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The Sound of Love: Orality and Networks of Hearing in *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*

An article recently published in *The Washington Post* explores a new exhibit at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland entitled, “A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe.” The critic, Philip Kennicott, aptly notes the focus of the exhibit: “the men and women of medieval Europe were as fundamentally connected to the world through their senses, and as alert to sensual pleasure, as we are today.”¹ Unfortunately for the article, Kennicott upholds a disparaging perspective regarding medieval literature in comparison to visual art, which he esteems to hold greater insight to how senses were perceived in the Middle Ages. An art museum must certainly display objects of visual art—which often do include manuscripts—but medieval texts, even without images, are capable of demonstrating the same sensuousness between character and between the reader. The twelfth-century romance, *Floire et Blanchefleur*, for instance, is a text that emphasizes how human networks are mediated and influenced by the senses, and, more particularly, how hearing most directly impact the relationships between humans, animals, and their environment. That is not to say that the other four senses do not play a significant role in the formation of such networks, as there are many crucial scenes in the romance that rely heavily on sight, touch, taste, and smell. It is simply that

¹ Philip Kennicott, “Medieval Europeans had noses, eyes and ears—and they used them,” *The Washington Post*, 12 November 2016.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/medieval-europeans-had-noses-eyes-and-ears--and-they-used-them/2016/11/11/89d23d5c-a5ef-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492_story.html

hearing is particularly important to mapping the narrative and the embodied responses and actions of its characters.

Networks of Hearing

In an initial appeal to the senses, the narrator of *Floire et Blanchefleur* calls upon the auditors of the romance to hear the story they are about to tell²:

Signor, oiiés, tot li amant,
cil qui d'amors se vont penant,
li chevalier et les puceles,
li damoiseil, les damoiseles !
Se mon conte volés entenre
molt i porrés d'amors aprendre:³

(ll.1-6)

The narrator's call upon the audience, which is made up of a diverse group, first underscores the tradition of orality in medieval reading. It is generally accepted that most romances would have been read aloud amongst an assembly of people.⁴ A possible incentive for listening to the tale, as will become more important later in this essay, is that those who hear it will learn more about love, and perhaps will be able to navigate the human connections love creates. Here lies the first

² I use the pronoun they because while the author of the text is considered to be Robert d'Orbigny, I do not make the assumption that the narrator is necessarily Robert, or, indeed, a man. Robert d'Orbigny, *Le Conte de Floire et Blanchefleur*, edited and translated by Jean-Luc Leclanche (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003), XIV-XV.

³ Hear, lords, and all lovers, / those whom love tortures so, / knights and young girls, / young men and damsels! / If you hear my tale, / Therein you may learn much about love:

All translations are my own. In my translations, I have favored accuracy of meaning over remaining true to rhyme or meter from the original. All Old French passages from *Floire et Blanchefleur* are taken from Leclanche's critical edition.

⁴ For more on the practice of reading, see D.H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading: The primary reception of German literature 800-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). This tour de force examines the intricacies of reading, primarily, Latin literature, but is useful still in gaining perspective on listening to vernacular texts.

network created from the lines of *Floire et Blanchefleur*. To clarify what I mean by network, I take my cue from Patrick Jagoda, who writes, “the term ‘network’ comes most consistently to take on two different referents that include technological or communication systems, on the one hand, and social organization, on the other.”⁵ *Floire et Blanchefleur* creates both types of networks that Jagoda highlights. The first, the communication system, is created by the technology of writing, by which *Floire et Blanchefleur* was able to be read and transmitted. This technological network allows for the extradiegetic “*Signor, oiiés*” that the narrator and reader relay to the audience.⁶ Thus, the romance in its written and spoken form create a communicative network between the text and its audience.

Floire et Blanchefleur, as the narrator indicates, belongs to a system of oral and aural transmission. The way in which the narrative circulates demonstrates an extradiegetic social network:

Illoec m’assis por escouter
deus dames que j’oï parler.
Eles estoient deu serours ;
ensamble parloient d’amors . . .
L’aisnee d’une amor parloit
a sa seror, que molt amoit,
qui fu ja entre deus enfans,
bien avoit passé deus cens ans,

⁵ Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9. Jagoda works with many different definitions of networks, but this basic concept is most useful for my treatment of the term.

⁶ The narrator’s direct address of the audience at the beginning reflects their frequent interjections in the romance. This is not an uncommon characteristic of medieval romance narrative: “*Vestige de l’ancienne oralité, l’intervention marquée de l’auteur n’est pas rare dans le Conte. Elle ne se borne pas à l’appel à l’attention de l’auditoire. Le narrateur omniscient recourt volontiers à l’anticipation des événements,*” Leclanche, XXIII.

mais uns boins clers li avoit dit,
qui l'avoit leü en escrit.⁷

(ll. 43-54)

The chain of communication of this narrative is complex because the text was written, recounted orally—to the eldest sister, to the youngest sister, and overheard by the narrator—written again by our narrator, and told to us.⁸ Within the eleven lines above, variations of *parler* (to speak) are repeated at least three times, accompanied by *dit* (said), *ecouter* (to listen), *oï* (to hear), and *leü en escrit* (read what was written). Paul Zumthor remarks on the oral relationship a text establishes with the audience: “L’emploi du couple *dire-ouïr* a pour fonction manifeste de promouvoir (fût-ce fictivement) le texte au statut de locuteur et de désigner sa communication comme une discours *in praesentia* . . . Parfois même, le texte semble use de *dire* pour signifier, par métonymie ou litote, « chanter ».⁹ Thus, the text speaks to the audience and its transmission is undeniably oral, and in some cases, can be considered to have been sung. We can imagine a textual network of different versions of *Floire et Blanchefleur* that have been transmitted orally by considering those who are not mentioned in the text (e.g. has anyone else overheard the sisters’ conversation and written the story down in turn?). The combination of orality and textuality outside the framework of the story confuses Jagoda’s separation of the two networks. The romance, and the way it circulates, therefore necessitates a conflation of network between writers of the text, the text itself, readers,

⁷ There I sat to listen / to two ladies I heard speaking. / They were two sisters; / together they were speaking of love . . . / The eldest was speaking of a love / to her sister, whom she loved very much, / that existed between two youths / well over two hundred years ago. / But a good clerk told her the tale, / which he had read from a book.

⁸ As I will briefly discuss in the final section of this paper, the network is expanded to include translations into different languages across centuries, and into various forms of media.

⁹ Paul Zumthor, *La Lettre et la Voix de la « Littérature » Médiévale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 42.

auditors, oral transmitters, translators, and transcribers.¹⁰ While the overlapping of technological/communicative and social networks may reflect the essential hybridity of reading in the twelfth century, the extradiegetic systems of communication laid out by *Floire et Blanchefleur* are, without a doubt, reinforced through the act of hearing over any other sense: they are networks of hearing.

Networks of Silence

These networks are present within the narrative itself and are established between characters and their environment. Perhaps the most obvious network is created on Floire's search for Blanchefleur after she has been sold as a slave and sent to Babylon. On his quest to find his beloved, Floire relies exclusively on clues given to him by innkeepers, merchants, and fishermen he meets along the way. The narrative, then, is driven forward by hearsay, and an oral, mercantile, network becomes the means by which Floire ultimately reaches Blanchefleur. The first stop Floire and his entourage make, chez le bourgeois, is remarkable because of the simultaneity and interconnectedness of hearsay and silence. The hostess notices Floire's dejectedness:

Autretel vi jou l'autre jor
de damoisele Blanceflor
(ensi se noma ele a moi) ;
el vos resanle, en moie foi,¹¹

(ll. 1291-1294)

¹⁰ This list is not exhaustive considering the many translations and adaptations of *Floire et Blanchefleur*. I am also not arguing that *Floire et Blanchefleur* was only ever read in a group setting, as reading was also accomplished alone. Rather, I am pointing the way the romance forms various oral and textual networks within a group setting.

¹¹ Another such one I saw the other day / of the young lady Blancheflore / (Thus she named herself to me); / She resembles you, on my word.

This excerpt presents a unique characteristic of *Floire et Blanchefleur*: there are very few means by which characters within the text are capable of differentiating between the two eponymous characters. Later in the romance, Licoris believes that Floire and Blanchefleur are twins because they share a similar face, body, and appearance (*tel vis, tel cors et tel sanlant*).¹² For the hostess, much like Licoris, the best and perhaps only method for distinguishing between the two is by hearing their names as they are told to her; the hostess can identify Blanchefleur because she has heard her name. Blanchefleur thus adds herself to the oral social network, which Floire is navigating to find her, and yet she chooses her words carefully and weighs them against her silence. While this may seem to be an observation unworthy of noting, Blanchefleur remains silent for the duration of her stay, except to say her name and Floire's name:

Ensement au menagier pensoit
et un sien ami regretoit,
Flore, cui ami ele estoit ;
por lui tolir on le vondoit . . .
Flore son ami regretoit,
et nuit et jor por lui ploroit.
Fors de cest dit tos jors ert mue.
Ele fu a cest port vendu.¹³

(ll. 1297-1305)

The only way the hostess knows Floire and Blanchefleur's name is because she heard it from a lamenting Blanchefleur. For Blanchefleur in this scene, speaking only served to name herself and

¹² ll. 1736-98.

¹³ Similarly, she was pensive while eating / and she lamented one of her friends / Floire, of whom she was a friend; / To separate them, she was sold . . . / She lamented her friend Floire / both day and night she cried for him. / Beyond these words she remained silent always.

her love, the latter emphasized by the repetition of *sien ami regretoir* and *son ami regretoit* (lamented her friend).

If words are used by Blanchefleur sparingly and with an aim of only identifying herself and Floire, then her silence, too, serves a purpose. When considering the utterances and potential sounds coming from Blanchefleur's crying in this scene, it is unclear whether she is totally silent. Her lack of words, however, lends weight to what she has said, as emphasized by the hostess: "*fors de cest dit tos jors ert mue.*" Similarly, when Floire hears that the hostess is speaking of Blanchefleur ("*Quant Flores s'amie ot nommer / et de li certement parler*"),¹⁴ he speaks no more words (*ainc n'en sot mot, si abati*).¹⁵ His silence is a result of happiness, unlike Blanchefleur's sorrow, yet nevertheless the two reflect each other and operate within the same social organization. Within these oral networks, then, silence plays as much of a role as the spoken word.

It is important to note the potential extradiegetic role such silences might have played in reading the romance. Paul Zumthor highlights the absence of a performative voice, "*Le silence fonctionnalis  dans la performance  tablit entre la po sie entendue et le temps tout autre que celui qu'engendre la lecture.*"¹⁶ For Zumthor, silence within a performance, or reading aloud of a text, creates a relationship between the audience and narrative time that cannot exist in silent reading. By emphasizing periodic moments of silence, Zumthor underscores the importance of orality in the transmission medieval poems, *Floire et Blanchefleur* certainly included. Much like Blanchefleur's poignant silence after she names Floire, Zumthor remarks that silence amplifies (*amplifier*) the

¹⁴ ll. 1311-12

¹⁵ l. 1314

¹⁶ Zumthor, Paul, *La po sde et la voix dans la civilisation m di vale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 41-2.

actions that precede and accompany it.¹⁷ Thus, Blanchefleur's choice to remain silent (*mue*) in this moment is echoed in the extradiegetic network of hearing, or silence, between the text, the reader/performer, and the audience.

At this point, in order to understand the different networks of hearing within *Floire et Blanchefleur*, it is useful to explore how networks are generally perceived and visualized. Jagoda explains that one of the most commonly utilized conceptions of a network is a complex and interconnected structure made up of groups of 'nodes' that are interconnected by 'links.' The best-connected of these central nodes are called 'hubs.'"¹⁸ If we consider individual characters to be nodes, and means of communication and reception to be the links, Floire and Blanchefleur, as two intimately connected nodes, constitute a hub. Within the networks of King Felix's court and Babylon, Floire and Blanchefleur are a hub of communication because they are most intimately and well connected because of their secret connections that exclude others, as I will show below. There are several different types of networks that exist in the narrative of *Floire et Blanchefleur* that I do not explore in detail here. For example, the geo-spatial network between Spain and France—where Blanchefleur's mother was captured—and Spain and Babylon, where Blanchefleur is sent. Additionally, these networks comprise smaller local networks, whose nodes include, for instance, the garden, school, court, market, and tomb in King Felix's kingdom.¹⁹ It is because of these geographical networks that networks of hearing are able to be established.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Jagoda, 8.

¹⁹ One of the local nodes in Babylon, the Tower of Ladies, is interesting because I first read this tower to be a vestige of the Tower of Babylon, which has fascinating and explicit connections with language, and how network of hearing, or unhearing, can exclude members of society.

Natural and Hearing Learned Networks

The similarity in speech—or silence—for Floire and Blanchefleur in the scene above is intimately related to the private communication the two learned in school together. The pair use Latin in order to speak secretly with one another:

En seul cin ans et quinze dis
furent andoi si bien apris
que bien sorent parler latin
et bien escrire en parkemin,
et consillier oiant la gent
en latin, que nus nes entent²⁰

(ll. 265-70)

This passage illuminates several aspects of Floire and Blanchefleur's unique network: they are educated, they speak Latin, and they separate themselves from those around them. Speaking Latin is a method for the two children to further bolster their own private network of hearing, thus ensuring that they cannot be understood and strengthening their status as a hub in the network of hearing in Felix's kingdom. Like silence in the section above, exclusion of one sound—vernacular sound, in this instance—underscores the importance of the other. Similarly, the lack of comprehension by those around them is critical because while they are simultaneously part of the network and can hear Latin being spoken, they are excluded from the same network because they cannot understand it. The rhyming couplet in the middle of the stanza above highlights the relationship between Latin (*latin*) and writing (*parkemin*), which illuminates the erudite implications of Floire and Blanchefleur's ability to write, read, and speak the language of

²⁰ In only five years and fifteen days / were so well educated / that they knew how to speak Latin / and write well on parchment / and consult each other in the company of others / in Latin, so that no one can understand them.

the learned. Sharon Kinoshita remarks that Floire and Blanchefleur's "precocious" Latin communication could emphasize Latin's foreignness within a Muslim context.²¹ More appropriately, however, she suggests that Floire and Blanchefleur's Latin network allows them to bridge the gap between "vernacular-speaking nobles and Latin-speaking clergy," and adds that this divide is what prompted the emergence of romance.²² Yet again, the reader is presented with extradiegetic commentary on the relationship, not only between the nobility and the clergy, but between the text, Floire and Blanchefleur's secret Latin, and the generic qualities and cultural factors behind the production of romance.

The coded use of Latin in the text also highlights the difference between natural and learned hearing. Given the settings of *Floire et Blanchefleur*, one could make the assumption that the vernacular language in the romance is Arabic. The text does reference Blanchefleur's mother teaching the Queen how to speak French,²³ but the *lingua franca* of the different courts is never explicitly mentioned.²⁴ Latin exists outside of the mother tongue of both Floire and Blanchefleur; it is learned through education. Natural hearing, then, is related to maternal language, and while it too is learned, it is passed from mother to child, a relationship that exists independently of pedagogically transmitted languages, like French for Floire's mother and Latin for Floire and Blanchefleur. In a network of transmission Friedrich Kittler identifies as the "Mother's Mouth,"

²¹ Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 85.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ l. 140.

²⁴ The Arabic gold letters on the tomb (*l'or d'Arrabe bien lettre* (l. 656)) is ambiguous as to whether the gold is Arab or if the letters made from gold use the Arabic alphabet. Perhaps both.

the mother creates “primary orality.”²⁵ A child learns to hear from its mother and language, in *Floire et Blanchefleur*, seemingly creates stronger bonds than the mother’s milk. For example, there are several allusions to Floire and Blanchefleur’s potential sibling relationship, but I would argue that—their erotic attraction notwithstanding for the sake of argument—such a fraternal connection could not exist, since they were not nursed from the same breast:²⁶

Livré l'ont a la damoisele,
por çou qu' ele estoit sage et bele,
a norrir et a maistroier,
fors seulement de l'alaitier.
Une paiienne l'alaitoit,
car lor lois l'autre refusoit.²⁷

(ll. 179-184)

Despite the preclusion of milk kinship, a “primary orality” is thus established between Floire and Blanchefleur because of Blanchefleur’s mother’s ability to educate (*maistroier*) each of the children, and teach them natural language, which differs from the Latin they learned in their late childhood. Thus, in spite of the natural network of hearing that is established between Floire and Blanchefleur through Blanchefleur’s Christian mother, they create their own network.

The nature of the maternal voice, however, is important because it highlights Floire and Blanchefleur’s relationship of hearing as erotic even outside of their secret Latin network. Patrick

²⁵ Friedrich A. Kettler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, translated by Michael Mettler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 26. My thanks to Meg Berkobien for suggesting this resource to me.

²⁶ Leclanche includes a footnote in his translation indicating that the author of *Floire et Blanchefleur* established a religious pretext for preventing milk kinship between Floire and Blanchefleur in order to avoid a potentially incestuous union between the couple. Leclanche, 13.

²⁷ They delivered him to the lady / because she was wise and beautiful / to nourish and teach, / except for breastfeeding. / A Muslim woman breastfed him /because the law forbade the other to do it.

ffrench identifies in a sound network the significance of Roland Barthes's concept of the "grain" of the voice, which extends beyond words and is inherent in the body: "*la matérialité du corps parlant sa langue maternelle.*"²⁸ Thus, the sound network established by the mother's mouth, to use Kittler's words, creates an erotic link between Floire and Blanchefleur. It stands to be clarified, however, that an erotic relationship does not necessarily mean sexual here, but rather that such a relationship simply exists between two individual bodies.²⁹ That Floire and Blanchefleur are connected by both their mother tongue and their learned language places them within an erotic network of hearing. Barthes, however, claims that "*tout rapport à une voix est forcément amoureux.*"³⁰ Taking into consideration Barthes's assertion, then, it is nearly impossible to consider Floire and Blanchefleur as sharing a non-erotic, non-amorous bond since their connection is fortified through their linguistic filiation.

Exiting the Network

At a pivotal moment in the romance, after rumor is spread of Blanchefleur's death, Floire decides he is going to kill himself. Before this decision, however, he laments his lost secret connection with Blanchefleur and how they would write to each other (*en écrivant consilliens*) in Latin so that no one could understand them (*en latin, nus ne l'entendait*).³¹ His weapon of choice for suicide—a silver stylus given to him by Blanchefleur—however strange, is telling of the importance writing in was in their relationship:

²⁸ Quoted in Patrick ffrench, "Barthes and the Voice: The Acousmtic and Beyond," *L'Esprit Créateur* 58, no. 4 (2015): 60. The scholar's last name is spelled 'ffrench,' and is not a typo.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Quoted in ffrench, 61.

³¹ ll. 742-4. A repetition of the fact no one around them could understand Latin further emphasizes the difference between Latin and vernacular speech, while emphasizing the importance of their learned language.

« Grafe, fait il, por çou fus fait
que fin mesisses a cest plait.
Moi te dona por ramembrer
de soi et a son oés garder
Blanceflor. Mais or fai que dois,
a li m'envoie, car c'est drois . . . »³²

(ll. 999-1004)

In his apostrophe to the stylus, Floire claims that Blanche fleur had provided him with it so that he could write to her, presumably in Latin as they had been taught in school. But more implicit here is the orality of writing. For instance, Shane Butler writes, “. . . from the Latin *stilus*, “pen,” has its own fair claim to be the proper pipe of poetry and, indeed has been by far the preferred term even for . . . sonic features”³³ The stylus is intimately related to the sound of poetry. We, of course, are aware of the oral implications of reading medieval literature, as I discussed above, but Butler artfully employs the stylus as metonymy for the oral performance of written text. Floire, in his attempt to kill himself with his stylus, wants to remove himself from the secret network established between himself and Blanche fleur, and in a fascinating extradiegetic commentary, wants to use the tool of his creation to erase himself from the oral, poetic medium.

The process of hearing a written medieval text, and Floire’s attempted stylus-suicide, lends further clarification to the relationship between the eponymous characters and learning love. Floire and Blanche fleur learn how to love each other from the books they read, or rather, the books they hear. We learn that the young couple read pagan books, where they heard love

³² “Stylus,” he said, “for this you were made, / to put an end to this process. / Blanche fleur gave you to me to remember her / and you for her advantage. But now / do what you must, send me to her, / because it is right.”

³³ Shane Butler, *The Ancient Phonograph* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015),76.

being spoken about (*Livres lisoient paienors / u ooient parler d'amors*).³⁴ It seems as though the narrator of the romance is self-consciously commenting on the medieval practice of reading. Of course, it could be interpreted that Floire and Blanchefleur are imagining the voices and conversations of the books they read, but I suggest that their reading aloud is a reflection of how reading was executed both within and out of the narrative: with the voice.

Birdsong

Thus far, I have examined several networks between characters within *Floire et Blanchefleur* and how hearing serves to enhance these connections. More so than humans themselves, however, birds and the sounds they make influence the demeanor and actions of human characters, pertaining to love in particular.³⁵ In King Felix's garden, for example, the singing birds underscore the budding romance between our eponymous characters:

Flouri i sont li arbrissel,
d'amors i cantent li oisel.
La vont li enfant deporter
cascun matin et por disner.³⁶

(l. 245-8)

The trope of the *reverdie*, the blooming of flowers and singing of birds, is a fairly common means in medieval romance to represent burgeoning love. It would be imprudent, however, to attribute the birds' singing simply as a symbol of Floire and Blanchefleur's nascent love, especially since

³⁴ ll. 227-228.

³⁵ For more on the function and symbolism of birdsong in Medieval literature, see Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

³⁶ The trees there are flowering, / the birds there sing of love. / The children go there for diversion / each morning and each dinner hour.

the youths habitually go to this flowering, bird-filled garden every morning and evening. In fact, it is the singing that appears to induce love between the two as the verse continues:

Quand il mangeoient et bevoient,
li oisel deseure aus cantoient.
Des oiselés oënt les cans,
çou est la vie as deus enfans . . .
Letres et salus dont d'amours
du cant des oisiaus et des flours.³⁷

(ll. 249-252)

The birds sing their songs of love around the two children, who hear (*oënt*) the songs, even if they are not actively listening, and from what they hear, they copy it down and concretize their learned love through the written word. Interestingly, the narrator stresses the positionality of the birds as above (*deseure*) the two lovers, which indicates that the network between the birds and Floire and Blanchefleur is aural and not visual; what the birds look like is immaterial here.

If the birds are out of sight and still influence the everyday lives of Floire and Blanchefleur, our young couple participate in an acousmatic network of hearing with the birds. Acousmatic hearing, according to Brian Kane, is the “direct opposite of active listening” and isolates “the sound from the ‘audiovisual complex.’”³⁸ The term “acousmatic” derives from the school of Pythagoras, where students, *akousmatikoi*, would listen to Pythagoras’s lectures from behind a veil in order to emphasize the meaning of his discourse.³⁹ Thus, by removing the sound

³⁷ While they were eating and drinking, / the birds above them were singing. / From the little birds they heard the song, / that is the life the two youths had . . . / They makes letters and salutations of love / from the songs of the birds and flowers.

³⁸ Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

from its origin, and much like the co-presence of silence and speaking, the meaning of the sound is emphasized, making what is being said more important. For Floire and Blanchefleur, then, hearing the love songs from birds that are invisible makes the instruction of love more potent. Indeed, in fewer than twenty lines, the narrator mentions the birds' love songs at least three times. The relationship between the birds and the youth's love, therefore, is causal and not merely symbolic; the unseen birds create a new link between Floire and Blanchefleur in their network of hearing.

In Babylon, it is not the song of real birds that influence humans, but rather birds made of bronze whose "songs" elicit reactions:

De l'une part est clos de mur
tot paint a or et a asur,
et desus, sor cascun cretel,
divers de l'autre a un oisel;
d'arain est trestous tresjetés,
onques mais ne fu veüs tés:
quant il vente si font douç cri
que onques nus hom tel n'oï . . .⁴⁰

(ll. 1963-70)

The bronze birds in Babylon are different from the real birds that inhabit King Felix's garden because they only produce sweet music (*douç cri*) when the wind blows.⁴¹ Such music, however, like most events objects in *Floire et Blanchefleur*, far surpass anything that has ever been seen or

⁴⁰ One part [of the garden] is closed by a wall / all painted with gold and azure / and above, on each crenel, / housed a bird, each different from the other / cast all from bronze; / Never before had anyone seen the like: / When the wind blew they cried sweetly / the like of which no one had heard.

⁴¹ Acousmatics is not as important here because the audience and the inhabitants of Babylon know what the birds look like, although not *all* can see the bronze birds when their effect is heard.

heard before (*que onques nus hom tel n'oi*). Much like the birdsong that influences Floire and Blanchefleur's youthful love, the bronze birdsong is not without consequence. The narrator tells us that the harder the winds blows, the sweeter the song of the birds (*Quant li oisel ont grignor vent, / adont cantent plus doucement*), and the sweet melody of the artificial birds tames all the wild beasts (*beste tant fiere*) in the area.⁴² In addition to taming leopards, tigers, and lions, and as E.R. Truitt astutely notes, the mechanical birds “fool real birds into thinking they could find a mate among them.”⁴³ Yet, the romance is slightly more nuanced in the effect of mechanical birds on those around them:

et autres oisiaus qui i sont
 qui par le vergier joie font,
 qui les sons ot et l'estormie
 molt est dolans s'il n'a s'amie.⁴⁴

(ll. 1983-6)

The last two lines here are paramount to the meaning behind the passage because the final couplet *estormie* and *s'amie* links sound and love together: upon hearing the artificial birds, real, uncoupled birds become inordinately sad. Also interesting here is that the narrator calls the real birds “*autres*,” which conflates the mechanical with the real and does not underscore the fact that some of the birds are cast of bronze by humans. Finally, the use of “*amie*” here recalls what Floire and Blanchefleur call one another: beloved. Implicitly, birds that are together can relish

⁴² l. 1971-6.

⁴³ E.R. Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 126. I am really interested in Truitt's categorization of these birds as “automata.”

⁴⁴ And other birds that are there, / that play in the orchard, / and that hear the sounds and tumult / become very sad if they do not have a beloved.

the *joie* created by their relationship, but the magic of the birdsong here is that it echoes in nature the sadness Floire and Blanchefleur experience during their separation.

Interestingly, real birds outside the tomb built for the “dead” Blanchefleur in Felix’s garden have a striking effect on the people around them. For young men and women who are in love (*por qu’ele amast*), the sweet song (*dous cans*) that they hear of love (*que il oïssent / d’amors*) causes them to hurriedly embrace and kiss each other (*qu’il se ourussent embracier, / l’uns l’autre doucement baisier*).⁴⁵ This sweet song echoes the *douç cri* of the bronze birds in Babylon and yet the pure birdsong, not the wind-driven mechanical whistling of manmade birds, incites an immediate physical reaction where love acts are fulfilled. Conversely, for those who no longer suffer from love (*qui ja d’amor ne se penaissent*), the sweet song causes them to fall asleep on the spot (*isnellepas s’en endormissent*).⁴⁶ In an interesting network of hearing, the songs of manmade birds influence the affective reactions in animals—the recognition of an absence of a beloved for birds—and the songs of birds in nature have a causal relationship with humans, both in love and out.⁴⁷

Sound of Eternal Love

The bronze birds in the Emir’s garden are not the only mechanized sound producers in the romance that symbolize or generate love. Returning to Blanchefleur’s—and eventually Floir’es—tomb, effigies of the young lovers immortalize the couple’s love. Remarking the unique characteristics of the tomb, Patricia Clare Ingham writes, “For one thing, it monumentalizes such cross-cultural love, rendering the lovers in perpetual three-dimension. With its letters in Arabic

⁴⁵ l. 630-6.

⁴⁶ l. 637-640.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, the natural birdsong seems to enforce a compulsory heterosexual love. This love, compelled by the natural world, seems to be akin to Alan de Lille’s Nature in *De Planctu Naturae*. This potential connection is unsurprising given the highly Christian overtones of *Floire et Blanchefleur*.

gold, and its gold-cast metal dolls of boy and girl, the tomb does not insist upon cultural difference, so much as testify to a beautiful union of Christian and Muslim.”⁴⁸ For Ingham, the gold statues memorialize Floire and Blanchefleur’s union in a moment of cross-cultural connection, even before Floire converts to Christianity at the end of the romance. I suggest that this reading, then, sheds light on and predicts the strength of the link between Floire and Blanchefleur, much like their shared Latin. If we take up the metaphor of the couple as hub among the cultural networks between Spain, Babylon, and the space and populations between, their hub is permanently localized through this beautiful memorial.

After “death,” too, sound is integral to the statues’ expression of love. They, like the bronze-cast birds, are automata powered by the wind:

En la tombe ot quatre tuiaus
as quatre cors, bien fais et biaux,
es queus li quatre vent feroient
cascuns ausi com il ventoient.
Quant li vens les enfans toucoit,
l'un baisoit l'autre et acoloit,
si disoient par ingremance
trestout lor bon et lor enfance.⁴⁹

(ll. 585-592)

The relationship between the wind blowing in the pipes and the wind causing the statues to kiss is somewhat ambiguous. In a sense, it seems that the wind blows across the pipes first, which then

⁴⁸ Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 89.

⁴⁹ In the tomb were four pipes / in each of the four corners, well-crafted and beautiful, / and when the four winds blew / they made each one blow with wind. / When the wind reached the youths, / one kissed and greeted the other, / as if by magic, / showing all goodness and youthfulness.

allows it to reach the statues, who, in turn, kiss. The text does not explicitly preclude the pipes from having an effect upon Statue Floire and Blanchefleur. Perhaps the sound from the pipes, and not simply the presence of wind, triggers the statues to embrace. If so, the manmade pipes are analogous in their causality to the bronze birds in Babylon. Their mechanic construction aside, the statues of Floire and Blanchefleur are influenced by what they hear in their expression of eternal, good, and youthful love.

The soundscape within the tomb is further complicated by the fact that the statues talk to one another after they kiss:

Ce dist Flores a Blanceflor:
« Basiés moi, bele, par amor. »
Blanceflor respont en baisant :
« Je vos aim plus que riens vivant. »
Tant com li vent les atoucoient
et li enfant s' entrebaisoient,
et quant il laissent le venter,
dont se reposent de parler.⁵⁰

(ll. 593-600)

In a moment that Truitt aptly identifies as verbal irony, Blanchefleur's statue refers herself and Floire as alive, despite their existence as automata.⁵¹ The relationship between the two statues in the tomb is contingent upon the wind blowing, and, as above, it is unclear as to whether the wind alone causes the two to talk and kiss, or if the sound of the wind on the pipes generates the expression of the love. Despite the ambiguous cause of the automata's dialogue, the network of

⁵⁰ This Floire says to Blanchefleur: / "Kiss me, my beautiful, my love." / Blanchefleur responds, kissing him: / "I love you more than anyone else alive." / While the wind touches them / the youths continue to kiss each other, / and when it stops blowing / they stop speaking.

⁵¹ Truitt, 99.

hearing between them continues, even after their “death,” immortalizing Floire’s request of a kiss from Blanchefleur, and Blanchefleur’s admission that she loves Floire more than anyone. But, according to the text, these are the words and actions that occur between the statues only when the wind blows; when there is no wind, there is silence. As I argued above, silence plays an equally important role in oral networks, even if they are posthumous. An assumption can be made here that the statues are speaking Arabic since the tomb was designed and created by Floire’s parents. This emphasizes the erotic bond discussed above between the couple as established by their natural, mother tongue. More representative of their love however, would be if the memorialized couple spoke in their learned, secret Latin. The text does not specify this perhaps because of its relative narrative unimportance, but the magic of the automata leaves it to the auditor to decide which language constitutes Floire and Blanchefleur’s immortal network of hearing.

New Networks/Looking Forward

Floire et Blanchefleur exhibits the creation of hearing networks between the text and audience, between characters of the romance, between birds—mechanized and real—and humans, between geo-spaces, and even between statues. And, indeed, there is no doubt about the widespread oral transmission of *Floire et Blanchefleur*. Leclanche notes that the romance exists in over thirteen medieval versions, in languages spanning from Norse and German to English, Czech, Yiddish, and Greek.⁵² And of course, Zumthor highlights transmission as one of the five constitutive operations of a text.⁵³ *Floire et Blanchefleur*, then, belongs to a literary network that was perpetuated by the oral-writing cycle the narrator discusses in the beginning of the romance: the

⁵² Leclanche, XXIV-XXVI.

⁵³ Zumthor, *La Poésie et la Voix*, 40. The other operations are production, reception, conservation, and repetition.

narrator hears the story from one of two sisters, who heard it from a clerk, who had read it in a book, and so on and so forth. Thus, the networks of hearing and love between the two characters within the romance extend outside of the narrative are translated into different languages, across many centuries, in various countries. The sonic network of *Floire et Blanchefleur* exists today, not only in the classroom and amongst medievalists, but as a three-part musical remediation, “A King’s Lie,” by Stan Nieuwenhuis. The composer notes that during one segment, after their separation, Floire—played by a euphonium—and Blanchefleur—represented by a flugelhorn—lament their lost love.⁵⁴ This musical version of the romance comprises a new node in the network of *Floire et Blanchefleur*, and provides a new type of sonority for the audience. All of the networks and instances of communication in *Floire et Blanchefleur* seem inseparable from love: sound influences love and love incites new networks. It is possible that these networks were a very real aspect of medieval readers’ lives, but it is clear that while they may not truly be immortal in a tomb with mechanical statues controlled by the wind, Floire and Blanchefleur’s voices exist today, even if they are heard through the euphonium and flugelhorn.

⁵⁴ <https://www.stannieuwenhuis.be/works/a-king-s-lie/>

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