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THE MEDIEVAL *PARTONOPEU*
OF BLOIS AND ORIENTALISM

The novel *Partonopeu of Blois* was composed at the end of the 12th century¹ and became very quickly one of the most popular works of the time. The text is anonymous, however we can suppose that it was well known during the Middle Ages as the novel was translated into several European languages² and there are at least ten manuscripts of it dating from the 12th to the 14th century³. This success could be explained by the quality and the great originality of *Partonopeu of Blois*. The distinct majority of French medieval novels take place in the King Arthur's world, an enchanted space of woods and castles hosting knights, fairies, or other amazing creatures. Yet this time, the reader is transferred into a very ambiguous space – the heart of the Byzantine empire represented by the oriental city of Chef d'Oire.

Partonopeu of Blois narrates the story of a young knight who gets lost in woods, finds an enchanted boat and arrives to the imaginary city of Chef d'Oire which can be easily identified as the medieval Constantinople. There, one night, he meets the fairy Melior, the heiress to the Byzantine empire who manages to keep his presence invisible to her people thanks to her supernatural powers⁴. She offers to Partonopeu everything he could ever desire but he cannot even try to look at her until she says so; if he manages to trust her and to respect this caveat, this *interdit*, he will marry her and he will rule the Byzantine empire as she cannot do it alone.

After his stay in Chef d'Oire, Partonopeu's help is needed in France which is on war and he has to go back to his family and his people for a while. Melior entirely approves this decision, also considering that she expects him to perfect his chivalric education. The knight reveals to his mother the story of his love but the family does not trust Melior's powers which evoke satanic forces and convinces the knight to look at her once he comes back to the fairy's palace, to confirm she is not a devil. Partonopeu will broke the promise he gave to Melior and he will be expelled from Chef d'Oire. He loses the fairy's love and leads a life of wandering and sorrow until Urraque, her sister, decides to help him to recover Melior's love and trust.

¹ The novel was written by 1185. Cf. Introduction to *Partonopeu de Blois*, ed. by Olivier Collet, Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2005, p. 19. Our abbreviation for this edition is *PB*.

² Spanish, Catalan, Dutch and German among other languages.

³ Cf. Introduction to *PB*, p. 12, note 1.

⁴ It is important to say that Melior is not a typical celtic fairy. Without no doubt she is connected to the *lai* tradition, but her knowledge comes from studying and can be lost. Melior can be seen as a bridge between two types of marvels: the first coming from the Arthurian world and the second one representing the scientific oriental world.

Melior cannot rule alone her empire, and now that she has lost Partonopeu, the gentry of Chef d'Oire will chose a husband for her. The nobles finally decide to organize a tournament so they can observe directly the best knight who would marry Melior and take control of the empire. Partonopeu obviously participates in the tournament and shows his chivalric skills so the gentry of Chef d'Oire decide to entrust him the future of the empire. Melior is happy to accept this situation; she still loves Partonopeu.

We should concentrate on the one hand on the description of the city and its impact on the reception of the relation between the West and the East expressed also by the relation between Partonopeu and Melior. On the other hand we will observe how the author intends to justify the western superiority and legacy of its rule.

The first contact that Partonopeu has with the city of Chef d'Oire is described as a vision of wealth and abundance (Ciggaar 1996). He finds a spectacle of colors and rich materials, decorated with sculptures, shining even during the night⁵. The place is depicted as perfectly beautiful, but completely empty. We can imagine that humans are replaced by invisible machines which take care of Partonopeu during his stay, they accomplish all typical duties of the domestics like serving the dinner, maintaining the fire or cleaning the table after the meal. This mechanism refers the reader to the concept of *engin*. In Robert W. Hanning's words "the manifestations of *engin* (...) are by no means always admirable. (...) Our reaction to *engin* embodies a profound ambivalence: engine complicates our acceptance of straight forward chivalric values (love, prowess, heroism)..." (Henning 1977: 105) and "*Engin* is a virtue par excellence of fallen man" (ibidem: 106). The presence of machines, a typical element of the oriental space, in Chef d'Oire reflects the admiration that the Westerners have for byzantine knowledge, but also disdain as the mechanism cannot replace the real moral values.

Likewise, the machines are present in the palace to serve Partonopeu: all his wishes are fulfilled, everything is prepared to serve him. The place is equipped with mechanisms which guess every desire of the young knight. The oriental knowledge and *savoir-faire* are made available to Partonopeu. The reader of the novel was probably fascinated and impressed by the description of the oriental technique, exactly as Partonopeu is at the beginning, but then he can see that the young knight is getting more confident. We could interpret from this that the reader himself can feel as he could dominate the oriental space even if he does not understand all its mechanisms.

In the description of the city the accent is put on the defensive character of its architecture, there are ramparts, towers and high walls (cf. *PB*, vv. 817–820). And this is interesting to see that the French knight has no difficulty to enter the city which seems to be perfectly prepared not to let anybody in. There is a constant contrast between the fortified character of the city and the facility with which Partonopeu is moving inside. Chef d'Oire does not try to resist Partonopeu. This impression is reinforced by the recurrent image of the open doors which suggests a possible sexual interpretation.

⁵ 'Il est entrés en une rue/ Qui de *tai* est et nete et nue./ De *tai* n'i puet avoir nient,/ Car tote est faite a pavament./ Et quant oncques plus i plovra./ Li pavemens plus clers sera./ Li palais sont trestot d'un grant ;/ Ainc n'avoit veü de teus tant./ Il sont trestot de marbre fin ;/ Li un sont bis, l'autre sanguin./ Li un sont pers, li autre ver –/ Qui dedens est ne crient iver – ;/ Li un sont blanc, li autre noir./ Molt furent fait par grant savoir./ Et trestuit sont covert enson/ De tuiles peintes et de plon'. *PB*, vv. 825–840.

Once the knight gets to the palace he finds the dinner served and he naturally takes the place of honor (cf. *PB*, vv. 985–992) even if there is a place for three thousand knights.

The author mentions that Partonopeu, before he finds the palace, is guided by God himself (cf. *PB*, vv. 961–962), which should justify this attitude of the young man that could be considered an act of audacity. Later on, candles show him the way to the empress bed (cf. *PB*, vv. 1059–1066), as if the palace itself wanted him to find the place which is right for him. God and light are supporting Partonopeu who is alone in the oriental space, the space of the Other. The emptiness of the city could seem hostile to Partonopeu at the beginning but he quickly finds out that this inanimate space accepts him and is even working for him.

The first day in Chef d'Oire, Partonopeu walks up the most beautiful tower in the city and contemplates the eastern lands as somebody who already has taken control over his new possessions. From the tower Partonopeu can appreciate the immensity of the empire which is highlighted by the *topos* of the sea. This vision of domination over the new territory harmonizes with the figure of the profusion of water, immense and without any limits, exactly as the Byzantine empire seemed to the Latins.

The author underlines that the knight is looking at the East: 'Esgarde vers soleil levant' (*PB*, v. 1619) which represents the future for the French chivalry. There is no circular movement, Partonopeu does not look back at his past, the land of his origins is not mentioned at this moment and all his attention is concentrated on the vision of the Orient, which is depicted as a source of luxury and opulence. This is the place which provides silk, rich materials, spices, golden shields, medicines, etc. All these goods evoke touch, smell, sight and taste, we could even speak about the hearing if we considered the sound that makes a golden shield. In such manner we obtain here a very sensual description of the Orient and its potential which makes Partonopeu forget the fear he felt when he arrived to Chef d'Oire.

Once he contemplated the East, he pointed his eyes to the south lands which present the vision of fertility. He can perceive gardens, vineyards and fields. 'La voit les cans amples et lés,/ Bien gaaigniés et bien semés;/ Ce li est vis que tant en voit/ Qu'a un roiaime assés seroit' (*PB*, vv. 1645–1648). Chef d'Oire stands for granary, Melior even says: 'En moi avers si bon tresor' (*PB*, v. 1764). She evokes its forests and its main river, she also reminds the presence of the sea which is directly connected with the trade, especially during the Middle Ages. Her presentation of the empire is concentrated on the nutritional aspects of the lands.

Partonopeu does not compare Chef d'Oire to Blois, he admits without any doubt that his new seat is the most impressive and imposing place in the world. In that way the French novelist recognizes that the Byzantine empire is far more attractive than the Western lands. There is no possible rivalry at this point: from Partonopeu's point of view, Chef d'Oire is incomparably superior to any other city and its placement is very advantageous⁶. The question is not to pretend that the French have the same possibility to built such a city for the reason it would not be credible. We can find all this

⁶ Cf. *PB*, vv. 1707–1714. While the description of Chef d'Oire is quite complex, the description of Pontoise, a western city is extremely poor: 'Pontoise est casteaus bon et bel./ De mur de cauç et de quarrel./ A peus et a grans roilleis, Et de bons cevaliers [garnis]'. *PB*, vv. 2119–2122.

exaltation of the byzantine city because the author makes Melior say that Chef d'Oire was in fact erected for Partonopeu. The empress judged him worth all this effort from the moment she heard about his chivalric values (cf. *PB*, v. 1716).

Just after his arrival, Partonopeu is guided by the candles in the palace and he finds the empress's bed where he is discovered by Melior, sovereign of Chef d'Oire and the whole Byzantine empire and a fairy, who, as expected, cannot resist him⁷. Even if she depends on her people's will concerning her marriage, she is the most important figure in the empire. This strong presence of the fairy Melior gives us a decisively feminized image of the city (cf. Gaullier-Bougassas 2003: 53). This is not the case in all medieval novels with the oriental background. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Cliges*, the Byzantine empire is represented by Alexander, his son Cliges and his uncle Alis. *Cliges* shows the occidental superiority over the Orient too but in a quite different manner. Melior's body inspires in Partonopeu both desire and fear which is parallel to the conventional reception of the Orient during the Middle Ages: as both frightening and attractive.

The West, with Partonopeu as the main character, and the Byzantine empire with Melior as its representative, exemplifies the typical opposition between the masculinity and the femininity and its relation with the opposition between the strength and the weakness as the feminine world needs masculine care and protection. In the case of *Partonopeu of Blois*, the femininity rhymes with the corporality. Their first contact is the touch, they do not see each other when they first meet in the empress's bed. We have to admit that Melior's situation is a little bit different because she had heard about Partonopeu, she admires him for his courage and his virtues. His first relation towards Melior is, however, purely physical and carnal. The importance of the sight and the image of the sight as source of love is well known in the medieval French literature, but here, the place of this sense is overtaken by the touch, which makes the oriental space of Chef d'Oire even more sensual. It confirms the thesis of Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas who maintains that "the oriental elsewhere [was] a perfect place for passionate love and corporal pleasure" (Gaullier-Bougassas 2003: 56).

During the Middle Ages, several French authors regularly mixed Troy up with Constantinople. They might speak about ancient times as war of Troy and proceed to the description of the medieval Constantinople. They definitely admired that civilization and assured that they were continuing the line of the Trojans. "The medieval people considered the succession of the empires as a transfer of the power, commonly called *translatio* in the 12th century"⁸. At that time, the idea of legacy of the ancient empire is at its best. As a consequence, the feeling of the superiority coming from the conviction that French continue the legacy of the Ancients is represented in literature.

⁷ This is important to underline that even if Partonopeu knows that Melior is Christian, she exclaims 'virgene Marie' (*PB*, v. 1145) when she sees Partonopeu, her religion seems to be overwhelmed by the oriental decoration. The cultural otherness surpasses the religious resemblance. In the same time, this short exclamations proves that there is no religious opposition between the two worlds, the text does not reflect the problems coming from the schism nor from any heresies that existed at that time.

⁸ Cf. Pastre 1992. Already in the 7th century it was mentioned that Franks descended from Trojans which was supposed to give more notoriety to the new dynasty.

However, the attitude towards the Byzantine empire is much more ambiguous. If the French had inherited the glory of Troy, which was literally “transferred” to Western Europe by those who escaped the massacre of the city, this transfer was only symbolic. The Byzantine empire was still situated where Troy has existed one day according to the medieval thought. Some of the authors expressed in their prose a conviction that French had some rights over the Byzantine territory. *Partonopeu of Blois* is an excellent example of this ambiguous attitude.

Partonopeu descends from Priam (cf. *PB*, v. 1501) which should justify why he has rights over the Byzantine empire. He is not a common knight who won the tournament and got the princess. His victory and his valor are reinforced by the genealogy, we could say that he returns to his ancestors’ land.

The opposition between the wealth of the Byzantines and the moral values of the West is here clearly underlined as Melior confesses that she had decided to seek for a perfect knight in France (cf. *PB*, vv. 1351–1364). She had observed his behavior, she had seen how he took the place of honor and how he slipped into her bed. In her eyes, his confidence justifies her choice: Partonopeu really is the perfect man to rule the Byzantine empire. He only needs to learn how to become a veritable knight in France; Melior can procure him wealth but she understands that he has to go to France to learn chivalry. She does not try to stop him, what is more, she encourages him wishing him to come back once he had arranged the military situation in France (cf. *PB*, vv. 1901–1908).

Partonopeu’s situation changes after he brakes the promise given to the fairy. The author devotes an important part of the novel to narrate the story of how Partonopeu helped by Urrique, Melior’s sister is recovering his beloved. We should, however, concentrate on his relation to Melior as the heiress to the Byzantine empire. When the inhabitants of Chef d’Oire discovered the presence of the knight from Blois and his relation with Melior, the fairy lost the possibility to chose him for a husband. The noble of Byzantium got the right to decide for her. During the councils some proposed different western⁹ princes but could not come to an agreement. This is remarkable that there is no proposition to find a husband for Melior among the Byzantines.

A noble but poor Ernoul de Maubricon proposes thus to organize a tournament. The tournament permits to chose the best knight in an anonymous way. It is to say that the Byzantine empire does not need a rich prince, but a brave knight. Ernoul insists that: “Ma dame a roialmes plusors/ Et contez et alters honors/ Et riches citez et chastels/ Et viles, plaines et casels,/ Et tant del sien, la Dé merci,/ Qu’aler puet a chois de mari” (*PB*, vv. 6525–6530). Ernoul, does not mean that anyone could become a new emperor, he just reminds that Melior does not need to look for a rich man. The empire needs a man of qualities, Ernoul even says “totes teiches” (*PB*, v. 6546). He should be: “gentils hom et loials/ Et chevaliers et buens et beals,/ Sages et frans et mes[u]rables/ Et de parole soit estables” (*PB*, vv. 6547–6550). By this enumeration the reader can guess that all those qualities are absent in the Byzantine empire.

The gentry of the Chef d’Oire not only accept the Western rule but they ask for it. After the tournament Partonopeu is not the only winner and the nobles of the Byzantine empire have to make a choice. The knight from Blois at the beginning of the novel is

⁹ There is a choice between Spanish, German and French Princes. Cf. *PB*, vv. 6467–6482.

chosen by Melior who appreciates his chivalric values as he is only a thirteen year-old boy, and then by her people, who admire his physical strength. His promotion to the range of the emperor cannot be a question of luck or blind love, but rather a conscious, mature decision of the most important people in the empire.

Emmanuèle Baumgartner reminds us that in *chansons de geste* the marriage between a western knight and an oriental, mostly Saracen, princess, very often obliged to stay in a closed space is a realization of a fantasy: conquest of the Orient (Baumgartner 2004). In the case of *Partonopeu*, the marriage is also a way to a legal acquisition of the empire which was always coveted and whose status was not necessarily recognized¹⁰.

It should be underlined that the novel does not concentrate on the opposition between different religions as it was usual in the *chanson de geste*, where the antagonism between the Christian West and the Muslim (or rather Saracen) East constituted the central axis of the plot. Here, in *Partonopeu of Blois*, the most radical division is between West and East. Both are Christian, even if *Partonopeu's* mother has doubts about Melior's religion. What makes a difference between *Partonopeu's* and Melior's worlds is their affiliation with the Orient. The Byzantine empire is first oriental, and then Christian. Also, at the end of the tournament there is a possibility of choosing a Saracen husband for Melior which would be unthinkable for the Westerners. We can see during the tournament that the Christians do not always fight against the Saracens, which would reinforce the opposition between the two religions.

The abundance, the engineering with its machines, the femininity represented by Melior, the fertility of the Byzantine lands, all those elements are passively exposed before *Partonopeu* in order to serve him. Every piece of decorum which, in the French medieval novels is usually related to the Orient is here offered to *Partonopeu*. The Byzantines recognize they need moral values coming from the West, where the level of chivalry is higher. This is how the western author manages to show that French Blois should take control over Chef d'Oire. This process does not have to be brutal, the city will not be taken by force, she has already offered herself to Blois.

As has been mentioned above, the novel was composed at the end of the 12th century, only about 25 years before the IVth Crusade, when the Latins conquered and devastated the city of Constantinople. Western chivalry admired and desired Constantinople and they finally took it in 1204. Those who conquered the Byzantine capital probably even did not feel as conquerors, they could really believe it belonged to them. It is definitely too much to confirm that the novel of *Partonopeu of Blois* had something to do with the fourth crusade¹¹, it cannot be affirmed that this text had any influence on the Franks' attitude. However, we can imagine that the story of *Partonopeu* and Melior was an expression of already present conviction that French have some rights over the Byzantine empire.

¹⁰ We should not forget that in *Chanson de Roland* it is said that Roland's sword, Durendal, has conquered Constantinople (cf. *Chanson de Roland*, 1990: Paris: Librairie Générale Française, v. 2329) what suggests that French have rights over the Byzantine empire.

¹¹ However, Thierry Crépin-Leblond (2005) sustains that the artistic and intellectual live of Blois could have influenced Louis de Blois to participate in the 4th crusade, he appreciated particularly *romans antiques*, novels set in ancient times, in Troy or Thebes, describing splendors of what everybody identified as Constantinople.

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- PB = Partonopeu de Blois*, 2005, ed. by Olivier Collet, Paris: Librairie Générale Française.

Résumé

Le médiéval *Partonopeu de Blois* et l'orientalisme

L'article est une tentative d'appliquer la théorie de l'orientalisme à *Partonopeu de Blois*, un roman anonyme médiéval français, particulièrement populaire au Moyen Age. L'auteure de l'article analyse le comportement d'un jeune chevalier occidental après son arrivée à Chef d'Oire, une ville byzantine opulente, dissimulant des merveilles de la technique orientale et procurant la prospérité à ses habitants invisibles. Les contacts de Partonopeu avec Mélior, une fée et l'héritière du trône, ainsi que les événements qui permettront au héros de devenir empereur, sont également interprétés. Tous ces éléments contribuent à créer une vision spécifique des relations entre l'Occident et l'Orient byzantin, dans laquelle ce dernier semble se soumettre à la suprématie étrangère.

Mots-clés: orientalisme au Moyen Age, Byzance dans la littérature, Orient au Moyen Age, Orient dans la littérature.

Streszczenie

Średniowieczna powieść *Partonopeu de Blois* a orientalizm

Artykuł jest próbą zastosowania teorii orientalizmu do średniowiecznej anonimowej powieści francuskiej *Partonopeu de Blois*, tekstu niezwykle wówczas popularnego. Autorka artykułu analizuje zachowanie młodego rycerza z Zachodu po przybyciu do bizantyjskiego miasta opływającego w bogactwa, skrywającego cuda orientalnej techniki oraz zapewniającego dostatek niewidzialnym mieszkańcom. Kontakty Partonopeusa z wróżką i następczynią tronu Melior, a także wydarzenia, które zaprowadzą bohatera do władzy nad imperium, pozwalają na dokonanie kolejnych interpretacji. Na podstawie tych elementów wyłania się szczególnie wizja relacji między Zachodem a bizantyjskim Wschodem, w której ten ostatni wydaje się poddawać obcemu zwierzchnictwu.

Słowa kluczowe: orientalizm w średniowieczu, Bizancjum w literaturze, Orient w średniowieczu, Orient w literaturze.