

Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor:
Romance, Conversion, and Internal Orientalism
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Abstract

Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor is a medieval romance interpolated into a thirteenth-century account of the struggles of the Kings of Asturias (eighth-ninth centuries) with the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordova. In this essay I demonstrate how the chronicler mapped political concerns onto courtly adventure narrative in order to promote ideologies of conquest and conversion. Flores' conversion to Christianity in the context of his lifelong love relationship with Blancaflor is a metaphor for the Christian dream of the conquest of al-Andalus and the conversion of Iberian Muslims and Jews.

A Mediterranean Fiction

The story of *Floire et Blancheflor* circulated widely in medieval Western Europe. It is one of a group of 'orientalizing' medieval romances, based on Byzantine models, that deal with the confrontation of Western Latin Christendom and the Muslim East. These narratives, including *Floire et Blancheflor*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and later *Tirant lo Blanc* play out the anxieties of Western elites over the political fate of the Mediterranean in fictional stories.¹ The Castilian version, *Flores y Blancaflor* (fourteenth century), is repurposed as a foundational narrative meant both to link the Castilian monarchy to the Carolingian legacy and to fictionalize the dream of a fully Christian peninsula. A tale that on the northern side of the Pyrenees is an allegory for Christian imperialism becomes in Spain a more problematic fantasy of Christian political and spiritual hegemony. In this essay I will demonstrate how *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* is an *internal-orientalizing* tale of boy-meets-girl meant to legitimize the regime of Sancho IV while providing a fictional happy ending to a thorny political and religious problem.

The story of Flores and Blancaflor (*Floire et Blancheflor* in French) is thought to be of Eastern origin, perhaps Byzantine, Persian, or Arabic. Western authors begin to mention it in the late twelfth century. The earliest fragment is an early thirteenth-century French manuscript, and complete versions begin to appear in French manuscripts in the late thirteenth century.² In the Iberian Peninsula, troubadours mention it starting in the late twelfth century, Juan Ruiz references it in his *Libro de buen amor* in the middle of the fourteenth century, and the version we discuss here is thought to have been composed in the late thirteenth or early

¹ On such romances in French, see Kinoshita (*Boundaries* 46–104) and Tolan (66–78).

² Arbesú dates the text ca. 1290 and the manuscript ca. 1390, while Correa places the manuscript in the fifteenth century. For full discussion of the various versions and manuscript witnesses of the tale, see Grieve (15–20); Correa (7–12); Arbesú-Fernández (3–8 and 22–27). On the tale's sources and analogues in other narrative traditions see Frenzel and Marzolph and Leeuwen 551–52.

fourteenth century, surviving in a late fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Estoria de España*, begun by Alfonso X 'The Learned' and completed by his son Sancho IV. It is most likely that the compiler of the manuscript in which *Flores y Blancaflor* appears was not at court. Diego Catalán believes him to have been a monk writing outside of the court, and as such more whimsical in his representation of the past than his counterparts at the court of Castile-León (Catalán, "Estoria" 354).

The present version is interpolated into an account of the history of the kings of Asturias and their struggles with the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordova. This episode in Iberian history was very important for the chroniclers of the Castilian kings Alfonso X and Sancho IV because it demonstrates political continuity with the Asturian kings, who are credited with the first significant Christian military incursions against the Umayyad Caliphate. In this way the Castilian kings connect the earliest campaigns of the Asturian kings against Umayyad Cordova with their contemporary struggles with Nasrid Granada. This sort of propagandistic historiography is not peculiar to the *Estoria de España*. What is most noteworthy about it is the way in which the compiler places the entirely fictional *Flores y Blancaflor* in the service of royal history, specifically in order to underscore the image of the Castilian Kings both as military and spiritual conquerors of al-Andalus, and as legitimate heirs to the legacy of Charlemagne, whose campaigns in al-Andalus took place when *Flores y Blancaflor* is set.

A political fiction

In *Flores y Blancaflor*, a French countess in the third trimester of her pregnancy is on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela when her entourage is attacked by Muslim raiders from al-Andalus. She is taken captive and brought to the court of King Fines, the Muslim king of Almería. It so happens that Fines' wife is also pregnant; she and the Countess give birth on the same day, and so the two children, the Muslim boy Flores and the Christian girl Blancaflor, are both nursed by the Countess and raised together at court.³ Eventually they fall in love. In order to separate the two, King Fines sends Flores away to Seville, then sells Blancaflor into slavery and fakes her death. Flores goes to rescue her. In the end, Flores converts to Christianity, marries Blancaflor, and as king of Almería converts his entire kingdom to Christianity.⁴

³ Kinoshita (*Boundaries* 84) notes that this pseudo-kinship suggests a conception of the Christendom and Islam as sibling societies, on which see Bulliet.

⁴ This spiritual conquest of Almería has a historical, military precedent. In fact, eyewitness chronicler Caffaro reports that the Christian campaign in Almería (1147) was undertaken to avenge forced conversions of Christians to Islam in that city (O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* 231; Hall and Phillips 37; Caffaro 69–70). The Latin poem commemorating the campaign is translated by Barton and Fletcher (251–63).

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The thirteenth-century Castilian version of *Flores and Blancaflor* appears tightly woven into the *Estoria de España* begun by Alfonso X of Castile-León and completed during the reign of his successor Sancho IV. Sancho reigned over a tri-religious kingdom under constant pressure from Rome to bring all of the Iberian Peninsula under Christendom.

In the twelfth-century French version, the story of *Floire and Blancheflor* was about emphasizing Charlemagne's military struggle with Islam at a time when France was once again entangled with Islam in the Crusades (Baranda). The narrative validated the crusades as the continuation of Charlemagne's struggle with Islam in Spain. However, when the romance is adapted by a Castilian historiographer for purposes of validating domestic crusade in Iberia, the adventures of the star-crossed young lovers finding each other against all odds becomes the story of Castilian political power and Christian proselytizing in al-Andalus.

What symbolic work does the romance of *Floire et Blancheflor* perform in its twelfth-century, so-called 'primitive' version? The key differences in the work performed by the story is that for France, the Crusades were a remote imperialist project, while for Spain it was a family affair, a domestic issue. The period during which French versions appear is one in which we see the development of conquest literature in chronicles, *chansons de geste*, and Romances (Trotter). The Iberian setting does not in any way indicate an Iberian origin for the tale. On the contrary, there are a number of French romances and epic poems set in the Iberian peninsula. These narratives frame the Iberian peninsula as another front in the Crusades, just as papal bulls issued from the late eleventh century forward confirm.⁵ Nobles from the South of France were frequent participants in Iberian campaigns against the Almohads and later against Nasrid Granada. In the literary imagination these campaigns were conflated with Charlemagne's campaigns waged along the border between the Catalan principalities that were under his protection and the Umayyad forces. His concern was not precisely that Islam was taking root in the Peninsula; rather it was that the Umayyads were controlling it uncontestedly.

In the eighth century there was no crusade *per se* and no discourse of crusade. While contemporary sources describe Charlemagne's military conflict with the Umayyad Caliphate in religious terms, Rome did not back this discourse with remission of sins for those who fought under the cross. In fact, Charlemagne's exploits in the Iberian Peninsula were almost entirely non-sectarian. He allied with Iberian supporters of the 'Abbasid caliphate against the Iberian Umayyad Caliphate, and therefore against Byzantium as well, as the Abbasids were closing in on Anatolia. The Abbasid-Charlemagne alliance was a political convenience meant to counter Abbasid encroachment on Byzantium. The Abbasids and Charlemagne

⁵ Trotter notes some authors of crusade epics use Iberian geography and cultural history in narratives that ostensibly take place in the East (74).

conspired to cut Umayyad Cordoba off from Mediterranean while Rome was locked in struggle with Byzantium over iconoclasm (Buckler 4–12; Sholod 43–50).

Nonetheless, the conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate was great grist for the propagandistic mill of late medieval writers. They recast the eighth-century conflicts between Christian and Muslim polities as precedents for the crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, clothing them in the discourse of crusade and holy war. This established a coherent narrative of historical continuity and lent legitimacy to the contemporary war effort. The reality is that during Charlemagne's time, the relationships between the Kingdom of Asturias to Charlemagne and the Eastern counts was more important than that with al-Andalus (Nava 32). Only retrospectively did the struggle with al-Andalus move to the fore, due to the ideological concerns that shaped the chronicles of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (*Reconquest* 8–9).

French fiction for Iberian reality

For authors and audiences of the French *Floire et Blancheflor*, questions of conquest, proselytization, and conversion (at least to Islam) were not domestic issues. There was no significant history of political Islam north of the Pyrennes, and consequently no identitarian struggle with a local Islamic past. For French audiences, tales of Saracen queens who convert to Christianity were free to fantasize what for France by the eleventh century was the stuff of distant legend in the context of a far-away imperialist project.⁶ For Spain, however, conversion and domestic crusade were the story of daily life.⁷ The metaphors of mixed marriage and conversion for the drama of Andalus and Castilian history part of both local history, and to a significant extent, daily reality. Just as French royals often intermarried with the royal houses of neighboring kingdoms, both Andalus Muslim and Christian Iberian royals had long formed political bonds through marriage.⁸ In the thirteenth

⁶ Leadership of the crusades was largely French, and in the case of the Fourth and Fifth Crusades launched by Louis IX, almost entirely French (Lloyd 35–38). Religious leadership also came from France. Urban II appointed the bishop of Le Puy as legate to the first crusade, and Paschal II chose the Archbishop of Lyon as his (Richard 28). Iberian participation was, for various reasons, more limited, but not insignificant, on which see Fernández de Navarrete.

⁷ Though many rank and file crusaders from the Latin West living in the Levant married Eastern Christian and converted Muslim women (Kinoshita, "Crusades" 96), this reality does not seem to have penetrated the literary imagination except in cases of when the hero marries a converted 'Saracen' king or queen.

⁸ 'Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912-961) was the son of a Christian slave woman from Northern Spain whose ancestry was only one quarter Arab (Fletcher 53). Political intermarriage between Christians and Muslim elites was quite common during the Umayyad period and into the 11th century (Crow 61–62; El-Hajji). Al-Mansur's nephew 'Abd al-Rahman was likewise son of a Christian noblewoman and was known in the family as 'Sanchuelo' ('little Sancho,' after his maternal grandfather Sancho Abarca of Navarre) (Kennedy 124).

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century, daily coexistence with Muslims in Christian kingdoms as well as political conflict with the Kingdom of Granada was not something that took place, as in the French version, 'long long ago' and 'far far away.'

These narratives of conversion have very different valences in France than in Spain. France effectively had no Muslim population in the thirteenth century. For French audiences, Islam was either part of their experience in *Outremer* as part of the Crusading effort, or perhaps through trade with Muslims in North Africa and the Levant. In any event, tales of the conversion of a protagonist in a given romance would not have been understood as bearing on domestic politics in any identifiable way.⁹ Even in *Aucassin et Nicolette* when Aucassin converts to Christianity in Spain this is only a desire to see France's neighbor put their spiritual house in order, and at best a justification of the participation of French knights in crusade, whether Peninsular or Eastern. But the Iberian cases speak to domestic history and politics. There *were* historical Muslim kings in Spain born of Christian mothers. Biconfessional families were not unheard of and in any event society in general, at least during the period when the *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* was written, was multiconfessional. There even existed a vocabulary of conversion in medieval Spain, where historically many people converted from one monotheistic religion to another, and where the traffic in souls was not simply a question of Christian conversion as it was elsewhere in Latin Christendom. Literary conversions to Islam or to Christianity were not simply embodiments of the Crusader dream of a Christian East; they were more like snapshots from a particularly turbulent family life. When literary characters in Iberian romances convert, they are enacting local history and local culture.

We see this familiarity reflected in how the authors imagine the physical appearances of Christian and Muslim characters. In the French *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Christian characters darken their skin chemically in order to 'pass' as Saracen. In the Iberian romances religion and skin color are not connected. Rather, for a Christian character to pass as Muslim, such as when Paris travels to the east in *Paris y Viana*, he simply changes his clothes, grows his beard, and speaks Arabic instead of French (Galmés de Fuentes 204).

⁹ The ironic wrinkle in this process is that many of the Iberian texts that feature the conversion of heroes are adaptations from French originals. *Flores and Blancaflor* is an adaptation of a twelfth-century French narrative, as is the fifteenth-century *Paris y Viana* (Galmés de Fuentes). The problem of the encounter between Islam and Christianity as it is conceived in France responds to a very different historical entanglement with the Muslim world, of which France was never a part. Christian Iberia, on the other hand, by 1300 had staked much of its identity on its relationship with Islam. The romances of the encounter with Islam, therefore, did not take place "long long ago and far far away," but were more about the here and now. Just as the *Cantar de Mio Cid* lacked the epic distance of the *Chanson de Roland* and consequently gives us a much more realistic and less melodramatic picture of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, *Flores y Blancaflor's* portrayal of this encounter is more nuanced than that found in its French counterparts.

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The solution proposed by *Flores y Blancaflor* is similar to other such arrangements in Arthurian romances where warring factions bury the hatchet by intermarrying, and posits a political/proselytic alternative to the narrative of holy war. The conversion of an entire kingdom achieved by the conversion of the ruler is not a unique case or merely fiction. The Central Asian Khazari King Bulan converted his entire kingdom to Judaism in the ninth century. The Navarrese author Judah Halevi (born in Tudela) famously dramatized this situation in his religious polemic the *Kuzari*, completed approximately one century prior to *Flores and Blancaflor* but contemporary with the French romances of conversion (Brook).

When the French fantasy of the Muslim other is retrofitted for Iberian audiences, the result is a curious internal-Orientalist novelized encounter between Christianity and Islam in which the role of the Muslim other is transformed from crusade metaphor to national historical allegory. At the same time, Iberian monarchs are using the Carolingian narrative against their counterparts across the Pyrenees by trying to lay claim to Charlemagne's legacy. That is, while the French kings used the romance to legitimize their dynastic claims, the author of the Castilian version appropriates the narrative for his own political ends against the French themselves, stabbing them, as it were, with their own Charlemagne.

Between fiction and history

One of the most curious features of the *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* is the extent to and way in which it is interwoven with the chronicle's account of the Asturian kings and their struggle with the Umayyad Caliphate.¹⁰ Ultimately the romance is a fictional allegory for the Castilian military and spiritual designs on al-Andalus. The Muslim Flores embodies the dream of the conquest and conversion of al-Andalus; Blancaflor the recuperation of Christian Hispania lost in the Muslim invasions of 711. The union of the two allegorizes Castile's dual claim to the Umayyad (Flores) and Carolingian (Blancaflor) political legacies.

How does this use of fiction fit into historiographical and narrative practice of the times? These are not the 'events that might have taken place' of the classical and medieval historians (Green 3 ff; Mehtonen 149), but something different: events and figures set in real time that are meant to make a point, to analogize the ideological or affective goals of the writers in narrative form. Just as Walsh writes of fiction as a rhetorical trope rather than as a genre or mode (6), the chronicler here is deploying the romance of *Flores y Blancaflor* not in order to represent history logically, but rather rhetorically, in an attempt to appeal to the affect or emotional faculty of the reader. Much as one might argue that romances of adultery appeal to the individual's desire for freedom in choice of romantic partner in an age when

¹⁰ There is another such example of a (non-historical) romance intercalated into a chronicle in the *caballero del cisne* in *Gran conquista de Ultramar* (Ramos; Querol Sanz, *Cruzadas* and *Leyenda*).

arranged marriages were de rigueur among the upper classes, *Flores y Blancaflor* is a historical fantasy in which a spiritual (not military) reconquest of al-Andalus is brokered by an interreligious love story. In this way, *Flores y Blancaflor* is akin to other allegorical tales such as the aljamiado *Doncella Arcayona*, in which the abused Arcayona (or Carcayona in some versions) rebels against her incestuous and cruel pagan father by converting to Islam and thus gaining the power she needs to overcome adversity (Valero Cuadra 521-30).

Flores and Blancaflor are not in any way historical characters as in the case of Arthurian legend. Instead, they are a sort of historical fiction that is meant to mobilize audiences' affective investment in the broader historical work being carried out by the chronicle with which their tale is so tightly interwoven. To speak of novelization in the thirteenth century may seem out of the gate to be a crass anachronism. By it I mean the addition of realistic or extra-historical detail, dialogue, description of physical surroundings, clothing, arms, social and chivalric practices that obtained at court, all of which are highly characteristic of medieval prose fiction, and to a lesser extent, historiographical writing (Desmond 139). A work with the word "chronicle" in it prepares us as modern readers for a bird's eye (or at least court's-eye) view of events, major battles, successions, political struggles writ large; the long shot, in cinematic terms. Prose fiction, like contemporary film, gives us the other shots, the emotional underpinning for moving the larger narrative forward.

By the twelfth century there was already a pronounced trend in novelizing historiography in allegorical narratives. Umberto Eco famously observed that allegory was the dominant aesthetic in the Middle Ages (Eco 52). Northrop Frye writes that historical allegory and novelization are a natural reaction to a lack of abstraction of historical consciousness. In the modern age we have developed abstract concepts of history based on collective national identity and supported by mechanical reproduction, and abstract ideas of the body politic (though still ultimately relying on embodiment). In the middle ages historical consciousness was embodied in the person either of a narrator or in a well-known historical figure whose exploits (as in epic) served as the historical referent for the community. Therefore, people wanted their history in stories about great heroes and villains, with named narrators and mediators, and in the form of palpable, weighty books that bore historical fact. The difference lies in what we regarded as fact then and now. Truth claims that today would require scientific support could then be legitimately made through narrative (Frye 50-58).

If Flores and Blancaflor are not historical, they are not exactly allegorical either. If fictional heroes of historical narratives embody societal ideals, historical allegories embody the actual events they protagonize.¹ The best known example in Spanish is probably the ballad "Abenámar," in which King Juan II is portrayed as being in love with Granada, which he desires to conquer (Díaz Roig 93-94). Some critics have suggested an allegorical interpretation for the late fourteenth-century tale of *Paris et Vienne* by which Paris represents the French Crown and Vienne

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represents the Dauphinate of Burgundy (Galmés de Fuentes 13-14). Their union, then, justifies the annexation of the Dauphinate by the Crown. Other popular narratives such as the Aljamiado *Doncella Arcayona* have served as a broad allegory for the marginalization suffered by the Moriscos in the century leading up to their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Valero Cuadra; Perry 25–35).²

The subordination of historical reality to a fictional romance is a way of dressing up the abstract concepts of spiritual ill in the form of young, attractive, noble lovers. In the age of allegories such as the *Roman de la Rose*, with which *Flores y Blancaflor* is roughly contemporary, this text is not simply a subtle yet outrageous literary invention; rather it is in step with the times as yet another experiment in historical and intellectual allegories that were very much in vogue at the time. Nonetheless, the author of *Flores y Blancaflor* takes the allegorical principle one step further. The eponymous lovers are not meant to allegorize historical events; they appeal to the audience's affective investment in historical events.³

Internal orientalism in fiction

In *Flores y Blancaflor* this plays out in an internal orientalist mode that is unique in Latin Christendom, the auto-exoticizing of Christian Iberian historical allegory. Karl Jubran coined the term *internal orientalism* with reference to modern Spain's engagement with its Andalusí legacy. For him it is the orientalizing process performed on one's own national history:

Spanish Orientalism is an internal process which involves the celebration of the 'other' within the historiography of Spanish national culture and identity. Although this represents a unique process which breaks down the model of binary oppositions presented by Said, and other postcolonial scholars, of the 'East/West' 'Christian/non-Christian', it is still a process concerned with modernization through imperialist aspirations. In this manner, this new process could be called an 'internal-Orientalism.' (45)⁴

This chronicle is perhaps the first such example. It is the re-appropriation of an ultra-Pyrenean orientalizing narrative put in the service of a Castilian royal history. As in the so-called Moorish novel, the Muslim protagonist is the mirror of Christian chivalry, and distinct from the Christians only by religion and perhaps outward appearance.⁵ And, as in modern Orientalist narratives, the Muslim Other is the object of conversion and conquest. However this orientalizing narrative is different because the other is not simply to be dominated through conquest and conversion, but ultimately becomes assimilated to the self; this is what Jubran means by

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"internal Orientalism," the exoticization and objectification of one's own cultural history.

The process of assimilating the other to self has a biological basis. The Muslim Flores is nursed by the countess, who has "good milk." Ostensibly this predisposes him to Christianity, *ca la naturaleza de la leche de la Cristiana lo mouio a ello* ("for the nature of the Christian milk moved him to that"). His eventual decision to convert is then *natural*, and explained in terms of the science and theology of the day (Arbesú-Fernández 53).⁶ This idea of a biological/chemical basis for religious identity predates by some centuries the concept of *limpieza de sangre* (the idea that Muslim and/or Jewish ancestry persisted in one's bloodline even after conversion to Christianity) that would come to be so important in shaping Spanish society in the fifteenth century and forward (Kaplan; Sicroff).

This idea of the hero born of Christian and Muslim parents is a familiar trope in medieval Spanish literature. In the *Poema de Fernán González*, the Prince Mudarra is son of Gonzalo Gustios and a Muslim courtier woman, in some versions the sister of the Hajib Almanzor himself (Menéndez Pidal 220–221 and 262; Lathrop). The narrator attributes both his outstanding moral character and physical beauty to his Christian heritage, which eventually 'wins' out over his Muslim heritage and makes him a Christian hero. Likewise, the Muslim Abenámar (i.e., Ibn `Ammar), protagonist of the abovementioned ballad, was born of a Christian mother who told him never to lie (Díaz Roig 93–94). Like Flores, who took in moral excellence along with the 'Christian milk' of the countess, these protagonists embody the dream of conquest and conversion that was the dominant ideology of the times.

The author of *Flores y Blancaflor* attributes the chapters on the tale of the eponymous lovers to a writer he calls 'Sigiberto,' the twelfth-century French monk and historian Sigebert of Gembloux, author of an influential universal history, the *Chronicon sive Chronographia* (Arbesú-Fernández 49).⁷ We have no manuscript of Sigebert's *Estoria de los señorios de la Africa*, though authors of texts contemporary with *Flores y Blancaflor* cite Sigeberts' other works (Catalán, "Estoria" 349). Putting aside for the moment the question of whether or not Sigebert's text is real, for a discussion of the relationship of the fictional story of *Flores y Blancaflor* to the historical material in the text, the more central concern is why the compiler would attribute plainly fictional material to an author who made his reputation writing non-fiction prose. Diego Catalán explains *Flores y Blancaflor* is more fictional and more novelized than other contemporary works of historiography because the author was a monk, not a court writer. He sees *Flores and Blancaflor* as a new kind of historiography, of 'monastic inspiration, less learned, not very respectful of historical truth, [and] clearly set down the road of novelization,' whereas the court histories of Alfonso X and Sancho IV were more scientific, more learned, and more respectful of 'historical truth.' (Catalán, "Estoria" 354).⁸

If this is the case, if we believe that monastic history (the genre that Catalán proposes we pay increased attention to) is more fiction-prone, perhaps it was

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Sigibert who inserted *Flores y Blancaflor* into the *Estoria de España*. However, the fact that many of the details peculiar to the Castilian version do not appear in the other (French) versions of *Floire et Blanche-flor* which for the French author Sigibert would have been more proximate, complicate the hypothesis. What, then, is at stake? None of the other examples of Sigibert's work mentioned in *Crónica de Castilla* and the other texts mentioned by Catalán are so boldly fictitious. Why would he suddenly break ranks with the story of Flores and Blancaflor?

The safer bet is that the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century compiler *attributed* the fictional interpolations to Sigibert, while full well knowing they were his own invention. If this is the case, we have here a bit of pre-Cervantine deconstruction of historiography in general, an early 'found manuscript' trope all the more inventive for naming a (mostly) historical manuscript as the source for his fictional material. If the monastic chronicles such as those of Sigibert already had acquired a reputation for liberal novelization of historical events and figures, the brazen introduction of a well-known fictional narrative such as *Flores y Blancaflor* into a historical chronicle (and attributed to Sigibert) might have been a way to *mock* Sigibert and other clerical chroniclers whose non-scientific approach (when contrasted with, say Alfonsine writers) was laughable for Sancho's court. That is, the compiler may simply be having a bit of fun at Sigibert's expense.

The taste for novelized history and for allegory come together in *Flores y Blancaflor* in the metaphor of the religious conversion of Flores and the Kingdom of Almería. Sharon Kinoshita has written on several twelfth-century French romances of conversion, including *La Prise d'Orange*, *Le charroi de Nimes*, *Floire et Blanche-flor*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*. According to her, these romances depicting the conversion of a Muslim royal to Christianity are born of a historical border anxiety that is resuscitated in the age of the Crusades when Carolingian legends about conflict with Islam are pressed into the service of the contemporary struggle with Islam (Kinoshita 12). French versions of *Floire and Blanche-flor* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* are "orientalizing," in that they represent an embodied encounter with the East. In some cases the body of the Muslim woman stands in for the desire for territorial and spiritual conquest. Kinoshita points out how this gambit is still used in artistic representations of modern colonialisms.⁹

However, the case of Spain is different. While French monarchs and nobles contended with Islamic political power in the Eastern Mediterranean, Iberian Christians were engaged in struggling with political Islam at home. This had technically been the case since the earliest campaigns of the Asturian kings against Umayyad forces. However, by the eleventh century such efforts were backed by Papal bulls of crusade and by the twelfth, by church and court historiographies that framed such conflict in terms of Holy War (O'Callaghan, *Reconquest* 24–33; Goñi Gaztambide).

In this context, *Flores and Blancaflor* is not simply a way for audiences to enact a fantasy of conquest and crusade, it is an allegorization of Iberian history,

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very carefully woven into the historical record of the events it allegorizes. The tale of *Flores y Blancaflor* is sandwiched between the history of the Asturian kings and the final conquest of al-Andalus. In the *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor*, chapters alternate between the story of the two lovers and the struggle of the Asturian kings to move their border with al-Andalus south. Thus the love story between Christian and Muslim is textually fused with the foundational narrative of Christian Spain.¹⁰

This tight weave of chronicle and romance is hardly unique to the *Estoria de España*. As we have mentioned medieval chroniclers did not make the same generic distinctions as do moderns between 'history' and 'fiction,' and in *Secular Scripture*, Northrop Frye reminds us that romance satisfies very deep seated-desires for order, for moral simplification, and for things to be ok. It is not surprising nor rare, therefore, that romances be so readily pressed into political service. However, In this case, the romance does not simply 'masquerade' as history, but rather becomes an allegory for local historical forces.¹¹

Conclusion

In closing, the *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* teaches us a number of things about fictional narrative and society at the close of the thirteenth century in Christian Iberia. In it we see that romance, far from being a strictly literary genre in the modern sense, was more of a mode of representation which was a perfectly acceptable option for representing the history of the court. In the kingdom of Castile-León this was a local history that sought to rival France and to represent itself as the legitimate heir to the twin legacies of Charlemagne and the Umayyad Caliphate. The latter was a matter of genealogy, achieved by the kidnapping of the French Countess in Galicia. The former is a bit more complicated, for the political and cultural grandeur represented by the Caliphate must first be stripped of its Islamic character. This is achieved in the narrative first by the Christian milk of the Countess and later by the conversion tale of Fines. In both cases the Chronicler deploys the affective resources of romance in order to lend credibility and coherence to a complicated political and religious problem, by which the complex history of the ninth through thirteenth centuries in the Iberian Peninsula becomes a tale of *boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy converts for girl*.

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This is the author's Postprint version. For purposes of academic publication please cite publisher's version: Wacks, David. "Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor: Romance, Conversion, and Internal Orientalism." *Narrative Culture* 2.2 (2015): 270–288.
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