LANG ANDREW

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

There is nothing in artistic poetry quite akin to "Aucassin and Nicolete."

By a rare piece of good fortune the one manuscript of the Song-Story has escaped those waves of time, which have wrecked the bark of Menander, and left of Sappho but a few floating fragments. The very form of the tale is peculiar; we have nothing else from the twelfth or thirteenth century in the alternate prose and verse of the *cante-fable*.[1] We have fabliaux in verse, and prose Arthurian romances. We have *Chansons de Geste*, heroic poems like "Roland," unrhymed assonant *laisses*, but we have not the alternations of prose with *laisses* in seven-syllabled lines. It cannot be certainly known whether the form of "Aucassin and Nicolete" was a familiar form – used by many *jogleors*, or wandering minstrels and story-tellers such as Nicolete, in the tale, feigned herself to be, – or whether this is a solitary experiment by "the old captive" its author, a contemporary, as M. Gaston Paris thinks him, of

[1] Gaston Paris, in M. Bida's edition, p. xii. Paris, 1878. The blending is not unknown in various countries. See note at end of Translation.

Louis VII (1130). He was original enough to have invented, or adopted from popular tradition, a form for himself; his originality declares itself everywhere in his one surviving masterpiece. True, he uses certain traditional formulae, that have survived in his time, as they survived in Homer's, from the manner of purely popular poetry, of *Volkslieder*. Thus he repeats snatches of conversation always in the same, or very nearly the same words. He has a stereotyped form, like Homer, for saying that one person addressed another, "ains traist au visconte de la vile si l'apela" τον δαπαγειβομενος προσεφε.. Like Homer, and like popular song, he deals in recurrent epithets, and changeless courtesies. To Aucassin the hideous plough-man is "Biax frère," "fair brother," just as the treacherous Aegisthus is αμυμων in Homer; these are complimentary terms, with no moral sense in particular. The *jogleor* is not more curious than Homer, or than the poets of the old ballads, about giving novel descriptions of his characters. As Homer's ladies are "fair-tressed," so Nicolete and Aucassin have, each of them, close yellow curls, eyes of vair (whatever that may mean), and red lips. War cannot be mentioned except as war "where knights do smite and are smitten," and so forth. The author is absolutely conventional in such matters, according to the convention of his age and profession.

Nor is his matter more original. He tells a story of thwarted and finally fortunate love, and his hero is "a Christened knight" – like Tamlane, – his heroine a Paynim lady. To be sure, Nicolete

was baptized before the tale begins, and it is she who is a captive among Christians, not her lover, as usual, who is a captive among Saracens. The author has reversed the common arrangement, and he appears to have cared little more than his reckless hero, about creeds and differences of faith. He is not much interested in the recognition of Nicolete by her great Paynim kindred, nor indeed in any of the "business" of the narrative, the fighting, the storms and tempests, and the burlesque of the kingdom of Torelore.

What the nameless author does care for, is his telling of the love-story, the passion of Aucassin and Nicolete. His originality lies in his charming medley of sentiment and humour, of a smiling compassion and sympathy with a touch of mocking mirth. The love of Aucassin and Nicolete —

"Des grans paines qu'il soufri,"

that is the one thing serious to him in the whole matter, and that is not so very serious.[2] The story-teller is no Mimnermus, Love and Youth are the best things he knew, – "deport du viel caitif," – and now he has "come to forty years," and now they are with him no longer. But he does not lament like Mimnermus, like Alcman, like Llwyarch Hen. "What is Life, what is delight without golden Aphrodite? May I die!" says Mimnermus, "when I am no more conversant with these, with secret love, and gracious gifts, and the bed of desire." And Alcman, when his

[2] I know not if I unconsciously transferred this criticism from M. Gaston Paris.

limbs waver beneath him, is only saddened by the faces and voices of girls, and would change his lot for the sea-birds.[3]

> "Maidens with voices like honey for sweetness that breathe desire,
> Would that I were a sea-bird with limbs that never could tire,
> Over the foam-flowers flying with halcyons ever on wing,
> Keeping a careless heart, a sea-blue bird of the spring."

But our old captive, having said farewell to love, has yet a kindly smiling interest in its fever and folly. Nothing better has he met, even now that he knows "a lad is an ass." He tells a love story, a story of love overmastering, without conscience or care of aught but the beloved. And the *viel caitif* tells it with sympathy, and with a smile. "Oh folly of fondness," he seems to cry, "oh merry days of desolation"

> "When I was young as you are young,
> When lutes were touched and songs were sung,
> And love lamps in the windows hung."

It is the very tone of Thackeray, when Thackeray is tender, and the world heard it first from this elderly, nameless minstrel, strolling with his viol and his singing boys, perhaps, like a blameless d'Assoucy, from castle to castle in "the happy poplar land." One seems to see him and hear him in the twilight, in

[3] "Love in Idleness." London, 1883, p. 169.

the court of some château of Picardy, while the ladies on silken cushions sit around him listening, and their lovers, fettered with silver chains, lie at their feet. They listen, and look, and do not think of the minstrel with his grey head and his green heart, but we think of him. It is an old man's work, and a weary man's work. You can easily tell the places where he has lingered, and been pleased as he wrote. They are marked, like the bower Nicolete built, with flowers and broken branches wet with dew. Such a passage is the description of Nicolete at her window, in the strangely painted chamber,

> "ki faite est par grant devisse
> panturee a miramie."

Thence

> "she saw the roses blow,
> Heard the birds sing loud and low."

Again, the minstrel speaks out what many must have thought, in those incredulous ages of Faith, about Heaven and Hell, Hell where the gallant company makes up for everything. When he comes to a battle-piece he makes Aucassin "mightily and knightly hurl through the press," like one of Malory's men. His hero must be a man of his hands, no mere sighing youth incapable of arms. But the minstrels heart is in other things, for example, in the verses where Aucassin transfers to Beauty the wonder-

working powers of Holiness, and makes the sight of his lady heal the palmer, as the shadow of the Apostle, falling on the sick people, healed them by the Gate Beautiful. The Flight of Nicolete is a familiar and beautiful picture, the daisy flowers look black in the ivory moonlight against her feet, fair as Bombyca's "feet of carven ivory" in the Sicilian idyll, long ago.[4] It is characteristic of the poet that the two lovers begin to wrangle about which loves best, in the very mouth of danger, while Aucassin is yet in prison, and the patrol go down the moonlit street, with swords in their hands, sworn to slay Nicolete. That is the place and time chosen for this ancient controversy. Aucassin's threat that if he loses Nicolete he will not wait for sword or knife, but will dash his head against a wall, is in the very temper of the prisoned warrior-poet, who actually chose this way of death. Then the night scene, with its fantasy, and shadow, and moonlight on flowers and street, yields to a picture of the day, with the birds singing, and the shepherds laughing, in the green links between wood and water. There the shepherds take Nicolete for a fairy, so bright a beauty shines about her. Their mockery, their independence, may make us consider again our ideas of early Feudalism. Probably they were in the service of townsmen, whose good town treated the Count as no more than an equal of its corporate dignity. The bower of branches built by Nicolete is certainly one of the places where the minstrel himself has rested and been pleased with his work. One can feel it still, the cool of that clear summer

[4] Theocritus, x. 37.

night, the sweet smell of broken boughs, and trodden grass, and deep dew, and the shining of the star that Aucassin deemed was the translated spirit of his lady. Romance has touched the book here with her magic, as she has touched the lines where we read how Consuelo came by moonlight to the Canon's garden and the white flowers. The pleasure here is the keener for contrast with the luckless hind whom Aucassin encountered in the forest: the man who had lost his master's ox, the ungainly man who wept, because his mother's bed had been taken from under her to pay his debt. This man was in that estate which Achilles, in Hades, preferred above the kingship of the dead outworn. He was hind and hireling to a villein,

ανδρι παρ ακληρω

It is an unexpected touch of pity for the people, and for other than love-sorrows, in a poem intended for the great and courtly people of chivalry.

At last the lovers meet, in the lodge of flowers beneath the stars. Here the story should end, though one could ill spare the pretty lecture the girl reads her lover as they ride at adventure, and the picture of Nicolete, with her brown stain, and jogleor's attire, and her viol, playing before Aucassin in his own castle of Biaucaire. The burlesque interlude of the country of Torelore is like a page out of Rabelais, stitched into the *cante-fable* by mistake. At such lands as Torelore Pantagruel and Panurge

touched many a time in their vague voyaging. Nobody, perhaps, can care very much about Nicolete's adventures in Carthage, and her recognition by her Paynim kindred. If the old captive had been a prisoner among the Saracens, he was too indolent or incurious to make use of his knowledge. He hurries on to his journey's end;

> "Journeys end in lovers meeting."

So he finishes the tale. What lives in it, what makes it live, is the touch of poetry, of tender heart, of humorous resignation. The old captive says the story will gladden sad men: -

> "Nus hom n'est si esbahis,
> tant dolans ni entrepris,
> de grant mal amaladis,
> se il l'oit, ne soit garis,
> et de joie resbaudis,
> tant par est douce."

This service it did for M. Bida, the painter, as he tells us when he translated Aucassin in 1870. In dark and darkening days, *patriai tempore iniquo*, we too have turned to *Aucassin et Nicolete*.[5]

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[5] I have not thought it necessary to discuss the conjectures, – they are no more, – about the Greek or Arabic origin of the cante-fable, about the derivation of Aucassin's name, the supposed copying of *Floire et Blancheflor*, the longitude and latitude of the land of Torelore, and so forth. In truth "we are in Love's land to-day," where the ships

sail without wind or compass, like the barques of the Phaeacians. Brunner and Suchier add nothing positive to our knowledge, and M. Gaston Paris pretends to cast but little light on questions which it is too curious to consider at all. In revising the translation I have used with profit the versions of M. Bida, of Mr. Bourdillon, the glossary of Suchier, and Mr. Bourdillon's glossary. As for the style I have attempted, if not Old English, at least English which is elderly, with a memory of Malory.

BALLADE OF AUCASSIN

Where smooth the Southern waters run
Through rustling leagues of poplars gray,
Beneath a veiled soft Southern sun,
We wandered out of Yesterday;
Went Maying in that ancient May
Whose fallen flowers are fragrant yet,
And lingered by the fountain spray
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

The grassgrown paths are trod of none
Where through the woods they went astray;
The spider's traceries are spun
Across the darkling forest way;
There come no Knights that ride to slay,
No Pilgrims through the grasses wet,
No shepherd lads that sang their say
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

'Twas here by Nicolete begun
Her lodge of boughs and blossoms gay;
'Scaped from the cell of marble dun
'Twas here the lover found the Fay;
O lovers fond, O foolish play!
How hard we find it to forget,

Who fain would dwell with them as they,
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

ENVOY.

Prince, 'tis a melancholy lay!
For Youth, for Life we both regret:
How fair they seem; how far away,
With Aucassin and Nicolete.

A. L.

BALLADE OF NICOLETE

All bathed in pearl and amber light
She rose to fling the lattice wide,
And leaned into the fragrant night,
Where brown birds sang of summertide;
('Twas Love's own voice that called and cried)
"Ah, Sweet!" she said, "I'll seek thee yet,
Though thorniest pathways should betide
The fair white feet of Nicolete."

They slept, who would have stayed her flight;
(Full fain were they the maid had died!)
She dropped adown her prison's height
On strands of linen featly tied.
And so she passed the garden-side
With loose-leaved roses sweetly set,
And dainty daisies, dark beside
The fair white feet of Nicolete!

Her lover lay in evil plight
(So many lovers yet abide!)
I would my tongue could praise aright
Her name, that should be glorified.
Those lovers now, whom foes divide
A little weep, – and soon forget.

How far from these faint lovers glide
The fair white feet of Nicolete.

ENVOY.

My Princess, doff thy frozen pride,
Nor scorn to pay Love's golden debt,
Through his dim woodland take for guide
The fair white feet of Nicolete.

GRAHAM R. TOMSON

THE SONG-STORY OF AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE

'Tis of Aucassin and Nicolete.

Who would list to the good lay
Gladness of the captive grey?
'Tis how two young lovers met,
Aucassin and Nicolete,
Of the pains the lover bore
And the sorrows he outwore,
For the goodness and the grace,
Of his love, so fair of face.

Sweet the song, the story sweet,
There is no man hearkens it,
No man living 'neath the sun,
So outwearied, so foredone,
Sick and woful, worn and sad,
But is healèd, but is glad
'Tis so sweet.

So say they, speak they, tell they the Tale:

How the Count Bougars de Valence made war on Count Garin de Biaucaire, war so great, and so marvellous, and so mortal that never a day dawned but alway he was there, by the gates and

walls, and barriers of the town with a hundred knights, and ten thousand men at arms, horsemen and footmen: so burned he the Count's land, and spoiled his country, and slew his men. Now the Count Garin de Biaucaire was old and frail, and his good days were gone over. No heir had he, neither son nor daughter, save one young man only; such an one as I shall tell you. Aucassin was the name of the damoiseau: fair was he, goodly, and great, and featly fashioned of his body, and limbs. His hair was yellow, in little curls, his eyes blue and laughing, his face beautiful and shapely, his nose high and well set, and so richly seen was he in all things good, that in him was none evil at all. But so suddenly overtaken was he of Love, who is a great master, that he would not, of his will, be dubbed knight, nor take arms, nor follow tourneys, nor do whatsoever him beseemed. Therefore his father and mother said to him;

"Son, go take thine arms, mount thy horse, and hold thy land, and help thy men, for if they see thee among them, more stoutly will they keep in battle their lives, and lands, and thine, and mine."

"Father," said Aucassin, "I marvel that you will be speaking. Never may God give me aught of my desire if I be made knight, or mount my horse, or face stour and battle wherein knights smite and are smitten again, unless thou give me Nicolete, my true love, that I love so well."

"Son," said the father, "this may not be. Let Nicolete go, a slave girl she is, out of a strange land, and the captain of this

town bought her of the Saracens, and carried her hither, and hath reared her and let christen the maid, and took her for his daughter in God, and one day will find a young man for her, to win her bread honourably. Herein hast thou naught to make or mend, but if a wife thou wilt have, I will give thee the daughter of a King, or a Count. There is no man so rich in France, but if thou desire his daughter, thou shalt have her."

"Faith! my father," said Aucassin, "tell me where is the place so high in all the world, that Nicolete, my sweet lady and love, would not grace it well? If she were Empress of Constantinople or of Germany, or Queen of France or England, it were little enough for her; so gentle is she and courteous, and debonaire, and compact of all good qualities."

Here singeth one:

Aucassin was of Biaucaire
Of a goodly castle there,
But from Nicolete the fair
None might win his heart away
Though his father, many a day,
And his mother said him nay,
"Ha! fond child, what wouldest thou?
Nicolete is glad enow!
Was from Carthage cast away,
Paynims sold her on a day!
Wouldst thou win a lady fair
Choose a maid of high degree

Such an one is meet for thee."
"Nay of these I have no care,
Nicolete is debonaire,
Her body sweet and the face of her
Take my heart as in a snare,
Loyal love is but her share
That is so sweet."

Then speak they, say they, tell they the Tale:

When the Count Garin de Biaucaire knew that he would avail not to withdraw Aucassin his son from the love of Nicolete, he went to the Captain of the city, who was his man, and spake to him, saying:

"Sir Count; away with Nicolete thy daughter in God; cursed be the land whence she was brought into this country, for by reason of her do I lose Aucassin, that will neither be dubbed knight, nor do aught of the things that fall to him to be done. And wit ye well," he said, "that if I might have her at my will, I would burn her in a fire, and yourself might well be sore adread."

"Sir," said the Captain, "this is grievous to me that he comes and goes and hath speech with her. I had bought the maiden at mine own charges, and nourished her, and baptized, and made her my daughter in God. Yea, I would have given her to a young man that should win her bread honourably. With this had Aucassin thy son naught to make or mend. But, sith it is thy will and thy pleasure, I will send her into that land and that country where never will he see her with his eyes."

"Have a heed to thyself," said the Count Garin, "thence might great evil come on thee."

So parted they each from other. Now the Captain was a right rich man: so had he a rich palace with a garden in face of it; in an upper chamber thereof he let place Nicolete, with one old woman to keep her company, and in that chamber put bread and meat and wine and such things as were needful. Then he let seal the door, that none might come in or go forth, save that there was one window, over against the garden, and strait enough, where through came to them a little air.

Here singeth one:

Nicolete as ye heard tell
Prisoned is within a cell
That is painted wondrously
With colours of a far countrie,
And the window of marble wrought,
There the maiden stood in thought,
With straight brows and yellow hair
Never saw ye fairer fair!
On the wood she gazed below,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.