

## Comic Elements in the Thirteenth-Century Provençal Romance 'Flamenca'

MAXWELL WALKLEY\*

The thirteenth-century Provençal romance traditionally entitled the *Roman de Flamenca*<sup>1</sup> is extant in a single manuscript to-day held in a library in Carcassonne. It is a text containing 8,085 octosyllabic verses with, sadly, the beginning and end of the romance lacking. As well, there are unfortunately some irritating *lacunae* in the text because of some missing folios. Much scholarly ink has been spilt in determining an exact date of composition for *Flamenca*, but no theory has prevailed. About the middle of the thirteenth century is the generally accepted date,<sup>2</sup> thus placing the composition after the Albigensian Crusade. Scattered throughout the text are many allusions to the lowering of the quality of feudal life and courtliness, a regret for past times when seigneurs used to show lavish generosity to *jongleurs* in an encouragement of their art.

*Flamenca* has been judged by critics to be one of the major masterpieces of thirteenth-century vernacular literature. For example, in their edition of the poem, Lavaud and Nelli refer to the richness of the work, mentioning its 'réalisme et poésie, psychologie et préciosité, naturalisme et idéalisme, sentiment et bel esprit'.<sup>3</sup> Jeanroy, one of the most important of modern French scholars to have written on Old Provençal literature, emphasised the graceful style and discrete irony of the work, qualities which, according to Jeanroy, make one think of the *contes* of La Fontaine and Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> Charles Muscatine speaks of *Flamenca* as the finest and most striking example of all medieval romances, suggesting that the anonymous poet is so much a master of courtly style and situation that he can play, as it were, with the conventions and thus produce a romance to end all romances. In the American scholar's opinion, although

\* Maxwell Walkley is a member of the Department of French Studies at the University of Sydney.

romances continued to be written in the tradition of Chrétien de Troyes<sup>5</sup> for another century, so far did the *Flamenca* author push style and structure to the limit, that a poet able to match him is not encountered until Chaucer with his *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>6</sup>

*Flamenca* is brilliant in many respects, but our concentration here will be on the many comic elements which characterise the work.<sup>7</sup> Since many of the humorous effects in the romance could be classed as comedy of situation, a brief outline of the plot seems justified.

The romance as we have it begins with envoys of Archambaut de Bourbon asking Count Gui de Nemours for the hand of his daughter, Flamenca.<sup>8</sup> The request being granted and the marriage celebrated at Nemours in May, the narrator takes obvious delight in describing meticulously the sumptuous preparations.

When at midsummer an even richer court is held at Bourbon-l'Archambaut, the King and Queen of France are special guests. The Queen takes exception to the special attention the king pays to Flamenca. He wears her favour in a tournament, he escorts her from the church after mass, and even places his hand with familiarity on her breast, but only to do the husband, Archambaut, honour, we are told. No evil intent on the King's part, but the Queen is certainly unimpressed!

La reina non volgra jes  
Li cortz dures ancar u mes,  
Car ben cuja certanamen  
Le reis am Flamencha per sen;  
Mas el non l'ama per amor,  
Anz cujet far mout gran amor  
A N'Archimbaut quan l'abassava  
Vezen sos ueils, e la baisava,  
Car negun mal el no i enten. (vv. 979–987)<sup>9</sup>

[The queen would not have wished the court to last for another month, for she was indeed persuaded that the king was deeply in love with Flamenca. Yet he wasn't in love with her; on the contrary, he believed he was doing great honour to Lord Archambaut when, in his presence, he embraced his wife and gave her a kiss; he meant no harm in this.]<sup>10</sup>

When the Queen draws the husband aside to confide to him her

suspicious, Archambaut immediately falls prey to the green-eyed monster. The court festivities over, the erstwhile joyous husband has the beautiful Flamenca locked in a tower with, for company, two serving maids, Alis and Margarida. The only respite from this tower-prison allowed Flamenca is her attendance at mass on Sundays and feast days, but even an ecclesiastical environment seems fraught with dangers to Archambaut who has a special box-like structure in the church erected for his wife, lest the priest himself, dom Justin, should see her face. Alone, the cleric who administers the peace, or *pax*, as it is generally known—a liturgical ceremony involving the kissing of a sacred book by members of the congregation<sup>11</sup>—could have seen Flamenca, but only if he had the inclination or the wits,

Si n'agues engien ni saber (v. 1448)

[If he had had the intelligence or wits for it.]

as the omniscient narrator so gently and playfully puts it.

The stage is now set for the entrance of Guillem de Nivers, courtly hero *par excellence*. We are given a flattering portrait of the young cavalier, followed by a dream he has in the course of which Dame Amour visits and informs him that he has been chosen by her to free Flamenca and wreak vengeance on her behalf (Amor's) on the jealous husband, Archambaut. Our hero, Guillem, is seen as the perfect courtly lover—or rather chivalric lover.<sup>12</sup> Although he himself has not yet had experience of love, yet he has read all the relevant authors and knows how a lover should behave:

Ancar d'amor no s'entremes  
Per so que (lo) ver en saupes;  
Per dir saup ben que fon amors,  
Cant legit ac totz los auctors  
Que d'amor parlon e si feinon  
Consi amador si capteinon. (vv. 1761–1766)

[He had never had anything to do with love such that he could know by experience what it was. From hearsay did he know what love was, since he had read all the authors who speak of it and are concerned with how lovers should behave.]

The modern reader may well be tempted to compare Guillem, who has learned everything from books about love and has decided

to put his learning into practice, with Don Quixote who, from just reading romances, was apprised of all there was to know about being a knight. No surprise, then, that Guillem knows that his heart must, by that celebrated medieval love convention, be kept prisoner in the tower where Flamenca herself is a prisoner :

Que pres es de Guillem li tors  
On es le cors qu'en son cor ha,  
Mais de lonc tems non o sabra  
Cil qu'es enclausa, et enclau  
Lo cor de cel que mout s'esgau  
Quan pot vezer ni remirar  
De lai on s'assis al manjar,  
La tor on es so que tant ama.  
On plus manja e plus afama  
De venir lai on sos cors es. (vv. 1943–1952)

[For that tower in which the person he loves is imprisoned is near to Guillem. But she who is a prisoner therein, for a long time will not know this, she a prisoner who yet holds in prison the heart of him who is quite joyful at being able, when he has sat down to eat, to contemplate the tower where the object of his love is held. The more he eats, the more does he desire to be where his heart is held.]

The astute reader will not fail to pick up in this last quotation the author's playing with the homonyms 'cor'/'cors' (heart/body). Chrétien de Troyes of course did this too, but the *Flamenca* author goes much further, this delight in juggling with sound and sense being one of the most prevalent and endearing features of this romance. Readers of Ovid will know that love is a sickness, a *maladie*. The lover must seem to be blinded, to be struck dumb by love. Thus this fate naturally befalls Guillem when he hears the song of the nightingale in a spring garden, while waiting to go thro the church for the first time to see Flamenca. The author never does things by halves, intentionally, it seems to me, to send up the established courtly conventions. We find Guillem blind, deaf *and* dumb at the end of the following extract:

Ab tan s'en passon per la plaza  
E van s'en fors en un gardi  
On le roncinols s'esbaudi

Pel dous tems e per la verdura.  
 Guillems se get' en la frescura  
 Desotz un bel pomier florit.  
 L'ostes lo vi escolorit  
 E cujet si que-l malautia  
 De que-l parlet a l'autre dia  
 L'agues en aissi descolrat;  
 Fort prega Deu que-l don santat  
 E-l lais complir tot zo qu'el vol.  
 Guillems entent al rossinol  
 E non au ren que l'ostes prega.  
 Vers [es] qu' Amors homen encega  
 E l'auzir e-l parlar li tol,  
 E-l fai tener adonc per fol  
 Cant aver cuja plus de sen!  
 Guillems non au ni ve ni sen,  
 Ni-ls oils non mou, ni ma ni boca;  
 Una douzor al cor lo tocha  
 Que-l cantz del rossinol l'adus,  
 Per qu'estai cecs e sortz e mutz. (vv. 2331–2353)

[Then they cross over a square, and pass out of the town into a garden where the nightingale rejoices for the sweet season and the greenness. In the delicious coolness of the shade of a fine apple-tree does Guillem throw himself down. The innkeeper, seeing him quite pale, thinks that the sickness he had spoken about the other day must thus be taking away his colour. He prays fervently to God to vouchsafe him health and to allow him to accomplish all he wishes. Guillem listens to the nightingale, hearing nothing of the prayers of his host. It is true that Love blinds a man, takes hearing from him and the power of speech, making him seem a fool when he (the lover) feels at the height of his good sense. Guillem hears nothing, sees nothing, feels nothing. He moves not his eyes, nor his hand, nor his mouth. His heart is touched by a sweetness that comes to him from the nightingale, and so he is blind, and deaf and dumb.]

Dame Amour, cunningly disguised as Flamenca, visits Guillem in a dream to suggest to the hero the double ploy which will win Flamenca's love as well as, finally, the possibility of the physical consummation of that love.

According to the stratagem, Guillem is first of all to become the

cleric who gives the *pax*. Thus he will have, each time Flamenca goes to church, the opportunity of secretly breathing to her one or two syllables, and she to him. Secondly, our hero is to see to the constructing of a tunnel, a *souerrain*, leading from his lodgings at the inn (owned by Peire Gui and his wife Bellapilla) as far as the celebrated health-giving baths of Bourbon-l'Archambaut, where Flamenca is permitted sometimes, in company with Alis and Margarida, to bathe.

The conversation actually effected in church between Guillem and Flamenca, delivered at the rate of two syllables a session, covers a period of three months (Sunday 7th May to 1st August, a special saint's day), and takes the author just under two thousand octosyllabic verses to describe. When one takes the trouble to collect the text of their exchanges, the following sequence results :

'Ai las!' . 'Que plains?' . 'Mor mi.' . 'De que?' .  
'D'amor' . 'Per qui?' . 'Per vos.' . 'Qu'en pucs?' .  
'Garir' . 'Consi?' . 'Per gein.' . 'Pren'i.' .  
'Pres l'ai' . 'E cal?' . 'Iretz.' . 'Es on?' .  
'Als banz.' . 'Cora?' . 'Jorn breu e gent.' .  
'Plas mi.'

[Alas! What do you complain of? I am dying. Of what. Of love. For whom? For you. What can I do? Cure me. How? By a stratagem. Take it. I have. What sort of stratagem? You will go. Where? To the baths. When? A sweet day, soon. I agree.]

It must be remembered that Flamenca is at mass only on Sundays and feast days and that Archambaut's vigilance explains the shortness of the basically disyllabic messages. What is remarkable is that the separate utterances collected as we have just done form a close imitation, perhaps even a parody, of a stanza of a famous troubadour poem by Peire Rogier, the canon of Clermont.<sup>13</sup>

Humorous references to troubadour poetry as well as courtly conventions are thus part of the literary techniques of this ingenious yet anonymous author, who has been shown elsewhere by modern commentators to parody existing poems, for example Guillaume de Lorris's part of the *Roman de la Rose*,<sup>14</sup> as well as to play joyfully with established literary conventions, Jaufré Rudel's theme of the *amour de loin*,<sup>15</sup> for instance.

The rest of the romance can be summarised quickly. The ploy of the *souterrain* is successful, and the illicit love of Guillem and Flamenca is consummated—on several occasions. Then Flamenca swears by the saints an oath to Archambaut to keep herself just as faithful, just as secure as he has managed to keep her in this condition. This is a double-edged oath, obviously, in that same tradition of the notorious oath Iseut gave to Marc in the Tristan story, when that heroine stated that her husband, Marc the King, along with the beggar who had just carried her (by her design) across the bog (Tristan in disguise), were the only men ever to have held her in their arms.

Mas certas bon plag vos faria ;  
Ma fe sobre sanz juraria,  
Vezent mas doncellas, ades,  
Qu'en aissi tostems mi gardes  
Co vos m'aves sains garada; (vv. 6685–6689)

[But certainly I shall be ready to make a just agreement with you : in the presence of my handmaids, right now, I would swear by all the saints to keep myself forever as well as you have so far kept me, here in this tower.]

The readers (in medieval times, the listeners) are indeed very well placed to judge just how well Archambaut has managed to keep her secure in the tower.

All is forgiven and Flamenca free to come and go as she pleases. A great tourney is announced for the following Easter. Guillem is sent back to his lands to win further glory for himself in the wars there. Archambaut—a changed man now and like his former courtly self—meets Guillem at a tournament at Louvain and, knowing nothing, of course, of what has happened between Flamenca and Guillem, invites him to the imminent Easter tourney.

Now for the supreme irony. On his return home, Archambaut shows Flamenca a 'salutz'—an epistle in verse, delicately illustrated with figures portraying two lovers—addressed by Guillem to 'la bella de Belmont', obviously Flamenca herself.<sup>16</sup> Archambaut has thus become the unwitting go-between for his wife and her lover. This introduces into the romance that comic element of the notorious and savoury fabliau theme—the cuckold beaten and content. As a

crowning misfortune for poor Archambaut, he is induced to read aloud this *salutz d'amor* by Flamenca's assuring him that he is such a good reader that the words will have more worth pronounced by his voice :

Car vos la[s] sabres mielz legir  
E faire los motz avenir (vv. 7085-86)

[For you will be able better to read it and emphasise the words]

At the Easter tourney itself, Guillem and Flamenca are free to sit together and share even more intimate pleasures, almost in the sight of Archambaut, without his being aware of anything amiss. Guillem moreover proves himself at the jousting the best knight of all.

Unfortunately, the last few folios of the manuscript are lost, so we do not know what is the final outcome of this *ménage à trois*. We are left with a feeling that an illicit, yet happy, love situation has been well-established.<sup>17</sup>

I mentioned earlier the fabliau theme of 'le cocu battu et content'. If one were to consider only the barest outline of the *Flamenca* romance, one could easily imagine its representing a fabliau with a title like *Le jaloux, la dame et le chevalier*.<sup>18</sup> However, such a schema would evidently omit essential aspects of *Flamenca*, the skilful drawing of characters, for example, which nowise resemble the two-dimensional stereotypes we in fact encounter in the traditional fabliau. Any interpretation of *Flamenca* as a mere fabliau would fail to account for the poetic texture of the romance; for the dialogues, both ardent and witty, between Flamenca and her handmaidens; for the ingenious soliloquies, due both to the narrator and to his protagonists; for, finally, the many hymns celebrating secret love and theorising about its attainability. There are, indeed, fabliau themes; but these themes are treated with courtly delicacy. Peter Dronke has well summed up the effect the author has achieved:

The poet in effect produces a skilful counterpoint between the narrative—many details of which are in themselves as ludicrous as any fabliau—and the values, emotions and ideas arising out of the narrative or imposed upon it. By such counterpoint he makes his poem complex and thought-provoking.<sup>19</sup>



Complex, certainly; but amusing and witty as well.

The author of *Flamenca* gives the impression of having at his fingertips the whole corpus of literature available to the medieval world. The exuberant catalogue of what works the jongleurs perform at the wedding court of Archambaut—and here its very excesses reflect another of the comic techniques so prized by the author—runs on for over a hundred lines, mentioning all: the fall of Troy, Ulysses' adventures, Jason and the Argonauts, David and Goliath, the Knights of the Round Table, the goat-leaf episode in the Tristan legend, Ovid's story of Daedalus and Icarus, not to mention lyric poems of troubadours, Marcabru for instance.<sup>20</sup> I have already mentioned the parody of Peire Rogier. As well, it has been established that there is imitation of Guillaume de Lorris's style and manner in the love casuistry evident in the following verses :

E per so vueil dir e mostrar  
Que cil douzors, ques al cor tocha  
Per oilz, val mais que cil de bocha:  
Plus fina [es] e plus entiera;  
E prec qu'entendas la cariera.  
Cascuns en si meseis consire  
De qual guisa o vueil eu dire;  
Quar, si con ieu dic, non es motz  
Que feses entendre a totz,  
Mais per ombra e per semblanza  
Ne dirai qualque demostransa.  
Quan dui aman fin e coral  
Dreigz oilz s'esgaron per egal,  
En dreg amor, mon eissient  
Tan granz jois al cor lur deissent  
Que li douzor que d'aqui nais  
Lur reven tot lor cor e pais.  
E l'ueil. per on treva e passa  
Cil douzors ques el cor s'amassa,  
Son tan liäl que nulla ren  
Negus a sos ops non reten.  
Mais la boca no-s pot tener,  
Quan baisa, que del bon saber  
A sos obs quesacom nom prenga  
Avan que ren al cor ne venga. (vv. 6558–6582)

[And by what I say here I wish to show that the sweetness which comes to the heart by way of the eyes is of greater worth than that which reaches it by the lips. It is purer and fuller. And I want you to pay careful attention to the path it follows. Let each person reflect on the way I am going to expound this. For as I have said there is no way of saying which will make it intelligible to all. I can make some sort of attempt through figure of speech. When two lovers, sincere and pure, gaze at each other in sign of true love, I think that such great joy goes down into the heart that the sweetness which derives from the love enlivens the heart and nourishes it. And the eyes, through which passes and repasses this sweetness which becomes concentrated in the heart, are so faithful as to retain nothing of the sweetness for their own pleasure. But the lips, when it is a question of a kiss, cannot help but retain some of the sweetness for their own profit before passing it on to the heart.]

The argument put forward obviously is that the heart of a lover receives more joy through the agency of the eyes than that of the mouth, for the latter (treacherous!) organ keeps for itself a part of the sweetness of a kiss, whereas the eyes send the pleasure and delights they collect from a contemplation of the beloved straight to the heart, retaining nothing for themselves. Millardet has pointed out a striking resemblance between this last quoted passage and one in the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>21</sup>

One cannot, of course, be absolutely certain that there is comic intent in the *Flamenca* author's skilful use of the conventions of courtliness and courtly love tenets. Finding actually intended humour in medieval texts is ever a parlous task, because our certainty of semantic intention diminishes as we go further back in time.<sup>22</sup> Yet comic intent is surely implied by the very insistence on courtly tenets, by an evident exaggeration on the part of the author, by his *ivresse verbale* which causes him to heap up words describing the symptoms of the *maladie* that is love :

Après manjar Guillems intret  
En sa cambra, lai si pauset,  
Si pausar pot hom appellar  
Tremblar d'angoissa ni sudar,  
Estendillar e trassallir,  
E badaillar e sanglotir,

Planer, sospirar e plorar,  
Estavanir et ablesmar.  
Guillems estet en aital pausa  
En la cambra tro a nug clausa,  
Adonc anet, aisi con sol,  
El bruil auzir lo rossinol,  
E ges sos mals non li mellura,  
An[s] s'en recrusa e pejura. (vv. 3299–3318)

[After eating, Guillem went into his room and rested there, if we can call rest trembling with anguish and sweating, stretching and shaking, yawning and sobbing, lamenting, sighing and crying, fainting and swooning. Guillem rested like this until nightfall, then he went, as was his custom, to listen to the nightingale in the wood. But far from being calmed, his sickness got worse and increased in intensity.]

There are also instances in *Flamenca* where a twentieth-century reader may laugh, and yet, on reflection, have doubts about the possible comic intention of the author. For example, there is a stage in the romance where Guillem is breathlessly awaiting the arrival of Flamenca at mass. As she enters, she takes off her glove and draws aside her veil—to spit! Guillem is in raptures because, thanks to this movement, he has the inestimable joy of gazing at her mouth.

Son gan trais de la destra ma,  
E per ucaison d'escupir  
Baissa-l muzel, tan que gausir  
Poc ben Guillems tota la boca. (vv. 3122–3125)

[With her right hand she removed her glove and, so as to spit, she lowered the veil covering her mouth, in such a way that Guillem enjoyed the sight of it completely.]

To-day, spitting is not an activity we associate particularly with being in church, but, in North Africa, houses of the bourgeois and wealthy classes have spittoons where we westerners might have ash trays.<sup>23</sup> We are in the presence of an example of cultural specificity, and it's certainly not the spitting which is meant to be funny in the *Flamenca* text. The established maxim 'autres temps, autres moeurs' could well be matched with 'autres pays, autres façons'.

The lady in courtly tradition is, it is well known, extremely sensitive to the correctness of manner in which she is approached.

But we must surely nevertheless admit a strong possibility of humorous intent when Flamenca protests to Alis and Margarida about the precipitancy of Guillem's declaration of love, when in fact it has taken him three months of real time and 1,000 verses of the text to get it out.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, that a lover should ask for divine help in furthering an adulterous love affair may seem strange to a modern reader. Guillem calls by name on the saints to intervene on his behalf, and even on God himself and the Virgin Mary, as the following example attests :

Adonc si leva e seina si;  
San Blaze pregu'e sant Marti  
E san Jorgi e san Geneis,  
E d'autres sains ben .v. o .vi.  
Que foron cavallier cortes,  
Ques ab Dieu l'acaption merces. (vv. 2118–2123)

[Then he gets up and crosses himself. He prays to Saint Blaise and Saint Martin, and Saint George and Saint Geneis, and to five or six other saints, all of them courtly knights, to obtain the mercy of God.]

But it is a well-known convention of troubadour lyric poetry that God is on the side of lovers, so there is not likely to be comic intention here—unless the number of saints invoked (as well as the casual manner of their invoking) is the comic point. This incident is, then, funny for us, but not necessarily so for the medieval audience of *Flamenca*, even if some scholars would argue so.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps we as modern readers should come to a similar conclusion—that is, that comedy was not intended in spite of the evident exaggeration—regarding the several incidents of love fetishism to be found in this romance. But there seems to me always to be a lingering, strong suspicion that the author is amused by his protagonist's excesses.

There is for example, that incident of Guillem's addressing the tower where his beloved is locked away :

Na Tor, fai s'el, bell'est defor;  
Ben cug dedins est pur'e clara;  
Plaguess'a Dieu qu'ieu lai fos ara  
Si qu'Ens Archimbautz no la-m vis,  
Ni Margarida ni Alis! (vv. 2129–2133)

['Dame Tower,' he said, 'you are beautiful seen from outside, and I believe that inside too you are pure and bright. Would that it be pleasing to God that I were now inside your walls, such that Archambaut saw me not, nor Margarida nor Alis!']

and that of Guillem's frantically kissing and touching the very page of the Psalter where he has just seen Flamenca put her lips in the *pax* ceremony :

Quan Nicolaus ac pas donada  
En la carta que li ac mostrada  
Guillems, c'al pertus s'atendet,  
En la man lo libre-l tornet.  
Quan Guillems lo sauteri tenc  
Totz le cors de joi li revenc;  
En son capiön si rescont  
Et ab lo libre tocha-l front,  
Los uilz e-l mento e la cara,  
E vas lo pertuset agara  
Per saber si ja o veiria  
Ci-l per cui el aiso fasia. (vv. 3177–3188)

[When Nicolaus had given the *pax*, at the page that Guillem had indicated to him, he gave the book over to Guillem who was keeping his eyes fixed on the narrow opening. And when Guillem had it in his hands, all his heart was comforted with joy. He draws his face back into his hood, takes the Psalter to his forehead, to his eyes, to his chin, to all his face. He looks towards the narrow opening to see if his actions are noticed by her for whom he was doing all this.]

Let the reader make up his own mind, but the words of Philippe Ménard, a modern scholar with wide knowledge of the different types of humour to be found in the literary productions of Medieval France, suggest that we should not expect to find comedy permeating works from this period :

Même les textes les plus riches de comique et d'humour, les romans de Chrétien de Troyes, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, le roman de *Flamenca* font une place de choix au sérieux. Ce n'est pas le comique qui prédomine, mais la poésie, le pathétique, le sublime.<sup>26</sup>

But it is the *Flamenca* poet's perspicacity, his knowingness, which

causes one to be almost sure that he is smiling at his cleverness in manipulating characters and situations, at his very astuteness in using words and rhymes. Take his rhyming virtuosity, for example. The author needs a rhyme for 'fo'. 'Vo' would be good, yet to be morphologically correct, given the syntax of the sentence, it should be 'vos'. Unperturbed, the poet introduces a situation where we are to believe that Guillem is going off to sleep, and does so in fact, the instant before he can pronounce the last consonant :

Si miei [oil] s'adormo defors  
Eu voil ab vos veille mos cors;  
Oc, ab vos, domna, oc ab vo!  
Non pot dir .s. qu'endormitz fo. (vv. 3443–3446)<sup>27</sup>

[‘Even if my eyes close, I want my heart to stay awake with you, yes with you Milady, yes, with you! He could not put the final ‘s’ on ‘vos’ for he had fallen asleep.]

Given the poet’s delight in words and word-play, puns are predictably present in abundance. Thus Flamenca gives a double sense to the word ‘pas’ (=peace) in the following example, as we are to understand both the Psalter representing the *pax*, plus the sexual relief which comes with ‘gauzimen’, or joy :

En gran pess[i]er avia messa  
Flamenca, ques ades l’aten  
Qu[e]il porte pas e gauzimen. (vv. 4320–4322)

[What he said had troubled greatly Flamenca, who was still waiting for the moment when he would bring her (the) peace and joy.]

Words similar in form and pronunciation are exploited for humorous effects. The similarity of ‘mesquina’ (=young girl) and ‘metzina’ (=remedy) is used elaborately in the following extract where the effects of Archambaut’s desire for Flamenca before his marriage to her are described:

E pero si fora mortals  
S’aitan tost non agues mescina,  
Mais el la trobet bon’e fina  
C’al penre non fos ges amara,  
Anz si fon si douza e si clara  
Qu’el mon non es nuilz homs tan sans

Que non degues voler que-ls mans  
E-ls pes agues totz amortitz  
Tostems, sol un jorn fos garitz  
Per medicina tan veraia. (vv. 168–177)

[And yet his sickness might have become fatal for lack of a ready medicine (young girl). But he found this remedy (young girl), fine, even perfect. Far from being bitter in the taking, so sweet and so pure was the remedy (young girl) that there isn't a single man in the world of such good health that he would not consent to have his hands and feet continually paralysed, provided that he could be cured in a day by such a perfect medicine (young girl).]

Verbal felicity and love of antithesis give us such gems as :

E cil qui es joves noiera  
Ja veilla non sia oquiera. (vv. 7837–7838)

[May she who says 'no' as a young woman never be a 'yes' sayers when she is old.]

where 'noiera' is a woman who says 'no', and 'oquiera' one who says 'yes'.

Playfulness and verbal dexterity are again evidenced in the following example, with jocular equivocation on 'mari' (=husband) and 'marri' (=troubled), quite typical of others scattered throughout the text :

Mais aitant tost con fos issitz  
De la tor lo gilos marritz  
O-l maritz, si-us voles, gilos. (vv. 5369-5371)

[But as soon as the troubled jealous one had come out of the tower, or, if you prefer, the jealous husband.]

Manifestly the author is aware he is addressing a cultivated audience possessed of a wide literary knowledge. There is a whole medieval literature on that most vexed of questions, generally referred to in its French formulation, 'Le débat du clerc et du chevalier', about who is the better lover, the knight or the priest.<sup>28</sup> The *Flamenca* author resolves impishly the whole question by having Dame Amour cut the Gordian knot, making Guillem both knight and cleric :

E tu sols deus la desliurar  
Car tu es cavalliers e clers. (vv. 1798-1799)

[And you alone can liberate her, for you are both knight and cleric.]

Ironical understatement could well be expected to be a favourite rhetorical procedure with such a cultivated, subtle author. One is thus not surprised to find the poet describing the lavishness of preparations for Archambaut's wedding court, and telling his readers that the only thing lacking was the presence of poor people to be given what was left over.

Anc a la cort res no sofrais  
Mais paubre a cui hom dones  
So que-i sobret, que no-s perdes. (vv. 468–470)

[At that court nothing lacked for a moment, except poor people to whom the leftovers might be given, to avoid waste.]

This technique is especially prized for erotic situations. When Guillem's two squires, Othon and Clari, are paired off with Alis and Margarida, they are told by Flamenca to enjoy themselves in the baths. The narrator intrudes to doubt whether the two 'punzellas' will indeed be maidens much longer :

Van s'en els bans per deportar,  
E podon las ben solassar:  
Cambras y a bonas e bellas  
Don ja non cal eissir punzellas  
Oimais Alis ni Margarida,  
Si-s volon, car gen las e[n]vida  
Jovens et Amors de son joc. (vv. 6471–6477)

[Off they go to amuse themselves in the baths. The squires can keep them good company, because there are fine and pretty rooms whence Alis and Margarida need not return virgins still, if they have the will, for Youth and Love gently invite them to their game.]

Litotes is again employed towards the end of the romance. During the Easter tournament, after the reconciliation of Archambaut and Flamenca has been effected, Guillem is left alone in a room with Flamenca, Alis and Margarida. Archambaut has just gone out. We are told that Guillem had no trouble in determining which of the 'jewels' he would choose, and he and Flamenca quickly have their will of each other as the rest of the company keeps guard:



Guillems non estet ges marritz  
Quals de las joias degues penre,  
Josta se ac bel cors e tenure,  
Blanc e delgat et escafit,  
Don no-l cal temer que ja crit  
Ni contradiga son talan  
Ni vueilla que ja re-l deman,  
Mais que so prenda el meseis.  
Tot bellamen vau[s] si l'estreis  
Et anc d'aqui no-s moc ni-s tolç  
Tro qu'en ac fag tot zo que volç. (vv. 7628–7638)<sup>29</sup>

[Guillem had no trouble in deciding which jewels he would choose. In his company he had a beautiful lady, delicate, white, fine and slim, and he did not have to worry about her crying out, nor her resisting his desire, nor would she need to be begged for anything: she would allow him to take what he wanted. Softly did he draw her to him and embraced her, and he did not leave that place until he had done his will with her.]

Margarida and Clari soon become occupied amorously also, providing an occasion for further understatement, as the author remarks that no article of clothing hindered their frolics :

Et al re si-s feiron ben leu  
De qu'ieu a dir cocha non leu;  
Mais tant y feiron a lur guisa  
Que anc ni blisaut ni camisa  
Non tolç res de lur benanansa. (vv. 7645–7649)

[And thus they soon did something else that I have no need to report on. And so successfully did they attain their ends that neither shirt nor jerkin impeded their happiness.]

Light touches of humour and irony glisten on every page of the text. Guillem awaits Flamenca's arrival in church

Si con fai austors a perdiz (v. 3113)

[As a goshawk eyes a partridge]

and during the ceremony of worship he wishes that the whole service be composed of those parts where the congregation is to stand, for then he can see Flamenca:

E ben volgra que tota-l messa  
Fos evangelis o *Agnus*,  
Quar adonc si dreissava sus  
Flamenca per cui el la era. (vv. 3146–3149)

[He would indeed have wished that the whole mass was only the Gospel or the *Agnus*, for Flamenca stood up at those times, she for whom he was there.]

Archambaut is said to be so jealous that, even if all the writers of Metz were to be employed on the task, his jealousy could not be sufficiently described :

Qui es gelos non es ben sans.  
Tut l'escriva que son a Mes  
Non escriurian los motz ves  
Ni las captenensas que fes  
En Archimbautz cascuna ves. (vv. 1332–1336)

[A jealous man is someone very sick indeed. All the writers in Metz would not be able to describe the various behaviours and faces Archambaut made each time.]

Nor do the more farcical elements of comedy lack, for example the grotesque descriptions of Archambaut as the 'gelos', where his bizarre physical appearance and gruff, uncourtly gestures are delightfully and maliciously captured for our entertainment (vv. 1035-1074). The *Flamenca* author's exuberance and exaggeration, his expansive manner and love of lists of things,<sup>30</sup> his joy in words, finally, remind one often of the magnificent excesses of Rabelais. Does not Guillem, for example, have enough courtliness to be able to share it with a thousand knights and for each one of them still to be deemed a worthy *chevalier*?

Guillem[s] de Nivers lo cortes  
Qu'era tan de totz bons aips ples  
Que mil cavallier n'agran pro  
E'n fora cascuns tengutz pro. (vv. 1753–1756)

[Guillem de Nevers the courtly one, in whom so many excellent qualities came together that from his qualities a thousand knights would have been able to take enough for each to be considered a worthy man.]

We should remember that in the troubadour ideal the qualities prized are *joven*, *jois*, *cortezia*, *pretz*, *valors* and *mezura*. But in *Flamenca*, although all the other qualities are well-represented, *mezura* ('moderation') seems to play no part. Is this a reflection of the personal taste of the unknown author who, we have seen, revels in excess?

For although we shall probably never be able to identify the anonymous poet of *Flamenca*, we can fairly surmise, I feel, much about his character. We are in the presence of an extremely intelligent author, an omnivorous reader of both vernacular and Latin works. In spite of a mischievous delight in amusing himself at the expense of contemporary literary conventions, and perhaps even of his contemporaries, the author must have been an optimistic *bon vivant*. We have seen that it is quite possible that his *Flamenca* raised smiles and laughter in the medieval audiences where it may have been read or recited. What is certain, however, is that the modern reader will be regaled on every page by the whole gamut of the humorous and comic techniques employed in this outstanding medieval romance.

#### Notes

- 1 Since François J. Raynouard's first edition of the text in his *Lexique Roman, ou dictionnaire de la langue des troubadours*, 6 vols, Paris, 1836–44. However, an Italian scholar, A. Limentani, chose to emphasise the rôle of the hero of the romance by employing a different title for his edition of extracts from the text: *Las novas de Guillem de Nivers (Flamenca). Introduzione, scelta, e glossario*, Padova, 1965. Ulrich Gschwind prepared a well-reviewed two volume edition published at Bern in 1975. Readers desiring to become acquainted with the romance in English can consult the verse translation provided in M. J. Hubert and M. E. Porter, *The Romance of Flamenca. A Provençal Poem of the Thirteenth Century*, Princeton, 1962.
- 2 Robert A. Taylor, *La littérature occitane du moyen âge. Bibliographie sélective et critique*, Toronto and Buffalo, 1977, p.118.
- 3 René Lavaud et René Nelli, *Les Troubadours: Jaufre, Flamenca, Barlaam et Josaphat*, Paris, 1960, p.635.
- 4 Alfred Jeanroy, *Histoire sommaire de la poésie occitane des origines à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1945, p.99: '... les grâces du style, un esprit délicat, une discrète ironie qui fait penser aux contes de La Fontaine et à ceux de Voltaire.'
- 5 In *Flamenca*, the marvellous elements typical of a romance *à la Chrétien*

*de Troyes* are virtually eliminated, and the adventure and love strands seem to have fused to form one theme.

- 6 Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Berkeley, 1957, pp.55–57. Jacques Bousquet, for his part, lays emphasis on the importance of psychology in *Flamenca* which is for him ‘le premier des grands romans où la culture et la psychologie remplacent très largement les péripéties chevaleresques’. See his ‘Roman de *Flamenca*’ in G. Grente et alii, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le moyen âge*, Paris, 1964, p.278.
- 7 Fundamental still for any commentary on *Flamenca* is K. Lewent’s seminal article ‘Zum Inhalt und Aufbau der *Flamenca*’, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 53 (1933): 43–73. Comic aspects of the text have been treated by, amongst others, P. Damon, ‘Courtesy and Comedy in *Le roman de Flamenca*’, *Romance Philology* 17 (1963/4): 608–15; L. T. Topsfield, ‘Intention and Ideas in *Flamenca*’, *Medium Aevum* 36 (1967): 119–133; and H. Solterer, ‘*Sermo* and *joglar*: language games in *Flamenca*’, in G. S. Burgess and R. A. Taylor, eds, *The Spirit of the Court*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.330–338.
- 8 The name seems to mean ‘brilliant’ or ‘gleaming’ and comes from the Old Provençal verb *flamar*. See Lavaud et Nelli, p.644, note c; and Emil Levy, *Petit Dictionnaire Provençal-Français*, (4th edition) Heidelberg, 1966, p.190b.
- 9 All quotations from *Flamenca* are read in the edition by R. Lavaud et R. Nelli mentioned in note 3.
- 10 This translation and the following ones in square brackets are my own.
- 11 For further information on this ceremony of the *Friedenskuß*, see the article by H.-W. Strätz, *Lexicon des Mittelalters*, Band 5, pp.1590–91.
- 12 Lavaud et Nelli (p.628) distinguish: 1. l’amour chevaleresque (a highly idealised form of love, but one allowing carnal contact of the lovers); 2. l’amour naturel (a love of passion perhaps, but no trace at all of idealisation); 3. l’amour courtois ( a highly idealised form of love which, especially because of the social difference separating the Lady and her suitor of inferior class, in principle at least excluded carnal contact).
- 13 See J. Salvat, ‘Peire Rogier’, in G. Grente et alii, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises—Le Moyen Age*, Paris, 1964, p.577. A distinctive feature of Peire Rogier’s poetry is his skilful use of the dialogue form. The actual stanza parodied is to be found (stanza VI) in the poem ‘Ges non puesc en bon vers fallir’. See Derek E. T. Nicholson, ed., *The Poems of the Troubadour Peire Rogier*, Manchester, 1976, pp.88–89.
- 14 G. Millardet, *Le Roman de Flamenca*, Paris, 1936, p.16.
- 15 This theme is taken up in the following quotation where we see Guillhem apostrophising his beloved, as yet unseen by him:

A gran peccat la tenon presa;  
Ai! bella res, dous’ e cortesa,  
Franca, de totz bos aips complida,

Non voillas qu'eu perda ma vida  
Tro de mos oïls vos aia vista!

[What a great sin to hold her captive like this. Oh! You most beautiful creature, sweet, courtly and noble, possessed of all the most excellent qualities, don't let me die before I have seen you with my own eyes!]

- 16 Car de la bella de Belmont,  
Qu'es li plus bella res del mont (vv. 7097–7098)

[For about the Beauty from Belmont, who is the most beautiful woman in the world ...] Two folios are missing from the text at this point, so we do not possess the actual 'salutz'.

- 17 G. Millardet, p.37 : '... le manuscrit mutilé nous laisse sur l'impression d'un amour coupable, mais heureux.'  
18 Millardet in fact suggests such a title, p.18.  
19 Peter Dronke, 'The Rise of the medieval fabliau', *Romanische Forschungen* 85 (1973): 275–297, p.296.  
20 Lavaud et Nelli, vv. 592–709.  
21 G. Millardet, p.16.  
22 This point is well made by Gloria Cigman, 'Language and Laughter', *Essays and Studies* 24 (1971): 101–122, pp.101–2.  
23 A Cambridge don, F. Brittain, recorded his horror and amazement about spitting in church when he noted the following about the Spanish cathedral of Burgos: 'I read the notices hanging from each pillar of the nave, "for the love of God and the sake of hygiene, do not spit on the floor of this cathedral".' The passage is in his *It's a Don's Life*, London, 1972, p.107.  
24 See Lavaud et Nelli, vv. 4898–4900 :

'Et anc no vi homen estrain  
Que tan leu d'amor si plaïsses  
A domna que non conogues.'

- 25 E. Baumgartner thinks that the anonymous author of *Flamenca* meant to play with the whole structure of ecclesiastical and divine elements in the romance. Here is an extract from his 'Les Troubadours : *Jaufre, Flamenca, Barlaam et Josaphat*', *Romance Philology* 19 (1965–66): 111: 'Pour triompher, l'amour adultère peut-il se jouer de tout, même de Dieu? Il semble que l'auteur anonyme ait conclu par l'affirmative. Comment d'ailleurs supposer que cet écrivain ingénieux et subtil, si versé dans la liturgie, n'ait ni senti, ni voulu l'impiété manifeste qui consiste à faire d'une église, d'un clerc, des livres saints et des rites liturgiques précis, les instruments d'une conquête amoureuse.'  
26 P. Ménard, *Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Age*, Geneva, 1969, p.752.  
27 Amongst many other examples where the author invents à l'improviste a situation or chooses an unexpected (and so potentially comic) rhyme are :

L.saumiers nos an ops  
E ja negus non sia clops. (vv. 94–95)

[We need fifty beasts of burden, and not one of them can be lame.]

and

Flamenca sospira e muda  
Color, et Alis estornuda. (vv. 5241–5242)

[Flamenca sighs and changes colour, and Alis sneezes.]

- 28 See Robert Bossuat, 'Le jugement d'amour'. in G. Grente et alii, p.441. C. Oulmont's book *Les Débats du clerc et du chevalier dans la littérature poétique du Moyen Age*, Paris, 1911, is still a full and useful study of the major texts of the tradition.
- 29 The mention of jewels ('joias') is furthermore a playful reference to the fact that a few verses earlier (vv. 7593–7596), Flamenca tells Archambaut that she cannot decide what jewels she should give to Guillem's company as a reward for their prowess.
- 30 A good instance is the list of the sorts of meat consumed at the wedding feast :

Austardas e cignes e gruas,  
Perdizes, anetz e capos,  
Aucas, gallinas e paons  
Conilz lebres, cabrols e cers  
Senglars et orses granz e fers  
I ac tan que ja plus non calgra;  
Ni l'autra carn ja mens non valgra. (vv. 394–400)

[Bustards and swans and cranes, partridges, ducks and capons, geese, chickens and peacocks, rabbits, hares, deer and stags, wild boar and enormous, fierce bears—there are so many of all that there will be need of no more. The rest of the meats will be of no less a quality.]