Marginality as Women's Freedom: The Case of Floripe

Marian Rothstein

Carthage College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Renaissance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol12/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
When Jean Bagnyon chose to rewrite Fierabras for his contemporaries at the dawn of the printed book, strong fictional women who participated in their own name in the world, women not limited to domestic, advisory, or intercessory functions, were rare. Their scarcity did not end then. The interest of what follows must lie, at least in part, beyond Bagnyon’s text and beyond Floripe herself. The purpose of subjecting the case of Floripe (sister of Fierabras) to close reading is in part to understand how this example of an active woman functions. My scrutiny of this text is also intended to contribute to a more general understanding of the textual means permitting woman to slip past the forces that still her voice, sometimes even in the confines of domesticity.¹

The questions about women’s roles that feminist scholarship has encouraged give us reason to pause at the presence of a dynamic female character in male-created and male-dominated fiction.² In addition, Floripe’s case has two particular advantages to offer a feminist study. First, the scope of her activities is great, and she supplies an extreme case, in which the operative forces, here studied under high tension, are clearly rendered. The paucity of dynamic women in fiction mirrors their infrequency in the world. Second, the text in which Floripe appears, Fierabras, was rewritten and republished for some six hundred years, during which time Floripe came to the attention of a broad range of readers.
For four hundred years *Fierabras* was a standard (elite) literary text, and then, for two more centuries, by means of the *bibliotheque bleue*, the story circulated as popular literature.3 Here Floripe’s activities will ground my investigation of when and how female power could be tolerated.

My discussion of Floripe requires that she be situated in *Fierabras*, originally a twelfth-century addition to the *Cycle de Charlemagne* telling how the Crown of Thorns and other relics of the Passion that had fallen into Saracen hands were eventually returned to the Christians to be piously preserved by Charlemagne. During the twelfth century these holy relics were exhibited at Saint-Denis, attracting large numbers of pilgrims to the fairs every June.4 These relics remained a source of motivation in the later prose redactions as well. The story had broad appeal, appearing in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in a variety of French, Provençal, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and English versions.5 *Fierabras* was printed for the first time in 1478 in the new prose rendition by Jean Bagnyon (1412–1489) of Lausanne. This version set the form in which the story was reprinted countless times until the early nineteenth century, accumulating minor changes over the years without undergoing further systematic revision.6

According to *Fierabras*, when the holy relics taken from the Christians at the sack of Rome are brought to the palace of the Saracen leader, Baland, he places them in the protection of his daughter, Floripe. As we shall see, Floripe is amply capable—by strength of wit, will, or arm—of fulfilling the function her father assigns her.

Floripe’s life of action is launched when she learns that her father’s prison holds five of Charlemagne’s peers. This is of more than idle interest to Floripe, who had seen and secretly fallen in love with one of the peers, Guy of Burgundy, when the French fought the Saracens seven years earlier at the siege of Rome.7 Her father’s jailor, Brutamont, proves an immediate impediment to the private interview she has been anticipating with Guy’s comrades:

Madame, vous me pardonnerez, ne se peut faire que vous y voïses pour la inhonnesteté du lieu, il ne vous appartient pas/ et dautre part votre père ma defendu que personne napprouche la prison/ et je me remembre que souvent par femme plusieurs preudhommes jay veus vergogniez et deceus (fol. 42 r.).
Provoked, by both his ideas and his insubordination, Floripe responds by direct, independent action:

Quand Floripes lentendit elle cuida perdre le sens et luy dist: O mauvais glout [sic] despiteulx me doibs tu mettre cest langaige devant/ je te promes que je ten feray payer brefment et demanda son chambrelain lequel luy bailla ung baston et fist semblant la fille de ouvrir la prison et Brutamont la veult contredire/ et subitement elle cecy voiant luy donna si grant coup ou visaige que les yeux luy fist voller dehors la teste et puis apres quil fut a terre elle le fist morir et puys le gecta sans ce quil fut sceu de nulluy des paiens dedens la prison (fol. 42 r.).

[When Floripe heard him, she thought she would lose her senses and she said to him: “O spiteful and evil man, should you speak thus to me? I promise I will shortly make you pay for it.” And she asked for her chamberlain, who gave her a stick. Then the girl made as if to open the prison and Brutamont wished to stop her. And seeing this, she quickly gave him such a blow across the face that she made his eyes fly from his head, and then after he was on the ground, she caused him to die and then threw him (into the dungeon) without any of the pagans in the prison learning of it].

Her physical strength seems to be as great as her spirit and resolve. Two earlier prose redactions suppress or modify this behavior; there the chamberlain, rather than Floripe, kills the jailor. Presumably direct violence from the weaker sex was too dangerous an example to set before the reader.
The peers go from the dungeon to Floripe’s apartments, where one of her handmaidens, recognizing the prisoners, threatens to tell Baland. Floripe calls the woman aside, as if for private consultation, strikes her a sharp blow to the head, and with the aid of a steward throws her body out the window into the sea. Shortly afterward, Sortibrant, advisor to Baland, provokes Floripe’s anger. If with the maiden she spoke sweetly and acted violently, now, in a more public setting, she limits herself to the verbal evocation of physical violence: “Filz de putain traistre desloyal parjure si je ne pensais etre plus outre blasmee de me prendre a toi, je te dontoye tel [sic] sur le visage que le sang aval en viendroit habundamment” (fol. 51 v.) [Son of a whore, traitor, disloyal perjurer, if I did not think I would be further blamed for dealing with you, I would give you such (a blow) across the face that your blood would flow freely down]. Floripe alludes to her status as princess, which gives her haughty superiority over her father’s less royal advisor. In all these cases, when she is offended Floripe does not seek protection from her father or any powers beyond her own. By the time Floripe’s will is crossed by Sortibant’s words, the reader has already been shown enough action so that her words are very nearly the sign of the deed.

Floripe is presented in discourse that is constantly aware of her otherness, aware that she is a woman, and yet her otherness accords her extraordinary scope. While she lives as befits a princess in her father’s palace, she is not limited to the private and domestic. Her action on behalf of the five French peers in her father’s prison follows from the place she seems to have in her father’s court, where she is shown taking a lively interest in political developments, speaking out in council among Baland’s advisors. Although Floripe’s astonishing murder of the jailor follows a highly conventionalized portrait of our heroine, her clothing as it is described in that portrait, while departing in no way from the expectations of tradition, is as much semiotic as vestimentary:

Et elle estoit habillie dune robe de pourpre merveilleusement riche trespointee destoilles de fin or laquelle fut faicte dune fee/ et estoit de telle vertu que personne qui lauroit ne pourroit estre empoisonne de herbe ne de venin. Et estoit Floripes si belle atout ses habillemens que se une personne eust jeune trois ou quatre jours sans mengier et la veoit il estoit
remply et saoule/ et plus outre elle portoit ung portel qui avoit este fait en lisle de colcos la ou Jason prist la toison dor comme on le lit en la destruction de troye prez du commencement lequel mantel estoit semblablement fait dune fee et avoit si grant oudeur que cestoit merveille/ pourquoy de la beaulte de celle damoiselle chaqun se merveilloit/ (fol. 41 v.).

[She was dressed in a wondrously rich purple gown decorated with stars of pure gold, made by a fairy, and which had the power that the person who had it could not be poisoned by plants or venom. And Floripe was so lovely in her dress that if a person had gone three or four days without eating, when he saw her, he would be filled and satisfied. Moreover, she wore a coat which had been made on the Island of Colchis, where Jason got the golden fleece as is told in the *Destruction of Troye*, near the start. This mantle had also been made by a fairy, and had a marvelous odor. Therefore everyone marvelled at the beauty of this young lady.]

The material refinement, magical capabilities, and sensual appeal—all conventional feminine attributes—flag aspects of Floripe that push the very limits of conventional expectations about women. The purple and gold of her dress mark her royal condition as well as offering magical protection from poisons. Floripe’s mantle comes from Colchis, having been made by a fairy probably to be identified with Medea. Like the sacred relics, it is accompanied by a pleasing smell. Her dress and mantle participate in a great tradition of semiotic clothing. In Bagnyon’s version and its descendants, another magical part of her costume, a girdle permitting Floripe to protect those around her from hunger, appears only later when it becomes an active element in the narrative. By the combination of robe, mantle, and girdle, she is equipped as a kind of archetype of woman to assure the salubrious nurture of those about her; that is, if Floripe tests limits generally imposed on woman, her status as woman is nevertheless beyond question.

The understanding of Floripe’s social position, her specific power to protect from harm (poison) and hunger, as well as a more general ascription of spiritual and magical powers conveyed by her clothing is
implicit in the description of Floripe's apartments to which the peers are taken when she releases them from their imprisonment. Her living quarters also suggest divine as well as nurturing capacities. The room to which she brings the Peers, as semiotically potent as her dress, is a symbolic abbreviation of benevolent nature:

Dessus la maîtresse porte par beaulx ars estoient fàis les cieulx les estoilles le soleil la lune le temps deste et diver bois montaignes oyseaulx bestes poisson:/ y estoient pain[t]s de toutes especes et figures par merveilleuse façon. Et selon aulcunes escriputures le filz matusale[m] la fiste faire/ et estoit logee celle chambre dessus une roche noire toute environnee de la mer et en ung des quarrts de la maison avoit un pretoire merveilleusement bel ou jamais fleurs ne fruys ne faillolient. Et la de toutes maladies fors de celle de la mort on trouvoit confort et bon adiutoire. La dedans vint et croit la maindegloire (fol. 43 r.).

[Under the main door were painted the sky and the stars, the sun and the moon, summer and winter, woods, mountains. Birds and fish of all kinds were painted there by wonderful skill. And according to certain writings, the son of Mathusala had this done. And this room was placed on top of a black rock surrounded by the sea, and one of the quarters of the house had a wondrously beautiful spot where there were always flowers and fruits, and there one could find aid and comfort from all maladies except death. And in there came and grows the "maindegloire."]

Floripe activates the nutritive aspects of her quarters, first by using the (re)generative "main de gloire" (mandrake) to heal Olivier's wounds and then by providing a feast for the peers and her maidens. Her corner of the Saracen Admiral's palace resembles a terrestrial paradise; not coincidentally, it is also where Floripe keeps the Crown of Thorns, the nails that attached Christ to the Cross, and the other holy relics.

The physical description of Floripe herself remains sternly conventionalized—hair, eyes, and skin compared to gold, stars, and lilies.
Convention, however, provides a flimsy barricade against the forces of desire, as is made clear in the previously cited passage. "Et estoit Floripes si belle atout ses habillemens que se une personne eust jeune trois ou quatre jours sans mengier et la veoit il estoit remply et saoule" [And Floripe was so beautiful with all her clothes that if a person had gone three or four days without eating and saw her, he would be filled and satisfied]. The inscribed audience is masculine. (This is further suggested by a breach of the usual strictures of grammar where a grammatical feminine, une personne, is the antecedent of the masculine third person pronoun, il.)

The claim of satiety applies to the male viewer for whom her beauty can overcome hunger, presumably by overwhelming him with lust. Lust leads to the destruction of the powers of Floripe’s girdle. Using his skills to break into the tower in the middle of the night, one of Baland’s magicians finds the girdle but is then distracted from his mission by the sight of sleeping Floripe. His rape attempt wakes her, and, in turn, her cries wake the peers. The Saracen is slain and thrown out to sea in an action that saves Floripe’s honor but cuts the girdle in half—its magic power destroyed indirectly by pagan lust. There is another lesson here about the danger that desire may pose to woman’s nurturing powers. Sexuality is clearly recognized as potentially dangerous.

Floripe herself is as chaste as she is passionate; she has the unswerving fidelity to the initial object of her love that tradition demands of those who love nobly. While she understands the duties of hospitality as requiring her to assign a handmaiden to spend the night with each of the peers rescued from the dungeon, Floripe herself spends the night alone, staunchly loyal to Guy. She recognizes and controls her own desire, too, when she finally greets Guy: "[Elle] sapproucha de luy pour traicter ung petit le desir de son cuer et ne losa baiser en la bouche si non es joues et ou menton por la cause quelle estoit paienne" (fol. 52 v.) [(She) approached him to deal with her heart’s desire and did not dare kiss him on the mouth, nor on the cheeks and chin, because she was a pagan]. The conventional gesture of greeting, a kiss on the mouth, would here be sexually charged; her kisses can be rendered licit only by marriage, necessarily preceded by Floripe’s conversion to Christianity, her formal admission into the community.

Eventually all twelve peers of the realm, including Guy of Burgundy, are in Floripe’s custody. Again Floripe acts, telling Guy of her love. He
accepts her declaration very phlegmatically, declaring himself completely subservient to Charlemagne’s will in this as in all other matters. Guy’s submission to the will of his lord contrasts sharply with Floripe’s independent disposal of her own heart. In the absence of his assent, they cannot be considered betrothed. Earlier, she rejected the dominion of her father and forfeited her claim to his protection. Now the narrative protects Floripe’s status as an independent actor responsible to neither a Saracen nor a Christian lord. Still, his comrades assume that Floripe will eventually marry Guy. His understated response is a reminder of the chanson de geste origins of the story, of the privileging of familial and national goals, that continue to determine its development. Guy’s subservience to Charlemagne’s wishes sets Floripe’s total disregard for the wishes of her lord (her father) in sharp relief. But Baland is a Saracen; this makes Floripe’s rebellion excusable and even necessary as it brings her to Christianity and protects her from the inevitable error of her father’s ways. Furthermore, Guy’s apparent indifference means that Floripe’s love can continue to be treated publicly as a question of allegiance and intention in keeping with the discourse of group action that motivates the narrative.

In addition to her physical powers, Floripe also has magical powers beyond those initially adumbrated by her wardrobe. She cures Olivier’s wounds with a magic balm. When her father’s magician sets afire the stones of the tower in which she and the French knights have taken refuge, she proves herself his equal, concocting a brew that extinguishes the magical flames. Such magic may be either the expression of diabolical powers (setting the stones that shelter the Christians on fire) or the extension of divine protection (Floripe’s flame-quenching brew or her magic girdle that provides food during the siege). Unlike Medea’s terrifying magic, Floripe’s powers are always deployed on the side of good. The French knights’ lives depend more than once upon Floripe’s intelligence and strategic intervention. She saves the lives of the seven peers who came as messengers by suggesting to Baland that they might be exchanged for her brother Fierabras, then a prisoner of the French. When Naimes kills the Saracen Lucafart, she alerts the French to the need for a plan to counter Baland’s fury. When the magic girdle can no longer provide food for the French knights in the tower, woman’s reputation for guile is put to good use: Floripe designs the broad lines of their strategy while the peers provide the strong arms and unfailing courage
to carry it out. When the tower is attacked, she remembers her father's treasure hoard of gold, precious stones, and idols stored there—heavy objects that make splendid missiles to hurl down at the Saracens trying to invade the tower. Floripe and her maidens participate actively as combatants during this part of the battle. Her readiness to reduce the gods of her father to brute physical functions also assures the reader that she is truly prepared to embrace the Christian faith.

When the Saracens have at last been defeated, Floripe is free to become a Christian. Her baptism legitimately entails a second conventionalized description of her body, now unclothed. But even while her body is cloaked in the sacramental sanctity of baptism at a moment of great spiritual purity, the description explicitly reminds us that woman's body is a sexual agent provocateur. Charlemagne has taken precautionary measures, surrounding Floripe at the font with the oldest men present. Nonetheless "elle frappa le cuer de pluseurs et agita leur intencion de concupiscence et especiallement de charles lempereur combien quil fuse ancien et casse" (fol. 88 r.) [She struck the heart of many and excited their thoughts to concupiscence, and specially Charles, the emperor, even though he was old and tired]. 17 In the first portrait of Floripe, the inscribed reader is marked as masculine; the audience at her baptism also appears to be entirely male. The implied threat of Floripe's sexuality is controlled first by Floripe's own purity and then by the order of Christian society. 18

The newly Christian Floripe puts on clothes—which are not described—and at long last marries Guy of Burgundy. The absence of any description of Floripe's wedding dress contrasts with the first presentation of Floripe as Saracen princess, where her costume was highly semiotically charged. The need for external signs is past. By the time of her marriage, her sensual appeal is clear. Her social position is now determined not by her birth or accoutrements, but by her husband. Her power will henceforth filter down to her via her husband, emanating from Charlemagne and the God of the Christians. Charlemagne crowns Floripe queen of the land. Baland's kingdom will be ruled by Guy with Fierabras as Guy's vassal. The holy relics are restored to their rightful custodian, Charlemagne, concluding Floripe's function. She has found her place in society; her days of activity are over.

One can hardly expect so strong a female character to entirely escape negative criticism. In Floripe's case, however, the current of censure that
runs through the text can be seen as the enabling apparatus of Floripe’s activity. The text is peppered with stock misogynist comments of the sort Baland’s unsuspecting jailor makes to Floripe just before she murders him: “je me remembre que souvent par femme plusieurs preudhommes jay veus vergogniez et deceus” [I remember that I have often seen many men shamed and deceived by women]. Or the counsel Baland’s advisor, Sortibrant, gives him: “Toutefois, Sortibrant, qui scavoit bien la mutabilite des femmes et la in[con]stance va dire a Balant/ Sire admiral ce n’est chose convenable que sur ce fait vous deviez fier en femme, a cause de leur mutabilite/ et vous en avez beaucoup oy de exemples et cogneu la verite comment pluiseurs ont este deceus par femmes” (fol. 51 v.) [All the same, Sortibrant, who well knew the mutability of women and their inconstancy, says to Balant: “Sire Admiral, it is not fitting that you trust to a woman on these matters because of their mutability, and you have heard many examples of it, and known in truth how many men have been deceived by women]. Or Lucafart’s offer to see what Floripe is doing with the prisoners, because “les femmes pour peu de fait sont changies de fait et de pensement” (fol. 53 r.) [a trifle causes women to change their deeds or thoughts].

Within the narrative these remarks are all true. The jailor, for example, is indeed about to be betrayed by Floripe. Baland would have done well to have distrusted his daughter as he was often advised and had every reason to do. Sortibrant and Lucafart are both right: Floripe has changed. She has diverged from the Saracen path and seeks to betray them. Received wisdom is corroborated by events, while Floripe herself is unscathed. The discourse that condemns her also protects her; the misogyny is undermined even as it is presented. In a text clearly conceived in black-and-white terms, only Saracens, never Christians, make such remarks. By allying herself with the Christians, Floripe is following the example of Fierabras, whose nobility is beyond question and who, as a male, is presumably not prey to mutability. Floripe, enlightened to the love of God by the love of Guy, sincerely intends to become a Christian as soon as conditions permit. Such circumstances render change desirable, deception permissible. The Saracens’ failure to understand this as a desideratum demonstrates their willful blindness to truth and goodness. Seen from the Saracen point of view, Floripe is indeed the proverbially mutable woman—predictably turncoat and untrustworthy. Seen from the
Christian point of view, she exhibits *in bonum* what woman is so often accused of *in malum*. Relying on the reader to know that *chrestiens on droit et payens ont tort*, the text, without denying ambient misogyny, has found a powerful way of encapsulating it so that, paradoxically, behavior condemned by misogynist voices redounds finally to the credit of the heroine.

This paradoxical balance is fostered by setting the narrative so that Floripe remains territorially in Saracen lands until the very end, although she is living among Christians. Before her baptism, Floripe violated the letter of the law while living according to its spirit. The text supports such a reading, telling us that she was baptized “*sans muer son nom ne changier*” [without altering or changing her name], in contrast to the Saracens in so many other medieval stories who must change their name upon conversion.

Floripe exists between two worlds: her father’s, which she rejects as wrong, and the Christian one, which she is eager to join but within which, as an unmarried woman owing formal allegiance to no Christian lord, she is subservient to no one. She escapes the usual marginality imposed on women by the accident of a narrative situation that marginalizes her politically and confessionally instead. As an outsider to Christian society, she is free to act. Here and elsewhere it is her marginality, which has nothing to do with the limitations of female gender, that is the key to Floripe’s freedom. Floripe is not a marginal character in either Christian or Saracen society. As a Saracen she has a social position that she had presumably hitherto fulfilled as a princess or else her father would not have trusted her with the relics and the prisoners. At her final appearance, she has a social position as Guy’s wife. Her activity is condoned only in the liminal space between two societies, where she is not clearly in or out of either. Floripe, moreover, seems in subtle ways to be surrounded by what, using the term slightly figuratively, I should like to call her *odor of sanctity* (see note 14). In using this expression I have in mind a set of things such as the odor attributed to her in the first description, the Edenic setting of her apartments, her custodianship of the holy relics, her control of good magic, and the connection with her brother Fierabras, Saint Florent de Roye. All this, too, suggests a marginality, albeit of a different sort, setting her above the ordinary run of mortals, and the concomitant possibility of special dispensations from normal limits on female behavior.
In *Fierabras*, Floripe is depicted largely outside domesticity, taking a decisive role in public events. I have suggested here some of the forces helping her to withstand the risks of her position. How great these risks are is illustrated by the earlier prose versions in which her actions, having been found excessive, were pruned. The risks of Floripe’s dynamism would seem to increase as time goes by, making the continued success of the enabling mechanisms discussed here all the more remarkable. *Fierabras* continued to be reprinted in chapbooks from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Before the invention of printing, manuscripts obviously circulated only in limited milieux; those with access to written materials were assumed to be right-thinking people, protected by their upbringing and education from the dangers of examples requiring interpretation and from the perils of mistaking bad examples for good ones. Within a hundred years or so of the invention of printing, censorship had become a serious political issue as the reading public broadened. The type of publishers who produced the later editions of *Fierabras* show that, from the end of the sixteenth century on, Floripe’s story was aimed at an even more popular public. Censorship was deemed vital to protect the *chose publique* from the potential for chaos and riot imputed to the masses. While literature was valued—or feared—as a running stream of models for human behavior, it is remarkable that Floripe survived uncensored. She did so, in large part, thanks to a situation that exploited her marginality, in which women’s guile could turn to military strategy and in which mutability meant finding Christian Truth. Once she is baptized and married, once the sacred relics and her father’s lands are restored to Christian control, the inherent contradictions and unstable conditions that allowed her activity are eliminated, and so is Floripe’s voice. The moral of the story—that is, the theoretical model that can be drawn from it—is appropriately ambivalent: woman’s social marginality can be the measure of her opportunity to transgress safely, the measure of her power and freedom.
Marginality Is Woman’s Freedom

Appendix: Bagnyon’s Text and the Bibliothèque Bleue

The following passages, taken from a mid-eighteenth-century edition of Les Conquetes de Charlemagne [Fierabras] (Troyes: Garnier, n.d.), will enable the reader to trace Floripe’s six-hundred-year career to its closing days.

1. (See p. 43.) “Quand Florippe l’entendit, elle lui dit d’un ton de colère: o mauvais glouton, me dois-tu faire ce refus, je te promets que je t’en ferai payer; et incontinent manda son chambellan, lequel lui donne un baton, et fit ouvrir la prison; Brutamont voulut s’y opposer, ce que voyant elle lui donna un si fort coup au visage qu’elle lui fit sortir les yeux de la tête. Et après elle le fit mourir, puis le jetta dans la prison sans qu’aucun payen ne le vit . . . ” (66). [When Floripe heard him, she said, sounding angry: “O bad wretch, if you refuse me, I promise I will make you pay for it.” And immediately she called her chamberlain who gave her a stick and had the prison opened. Brutamont tried to stop her, seeing which she gave him so great a blow to the head that she made his eyes leave his head. And afterwards, she made him die and then threw him into the prison without any pagan seeing it.]

2. (See p. 44.) “Elle etoit habillee d’une robe de pourpre, qui etoit merveilleusement riche, et peinte d’étoiles de fin or, laquelle avoit telle vercu que celle qui l’avoic ne pouvoit etre empoisonnee d’herbe ni de venin. Florippe etoit si belle avec ses habillemens, que si une personne eut jeûné trois ou quatre jours, la voyant, étoit rassassie, et elle portoit un manteau qui avoit été fait en l’île de Colcos, ou Jason prit la toison d’or, comme on a trouvé par écrit en la destruction de Troies, lequel manteau étoit fait d’une face [sic: fée] et qui avoit si grande odeur, que c’étoit merveille. Parquo de la beauté de cette demoiselle chacun en étoit ravi” (65). [She was dressed in a purple gown that was wondrously rich, and painted with solid gold stars, which had the power that the (female) person who had it could be poisoned neither by venom nor plants. Floripe was so lovely in these clothes that if a person had gone three or four days without eating, seeing her, he would have been satisfied. And she wore a cloak which had been made in the island of Colchis, where Jason got the Golden Fleece, as is written in the Destruction of Troye. This coat was made by a fairy, and smelled marvelously strong. Therefore, everyone was pleased by the beauty of the damsel.]
1. Penny Schine Gold, in *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), explores the roles and images of woman, limiting her study to twelfth-century France (relevant to the prehistory of our subject, since that period produced the first version of Fierabras, therefore of Floripe). Gold, a thoughtful historian with impressive interdisciplinary grounding, declares that she came to the subject expecting to find “a negative view of women contemporary with increasing strictures on women’s experience” (xvi) and that in fact she found women are treated with ambivalence and given greater voice than she had supposed. Expecting little, she was pleasantly surprised, but the women Gold writes of almost never act independently, that is, beyond nurturing, advising, interceding—all subordinated functions.


3. On the important implications of this socially varied audience, see p. xx[14] below.


6. Bagnyon’s version was the basis of Caxton’s translation, cited in n. 5. Later French editions of roughly the same text are entitled *Fierabras* or *Les Conquestes de Charlemagne*. In researching the fortunes and vicissitudes of Bagnyon’s version, I have examined more than twenty such editions, about half of them clearly intended for a popular market (from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries).
7. Fierabras is the sequel to La Destruction de Rome, recounting the Saracen sack of Rome. The event in which Floripe saw Guy of Burgundy is itself contained in the extended fiction.

8. This and all subsequent citations from Fierabras are from Jean Bagnyon’s text (Geneva: Symon Jardin, 1478). All translations are my own.

9. The way other retellers of the story dealt with Floripe’s recourse to violence suggests that she tested the limits of their social tolerance. The fourteenth-century prose version is more circumspect, showing greater deviance from the verse model than does Bagnyon. Floripe delegates the violence of the jailor’s death to her seneschal. He “ferit du baston sur la teste tel cop qu’il abatit mort en la place” [used the stick to deliver such a blow to his head that he struck him dead on the spot] (Fierabras, ed. Jean Miquet [Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1983] 82, para. 68). This version systematically diminishes Floripe’s role, eliminating her initial portrait, describing her violence without gusto, and omitting both the second killing and the antifeminist remarks of the jailor. The prose redaction, composed by David Aubert for Philippe le Bon of Burgundy in 1458, also omits the portrait but does ascribe the personal violence to Floripe herself, although later, Aubert, too, removes the ladies from an active role in the battle from the tower (Croniques et conquestes de Charlemagne, ed. Robert Guiette [Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1943], vol. 2, pt. 1). These variants suggest repeated difficulty in dealing with physical violence emanating from a woman.

10. Before her first appearance, she is briefly mentioned as a woman/object, a matrimonial bargaining chip offered by her brother, Fierabras. Fearing his honor may be wounded if he kills Olivier, who is much smaller than he and who was wounded before their contest began, Fierabras offers the promise of his beautiful sister in marriage if Olivier will embrace paganism and surrender. Given the strength of Floripe’s will, it is fortunate that Olivier goes on instead to defeat Fierabras, who himself becomes not merely a Christian but a saint (Saint Florent de Roye).

11. La Destruction de Troie is Raoul Le Fèvre’s Recueil des histoires de Troyes, of 1463.

It is instructive to compare this initial portrait of Floripe with the Old French verse version to illustrate Bagnyon’s variations from his source, which gives a slightly more elaborated version of her clothing and then returns to dwell on the beauty of her breasts.

\begin{verbatim}
Vestue fu d’un paile galacien saffré;
La fée qui l’ot fait l’ot menue estélé
D’estoiles de fin or qui jetent grant clarté.
Çaint ot i. singladoire menuement ouvré;
\end{verbatim}
Hons ne fame qui soit n'ara le poil mellé
Ne ja n'ert de venin ne d'erbe enpisonné;
Se il avoit .iii. jours .iiii. ou jéuné,
S'esgardast la çainture et l'anel noielé,
Si aroit il le cors et le cuer saoulé.
Cauces avoit moutl rices, de paile à or freté,
Si sauler furent rike, menu eskierkeré;
D'argent et de fin or estoient painturé.
D'un rice singlatum ot mantel affublé;
Une fée l'ouvrara par grant nobilité,
En l'ille de Corcoil, dont on a moutl parlé,
Là où Jason ala, là où fut endité,
Por l'ocoison d'or fin, ce dient li lettré;
Pour ce fu puis destruit toute la grant cite.
La pene estoit de sable, qui moutl flairoit souef;
Ne vaut mugués ne mente à li un oef pelé.
Moutl estoit la pucele sage et de grant biauté;
Petites mameletes, cors bien fait et molé,
Dures comme pumetes, blankes com flos de pré.
Fierabras, ed. A. Kroeber and G. Servois

[She was dressed in a yellow gown covered with solid
 gold stars by the fairy who made it, and cinched with
 a delicately worked belt which would protect man or
 woman from poison. If he had not eaten for three
 or four days, and looked at the belt and the ring,
 his body and his heart would be filled. She had
elegant stockings, decorated with gold, and her shoes
were rich and finely worked with gold and silver and
designs. She had put on a rich coat worked by a most
noble fairy in the island of Colchis, well known,
there where Jason went to get the golden fleece, there
where he is celebrated as learned men say. This is
why the great city was destroyed. The bottom of the
mantle was black, and smelled sweet—as much as
lily of the valley or mint are better than a peeled
egg. The damsel was very wise and beautiful, small
breasts, her body well made and molded, hard as
little apples, white as flowers in the field.]
While nothing proves that this text, taken from a fourteenth-century manuscript of a poem undoubtedly first written earlier, is the specific precursor of Bagnyon’s version, it is clearly in the same tradition.

The description of Floripe, as it appeared six hundred years later in the *Bibliothèque bleue*, is reproduced in the appendix of this paper (p. 53).

12. Such protection, as also possessed by Oenone (Ovid *Heroides* 5:145–50), carries with it the implication that the possessor merits such skill by her virtue (which is assumed to be a sympathetic agent in the cure).

13. Medea was generally identified as a magician–witch in the Middle Ages. She is certainly treated as someone with quite dangerous magical powers in Raoul Lefèvre’s popular fifteenth-century *Histoire de Jason*. The same author’s *Recueil de Troye* is the source of the passing reference to Jason and the destruction of Troy in the description of Floripe’s mantle, although the elements of the reference were already there from earlier sources as can be seen in the verse description cited on page 5. Medea as witch exemplifies the danger always seen as inherent in female power—that it may be turned to evil ends. The argument below is that just this threat, turned back on itself, becomes the agent of Floripe’s freedom.

14. Sweet odors are often described as emanations from holy objects or the living or dead bodies of holy persons. Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), notes that the phenomenon is largely feminine and gives many examples of holy women whose breath is remarkably sweet, whose fingers oozed sweet oils, or whose bodies in corruption smelled delightfully sweet. Of Colette of Corbie (died 1433), for example, the hagiographer tells us “that both in life and in death her body gave off only sweet odors” (138). Late in the history of the Church (under Benedict XIV) such odors were officially recognized as a sign of saintliness, but the notion clearly existed in the Middle Ages and is preserved still in both French and English by the expression *odor of sanctity*. In *Fierabras* such a sweet holy smell is evoked as well with each of the appearances of the Crown of Thorns, sometimes loosely rationalized by having it grow miraculous flowers. Flowers bring us finally to Floripe’s name (in earlier versions, Floripas), which Mandach (72) interprets as “passe-fleur,” suggesting pleasant odors by onomastics.

15. I do not mean to claim a masculine-inscribed audience on the evidence of grammar alone. The French of this period is not absolute in demanding pronominal gender distinctions, but they do exist. And if this use of the masculine is accidental, it must be granted that it is so at a telling moment.

16. Lust is felt by the Christians as well although, unlike the evil Saracen, they control their desire. Duke Naimes, the oldest and most prudent of Charlemagne’s
Peers, remarks that he could love Floripe on sight at a moment when his mind ought to be on strategies of escape. Looking at her at the moment of her baptism, we are told that Charlemagne, old and wise as he is, lusts. Women are dangerous. Such concupiscence was understood as being part of the human (= male) condition: "Tel concupiscence n'est pas peché en soy si on n'y consent... Elle procede de notre nature corrompu d'Adam" [Such concupiscence is not a sin in itself if one does not give way to it... It procedes from our fallen nature, from Adam] (F. I. Benedicti, La somme des pechez et le remede d'ieceux [Paris: Claude Chappelet, 1601], 205).

17. The Council of Nicea, in the seventh century, forbade men to be present at a woman's baptism, or women at a man's, precisely because the subject was unclothed. See Jean Claude Boulogue, Histoire de la pudeur (Paris: Hachette, 1987), who also cites, page 27, the chanson de geste Gaufrey in which the baptism of a beautiful Arab maiden sets the elderly Doon de Mayence all atremble with desire.

18. Here, too, the fourteenth-century prose version is more circumspect, avoiding all actual description, although it cannot deal with a scene involving a naked female without conveying a strong sense of sexuality: "Estoit la plus belle creature que oncques homme eust veue. A ce jout elle fut moult desiree de plusieurs. Le roy la tint, Reyniez et le duc Tierry d'Ardaine, car le roy Charlemaigne vouloit qui n'y eust que vieulx a la tenit et fit ouster les jeunes. Et encore, nonobstant que les trois fussent bien vieulx, sy rioient ilz et avoient grant plaisir de la voyr ainsi toute nue, tant estoit belle" [She was the most beautiful creature ever seen by man. On that day she was greatly desired by many. The king presented her at the fount, with Regnier and Duke Thierry, for King Charlemagne wished that only old men be there and had the young ones removed. And still, even though those three were quite old, they laughed and took great pleasure in seeing her thus naked, so beautiful was she] (Fierabras, Jean Miquet, 170).

19. In each of these declarations of misogyny, the Old French version differs from Bagnyon's text by adding exempla in which other women's behavior bore out the predictions being made. Bagnyon discarded this procedure perhaps in the interests of a more linear narrative. The result is a text in which praise and blame are directed at a single person.

20. Ian Maclean, in The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 7, 16, notes scholastic notions of female behavior that present a strong double view, that is, when she is good she is very very good, and when she is bad, she is terrible. The Saracen and Christian views of Floripe invite such a reading, and as such, the text may be exploiting a consequence implicit in her sex.
21. In contrast, Baland, her father, displays masculine steadfastness but fails to earn the reader's admiration for it. When captured by Charlemagne, he refuses to depart from his course of error in a shocking display of brutish stubbornness that costs Baland not only this life but eternal life as well.

22. When Jean Bagnyon wrote his prose version of *Fierabras* in the 1470s the work was dedicated to Henri Bolomier, of Lausanne, Canon of the cathedral of Geneva, an educated man. A manuscript of Bagnyon's *Fierabras* contemporary with the author is clearly a luxury product. Many copies can be shown to have been in noble libraries. By the eighteenth century this was probably because of an antiquarian interest in books as collectors items, not books to be read. But earlier, such records of ownership as there are suggest that the audience for which Bagnyon wrote, the educated upper bourgeoisie and nobles, defined its readers for the next century or more.

23. To take only one example, very briefly, Toinette, in Molière's *Malade imaginaire*, is in a position with respect to Argan's bourgeois household analogous to Floripe's relation to the Christians: she can be a member of the family in spirit only. Toinette, on whose inventions the happy outcome depends, demonstrates a freedom of speech and action otherwise associated with male comic characters, for example, Sganarelle. Her mock doctor, wishing to remove an eye or an arm is as nonnurturing as the real (male) doctor in the play.