

Francis Heuffer. *The Troubadours: A History of Provençal Life and Literature in the Middle Ages.* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878). 16-26.

[*Flamenca* is] a work which, quite apart from its philological and literary interest, is invaluable to the student of mediaeval manners and customs. This [...] narrative poem in octosyllabic couplets, dat[es] most likely from the first half of the thirteenth century. [...] Unfortunately the beginning and the end of the poem are missing, and with the former the name of the author, frequently mentioned in the introductory lines of mediæval romances, has most probably been lost.

Flamenca, the lovely daughter of Count Gui de Nemours, is wooed by the King of Hungary and by Lord Archimbaut Count of Bourbon. Her father prefers the latter suitor, who is said to be one of the best and most valorous knights in the world; an important circumstance which the reader is asked to remember. Count Archimbaut, on being told of the decision in his favour, makes preparations on the grandest scale to visit his bride, whom he has never seen, but of whom the descriptions of her beauty given by his messengers have deeply enamoured him. The festivities arranged for his reception at the court of Nemours are described at some length, and give the poet an opportunity of deploring the decay of liberality amongst the great nobles, of courtesy, of love, and of chivalry in his own time, a complaint frequently met with in the works of the later troubadours.

Early on a Sunday morning Count Archimbaut is introduced by her father to Flamenca, who, like a well-educated young lady, 'did not pretend to be doleful, but was a little shamefaced.' 'Here is your bride,' Count Gui says; "take her if you like." "Sir," answers the bridegroom, "if she does not gainsay it, I never was so willing to take anything in my life." Then the lady smiled, and "Sir," she said, "one can see that you hold me in your power, as you give me away so easily; but as it is your will I consent" This "I consent" throws Archimbaut into a transport of joy, and he presses her hand passionately. But here the interview ends. The gentlemen retire, Archimbaut taking leave of her with his eyes at the door, while Flamenca did not show pride, but gave him good countenance, frequently saying, "God be with you!"

What can be prettier than this quaint picture of mediæval wooing, and what more magnificent than the wedding ceremony performed in the presence and with the assistance of five bishops and ten abbots, and lasting much too long for the impatience of Archimbaut, "for it was past the sixth hour (noon) before he had married her." At the banquet the bridegroom and the father of the bride have to wait at table according to ancient custom; but the eyes of the former continually go where his heart is, and inwardly he curses the appetite of the guests and the long-winded songs of the joglars. After nine days' feasting he hurries home to prepare his house for his bride. All this looks auspicious enough for the happiness of the couple. But this bright beginning is but a clever trick on the narrator's part to show in its darkest dye the monstrous vice which turns brightness itself into night. This vice is jealousy.

The King of France, to do honour to his trusty baron Gui of Nemours, escorts Flamenca to her husband, and attends with his wife and his court the festivities arranged by Archimbaut to celebrate the occasion. At the tournament which takes place the king carries on the point of his lance, by way of *gage d'amour*, the sleeve of a lady's dress. "I don't know whose it was," the poet adds diplomatically. The queen's jealousy suggests Flamenca, and she loses no time to impart her Suspicion to Archimbaut, who immediately takes fire at the thought He keeps his countenance while his guests are present, but inwardly he feels sad, and tormented by "a burning sickness called jealousy." "What was I thinking of," he frequently says to himself, "when I took a wife? God! I was mad. Was I not well off and happy before? Evil befall my parents that they should have counselled me to take what did never good to any man!"

The symptoms of the “burning sickness” are described with graphic vivacity. Archimbaut shuts himself up; in every visitor he suspects a suitor of his wife; he pretends to be very busy, and adds, in a whispered aside, “I should like to kick you out head foremost.” He then calls to his servants for water, to wash for dinner, in order to make people go, and if this does not avail he will say, “Dear sir, will you have dinner with us, for it is time? I hope you will. There will be a good opportunity for flirting”—looking all the while like a dog who shows his teeth.

So far so good; but we can hardly believe that a noble and gallant knight should lose all sense of decency so entirely as to go about unwashed and unshaven, letting his beard grow long and matted “like a badly made sheaf of oats,” except in places where he had torn out the hair and stuffed it in his mouth. The poet here decidedly makes a concession to his courtly audience, who naturally were delighted to hear a jealous husband likened to a “mad dog.”

At last Archimbaut resolves to keep his wife a close prisoner in a tower, and “May I be hanged by the throat,” he says, “if ever she go out without me even to church, to hear mass, and that only on high feast days!” So poor Flamenca is shut up in the tower with only two devoted maidens, Alice and Margarida, to comfort her in her misery. [...] As she could not love her husband and had no child to be fond of, he suggests, it was a blessing, or “a great favour of God,” as he puts it, for Flamenca, that the feeling of love entirely ceased in her for a season. For if she still had had love in her heart with no object to centre it upon, her condition would have been infinitely more unhappy.

But Flamenca's fate is not to last, nor are Archimbaut's misdeeds to be left unpunished for ever. The avenger is nigh. He takes the form of a perfect beau of the period, described by the poet in the most glowing colours; with his riches, his valour, his courteous demeanour, his love of poetry and song, his scholarship—for he has gone through his trivium and quadrivium at the University of Paris—and last, not least, his beauty, down to the whiteness of his skin and the very shape of his mouth and ears. Guillem de Nevers, for such is his name, hears of Archimbaut's jealous atrocities, which have become the butt of all the gay troubadours of the country, and at once resolves to comfort the lady and punish the monster. The question is, how to baffle the watchfulness of this Argus and Cerberus combined. The manner in which this question is solved is a marvel of ingenuity.

The first and greatest difficulty is to establish communication with the imprisoned lady. The tower is watched against any possibility of approach, and she never leaves it except to go to church. The church, therefore, must be the scene of operations.

Guillem de Nevers ingratiates himself with the priest, who accepts him as his clerk, and in this disguise the lover succeeds in entering the private pew, from which, thickly veiled and concealed by a trellis work, Flamenca is allowed to attend mass. When the clerk approaches the lady to let her kiss the mass-book according to sacred rite, she is struck with his beauty, and still more astonished when, instead of a sacred formula, he breathes a suggestive *Ailas!* (alas). More than these two syllables he dares not utter in the presence of the watchful Archimbaut. Flamenca, on her return home, begins to muse on the strange behaviour of the clerk. At first she feels almost aggrieved by his exclamation. “What right has he,” she says, “to be miserable? He is strong, and free, and happy. Maybe he is mocking my own suffering. And why should he be so cruel as to add to my grief? Tears and sighs are my lot. A slave compelled to carry wood and water is enviable compared with me. My fate could not be worse even if I had a rival and a mother-in-law.” But the two chambermaids know better. With the sagacity of their class they at once fathom the mystery. “Your beauty,” Margarida suggests, “has ravished his heart, and, as he has no other way of speaking to you, he has exposed himself to great peril to let you know the state of his feelings.”

An answer has now to be thought of, and the united wisdom of the three fair conspirators decides upon the query *Que plans?* (what is your complaint ?) and these two syllables, softly whispered, gladden the

heart of Guillem on the ensuing Sunday. His immoderate rapture on seeing his passion noticed by its fair object gives rise to a remark on the part of the poet which strangely foreshadows the celebrated dying speech of Cardinal Wolsey. "If Guillem," the passage runs literally, "had served God as he served Love and his lady, he would have been lord of Paradise"

Flamenca on her part is most anxious to be certain that her frightened whisper has been understood, and the poet describes with masterly touches a charming scene in the lady's closet, when Alice has to take a book—it is the romance of *Blanche-fleur*—and hold it exactly in the position and at the distance that Guillem has presented the missal. The lady then bending over the pages whispers the two syllables, and inquires whether she has been heard, which question the obliging chambermaid answers with an "Oh, certainly. Madam! if you have spoken in such a tone, he must have understood you."

In this manner the lovers continue to correspond, a week elapsing between each question and answer, unless a devoutly wished-for saint's day shortens the interval. A lover who for months feeds his passion on dissyllables, sweetened only by an occasional lifting of Flamenca's veil or a furtive touch of her finger, deserves at any rate the praise of constancy. Does the reader care to hear the dialogue in which this extraordinary intrigue is carried on? Here is the series of questions and answers, divided, it must be remembered, by an interval of several days, and exchanged under the very eyes of the jealous husband, who mistakes for pious mutterings of the Catholic ritual what in reality is offered at a very different shrine :—

Guillem, in answer to Flamenca's question above cited: *Muer mi* (I die). Flamenca: *De que?* (what of?) G.: *D'amor* (of love). F.: *Per cui?* (for whom?) G.: *Per vos* (for you). F.: *Quen puesc?* (how can I help it?) G.: *Garir* (heal me). F.: *Consi?* (how?) G.: *Per gein* (by subtle craft). F.: *Pren li* (use it). G.: *Pres l'ai* (I have). F.: *E cal?* (what craft?) G.: *Iretz* (you must go). F.: *Es on?* (where to?) G.: *Als banz* (to the baths).

This requires a word of explanation. Bourbon in Auvergne, the seat of Count Archimbaut, was then, as it is now, a well-known spa, of the arrangements of which the author gives rather a curious description. "Here," he says, "every one, stranger or native, can bathe in excellent fashion. In each bath-room you can see written up for what malady it is good. No lame or gouty person would come there but he would go away quite cured, provided he stopped long enough. Here one can bathe when he likes, provided he have come to terms with the landlord who lets the bath. And in each of the cells there is to be found boiling water, and in another part cold. . . . Adjoining these baths are rooms where people can lie down and rest and refresh themselves as they like." There is also a capital portrait of the typical lodging-house keeper, who—wonderful touch of nature which makes Margate and Bourbon kin—recommends a particular room "because Count Raoul takes it every time he comes to Bourbon."

With this worthy and his wife, dame Bellepille, Guillem has made himself exceedingly popular. He has paid his bills without haggling, has dined at their table, and taken absinthe (*de bon aluisne*) with the husband. At last he has persuaded the couple to decamp for a season and leave him in sole possession of their house—for a consideration, it need hardly be added. This house he has had connected by a subterraneous passage with one of the bathing cells, and to the latter Flamenca is summoned by the mysterious phrase alluded to. The lady understands the hint, and at once takes the necessary measures for carrying out the scheme. She feigns sleeplessness and pain—nothing but a bath can cure her. Archimbaut, anxious for her safety, gives his consent, and himself conducts her to the arms of her expectant lover, who receives her with knightly courtesy and leads her, together with the two faithful damsels, through his subterraneous passage to a room splendidly adorned to receive such a visitor. The jealous husband in the meantime keeps watch before the door of the bath-room, with the key in his pocket, while the careful damsels have not forgotten to bolt the door inside.

Such is the just and inevitable punishment of jealousy according to the doctrine of the Troubadours. But, strangely enough, this punishment, unknown to himself though it be, ultimately works Archimbaut's cure. He notices the change in his wife's manner; she shows no affection for him, and even neglects the ordinary forms of politeness. At last he gets tired of his suspicions, and accepts a compromise proposed by his ill-treated wife to the effect that the lady is to be restored to liberty on her own solemn promise of faithfulness to her husband. [...] With a virtuosity of mental reservation worthy of any Jesuit she swears by all the saints and in the presence of her inwardly chuckling damsels that "henceforth I will guard myself quite as well as you (Archimbaut) have hitherto guarded me." On this happy turn in her affairs the lady takes leave of her lover for a season. He must resume his rank and add to his fame by new deeds of valour. But she agrees to see him again at a tournament which Archimbaut proposes to hold in celebration of his happy recovery. In answer to his lady's command, Guillem goes to the war and makes the country ring with his prowess. Archimbaut becomes acquainted with him and eagerly invites him to attend at his feast, where he himself introduces the valorous and renowned young knight to his wife. The lovers keep their countenance and greet each other in distant politeness, but in secret they meet again and renew their bliss. At the tournament Guillem carries all before him, but second to him alone shines Archimbaut, who has become again the valorous and accomplished knight he was before the fell disease attacked him. In the midst of their joustings and feasting the manuscript breaks off [...].