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Florent et Octavien: The Fourteenth-Century Poem

The late French epic *Florent et Octavien* has, on the whole, suffered from a bad press. Although it was apparently popular for several hundred years, to judge from a thirteenth-century octosyllabic poem, a version in alexandrins dating from the fourteenth, a prose remaking in the fifteenth, and a series of imprints running from 1500 into the early seventeenth century, it nevertheless had the misfortune to meet with Paulin Paris's disapproval in the nineteenth century, when he wrote a summary of it for the *Histoire littéraire de la France*.¹ Of the various versions of the text, only the earliest has been published in modern times.² The *mise en prose*, although discussed briefly by Doutrepoint in his important study, *Les mises en prose des épopées et des romans chevaleresques du XIVe au XVIe siècle?* is usually mentioned only in passing, although it presents a very entertaining reflection of late medieval interests. Correct information about the imprints is difficult to find, and it was quite by chance that an article about a Lyons edition of 1500 came to light in the Morgan Library, as this edition is not mentioned by Doutrepoint nor in the Woledge Bibliography.⁴ The two earliest versions were the subject of a rather derogatory article in *Romania* by Alexandre H. Krappe,⁵ which he devoted largely to

¹ *Histoire littéraire de la France*, vol. 26 (1873) 303-35.

² *Octavian, altfranzösischer Roman, nach der Oxforder Handschrift Bodl. Hatton 100 zum ersten mal hgg. von Karl Vollmöller. Altfranzösische Bibliothek 3* (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1883).

³ *Mémoires, 2e série, Classe des Lettres 40* (Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1939) 176-84; 693-98.

⁴ Claude Dalbanne, *Typographie lyonnaise au XVe siècle* (Lyon: Aux dépens des Amis de la bibliothèque de Lyon, 1934) 13-21.

⁵ "Florent et Octavian," *Romania* 65 (1939): 359-73.

folkloric themes in the poem, comparing some of these not only to Herodotus, but also to American Indian legends. His conclusion was that the poems were lacking in originality. A more useful article by Robert Bossuat also appeared in *Romania*,⁶ this one insisting that the poem was worthy of more respect than accorded it by Paulin Paris, even though it quite evidently belonged to the epic's period of decline. Nobody has seemed the least concerned to consider why it continued to attract interest over such a long period of time.

One clue to its success, suggested by Bossuat in particular, is the poem's connection with the pseudo-history of the Merovingian King Dagobert, reputed throughout the Middle Ages to have been the founder of the royal abbey of Saint-Denis. *Florent et Octavien* is apparently the first of a group of late epics to have this history as a background. It was formerly proposed that these poems might reflect a lost primitive Merovingian cycle, but no real evidence exists to support such a theory. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the legend of King Dagobert flourished during the latter part of the Middle Ages, encouraged especially by the monks at Saint-Denis themselves, in the twelfth century at the time of Abbot Suger and in the thirteenth during the reign of Saint Louis, who had a new tomb constructed for the remains of his predecessor. It was the monks who produced the *Gesta Dagoberti* (ca. 835), an important source for the *Grandes chroniques de France*, composed there and translated into French in 1274.⁷ A circumstantial life of the king is recounted and he is held up as a model for princes. This is undoubtedly the source for the opening lines of the thirteenth-century *Octavien*:

Seigneur preudon, or escoutes,
Qui les bones chancons ames,
D'une tant bone oir porres,
la de meilleur dire n'orres,
Des grans merueilles que sont faites

⁶ "Florent et Octavien, chanson de geste du XIVe siècle," *Romania* 73 (1952): 289-331.

⁷ *Les grandes chroniques de France*, ed. J. Viard (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de la France, 1922) 2:95-129.

Et de latin en romanz traites.
 Apres un ior qui iadis fu
 Ot a Paris un roi cremu,
 Qui Dagonbers fu apeles ... (vv. 1-9)⁸

By the middle of the fourteenth century, Dagobert was called upon to play an even more important role in support of the French monarchy, devastated by the defeat at Poitiers and threatened by uprisings against the government which marked the future Charles V's regency during the captivity of his father, John II, in England. Once he became king in his own right, Charles V developed a program of propaganda designed to underscore his superior and, indeed, indisputable claim to the French crown. This made use of his consecration with holy oil at Rheims, but also of his descent from Dagobert even before Charlemagne, for whom he had a great admiration and whose name, of course, he bore. All this was supported by a literary program designed to educate his subjects, based on a revision and continuation of the *Grandes chroniques*, on translations such as the one commissioned from Raoul de Presles of Saint Augustine's *City of God*,⁹ which included an introduction underscoring the concept of the divine origin of the French monarchy, as did the anonymous *Songe du Verger* dating from much the same time. This program apparently also included the rewriting of certain chansons de geste, notably those centering on King Dagobert, such as *Hugues Capet*, *Theseus de Cologne*, and *Florent et Octavien*. Certain details that have been added to the second version of the last-named poem, the one in alexandrins, are recognizable as having been inspired by this program, suggesting for it a date soon after Charles V's accession in 1364. It is noteworthy that the earliest manuscript of the fourteenth-century *Florent et Octavien* appears as a basic document in the catalogue of the exhibition devoted to *La librairie de Charles V*, organized by the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1968.¹⁰ The catalogue also notes that the

⁸ Vollmöller, ed., p. 1.

⁹ C. C. Willard, "Raoul de Presles's Translation of Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*," in *Medieval Translators and Their Craft*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989) 329-46.

¹⁰ *La librairie de Charles V*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968) 7.

slightly later *Charles le Chauve* echoes ideas on the divine right of kings conferred by the consecration with holy oil, promoted by such writers in the king's service as Jean de Montreuil, Raoul de Presles, Nicole Oresme, and the anonymous author of the *Songe du Verger*.¹¹

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It is impossible in a short article to give more than a sketchy idea of the complicated subject matter of *Florent et Octavien*.

Octavien, emperor of Rome, was a contemporary and friend of Dagobert, a faithful ally who readily came to his aid when Paris was threatened by an invasion of the pagan Wandres, who were not without an implied resemblance to the invading English.

The central action of the poem has to do with the adventures of Octavien's twin sons, born after the emperor's return from Paris to Rome when the pagans had retreated. Octavien's mother's jealousy of his wife, the Empress Florimonde, leads her to try to persuade her son that the children are not his, in spite of the fact that they are born with scarlet crosses on their shoulders, a sure sign of royalty. The wicked mother even manages to bribe a courtier to introduce himself secretly into her daughter-in-law's bedchamber in order to discredit her with the emperor. He then believes the accusation, perhaps primarily out of fear of his mother, and sends his wife and children away from court to a long series of adventures. These begin with Florimonde's falling asleep from exhaustion in a woods, so that one of the twins is stolen by a monkey and the other by a lion. A pilgrim rescues the first child, but he is stolen again by some thieves, who eventually sell him to a Parisian money-changer, Clement, on his way home from the Holy Land. Clement has the child baptized with the name Florent, and raises him with his own son, Clodoain.

¹¹ In addition to *La librairie de Charles V*, pp. 7-8, see E. Faral, "Le Roman de la fleur de lis de Guillaume de Digulleville," *Mélanges E. Hæpffner* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1949) 327-38, and R. Bossuat, *Les lettres romanes* 7 (1953): 199.

In the meantime, Florimonde, with the help of some other pilgrims, finds the other child in the lion's den where, to everyone's surprise, the beast is licking and caressing him without harming him. The mother is able to rescue her child, but when she tries to board a ship in a nearby port, the lion insists on following her, and even swims after the ship until the ship's master agrees to take it on board. The lion becomes the child's faithful companion, one of the most delightful aspects of the story. On arrival in Jerusalem, Florimonde has this child christened with his father's name, Octavien.

Succeeding episodes of the story develop the adventures of Florent in Paris, where blood clearly shows that he was meant to be a warrior rather than a tradesman, as his stepfather intends. While fighting for Dagobert in defense of Paris against another pagan attack, he encounters his true father, the Emperor Octavien, who feels a strange attraction for him. Eventually, both of them are captured by the enemy in a tremendous battle and are carried away as prisoners to Mediterranean lands.

The young Octavien, on the other hand, has a remarkable series of adventures fighting infidels in the Middle East. His prowess brings him fame and the legacy of more than one kingdom as well as the love of two pagan princesses, both of whom he converts to Christianity. After a great many complicated adventures, he is eventually able to rescue his father and brother, to reunite his parents and arrange all their lives in a satisfactory manner. The wicked mother dies in disgrace. Florent and the pagan princess he has converted and married eventually become the parents of a son, a third Octavien, who becomes in his turn the father of Florence of Rome, to whom another poem is devoted.¹²

This tale is developed with a great proliferation of episodes, some of them variants on well-known themes in literature and folklore,¹³ and there is also an abundance of secondary characters,

¹² *Florence de Rome, chanson d'aventure du premier quart du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Axel Wollensköld. 2 vols. SATF. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907-1909).

¹³ See A. H. Krappe article cited in Note 5.

both Christian and pagan. This does not prevent *Florent et Octavien* from being, on the whole, a rather entertaining narrative, notwithstanding Paulin Paris to the contrary. Although obviously influenced by adventure romances, it still does not depart entirely from Léon Gautier's definition of the epic, which calls for "une époque primitive, un milieu national et religieux; des faits extraordinaires et douloureux, et des héros enfin qui soient vraiment la personnification de tout un siècle."¹⁴ While Florent fights valiantly to preserve Paris from destruction at pagan hands, Octavien wages constant warfare against enemies of Christianity in the Middle East, converting what infidels he does not kill in battle. All this summarizes the royal aspirations of the mid-fourteenth century. If the style has changed somewhat, two hundred or so years have passed since the first chansons de geste were composed.

Even between the early poem and the fourteenth-century revision, there are significant differences. Especially interesting is the insistence in the later poem on Florent's adventures at the expense of Octavien's. Indeed, Paulin Paris considered Octavien's exploits in the Middle East scarcely worthy of notice, although Bossuat pointed to their presence as giving better symmetry to the revision. Both Vollmöller in his edition and Bossuat in his analysis dwell at some length on these differences, which are interesting in reflecting differing tastes and attitudes at the times they were composed.

Of particular significance, of course, is the attention given to supernatural aspects of the founding of the abbey of Saint-Denis. The earlier poem mentions these only in passing, but in the later version not only is the martyrdom of the saint retold at length, but there is also an account of the rediscovery of his remains by Dagobert, who then gave the martyr's head to Notre-Dame, according to a legend which was particularly honored in the fourteenth century. The rest of the saint's body was reburied in a miraculously designated spot, which was, of course, the site where the abbey was established. Furthermore, in a bleak moment during the struggle to defend Paris, Dagobert prays to Saint Denis for help.

¹⁴ *Les épopées françaises*, vol. I (Paris: Palmé, 1878) 13.

In the earlier poem, it is Saint George who appears leading a host of heavenly warriors:

Quant Sarrazins gardent ensemble
Desor Monmartre en une lande,
Et uoient molt grant gent uenir
Sor blanc cheuaus de grant air,
Plus sont blans que noïs qui s'espant.
Saint lories uenoit tot deuant,
Sa gent le siuent a eslais,
Es Tors se firent a un fes,
Plus de .xxx. mile unt uerses.
Es uos paiens espoentes.
Tant s'est Saint lorges conbatus
Que les paiens a desrompus.¹⁵

In the fourteenth-century version, the intercession of Saint Denis is stressed and Saint George is accompanied by Saint Maurice:

Mais Dieu en ot pitié de ce soyés tous fis
Car l'istoire tesmoigne que ly doulx Jhesucrist
Par l'impetracion du bon corps Saint Denis
Envoya lors saint George et le bon saint Moris
Et grande compagnie de gens tous blans vestis...

It is at this moment that Dagobert swears to endow the monastery:

Ses mains joint vers le ciel ly franc roy seignoris
Et a dit en plorant "He vray corps St. Denis
Data ça nous opportuns la foy de Jhesucrist
Si vray que par vous fusmes de la foy entreduis
Veuilles a Dieu le père pour qui fastes martris
Par tel conuenant sire je vous plevis
Que si de la bataille je puis eschapper vifs
Et que je puisse avoir victoire de Persis
A vostre non sera ung mostire establis
Et une belle abbaye de moignes beneys
Qui de cuer serviront le Roy de Parais,
Et vous diront louenges noble corps et gentilz
Priés Dieu qu'aujourd'uy il nous veulle estre amis."¹⁶

¹⁵ Vollmöller, ed., vv. 4705-16

¹⁶ Bibl. Nat. MS. fr. 1452, fol. 76.

God's favor had already been shown to Clovis when the angel brought to him *the fleurs-de-lys* which appear on the French coat of arms, a legend mentioned twice in the fourteenth-century poem. A particular point of this legend is also made in texts prepared under the patronage of King Charles, notably in the introduction to Raoul de Presles's translation of St. Augustine. Such legends, along with the idea of the king's direct descent from Dagobert, were important details in the Valois claim to the French crown against other contenders, notably Edward III of England and Charles the Bad of Navarre.¹⁷

In the course of the battle in which the Emperor Octavien and his son Florent are finally captured by the enemy, the son is described as standing valiantly beside his true father, sustaining honor in the face of defeat, a scene which would undoubtedly have reminded many Frenchmen of Prince Phillip's stand beside his father, John II, on the battlefield of Poitiers. There is no comparable passage in the earlier poem.

A different sort of interest is reflected by the treatment of Florent's adoptive father, Clement, in the two versions. In the earlier one, there is a distinct tendency to mock this good bourgeois because of his ignorance of chivalric practices. In the fourteenth-century version, bourgeois values are treated with greater respect. This time, if Clement lacks sympathy for Florent's chivalric aspirations, he merely makes it clear that his own method of dealing with the enemy would be different, perhaps more practical, and there is no comment on this attitude. Charles V's reliance on solid bourgeois support during his reign is too well known to require further notice, but nonetheless, Florent's instincts in both poems give expression to the firm conviction of both poets that "blood will tell." As the second poem explains:

Et le traioit nature en son encesserie
Combien qu'il ne seust point qu'il fust de tel lignie.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Note 11.

¹⁸ MS. fr. 1452, fol. 18v^o.

Bossuat's insistence that the final episodes of the fourteenth-century poem were a later addition, based on borrowings from other chansons de geste, requires special comment.¹⁹ With regard to some rather quixotic adventures of the characters in the Middle East, he fails to see any connection with historic crusading ventures of the period—the crusade of Pierre I of Cyprus, for example, or Amadeus VI's capture of Alexandria. As recounted by Machaut, this second undertaking seems only slightly less exotic than fiction, and both were doubtless a subject of interest to their contemporaries and, presumably, to those who formed the audience of this poem. Leopold Delisle mentions a collection of documents in Charles V's library having to do with crusading plans, some of them discussing projects which never took place, but evidently interest in such ventures continued to exist throughout the Middle Ages.²⁰

A further question must then be considered. For whom were poems such as the fourteenth-century *Florent et Octavien* written? Bossuat considered that in common with *Hugues Capet* and *Charles le Chauve*, for instance, it was intended for a popular audience, when he wrote: "Destinées à la foule et déclamées au coin des rues par les jongleurs, elles n'atteignent pas tout d'abord la bonne société, qui les méprise."²¹ On the other hand, the author of a recent study of Dagobert suggests quite a different possibility, when he says:

Ces œuvres immenses, artificielles, étaient destinées à un public savant. On peut douter qu'elles se soient répandues dans le peuple et que leur audience ait dépassé un cercle restreint. Mais c'était le public lettré: clercs, légistes, universitaires, négociants, grands aristocrates, que Charles V souhaitait voir empregné des hauts faits d'une royauté mythique, afin de le gagner à sa cause et de le convaincre de la

¹⁹ Bossuat, *Romania*: 319-22.

²⁰ *Le cabinet des manuscrits I* (Paris: Bibliothèque Impériale, 1868) 30.

²¹ Bossuat, *Romania*: 330.

légitimité des Valois. Ce n'est pas par hasard que Dagobert, dans cette entreprise, a été le plus sollicité.²²

This was undoubtedly the audience for which the *Grandes chroniques de France*, the *Songe du Verger* and the translations of Raoul de Presles, or Nicole Oresme's translations of Aristotle, were intended, but were these same people attracted by the adventures of Florent and Octavien? The evidence offered by a writer who knew well the court of Charles V would seem to suggest a better possibility. Christine de Pizan, in offering advice to queens and princesses in her *Livre des trois vertus*, speaks of the custom observed by one queen, probably Charles V's Jeanne de Bourbon, of having someone recite tales such as these during meals. She writes: "Et tandis que l'assiete durera, selon la belle ancienne coustume des roynes et des princepses, aura un preudomme en estant au chief du dois qui dira dittiéz d'anciennes gestes de bons trespasés ou d'aucunes bonnes moralitez ou exemples. La n'aura mie grant noyse menée." In the *Livre du corps de policie*, while speaking of the education of princes, she further cited the example of the Romans, saying: "Au mengier faisoient chanter les gestes de vaillans trespasés et des bons euvres de leurs predecesseurs afin que la volenté des jeunes en feust plus courageuse . . ."²³ Jean Gerson in his educational treatise intended for Louis de Guyenne, the heir to the French throne, likewise recommended that he follow the example of his great uncle, Louis de Bourbon, who "à son disner continuellement [écoutait] les gestes des trez renommez princes jadis roys de France."²⁴

One can understand that this variation from accepted literary theory might not have appealed to Paulin Paris, diligently studying the three extant manuscripts of the poem in the Bibliothèque

²² Laurent Theis, *Dagobert* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1982) 103.

²³ *Le livre des trois vertus*, ed. C. C. Willard (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1989) 50; *Le livre du corps de policie*, ed. R. H. Lucas, TLF 145 (Geneva-Paris: Droz, 1967) 240.

²⁴ Cited in Jacques Krynen, *Idéal du Prince et pouvoir royal en France à la fin du moyen âge (1380-1440). Étude de la littérature politique du temps* (Paris: A. J. Picard, 1981) 88-89.

Nationale, nor indeed to Robert Bossuat, an admirable scholar, but imbued, as William C  lin has suggested, by Brunetierre's theories on the development and decline of literary genres.²⁵ This is one more case where one must try to detach oneself from viewing the Middle Ages across the nineteenth century and undertake to consider the evolving story of *Florent et Octavien* directly. It is not only an entertaining tale, but its progressive versions provide an insight into the tastes of the late Middle Ages, which already point the way to the seventeenth-century novel.

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²⁵ *The Epic Quest* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966)
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