

The Gendered World of the *Chanson de Guillaume*

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The *Chanson de Guillaume* remains a problematic epic when viewed against the influential Oxford *Roland*, not to mention other *chansons de geste*. Though it is one of the earliest epics extant, it nevertheless fails to conform to the "early epic" criteria. Doubly double, it not only repeats the same events already narrated, it has a sequel qua repeat known as *Aliscans*. In the doubled narration of the *Chanson de Guillaume* itself, the repeated material emphasizes the scenes between William and Guibourc as well as the battles. The prominent role she plays may or may not define the epic norm, according to which critic one follows.¹ At any rate, Guibourc has no counterpart in the Oxford *Roland*. However, in the *Chanson de Guillaume*, Guibourc is not alone: Blanche-flor, the king's wife, also plays a brief but important part in the action. Though Guibourc and Blanche-flor never meet, they nevertheless have a relationship which bears on the problematic nature of this epic. A convert to Christianity, Guibourc helps turn the tide against the Saracens and save the city of Orange. Their strategies include William's journeying to King Louis' court for the express purpose of enlisting aid; unfortunately, Guibourc and William will finally not be able to depend on their sovereign for more than a token gesture. Louis is influenced by Blanche-flor, his wife and

Williams sister. She resists giving help to William out of animosity toward Guibourc. The clash between these two incarnations of medieval women ends by revealing fundamental attitudes toward women in an epic context and makes the *Chanson de Guillaume* an important work in specifically tracing attitudes toward gender in the medieval period.

I. Guibourc

The way in which the poems public is led to view Guibourc sets the stage for the clash between the two women characters to which I have just referred. Many modern critics view Guibourc as the ideal feudal wife and the poem seems to corroborate their understanding in passages like the following one:²

Il n'i out tele femme en la crestienté
 Pur sun seignur servir e honorer,
 Ne pur eshalcer sainte crestienté,
 Ne pur lei maintenir e garder.³

These lines of the poem emphasize Guibourc's obedience to her husband and her religion. Yet in the *Chanson de Guillaume* itself, there is evidence that the excerpt above could be taken ironically, even in the context of medieval literary troping. Guibourc may have no peer as a wife or Christian woman, but neither the intra nor extra-diegetic public nor she herself must forget that she is a convert and a Saracen, as the poem repeatedly reminds us (vv. 946-47, 1012-13, 1422, 1624-25, 2391-94). In the *Prise d'Orange*, another epic poem and a version of which was contemporaneous with the *Chanson*, Guibourc helps William kill her first husband, seize Orange, and converts to Christianity in order to marry William.⁴ We can assume that the historical public of the *Chanson* had heard of these aspects of Guibourc's literary biography and that

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the story lent a special significance to the statement that there was not such a woman in all Christendom.

However, what the poem demonstrates, but does not state explicitly, is that Guibourc operates out of the realm assigned to her as a female character. Consider that Guibourc makes an excellent castellan whose capability in organizing and communicating equals that of men. The text favorably presents the way in which she replaces William in continuing preparations for the war and enumerates the tasks she undertakes. Among the roles she easily shoulders are the important offices of the medieval court, always allotted to men: wine-steward (v.1239), watchman (v. 1241), and porter (v. 1279) are all specifically mentioned.⁵ We may assume that she also functions as seneschal in serving the meal to these knights and chamberlain, with all the irony that notion would entail. Normally filled by different individuals, Guibourc alone is able to do all of them. As a commentary on both male and female gender roles, this situation ironizes the masculine ego which separates functions within the castle at the same time that it indicates the decadence of this particular court in which a woman steps into the breach opened up by men's failures to provide and succeed. Guibourc shows prowess in the assumption of these tasks, a trait which is clearly not allotted to her by the social order. In a society where one is one's social role, stepping outside that role is unreasonable, no matter what the circumstances. Thus, the circumstances described above are ironic since, plainly, Guibourc is still in possession of her faculties.

However, the lines are also sharply drawn around the public and private spheres. If Guibourc plays these roles only for her husband and the text brings into play only positive or neutral comments about them, then my previous claims about an ironic reading of her transgression of gender boundaries will themselves be questionable. However, William clearly displays uneasiness with her activities by twice asking what she is doing guarding the gate: "Dame Guiburc,

des quant gardas ma porte? . . . Seor, duce amie, des quant ies mun porter (vv. 1282, 1285). Each time he sets out for the battlefield she takes steps to help and, on his return, she has devised plans for continuing the war despite Williams objections. Her activity and aggression are never acknowledged by her husband except as a threat to him.

Contrarily, her presence reassures the knights she has assembled to continue the battle, a plan she explained to William. Why should she be received positively by these outsiders and not by her husband? The reply lies in the self-interest of each party. If Guibourc is still within the castle and has not taken refuge, surely the situation is not desperate for the knights either. However, if Guibourc has taken over for designated knights in Williams household, that fact alone rebukes the strategies leading to Williams failures. Guibourc's role has expanded to fill a void, a double failure of a gender-based role system. Whether or not Guibourc often plays this "masculinized" role of being in charge in front of others, William suffers a loss of prestige when confronted by the knowledge of how his wife behaves in his absence. He is destabilized in his own gender role when his failure is reflected back at him through this Other, his wife. If Guibourc has assumed behavior characteristic of the masculine role, then William must also have taken on feminine traits. This kind of cross-over obviously brings into question the essential duality of the roles Guibourc and William play as the action in which they are involved gets started. While she stays behind, he leaves to do battle. However, his prowess erodes: first, he delays his departure; second, he is beaten by the enemy; third, and most important, his failure is implicitly displayed to comrades-at-arms to whom Guibourc's prowess is patently evident. Obviously, the theme of tension around gender roles underlies much of the action of this epic.

Of course, historically, the role reserved for women, even noble women, by medieval society is that of mother, but it is a role which Guibourc does not play. Guibourc therefore embodies all the better the

problematic attitude toward women held by the society depicted in this text, where on the one hand, she is judged an ideal wife, except that her antecedents undercut her, but on the other, her competence and energy are a threat to her husband. Suzanne F. Wemple notes that in Frankish society:

As helpmates of their husbands and as widows, women were esteemed for their energy and competence, while as daughters and wives they were supposed to accept their inexorable subordination to male interests and values. Passivity and submission, the behavior traits forced upon women as daughters and wives, were diametrically opposed to the self-assertion and resourcefulness women were expected to display as heads of the household and managers of property both during their husbands' lives and after their deaths.⁶

This passage concerns a historical period preceding that of the supposed composition of the *Chanson* in 1150, though the sole existing manuscript of this poem dates from the thirteenth century.⁷ However, there is every indication that the twelfth-century renaissance curtailed women's activities even more.⁸ Most importantly, the effect of such contradictory expectations about the historical role of women and their behavior was to deprive them of a stable social niche and so keep them outside the group holding power, both despite their contributions to upholding the political status quo and because of them. The reverberations of this dichotomy reach us in the *Chanson de Guillaume*.

This historical paradox concerning the role of women is mirrored in the problematic representation of gender roles by the characters of Guibourc and William. The duality of gender difference staged at different points of the *Chanson de Guillaume* fails to mask another phenomenon presented by the text and now theorized as the partaking of each gender in the role and characteristics of the other in the construction of

gender identity. That is, there is no difference without the Other. Cixous and Irigaray theorize femininity as a structuring of the libido through patriarchal discourse, i.e. through language⁹; thus, there is no absolute difference in verbal representations of the two genders as opposed to their corporeal manifestations and even these differences and similarities co-exist in an essentially boundary-less framework:

First, both masculinity and femininity as entities or identities are produced by a more originary play of masculine/féminine difference within both men and women. Second, for both genders within our gender system, gender identity continues to exist after its production only because each gender partakes of the other gender. Third, the two different interplays between masculinity and femininity that produce each gender are not opposed to each other but asymmetrically different.¹⁰

Equally, therefore, masculinity results from a structuring of the libido through patriarchal discourse. Even the usual grammatical comparison of the two genders, (male) subject and (female)

object, presupposes the verb, sometimes technically a "copula". We could consider the latter a verbal representation of that Golden Age originary unity which has to be reconstructed or the expandable or contractable filler between the subject and object; we should also not forget that subject and object can switch places, become only nominal representations. In other words, this absolute pronouncement of the role of the two genders within language also contains a spectrum of roles and dependencies in order to create meaning. Guibourc and William apparently do not signify strongly enough as single entities; each requires the other to conceptualize the world and be conceptualized by it despite the strongly dualistic gender system of their society.

The *Chanson de Guillaume* underlines the socially required presence of the Other by making

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Guibourc Saracen. Because she is pagan and not simply foreign, she personifies the exogamy to which the French aristocracy had recourse in order to establish young men with properties and titles. However, the agnatic system dependent on land, such as was developing in France in the twelfth century, looked askance at the wives' family connections who could make demands.¹¹ Being enemies, Guibourc's family is rightly excluded from the order of loving, as described by Peter Lombard. Her family members who could have been expected to make such demands have been vanquished; she herself repudiated her Saracen husband. The fact that all of her known family relations are males underscores the agnatic systems dependence on the exchange of women between men. Though Guibourc's Christian marriage was unintended by her family, nevertheless an exchange of a woman, a territory, and a title did occur. Yet, despite (and because of) being the basis of the transfer of power between men, Guibourc's status is just as problematic in this epic as what can be ascertained of that of aristocratic women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even when the latter have supposedly exemplified the power to which certain women could accede.

To cope with their contradictions, all societies, including literary depictions of the same, have mechanisms to defuse tension. For instance, Guibourc shows the zealotry of the convert in her absolute devotion to the Christian cause: marriage and religion have dissolved all her ties and made her self-interest dependent on her husbands. Why? Because she has burned all her bridges behind her and there is no going back to the Saracen side. She is obliged to fight for her husband. On the other hand, William also allots some praise to Guibourc. He admits that her advice has been useful "en plusurs lius" (in several cases) where he has needed it (vv. 2433-34). Comments like this one are obviously enough to re-motivate Guibourc, if indeed her zeal flagged. William also repeatedly uses a pair of interesting epithets to address his wife: "Seor, duce amie" (vv. 945, 1015, 1285, 1357

etc.). The first term is literally an expression of a family tie and the second be. *One's friends* and *allies* were often simply family members (cf. the term *charnel ami*). Guibourc even states once about her nephew, who is evidently part of Williams court and a convert: "Il est mis nies, mult est prof de ma char" (He is my nephew and very close to my flesh [v. 1034]).

The closest a wife can come to being a part of the family into which she marries is to be thought of as a sister. Since there are only hints at Guibourc's family origins, it is highly likely that this epic attenuates that fact by associating her with Williams family, thus another reason for the term of *soeur*. Of course, the inherent problem with this terminology does not go unnoticed even within the action narrated in the *Chanson de Guillaume*. The brother-sister relation occasions an important scene later. Foreshadowed here, that scene shows that being a sister is no solution for women either. Sisters must marry outside their families, thus posing anew the question of their status within a family. Georges Duby characterizes the situation for women in the Middle Ages in the following way. The woman introduced by marriage into a different family:

cessera de relever de son père, de ses frères,
de ses oncles pour être soumise à son mari,
mais toutefois condamnée à demeurer
toujours une étrangère, un peu suspecte de
trahison furtive dans ce lit où elle a pénétré,
où elle va remplir sa fonction primordiale:
donner des enfants au groupe d'hommes qui
l'accueille, qui la domine et qui la surveille.¹²

Of course, Guibourc and William have no children. However, she does provide for the continuing of the line and the maintaining of the property by having her long-lost brother enter her husband's service. As a surrogate of of his *sister* Guibourc, Rainouart renews the family. Otherwise, Duby's comments fit her situation very well: brought into the family, dominated, and watched over by her husband.

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Finally, the courtly nature of this epithet of "seor, duce amie" has to be considered. Certainly, the terms convey affective meaning.¹³ However, in what context does one find duce here? In the epic context, it has to be read against *charnel ami*, that formula for the bond between men. That sort of bond does not characterize Guibourc's relationship with William. She cannot be a blood brother; her offer to send her nephew Guischarde to battle is fraught with contradictions. What does being closely related mean with respect to Guibourc? Does Guischarde share his aunt's commitment to the Christian cause, without the reasons for it? Or does his relation to her come out of her Saracen past? As Guibourc's surrogate, Guischarde should fill the role of blood brother to William. Yet, this nephew does not; he recants his Christian conversion and rues the day he left his Saracen world behind (vv. 1196-1200). Considered from this viewpoint, duce appears to be a word reserved for indicating that women will never arrive at the privileged inner circle of power. Thus, duce would mean docile and tractable as much as sweet, pleasing, soft, etc. This adjective again points in the direction Duby has traced above.

According to the echoes of the ideology present in the literary representation of this society, *duce* and *charnel* line up with gender role expectations. *Duce* is a term for women, antonymic to *charnel* for men. A *duce amie* can be expected to comply, as the example of the pastourelle, among others, shows us. A *charnel ami* provides loyal service in feats of arms. That the intradiegetic world of the *Chanson* or even intertextual comparisons reveal deficiencies in how characters fulfill the expectations implied by these epithets serves only to underscore that these expectations point to an ideology against which "reality strains. Thus, William verbally demonstrates his dominant role in the couple, though he fails to win in combat. Thus, Guibourc soothes her husband's feelings, though she has foreseen that reinforcements will be necessary. Concurrent actions by both show Guibourc going against this ideology of gender roles in order to guar-

antee the survival of the patriarchal system. If she succeeds in her plans, William will be assured of continuing his tenancy of the city and remaining a lord.

The question of the literary representation of women's status in the medieval family brings up the issue of women's loyalty and tractability, an important one in a society where loyalty to a family is a way to survive. Nevertheless, the narrator and the historical, extradiegetic audience, to the extent we can discern it, and to whom the text is addressed themselves evidently approved of Guibourc's behavior despite the contradictions such approval would entail. Only the text can testify to attitudes held by the original publics of this epic; despite the slender evidence in this case, another character's behavior contrasts so markedly with Guibourc's that it is impossible not to draw conclusions relating to the audience's expectations of and in the *Chanson de Guillaume*.

II. Blancheflor

As the queen of France, Blancheflor resides at the royal court with her husband, King Louis. Thus, she is present when William arrives at the king's court to enlist Louis' aid. Not only is Blancheflor at home during William's visit, she attends a public gathering with the king. The fact of her public appearance might be somewhat unusual; however, the court has gathered to hear from William, Blancheflor's brother. The scenario of domestic tranquility and brotherly love changes as soon as William unveils the reason for his visit, a reason the king already suspects:

"Sire Willame, cum faitement errez?
Ne vos vi mais ben ad set anz passez;
Ne sanz bosoig, ço sai, ne me requerez."
(2507-09)

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Though Louis is hardly inclined to help, inasmuch as he refuses even to look at William and then flatly rejects the idea of helping the besieged couple (vv. 2524-25; 2530-31), nevertheless Blanche-flor bursts out with a pre-emptive strike to prevent her husband from getting embroiled in her brother's war (vv. 2590-96) because her husband was letting himself be convinced to help in this cause by other barons (vv. 2588-89). She attacks William by libeling Guibourc and reminding him of the foreign source of his power. He married the wife of the Saracen ruler of Orange whom William ousted with the help of that ruler's wife. That wife was named Orable; she became Guibourc. From this point of view, Guibourc is both a traitor and an adulteress. Naturally, William rejects his sister's charges. He even draws his sword and threatens to kill her (vv. 2623-25). Other men also present at court, among them her father, blame Blanche-flor's outburst too though less violently than William. Her father rejects her by cursing the day she was born (v. 2629), a word to the wise according to the narrator (v. 2627). Meanwhile, her husband, the king, comments that the queen must be insane: "Ele parole cum femme desvee," (v. 2631). Blanche-flor obviously violates strong taboos in speaking out as she does.

Yet, how exactly does Blanche-flor's speech differ from Guibourc's? The former meets with violent disapproval while the latter receives praise, undercut though it is with ironic undertones. One could theorize that among the many doublings of the *Chanson de Guillaume*, the two women characters also are different versions of an archetype, onto one of which all the latent hostility to the role played by a woman character in the previous action is displaced and made overt. Assuming a public role and speaking to the decision makers in front of the lord of the castle is a boundary not even Guibourc crosses. Thus, indeed, Blanche-flor is *desvee* for she deviates from accepted norms. She speaks out in an arena where only men speak, the court, and thereby breaks social conventions surrounding gender roles. She assumes a man's role and turns this

little world upside down. Such activity belongs to the devil, the original devious one. Indeed, during the Middle Ages and even later, insanity was commonly thought to be the mark of the devil. Thus, to be out of bounds is insanity. On the other hand, no matter how Guibourc speaks and behaves, she has already been relegated to being beyond the pale. The events of her life and the situation in which she finds herself marginalize her automatically, reflected in that epithet of *duce* for her, as if she actually played the role of courtly lady and her astuteness had no more significance than planning an amorous adventure. Contrarily, Blanche-flor, who does reside at the center of political power, needs to be silenced. In fact, she will appear no further in the Chanson after this scene.

Thus, Blanche-flor is Guibourc's negative counterpart.¹⁴ Foreign Guibourc receives her share of criticism, but has learned to work within the confines of her role to merit the grudging approbation of her husband, the narrator, and the intradiegetic audience. Native-born Blanche-flor resides at court and does not have the opportunity to play an active role in affairs behind the scene to the extent Guibourc does because her role consists of advising *out of public hearing*. She may advise her husband in private, as does Guibourc, but she would not actively participate in the defense of the capital. The outlying areas, in one of which William and Guibourc reside, are designated for that purpose. Thus, the sole influential role in which Blanche-flor can lend assistance is consultative. Since William turns up unexpectedly, Blanche-flor cannot consult behind the scenes. Nevertheless, she is determined that Louis not make a mistake. Thus, she speaks out and thereby breaks social conventions to the point of appearing mad.¹⁵

Daring to express her opinion publicly, despite the fact that she thereby upholds the patriarchy by telling her husband to resist Guibourc's wishes, earns her the label of being beyond reason because she has thereby assumed a role of equality with men. She is immediately punished for her transgression, for cross-

ing the boundary between public and private. Drawing his sword, William actually threatens her with death (vv. 2623-25). Her father rejects her by cursing the day she was born (v. 2629), a wise step to take according to the narrator (v. 2627). As noted earlier, her husband considers her mad. From the point of view of the narrative, she is also a character with whom it is better to dispense: suppressed by the other characters, she disappears as well from the text itself and makes no further appearances in this poem. By speaking in the public realm, in the court, in the very place where the only men worth mentioning speak, the highly born, she also merits the indictment of the public hearing. The legitimate speakers condemn her to forfeit a public hearing: she needs to speak out of public hearing and therefore, technically, she does not speak. This state of affairs upholds the patriarchy, according to the collective, knightly wisdom. They fail to realize that Blanche-flor has rightly assessed the influence of Guibourc and how the latter manipulates the double standard of the patriarchy, thereby undermining it unintentionally even as Guibourc seeks to uphold the status quo. Unfortunately for Blanche-flor, the ends do not justify the means here. Open defiance of patriarchal norms, even in their support, obviously meets with strong defensive action. Stepping out of the gendered scheme of this world view has to be explained; if not, the deviation could become the norm and power would begin to flow away from those presently holding it.

Though Blanche-flor has been certified crazy because of her violation of norms and thus being beyond reason, she broaches a number of topics in her outburst about which William, the intradiegetic public, and the historical, extradiegetic audience at whom the *Chanson* is aimed might have been sensitive. Therefore, despite being crazy and consequently "having nothing to say," nevertheless she has made her charges before anyone can react. She articulates deeply buried partisan positions which touch on family relationships, religion, and political power.

Specifically, Blanche flor reproaches Guibourc for knowing sorcery, a knowledge brought with her from her pagan life and which Blanche flor sees as the reason for Guibourc's influence. After all, was Guibourc's original name not Orable, akin to oracle, a pagan, anti-Christian, instrument of the devil. After all, William has come to the court to demand that everyone save Guibourc, as if he himself were not involved (vv. 2487-88, 2522-23, 2528-29) and thus demonstrates to everyone that he is controlled by his wife. Blanche flor even provides a rationale to prove the validity of her accusation. Only a woman knowledgeable about witchcraft could seduce good Christians, that is, the male members of society. Brought from her pagan life, this knowledge of sorcery would account for Guibourc's popularity. Moreover, Guibourc obviously ensnared William and acquired a name and status in Christian society by virtue of her marriage to him. This situation leaves no opportunity for Blanche flor, the real sister, to influence her brother. Her outburst can be read as one of jealousy that an outsider has usurped William's esteem and enjoys his companionship while Blanche flor does not. This theme of a special bond between brother and sister can be traced to customs of the Merovingian and Carolingian courts, as well as other stories of Germanic origin like Siegfried and Brunnhilde. It is entirely possible that in French epic, besides the theme of uncle and nephew, there are echoes of previous, incestuous relations that prevailed between brother and sister.¹⁶ Following this reasoning, Blanche flor gives vent to her rancor at being displaced by a Christian, exogamous marriage and thus accuses Guibourc of plotting. Naturally, her brother cannot be responsible for having chosen Guibourc of his own volition. However, new norms are in place. To choose one's real sister as wife is the new impossible choice. Nevertheless, the queen sees herself as a victim of persecution.

William counter-attacks with such great verbal violence and crudeness that he could hardly equal it on the battlefield where his adversary would be more

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redoubtable (vv. 2597-2624). He does not bother to refute his sisters charges of sorcery against Guibourc or deny the existence of plots against the court; these charges do not seem to merit a reply. In rejecting them out of hand William conducts himself similarly to the leaders of the Church in the period of this epics composition inasmuch as they too simply rejected the popular belief in witchcraft (although they uphold and use that belief in later periods).¹⁷ Instead, William can and must attack on the issue where the brother-sister relationship at the crux of this dispute is most unacknowledged, the realm of sexual obsessions. He must attack at this underlying theme because not to do so would imply that he himself is in league with the devil. By refuting Blancheflor on the grounds of her subtext, he simultaneously defends Guibourc against the charge of sorcery because the mark of the witch is her sexuality.¹⁸ Though he cannot identify the source of the trouble between them, he comes close by referring to the sexual matters which his sister avoided and calls her a slut, *pute reine* (vv. 2599 and 2603). In so doing, he too may be motivated by jealousy; his sister has escaped his control, therefore he imagines the worst excesses of her.¹⁹

He lists the offenses which, according to him, link her to the Christian defeats at the hands of the Saracens on the battlefield of the Archamp. One, she shares the responsibility for what happened by having been sexually involved with the two cowards, Tedbald and Esturmi, who left Vivien to die at the hands of the superior Saracen force at the beginning of the poem. William has been trying to redress the situation since then. Two, she squanders resources which could be used by the army by having succulent meals, rich wines, a comfortable bed, and someone with whom to share it.²⁰ William attempts to rid himself of guilt over her successive defeats by identifying his sister with what is rotten in the kingdom (v. 2613). He must also indirectly be insulting Louis; if his sister is having affairs, then the king is a cuckold, avatar of the medieval theme of the weak king. Unfortunately, part of what is wrong

with the conduct of the war and which has made Guibourc's help indispensable is William's attitude: he has delayed when action should have been taken (vv. 1003-1041); he has indulged at the table and enjoyed creature comforts too (vv. 1042-64 and 1402-83); he is uneasy over having exploited Guibourc's good sense and having enjoyed the credit heretofore. Moreover, Blanche-flor makes a good scapegoat for someone like William who is at his wits' end. In fact, William displaces his own guilt and shame onto his sister. As a patriarchal figure he has difficulty measuring up. If he is taking advice from a woman, perhaps he is like a woman himself and then he must be crazy. However, no one will speak up for Blanche-flor. For brother, father, husband, and the knights assembled at court, she is a troublesome woman and an outsider to the court who does not know how to keep its conventions. As a married woman she does not really belong with either family, nor does Guibourc.²¹

Such is the character of feudal society, as noted before, that foreign women often marry the sons of great families. They bring with them land, hence power, which would not be in the reach of these sons otherwise. They are invaluable to their husbands for their opinions as well as their wealth, but since by definition society does not approve of their views, it refuses their integration into any society. Blanche-flor wrongly assumes that whatever advice she has for her husband is also meant for public ears and that there is no harm in explicitly demonstrating that she is the power behind the throne. The male characters react angrily to this breach of the code, especially William, who may see parallels with his own situation in which Guibourc repeatedly gives him advice on how to wage war.

Blanche-flor represents the contradictions surrounding the role of aristocratic women in medieval French society. Though Guibourc negotiates a way through these attitudes, in an approach perhaps reflective of the emerging mercantile class or the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Blanche-flor fails victim to

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them. Expected to be behind their husbands and provide them with opinions, they owe their very objectivity to their status as outsiders.²² Though other people have also questioned Guibourc's rank and prestige, only Blanche-flor voices these criticisms in public. Additionally, William's reputation does nothing to help him at court: the king is jealous and knows that William would not appear before him if the situation were not dire. However, the queen has her own reasons to accuse Guibourc of malicious intent: the fact that she, a Christian, has less prestige than her sister-in-law, a convert. Because Blanche-flor feels insecure about her position at court, she sees in Williams plea for help in defending Orange, a plea which precipitated the scene between them, a pure fabrication designed to give Guibourc and William the throne. Thus, she flatly contradicts her husband's belated offer of help to fight the Saracens besieging Orange. The whole of the incident reflects the predicament of one outsider fighting for the favor shown another.

The relations the characters entertain with one another almost come unravelled in this scene. The relationships questioned here — brother-sister, husband-wife, king-vassal — reach into every area of the socio-political world picture in this epic. Blanche-flor is bothered by her brother's marriage to a convert; William is distressed to see his sister the wife of a man whom he established, yet who now has rights over him (according to the epic tradition). Blanche-flor and Louis live regally while William and Guibourc struggle to survive on the frontier for the weak king. Williams loyalty to the latter prevents him from assuming in fact the power over Louis to which his reputation entitles him. The kingdom risks crumbling at this moment. Better to dismiss Blanche-flor's assertions as ranting. Yet, in the end, Louis does not reject his wife's advice to stay home:

"Si jo n'i vois, si serrad m'ost mandee.
Vint mile chevalers od nues espees
Li chargerai demain a l'ajurnee." (2632-34)

Neither does William insist that the king accompany him.

III. Representations of Women's Voices

Thus, Blanche-flor represents the aristocratic woman whose physical presence is authorized at court, as a guarantor of her husband's identity and prowess, through her beauty and promise of fertility. However, social norms allot her only the status of an object, like the throne on which her husband sits. Blanche-flor's speech startles this world as much as if that throne had begun walking on its "legs." Marginal yet central, the queen momentarily holds absolute power in this court and completely reverses the usual situation in which noblemen speak and all others are simply present, their role not even consisting of listening. Blanche-flor's influence pulls apart and unravels the feudal and familial bonds between men who occupy the central stage. These men close rank and attempt to destroy her. Yet, her voice echoes in the corridors of power; nothing can undo the words which all have heard. No one defends Guibourc certainly; no one takes issue specifically with the insults Blanche-flor levels against William. Blanche-flor may also give voice to many unspoken ideas held in this circle and reflected earlier by the way the young *bachelors* treat William: in ignoring him when he has no gifts to distribute, they are presumably less astute about dissembling than their elders. She certainly has authority with her husband since he shows the public the extent to which he takes her advice and probably always has.

This public visibility of a strong wife who usurps the role of counselor destabilizes the social structure; thus, in keeping with the William cycles theme of a vacuum at the center of the realm, the royal court again proves its inherent flaws. The king and queen also reflect , as if through a bad mirror William and

Guibourc. That mirror image shows a royal couple comporting itself outside the pale of social convention while the vassalic pair resides on the fringes of civilization. The poem's extradiegetic audience, whether historical or modern, receives the message that the couple, the family, and society survive only if restrictions, social or spatial, are applied to the role women play. However, the narrative also shows that women retain the power to free themselves from these restrictions, given certain opportunities: Guibourc and Blancheflor step into a power vacuum created by the patriarchal power structure and show characteristics defined as male: courage, activity, character. Ironically, the patriarchy has spawned "monsters": women who act like men. Williams' violent reaction to Blancheflor, and indirectly to Louis, represents one of despair about the forces he confusedly perceives at work in his society and in his own marriage.

Calling a wife a sister implies that the bond of marriage is not enough to integrate her into her husband's family. That relationship is concretized in a form in which the wife is literally one of the same kind as her husband. Thus, the wife's ties to her own family must be lessened. Her identity must change; Orable the Saracen princess becomes Guibourc the Christian wife. Designed to insure the wife's identification with her husband's family, these steps succeed: Guibourc is a zealous convert. Still, she is evidently suspect. Blancheflor is to the manner born and, yet, she too fails to pass muster. However, precisely because Guibourc's sympathies for the Christian world never falter, she serves as a good example of the futility of medieval society's struggle to insure conformity to its ideas through emphasizing the Christian family, making sisters of wives, only to suspect the latter too.

Guibourc's entry into male consciousness in the William cycle is symbolic: Saracen-born, yet paragon of a Christian, wife but not mother, Guibourc presents a threat to William and his society insofar as her role renders explicit the falseness of the images of women to which they subscribe. The *Chanson de*

Guillaume gives many examples of the contradictory feelings the masculine representatives of power have toward women and family loyalty, even when the women in question are drawn from its ranks. When the loyalty of Blancheflor is to her own interest and to her husbands, rather than her fathers family, her behavior is condemned. In Guibourc's case, loyalty to her fathers family would not be tolerated; instead, she is and must be on the side of Williams family. Otherwise, the narrative cannot fulfill its function of correcting, but also affirming the public to which it is destined. As a product of the patriarchy, this epic sanctions the status quo; its seeming challenges to the ruling class disappear, one by one, subsumed into the patriarchy.

In fact, William is in no danger from Guibourc. her presence at his side insures his geste of survival better than any sons would do, just as Jean Frappier notes: "Cette invention du couple héroïque mettait déjà hors série la destinée de *Guillaume*."²³ As the emphases which I have added to Frappier's comment indicate, ironically the role of the "ideal" epic woman in the *Chanson de Guillaume* is to allow only William to be perceived as out of the ordinary, indicated by the title to which his marriage to Orable gave him the right, William of Orange. The power of the ideal woman, in short, is to allow William first to be and then to remain William of Orange.

NOTES

1 See for example A. Adler, "Guillaume, Vivien, et Rainouart: Le *Souillé* et le *Pur*," *Romania* 90 (1969), 11 ; and Bernard Guidot, "Figures féminines et chanson de geste: l'exemple de Guibert d'Andrenas," in *Marche romane: Mélanges de philologie et de littératures romanes offerts à Jeanne Wathelet-Willem*, Cahiers de l'association des Romanistes de l'Université de Liège (Liège: Association des Romanistes de l'Université de Liège, 1978), 194.

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2 Among these critics are Jean Frappier in *Les Chansons de geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange* (Vol. I [Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1955]) and Italo Siciliano in *Les Chansons de geste et l'épopée: Mythes, histoires, poèmes* (Biblioteca di Studi Francesi, 3 [Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1968]).

3 *La Chanson de Guillaume*, ed. Duncan McMillan, Société des Anciens Textes Français (Paris: Picard, 1949-50), vv. 1487-90. All further references to this work will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in my text.

4 *La Prise d'Orange*, ed. Claude Régner, 5th ed., Bibliothèque Française et Romane, Série B: Editions Critiques de Textes, 5 (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), 34.

5 Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, *A History of Private Life: II, Revelations of the Medieval World*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 73.

6 *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900*, The Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 120.

7 Jeanne Wathelet-Willem, *Recherches sur la "Chanson de Guillaume": Etudes accompagnées d'une édition*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philologie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège, 210 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1975), 653.

8 Paulette l'Hermite-Leclercq, "The Feudal Order," in *A History of Women in the West*, Vol. 2: *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 202-249.

9 E. Jane Burns, *BodyTalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 8.

10 Leslie Wahl Rabine, "A Feminist Politics of Non-Identity," *Feminist Studies* 14, 1 (Spring 1988), 21.

11 David Herlihy, *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978-1991*, ed. A. Molho (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), 147.

12 "Le Mariage dans la société du Haut Moyen Age," in *Il Matrimonio nella società altomedievale*, Proc. of a Conference of the Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 22-28 April 1976, Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 24 (Spoleto: Presse La Sede del Centro, 1977), 21.

13 A. Grisay, G. Lavis and M. Dubois-Stasse (*Les Dénominations de la femme dans les anciens textes littéraires français*, Publications de l'Institut de Lexicologie Française de l'Université de Liège [Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1969], 150-51), state: "Les épithètes .. sont toujours les mêmes. .. elles ont renforcé le caractère affectif du mot. Avec soeur, amie est donc par excellence le mot dont la littérature médiévale s'est servi pour exprimer la tendresse à l'endroit des femmes."

14 Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez, "William and Rainouart: Comic Renewal in the *Chançon de Willame*," *Olifant* 7 (1979), 14, n. 18.

15 Wemple (p. 106) cites a rebuke made by the Synod of Nantes in 895 which is in the same vein. The sphere of influence of women was to be restricted to family affairs.

16 William Oliver Farnsworth, *Uncle and Nephew in the Old French Chanson de Geste* (1918; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1966), 1-2.

17 Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), 270.

18 Shahar, 275.

19 Duby, 21.

20 Seidenspinner-Núñez, 14, n. 18.

21 Duby, 21.

22 Pauline Stafford (*Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* [Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1983], 98, 112, and 141) confirms that medieval queens and noblewomen were among

the first to be able to influence events because of the nature of personal rule; their own survival depending on that of their husbands, they were the most loyal allies.

23 I, p. 88. However, again, the emphases are mine.

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