functions somewhat like a treaty or contract: simply to read it is implicitly to agree with the negotiability of its oppositions, even if characters *within* the text do not share our privilege of readerly omniscience." (Vance 1980, 74) It is impossible to disagree with these conclusions — but equally impossible to continue to ignore the most significant textual manifestations of this mediated, negotiable mid-point, the clearest statement of the impossibility (or at least undesirability) of radical ruptures, which is, of course, the first and last question of the *chantefable*, that of Nicolette's origins.

The "Arabic question"[10] here serves as the most consistent metaphor for dialogue and difference. And ultimately, because of a marraige effected *because* Nicolette recognizes herself for what she is and makes it apparent to all, that Arabic Other which has in fact *become* the Self is no less the most significant emblem of the best kind of dialogic mediation: difference seen (what Aucassin's radical nominalist and lyric blindness could not grasp) and yet accepted as a necessary part of productive and fertile union (what the parents' epicine and realist generation could not do). Again, it is critical to note that the text has fully internalized and aestheticized what might be considered by many to be external history: we have here a version of twelfth century cultural history marked by a remarkable degree of hybrid productivity in the multiple levels of inter-

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10. A term that to most medievalists signals a secondary discussion — all too often tedious and/or simplistic — of some "borrowing" from the alien Arabs by the natives of medieval Europe.

action between the Christian-Latin and the Spanish-Arabic worlds which were, more often than not, not at all those separate worlds we tend to imagine and project but rather, as *Aucassin et Nicolette* depicts it, often difficult-to-separate components of the same universe. In turn, and perhaps necessarily, the conspicuous cultural diversity engendered or encouraged a degree of relativism and interpretational latitude which most cultural historians identify with "modernism," certainly not with any kind of medieval universe, but which, in fact, becomes abundantly clear in a text such as *Aucassin et Nicolette.* Clear-cut tags and identities and origins had largely been replaced by the multiple products of cross-fertilization: a radical Aristotelianism as properly called Averroism; an "Arabic" number system (itself already a product of Iberian hybridness) which is being thoroughly "Europeanized" by an Italian with a name that is an Arabic calque, Fibonacci; culturally as well as aesthetically complex literary works such as the *Disciplina clericalis*, a work written in Latin, purportedly for Christian instruction, in England, by a converted Spanish Jew (né Moshé Sefardí, baptized Petrus Alfonsi), whose principal source, repeatedly and explicitly specified, is a species of Arabic exemplary literature that includes stories whose (traditionally defined) didactic value is unclear, at best.

But once again, a history that is either obscured or so thoroughly assimilated as to be unknown must be in some measure recouped before we can ask it to recede into the background — since "background" means what we all really know and are not obliged, consequently, to articulate. In considerable measure it is precisely this conflict that the *chantefable* acts out: the old guard is interested only in a banal and already obsolete version of history while Aucassin, infatuated with his lover's aesthetic perfection, believes, somewhat naively, that her history is irrelevant. It is the complexity of the issue — and its irreducibility to either of these two postures — that constitutes the dramatic thematization of the no doubt dramatic and difficult process of radical cultural assimilation that dominated the European scene in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries.

In so markedly alluding to the difficulty of distinguishing Arab from French, in both name and origin, in so unmistakably pointing to the impossibility of clear-cut absolutes, *Aucassin et Nicolette* presents its audience much more than an incidental or exotic marker of difference: the text is in fact placing itself squarely in the midst of the most vibrant and consequential Self-Other conflict of its day and its century. The romance of this particular couple is certainly a sign of those times and it is far more a sign of *our* critical times that we have tended to either not see at all or marginalize this most conspicuous and textually and historically central emblem of both difference and unity, of relativism and heterogeneity, in twelfth and thirteenth century culture and society. Historical revisionism is necessary here, in other words, largely because a critical

tradition with a strong ideological component — like all others — has effaced most of the memory — conscious or not — necessary to have all the different strands of the story make much sense. The story itself inscribes the different explanations for these developments within itself. In part, of course, the effacement is a trope of Aucassin's lover's blindness: since so much of what was originally Andalusian-Arabic was so fully integrated and rendered indistinguishably "European" in that highly mutative historical crux, we are scarcely able to re-evoke a moment when so much of what was to become and thereafter seem so canonically European, like Nicolette herself, was not that at all at the outset. Failing to see, or at least to fully appreciate the import of a process of inscription from the Arabic to the European we talk about Aristotle in the thirteenth century (when, more "accurately," it was then Ibn Rushd, Averroes) and it is exceedingly difficult to pick up on the generational tensions that would have been all too natural during such an adoptive and adaptive process. Its very success, in other words, much like Nicolette's perfectly conventional beauty, has lulled us, like Aucassin, into believing the process of appropriation and conversion was insignificant. It is also true, however, that the effacement is no less a trope of the perceptions of the parents' generation in the text: those who find acceptance of the bastardization of a presumably pure occidental blood line difficult or impossible — and that is what is at stake both in Aucassin's desired union with the *sarasine*, princess or no, or the centrality (as opposed to the exoticism) of the Arabic role in the formation of late medieval culture and society.

Fittingly, finally, it is Nicolette whose polyvalent perspective, born of her hybridness, not only carries the day but provides the most attractive paradigm for a critical perspective — and this is doubly appropriate, in the spirit of the text, since she embodies the potentially doubly marginalized Other, the woman and the "foreigner." And like Nicolette, the role of the Arabic Other both reflected and actively espoused in this text, is far from either marginality or mere opposition: it is, rather, the tie that binds the other discourses together and the principal link to History. It is Nicolette, in the end, who reads things most clearly, recognizing what she is at the walls of Cartage and using that knowledge of her Arabness to effect the marriage with the Other she desires. She has no illusions about Difference but sees it, as much of the twelfth century in Europe clearly did as well, as the best reason for union and appropriation. Thanks to that dual clarity of perception the Arab princess and the reluctant heir of the old aristocracy from Beaucaire did, after all, live happily ever after.

Yale University

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