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Aude Martin*

Acheflour and Blanchefflour: Mothers and Wives in *Sir Percyvell of Galles* and *Sir Tristrem*

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Abstract: The Middle English characters of Acheflour, the hero's mother in *Sir Percyvell of Galles*, and Blanchefflour, the hero's mother in *Sir Tristrem*, share their actively voiced concern for their sons. In doing so, they are granted greater prominence in these Middle English narrative contexts than their counterparts in other linguistic traditions. In this article, I argue that the figure of Acheflour, whose agency has been acknowledged in scholarship, sets up a standard for Blanchefflour, whose role in the story has been, on the contrary, rather overlooked. Acheflour and Blanchefflour have in common that they are sisters to a king – Arthur and Mark respectively – and young widows. I argue that the strategies that they develop in order to protect their sons from the dangers of knighthood are comparable and create stronger relationships with these young knights.

Résumé: Les personnages moyen-anglais d'Acheflour, la mère du héros dans *Sir Percyvell of Galles*, et de Blanchefflour, la mère du héros dans *Sir Tristrem*, partagent leur manière explicite d'exprimer leurs inquiétudes concernant leurs fils. Ce faisant, elles occupent toutes les deux une place plus importante dans ces versions moyen-anglaises que leurs homologues dans d'autres traditions linguistiques. Dans cet article, je propose de voir le personnage d'Acheflour, dont la capacité d'action est reconnue par la critique, comme un point de repère pertinent pour étudier le personnage de Blanchefflour, dont le rôle dans l'histoire a été jusqu'ici laissé de côté. Acheflour et Blanchefflour ont en commun d'être sœurs de rois – respectivement Arthur et Mark – et de devenir rapidement veuves. Je propose de démontrer que les stratégies qu'elles mettent en place pour protéger leurs fils des dangers de la chevalerie sont comparables et contribuent à construire une relation forte avec ces jeunes chevaliers.

Zusammenfassung: Die mittenglischen Figuren Acheflour, die Mutter des Helden in *Sir Percyvell of Galles*, und Blanchefflour, die Mutter des Helden in *Sir Tristrem*, teilen ihre offen geäußerte Sorge um ihre Söhne. Dadurch kommt ihnen in diesen mittenglischen Erzählungen eine größere Bedeutung zu als ihren Pendants in anderen sprachlichen Traditionen. In diesem Artikel wird die These vertreten, dass

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die Figur von Acheflour, deren Handlungsinitiative in der Forschung untersucht worden ist, einen Maßstab für Blanchefflour setzt, deren Rolle in der Erzählung hingegen weniger beachtet wurde. Acheflour und Blanchefflour ist gemeinsam, dass sie Schwestern eines Königs – Arthur bzw. Mark – und junge Witwen sind. Hier soll gezeigt werden, dass die Strategien, die sie entwickeln, um ihre Söhne vor den Gefahren des Rittertums zu schützen, vergleichbar sind und die Beziehung zu den jungen Rittern verstärken.

Keywords: Arthurian women, mothers, *Sir Percyvell of Galles*, *Sir Tristrem*, Acheflour, Blanchefflour, agency

In line with the interest of critical scholarship in female characters of Middle English romance, mother figures have attracted some critical attention. Their role in romances ranging from *Octavian*, *Degaré*, *King Alysander*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* to *Sir Bevis of Hamton* or *King Horn*, has been investigated.¹ There is more to learn about the role of women and mothers in Middle English romance from the characters of Acheflour in *Sir Percyvell of Galles* (henceforth *Sir Percyvell*) and Blanchefflour in *Sir Tristrem*; they both illustrate the tendency of English romancers to give female characters greater agency than their counterparts in other linguistic or national traditions.² Acheflour's and Blanchefflour's contributions to the Perceval and the Tristan narratives are unique. The former survives her son's departure and

1 Jennifer Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English romance', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150–1500*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 41–60; David Salter, "'Born to thralldom and penance": wives and mothers in middle English romance', *Essays and Studies*, 41 (2002), 41–59; Angela Florschuetz, *Marking Maternity in Middle English Romance: Mothers, Identity and Contamination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Elizabeth Archibald, 'The Importance of Being an Arthurian Mother', in *Medieval English and Dutch Literatures: the European Context. Essays in Honour of David F. Johnson*, ed. by Larissa Tracy and Geert H. M. Claassens (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2022), pp. 329–50.

2 See, for example, Joanne Findon, 'The Other Story: Female Friendship in the Middle English *Yvain and Gawain*', *Parergon*, 22.1 (2005), 71–94 and Evelyn Meyer, 'Manuscript versus Edition: The Multiple Endings of *Yvain/Iwein/Iven/Ywayne* and Their Gender Implications', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 68 (2011), 97–141, for considerations of the female characters in the Middle English *Yvain and Gawain*; see also Jane Gilbert, 'Gender, Oaths and Ambiguity in *Sir Tristrem* and Béroul's *Roman de Tristan*', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. by Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 237–57 for an analysis of the female characters – but not Blanchefflour – in *Sir Tristrem*. For more general perspectives, see the chapters in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1500*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

has a decisive role in the fulfilment of the plot, while the latter's concern for her son's safety is explicitly voiced.

The character of Percyvell's mother in *Sir Percyvell*, Achefflour, will be examined first. She has been given attention in scholarship, both in studies of mothers in Middle English romance and in analyses which focus on *Sir Percyvell*.³ The unique treatment that the poet gives of her, however, deserves deeper analysis, and will become apparent when the character of Achefflour is compared with the character of the hero's mother in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, the anonymous Welsh *Peredur ab Efracw*, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Achefflour's unique relationship to King Arthur, the decisiveness with which she acts when she leaves the court, and the understanding she shows when Percyvell leaves her all demonstrate a more complex and independent character than her counterparts in the other versions of the narrative. Focusing on Achefflour's life before her son's birth and during his childhood will be most appropriate as it corresponds closely to Blanchefflour's lifespan in *Sir Tristrem*.⁴ Until now, the character of Tristrem's mother has been mostly neglected in the critical debate. Yet looking at her unique depiction by the Middle English poet will provide new avenues for a better understanding of the cultural and social context in which these romances were adapted.

Jennifer Fellows rightly notes that most of the Middle English romances include a brief story about the hero's *enfance*, often with reference to his conception and to his birth. 'When mothers appear in these narratives at all', she argues, 'therefore, they are usually introduced at the beginning of the story and have some crucial role, whether active or passive, to play in the events that precipitate the main action'.⁵ Both Achefflour and Blanchefflour appear in narratives which include a story about the hero's parents. Depicted as wives and as mothers, they both play an active role in the narratives by challenging the patriarchal values of the world to which they belong.

3 See Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English romance'; Francis Xavier Baron, 'Mother and Son in *Sir Perceval of Galles*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 8 (1972), 3–14; Patricia Rose, 'Achefflour: Wise Woman or Foolish Female?', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 46.4 (2004), 452–72; Ad Putter, 'Story line and story shape in *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*', in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 171–96.

4 One of the unique motifs found in *Sir Percyvell* as opposed to the other versions of the story is the fact that the hero's mother does not die but remains alive until the end of the story, allowing for her son to see her again. See, among others, Rose, 'Achefflour'; Raluca Radulescu, 'Sir Percyvell of Galles: A Quest for Values', in *Handbook of Arthurian Romance: King Arthur's Court in Medieval European Literature*, ed. by Leah Tether and Johnny McFayden (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 389–402, for examples of critical readings of this episode.

5 Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English romance', p. 43.

Sir Percyvell is the only existing Middle English version of the Perceval story. It has been preserved in the Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS 91), which has been dated to the middle of the fifteenth century, while the poem itself is thought to have been composed between 1300 and 1340.⁶ This version of the Perceval tradition comes after the twelfth-century French *Conte du Graal*, the thirteenth-century Welsh *Peredur*, and the thirteenth-century German *Parzival*. The Middle English *Sir Percyvell* is usually said to be based on Chrétien's work,⁷ but in this article I make a case for a comparative analysis alongside the German and Welsh versions of the story; adapted to different cultural contexts, they still provide examples of women and mother figures whose roles within the narrative are similar to that of Chrétien's character – they flee from the court but their influence on their sons' lives is quickly replaced by that of men, and their death seems unavoidable.⁸ On the other hand, *Sir Tristrem* is the only existing Middle English version of the Tristan story before Thomas Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram*, included in his *Le Morte d'Arthur*. *Sir Tristrem* is extant in the Auchinleck manuscript (Edinburgh, NLS Adv MS 19.2.1), which has been dated to the first half of the fourteenth century; the poem itself may have been composed in the last decades of the thirteenth century.⁹ Its narrative follows

6 W. R. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London: Longman, 1987), p. 155; see also Ad Putter, 'The Text of "Sir Perceval of Galles"', *Medium Ævum*, 70.2 (2001), 191–203, who notes that the 'MED dates the work before 1400; the date accepted by most scholars is 1300–40' (p. 191).

7 Keith Busby, 'Chrétien de Troyes English'd', *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 596–613; Radulescu, 'Sir Percyvell of Galles: A Quest for Values', p. 389.

8 The Middle English version is cited from 'Sir Perceval of Galles', in *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. by Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995). The French version is cited from Chrétien de Troyes, *Romans; suivi des Chansons; avec en appendice, Philomena*, ed. by Jean-Marie Fritz (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1994). Its English translation is cited from Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, ed. and trans. by Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). The Welsh version is cited from *Peredur ab Efracw*, ed. by Kuno Meyer (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1887). Its English translation is cited from *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). The German version is cited from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. by Karl Lachmann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) and will be hereafter referred to by section and line numbers according to this edition's layout. Its English translation is cited from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival with Titurel and The Love-lyrics*, ed. and trans. by Cyril Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004; Oxford University Press, reprinted with an introduction by Richard Barber, 2006).

9 Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, p. 154. Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Donka Minkova provide a list of Middle English works which allude to *Sir Tristrem* and help support this date, in Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson, and Donka Minkova, 'Dialect, Rhyme, and Emendation in *Sir Tristrem*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 113.1 (2014), 73–92 (p. 73).

what is known as the courtly branch of the Tristan tradition,¹⁰ which is represented by Thomas's Anglo-Norman *Roman de Tristan* composed in the early twelfth century, Gottfried's German *Tristan*, and Brother Robert's Old Norse *Tristrams Saga ok Isöndar*, both composed in the early thirteenth century.¹¹ It is commonly agreed among critics that the Middle High German, Old Norse, and Middle English versions are derived from Thomas's poem.¹² The latter, unfortunately, has only survived in fragmentary form and none of the episodes that would have given an account of the hero's mother are extant. The present analysis of Blanchefflour will thus rely on Robert's and Gottfried's versions.

The poet of *Sir Percyvell* first introduces Achefflour during a conventional scene in which King Arthur, Achefflour's brother, gives her as a reward to one of his best knights, Perceval's father:

Tharefore Kyng Arthoure
 Dide hym [Perceval's father] mekill honoure:
 He gaffe hym his syster Achefflour (ll. 21–23)

Here she is the object of exchange between men. This depiction has led Patricia Rose to argue that Perceval's father 'marries her firstly for the dowry she brings

10 The style of the Middle English poet has been studied by some critics in relation to Bérout's version. Jane Gilbert, for instance, compares the oath scene in *Sir Tristrem* with that in Bérout's *Roman de Tristan* because, she suggests, such a comparison could 'illuminate the Middle English text' which contains 'Bérout-like changes of tone and humorous seeming-incongruities'. See Gilbert, 'Gender, Oaths and Ambiguity', p. 239.

11 Thomas's work is cited in the original language from *Tristan et Iseut: les poèmes français, la saga norroise*, ed. by Daniel W. Lacroix and Philippe Walter (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989). Gottfried's work is cited in the original language from *Gottfried's von Strassburg Tristan*, ed. by Reinhold Bechstein, 2 vols (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1869). Robert's work is cited in the original language from *Norse Romance*, ed. by Marianne Kalinke, 3 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), I. *Sir Tristrem* is cited in the original language from *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem*, ed. by Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). All references to these four editions will hereafter be given by line numbers, except the Norse version which will be cited by page numbers. The English translations given for Gottfried's and Thomas's texts are from *Gottfried von Strassburg Tristan, translated entire for the first time, With the surviving fragments of the Tristan of Thomas*, ed. by Thomas Hatto (London: Penguin Books, 1960). The English translations given for Robert's text are from *Norse Romance*, ed. by Marianne Kalinke, 3 vols (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), I. All references to these two editions will hereafter be given by page numbers.

12 For Thomas as the basis for *Sir Tristrem*, see Putter, Jefferson, and Minkova, 'Dialect, Rhyme, and Emendation', p. 73; for Thomas as the basis for Gottfried, see Walter Haug, 'Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances of Thomas and Gotfrid: Implications of a Recent Discovery', *Arthuriana*, 7.3 (1997), 45–59 (p. 45); for Thomas as the basis for Robert, see Alison Finlay, "Intolerable Love": "Tristrams saga" and the Carlisle "Tristan" Fragment', *Medium Ævum*, 73.2 (2004), 205–24 (p. 205).

him and, almost as an afterthought, for her own sake'.¹³ It is true that the narrator first refers to 'the gyftes that ware gude' (l. 39), and then mentions 'hir ownn sake' (l. 40). At the same time, he introduces Acheflour's lineage with Arthur before naming her (l. 23). Acheflour's depiction here clearly corresponds to the Arthurian heroine as described by Maureen Fries, especially as she is used to '[reward] the actions of their knight-agents'.¹⁴ It must be noted, however, that even as a heroine, Acheflour's portrayal differs from other versions of the story. While Rose points out that Acheflour is Arthur's sister, she does not mention that this detail only appears in the Middle English text and therefore illustrates the greater agency that *this* English poet gave to *this* female character.¹⁵ Only in *Sir Percyvell* is Acheflour a very close relative to King Arthur himself, and thus of royal blood. Her wedding with Percyvell's father is not, as in other versions, what brings her closer to the life of the court, but what brings *him* closer to the royal family. It is through her familial background that Percyvell is Arthur's nephew. Acheflour is portrayed by the Middle English poet as a conventional female character who will be shown, in the course of the present argument, to have a stronger impact on men's lives than her French, German, and Welsh counterparts do.

In the Welsh *Peredur*, the hero's mother is introduced as 'a wise and clever woman' (p. 65) ['Gwreic ystrywyat kymet oed yn vam idaw' (p. 1)] but the poet does not name her. Chrétien, in the *Conte*, introduces her as 'the widowed lady / Living alone in the Barren / Forest' (ll. 74–76) ['la veve dame / De la gaste forest soutaine' (ll. 72–73)] but, as in *Peredur*, she has no name. Her Welsh and French counterparts, therefore, display less individuality than the Middle English Acheflour; they are mainly defined by their functions as mothers and widows. The Welsh author briefly mentions *Peredur*'s background at the beginning of his story, but nowhere does he mention that the hero's father, Earl Efrog, or his mother are related to Arthur's court or family. In the French work, when Perceval announces that he wants to go

13 Rose, 'Acheflour', p. 453.

14 Maureen Fries, 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition', in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 59–73 (p. 72). Fries proposes a classification of female characters in Arthurian romance in three categories: 'Arthurian heroines are conservative, passive, instrumental non-actors, useful for provoking, renewing and rewarding the actions of their knight-agents. Arthurian female heroes may, indirectly and for a specified time, consciously play female parts to effect transformation of their male-dominant world, but they always act only for knightly benefit. Arthurian female counter-heroes openly refuse to be seen in womanly supportive roles in what is essentially a male drama and attempt to change their woman-hostile world by direct and not indirect action' (pp. 71–72).

15 Rose, 'Acheflour', p. 453.

to Arthur's court, his mother tells him about his father and brothers and about her own family background:

Que je sui de ceste contree,
 Voir, des meillors chevaliers nee.
 Es illes de met n'ot lignaige
 Meillor do mien en mon aaige (ll. 395–98)
 [For I, too, was born
 Of knights, the best in this land.
 Nowhere in the Islands is there
 A family better than mine – (ll. 423–26)]

Perceval's mother, just like Percyvell's and Peredur's, descends from a noble family of high rank. It is not the mother's lineage which differs from one version to the other – the three romances all take place in a courtly environment – but its contribution to the narrative. In the French and Welsh texts, the lineage of the hero's mother is a direct contribution to the hero's own storyline. The authors use these characters to emphasise the noble identity of Perceval and Peredur instead of their identity; they might be the heroes' mothers, but in the end, they remain unnamed women. In addition to being named, Acheflour is portrayed not as the descendant of any noble family but of the king's family. Such a detail enhances the mother's identity more than the hero's storyline in *Sir Percyvell*.

Wolfram's *Parzival* differs from the French and Welsh versions in that the hero's mother is named and her background is highly detailed. She is first introduced as the Queen of Waleis. When Gahmuret, Parzival's father, arrives in the country of Waleis, the narrator gives more details about her social class:

diu künegîn von Wāleis
 gesprochen hete ze Kanvoleis
 einen turney also gezilt,
 [...]
 si was ein maget, niht ein wîp,
 und bôt zwei lant unde ir lîp
 swer dâ den pris bezalte. (section 60, ll. 9–11; 15–17)
 [The Queen of Waleis had proclaimed a tournament at Kanvoleis [...]. She was a maiden, unmarried, and offered two countries as well as her person to whoever won the prize there. (p. 27)]

Sometime after this introduction, the narrator directly addresses his audience, reveals the woman's name, Herzeloide, and details her lineage (ll. 2498–505). Questions of kinship in *Parzival* are more complex because more characters are involved than in the other versions of the story. Herzeloide's portrayal is conventional as she offers herself as a reward to the knight who wins her tournament. At the same

time, she challenges patriarchal values because she is the one who initiates the tournament and chooses the prize. The familial link between the hero's mother and King Arthur, however, remains peculiar to the Middle English version, and will give Achefflour more independence and agency when she leaves the court.

In all the versions, after the wedding between the hero's parents has been celebrated, the hero's father dies and his mother decides to flee to the woods with her son in order to keep him away from the dangers of knighthood and chivalry.¹⁶ Therefore, in all the versions, the hero is brought up in the wilderness by his mother. Unique to the Middle English story, however, is the fact that 'the world in which Perceval of Galles is reared is one of women and of women's values', Rose points out.¹⁷ The hero lives in the woods with his mother, but also with 'A mayden scho tuke hir withalle / That scho myghte appon calle / When that hir nede stode' (ll. 182–84), and with 'a tryppe of gayte, / With mylke of tham for to bayte / To hir lyves fode' (ll. 186–88). Percyvell spends his childhood surrounded by female characters only, and with his mother as sole authoritative figure. Moreover, when Achefflour takes her decision to leave, she shows determination and independence (ll. 161–64). She is neither left alone nor pushed away. Being Arthur's sister and part of the royal family secures her position by preventing her from being ousted from the court, yet she decides to leave. She chooses to oppose the knight-centred world of the court, therefore acting along the lines of the 'female counter-heroes' who, as Fries defines them, are 'never completely committed to the knightly ethos which dominates their world' and 'are capable of transforming their environment(s) and doing so for their own benefit'.¹⁸ Achefflour leaves the court for her own benefit and for that of her child, a decision which is 'as likely to hurt the hero as to help him'.¹⁹ The other authors do not depict the escape of the hero's mother as an independent and decisive choice but rather as an obligation. Yet Achefflour is more than a counter-hero. The gap that she creates between the world of knighthood and the wilderness is greater than in the other versions of the story because she avoids bringing men or boys, while at the same time she has more influence than her counterparts on the hero's introduction to the ways of the court because Percyvell listens to her advice until the end of the story, when they reunite.

In the Welsh text, Peredur's mother takes with her 'women and children, and meek, mild men who could not and would not fight or wage war' (p. 65) [*Ny adawd*

¹⁶ The *Conte* is different in this respect. Perceval's father had fled into the woods with his family because he had become poor and noble families were being dismissed from the realm. He then died broken-hearted when his two oldest sons died in knightly encounters (ll. 407–52).

¹⁷ Rose, 'Achefflour', p. 457.

¹⁸ Fries, 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes', p. 71.

¹⁹ Fries, 'Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes', p. 68.

neb yn y chedymdeithas, namyn gwraged a meibon a dynyon didraha, ny ellynt nac ny wedei udunt nac ymlad na ryfelu' (p. 1)]; Chrétien populates the world of Perceval's childhood with 'Hercheors que sa mere avoit / Que ses avaines li erchoient' (ll. 80–81) [the plowmen sowing oats / In his mother's fields (ll. 82–83)]. In both these versions, the hero is brought up by his mother but lives among male figures. The wilderness in which he grows up excludes the influence of knighthood but is not devoid of the masculine presence that the hero would have experienced had he grown up at court. In the *Conte*, Perceval's mother was already established in the woods before her husband died and does not leave the court by herself. She tells Perceval how she suffered the consequences of his brothers' and his father's deaths:

Vos esteiez toz li confors
 Que je avoie et toz li biens,
 Car il n'i avoit plus des miens (ll. 450–52)
 [You are all the comfort
 I have, and all that's worthwhile;
 There's no one else in my life. (ll. 484–86)]

As opposed to the Middle English Achefflour, the French character does not demonstrate the decisiveness and independence of a counter-hero but is portrayed as a victim of the dangers of knighthood.

In the Welsh version, Peredur's mother decides 'to flee with the boy to wasteland and wilderness, leaving behind the inhabited regions' (p. 65) ['Ssef a gafar yn y chyghor, ffo y nyalwch a diffeithwch didramwyeit, ac ymadaw ar kyfannedeu' (p. 1)]. Her flight, caused by the death of her husband and her six sons, imply her desire to keep Peredur away from violence. In the Middle English version, Achefflour's pledge also follows her husband's death and is more explicitly related to her son's well-being outside the court:

And now is Percyvell the wight
 Slayne in batelle and in fyghte,
 And the lady hase gyffen a gyfte,
 Holde if scho may,
 That scho schall never mare wone
 In stede, with hir yonge sone,
 Ther dedes of armes schall be done,
 By nyghte ne be daye.
 Bot in the wodde schall he be:
 Sall he no thing see
 Bot the leves of the tree
 And the greves graye;
 Schall he nowther take tent

To justes ne to tournament,
 Bot in the wilde wodde went,
 With bestes to playe. (ll. 161–76)

The Middle English poet does not depict this event as a forced escape from a dangerous place, but rather as a chosen departure for a safer place. He emphasises the final aim of the journey while the Welsh author highlights the need to get away. In the Welsh and the French versions, the hero's mother is portrayed as a heroine and a victim of a knight-centred society. In the Middle English version, her flight is a way of opposing this society as a counter-hero, by creating an environment in which she is able to develop her own values.

While Achefflour is described by Fellows as part of the female characters in romance who 'display a good deal of strength and dignity, exercising control over their own and their children's destinies',²⁰ the case of Blaunchefflour – Tristrem's mother in the Middle English *Sir Tristrem* – has not been investigated at all. The similarities between the two characters suggest that Blaunchefflour's empowerment in *Sir Tristrem* is comparable to Achefflour's pre-eminence in the *Perceval* tradition. Both challenge the norms established in the patriarchal society in which they live. Portrayed as conventional Arthurian heroines, their deeds throughout the stories often exceed the boundaries that the narratives impose on them.

In the courtly versions of the Tristan tradition, Blaunchefflour is, like Achefflour, a wife and a mother, and shares with her royal lineage and individuality. They are both sister to the king – Arthur in *Sir Perceval* and Mark in *Sir Tristrem* – and both marry a worthy knight who has proved his strength and bravery at court. Blaunchefflour must also endure the loss of her husband who dies in a fight; she has to take care of her son, before dying in childbirth. The two women also share their decisiveness when they choose to leave the royal court. Their reasons to do so may differ – the widowed Achefflour wants to protect her son whereas the pregnant Blaunchefflour follows her husband to his native lands – but their personal choice to leave depends on their own decision rather than being imposed upon them. In *Sir Tristrem*, the Middle English poet builds a more complex character with greater agency in the story than the Norse and German authors do. Having been portrayed as a traditional Arthurian heroine, Blaunchefflour demonstrates the independence and decisiveness of a female hero when she entrusts Rouhand with her ring in a unique episode, and when she follows her husband to Ermonie, an attitude which is less enhanced in other versions of the story.

In the German *Tristan*, Gottfried's Blanschefflûr is introduced almost as Mark's property:

20 Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English romance', p. 55.

und Márké der guote,
 der hövesche hôhgemuote
 ân' ander frouwen schönheit,
 die er hâte an sînen rinc geleit,
 sô hæte er doch besunder
 ein sunderlichez wunder,
 Blanscheflûr sîn swester dâ (ll. 625–31)

[And Mark the good, the courteous and magnanimous, had a rare marvel of his own apart from the beauty of other ladies, whose pavilion he had placed in his ring – his sister Blanche-flour. (pp. 49–50)]

The lady is defined here by her relationship to Mark. She is presented as his ‘rare marvel’, comparable to one of the luxury objects that could be found among the king’s treasures. The German poet then emphasises her physical appearance which reinforces her passivity: her beauty only depends upon the approval of men and is even used as a benchmark to rank other women’s physiques (ll. 632–50). She represents the idealised figure of the courtly lady waiting to be traded among masculine subjects, and as such corresponds to the Arthurian heroine that Fries defines as a ‘passive, instrumental [non-actor]’.²¹

Like Gottfried, the Norse poet Robert introduces the hero’s mother as the object of a sentence in which the active subject is King Mark:

Kóngr þessi hinn frægi ok ríki, Markis, átti systur eina, er svá var fríð ok ynnilig, sjálig ok sæmilig, kurteislig ok elskulig, ríkulig ok göfuglig, svá at þvílíkt rósalíf var ekki til í veröldinni, svá at men vissu til. [...] Ok svá víða sem menn spyrja til hennar í önnur kóngsríki, þá óx henni lofsæl frægð ok mesta ástsemd af mörgum ágætum höfðingjum ok hinum fríðustum æskumönnum, sem aldri höfðu enn sjón af henni. (p. 34, my emphasis)

[*This famous and powerful king, Markis, had one sister, who was so beautiful and lovely, attractive and honorable, well mannered and beloved, magnificent and generous that as far as people knew, another such cheerful being could not be found in the world. [...] As far and wide as men learned of her in other kingdoms, her fame and reputation and great affection grew among many excellent leaders and the most handsome young men who had never even laid eyes on her. (p. 35, my emphasis)*]

He also focuses on the lady’s royal kinship and beauty, defined, too, by male approval. She has some non-physical qualities as well – ‘honorable’, ‘well mannered’, ‘generous’ – but her beauty and attractiveness still dominate the description. The poet has a unique way of revealing her name only at the end of the following chapter, after her torments have been described (p. 37). The woman’s feelings towards the knight are more important than her name here, an imbalance which weakens the

21 Fries, ‘Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes’, p. 71.

woman's identity and defines her as the passive embodiment of masculine desire rather than the active initiator of her emotions. Just like Blancheflor in Gottfried, the Norse character represents an idealisation of the romance heroine, reputed for her beauty and good manners more than for her name or actions.

As opposed to these two versions, the Middle English poet first introduces the hero's mother as 'maiden Blaunchefflour' (l. 77), 'the maiden of heighe kinne' (l. 78), and 'Blaunchefflour the bright' (l. 98). Like Acheflour's name in *Sir Percyvell*, Blaunchefflour's is immediately revealed together with her high rank. Her relationship to the king, however, is introduced later in *Sir Tristrem* than in *Sir Percyvell*. In the extant copy of the poem, Blaunchefflour herself mentions her royal kinship when she is on her deathbed. In the German and Norse versions, she dies without saying a word, the Middle English Blaunchefflour entrusts Rouhand with her father's ring and says that her brother, King Mark, knows it well and would recognise it should he see it (ll. 221–31). The Middle English poet emphasises Blaunchefflour's relation to the king by having her mention this relationship herself. Like for Percyvell, this unique scene contributes to the hero's storyline but is not necessary to the plot. It contributes even more to Blaunchefflour's own storyline and to the development of her identity as a conventional yet active female character.

Moreover, Blaunchefflour's beauty – a prominent characteristic in the other retellings – is hinted at once in the traditional collocation 'Blaunchefflour the bright' (l. 98), which seems to contribute more to the rhyme scheme than to the character's specificities. This also parallels Acheflour's portrayal: her beauty is introduced late and in rhyming position through the collocation 'that frely fode' (l. 38). The poet of *Sir Tristrem* uses the woman's beauty not as her primary and defining quality but as a reminder that Blaunchefflour corresponds to the physical standards of a true romance heroine. However, she later demonstrates that she can be more active than the German and Norse characters.

When her husband Rouland is called back to the land of Ermonie because of Morgan, Blaunchefflour is actively taking part in the decision to leave. She speaks for herself as she decides to leave with him to see his lands and meet his people:

'Mi duelling is hir ille;
 Bihold and tow may se.
 Mi rede is taken thertille,
 That fare Y wille with the
 And finde
 Thi fair folk and thi fre
 O lond ther is thi kinde.' (ll. 137–43)

She makes her decision after Rouland has taken his leave of Mark. Lines 124 to 135 are unfortunately missing in the manuscript due to the cutting of the miniature on

the first page. These twelve lines must have contained Rouland's announcement of his departure to the king and then to Blanchefflour. As in other versions of the story, Rouland gives his lady the choice between staying in England or leaving to Ermonie.²² However, as Sergi Mainer notes, 'so few lines would have not allowed for an elaborate display of courtly language and imagery' as in the German and Norse stories.²³ The knight must have addressed his lady in direct terms and thus given her a significant role in her decision to leave. She does not allude to Rouland's protection or influence. In the two other versions, the poets emphasise the lady's fear and despair and, each in his own way, use this episode to enhance Rivalen/Kanelangres' qualities. Even though the man gives her the choice between leaving and staying, he is the one in charge.

In the German version, Blanchefflour wants to leave with her lover, but she is afraid and wishes to flee in secret. She asks Rivalen to help and advise her, and he plans her secret escape (ll. 1555–63). Her need to hide could suggest that she lacks the freedom to do as she pleases and depends on Rivalen for her safety. The hidden journey is not mentioned in the Norse story, but the woman is as passive as in the German text. Kanelangres also gives Blensibil the choice, but he is presented here as the one who assumes responsibility and acts. He first comforts her: 'Unnasta, [...] ek skal at þessu gera sem bezt kann ek [...] þá skal af þessu gera, sem virðuligast er' (p. 44) ['Beloved, in this matter I will do the best that I can [...], I will behave in this matter as honorably as possible' (p. 45)]. His qualities are then enhanced in Blensibil's thoughts:

Sem hún skildi hans góðvilja ok hann vildi hana með sér færa í sitt fóstrland, ef henni líkaði betr þar at dveljaz, þá vill hann ekki verðr ámælis, er svá virðuliga vill gera hennar vilja (p. 46).

[When Blensibil understood his good intentions and his wish to take her with him to his homeland, or, if she preferred to remain there, then he would do as she wished, then she felt him to be above reproach, since he so honorably would do as she desired. (p. 47)]

²² Line 136 contains the end of Rouland's speech, and more precisely the second half of the choice given to Blanchefflour: 'Or thou wilt wende with me'.

²³ Sergi Mainer, 'The Singularity of Sir Tristrem in the Tristan Corpus', *Leeds Studies in English*, 39 (2008), 95–115 (p. 98). For Mainer, the lines following the missing extract describe 'Rouland's fear for his land not being a safe place for Blanchefflour (ll. 136–43)' (p. 98). The text, however, suggests that it is rather Blanchefflour who is telling Rouland that she wants to go with him and discover where he lives and who are his people. The glossing that Lupack gives for 'Mi duelling is hir ille' (l. 137) as 'My remaining is bad for her' might be the cause for such a misinterpretation. Blanchefflour's discourse would be more coherent if this line is glossed as 'My remaining here [in England] is disagreeable', as the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests. See <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED21964/track>>.

Kanelangres acts in accordance with the code of courtesy and, even though the scene describes Blensibil's choice, such a choice still depends on the man. She is not presented as the one who chooses her own fate but who accepts one of the man's suggestions. In the end, the decision will correspond either to Kanelangre's wish or to his action following his wife's wish. In both cases, he is the active subject while Blensibil is the passive object.

The succession of events might be the same in these three versions – the knight must go back to his land, he takes his leave of the king, he warns his lady, she shows her distress, he lets her choose between staying and leaving, she decides to go with him, they leave – but their focus is different. The German and Norse ladies are stuck in courtly conventions according to which the man is in charge. Their choice to leave needs to be validated, protected, and supported by their lovers. These versions illustrate the observation made by E. Jane Burns about courtly love:

It is men's feelings that are expressed and men's prowess and social standing that are at stake as men practice and profess the art of love even though the adored ladylove stands nominally at the center of the process.²⁴

Blensibil and Blancheflor are both central to the hero's actions, but at the same time they are subjected to his will. On the contrary, Blanchefleur's choice in *Sir Tristrem* is confidently taken. She speaks for herself as the active subject of her affirmations. Neither she nor the narrator mention Rouland's reaction, still less his approbation. Moreover, the lady gives arguments in favour of her decision. Her interest in Rouland's origins shows that she is curious and adventurous rather than in despair and fearful. Blanchefleur's behaviour in this scene is very similar to Acheffleur's when she decides to leave the court to protect her son. Seeing Acheffleur in this situation as 'a woman of principle, decision, and courage'²⁵ helps to shed light on Blanchefleur, who is just as brave and determined as Acheffleur is. At this point, they do not act as conventional heroines but become more active in order to protect their sons. Acheffleur opposes the world of the court and its patriarchal values. Blanchefleur remains within the boundaries of a knight-centred court but takes up space within this world by talking and making decisions for her and for her son.

Just like Acheffleur, Blanchefleur goes from the role of heroine to that of female hero in *Sir Tristrem*. As has been mentioned previously, Rouland is chosen for Blanchefleur (ll. 76–77), which suggests that she only plays a small part in this

²⁴ E. Jane Burns, 'Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition', *Signs*, 27.1 (2001), 23–57 (p. 23).

²⁵ Rose, 'Acheffleur', pp. 461–62.

decision. Her desire to leave to Ermonie with Rouland, however, is not that of a passive woman but of a challenging character who goes against the established norm (ll. 137–43). While the German and Norse characters follow their husbands' choice and remain stuck in passive roles, Blanche flour actively argues in favour of her departure. Similarly, the unique discussion between her and Rouhand in *Sir Tristrem* demonstrates how she consciously plays her part as a mother to ensure her son's safety (ll. 221–31). Blanche flour always remains within the courtly boundaries of romance. She is nonetheless a powerful and active character who influences her husband's and her son's lives. In similar ways, Blanche flour and Ache flour contribute to illustrate how the Middle English poets infused their romances with powerful female characters. Like some of the female characters of Anglo-Norman romances that Judith Weiss examines, Blanche flour and Ache flour also 'challenge the stereotypes of their period and, in so doing, come alive'.²⁶

²⁶ Judith Weiss, 'The power and the weakness of women in Anglo-Norman romance', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150–1500*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 7–23 (p. 18). See also, on the same topic, Judith Weiss, 'The wooing woman in Anglo-Norman romance', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. by Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 149–61.