

Preview of first pages of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, translated and photo-illustrated by Katharine Margot Toohey

*Aucassin and Nicolette* is a medieval French 'chantefable' (a song-fable), written by an anonymous author. It juxtaposes and interconnects story and mnemonic song to create a multifaceted courtly love story. The songs in this new translation closely reflect and try to retain the original rhyme patterns, especially the striking rhyme on the last syllable of every line, while also trying to stay close to the meaning of the diction.



## OF AUCASSIN AND NICOLETTE

Who would hear good verse gladly,

to make an old man happy,

about two graceful progeny

Nicolette and Aucassin?

Oh, his great trouble you will see

and his acts of bravery

to see his love's face clearly.

This tale is fine, I sing sweetly,

it was born of true courtesy.

There is no one so shaky,

so sorrowful or lowly,

or so ill and so sickly,

who will not recover quickly

with this tale and be free,

*since none is sweeter.*

C'EST D'AUCASSIN ET DE NICOLETE/Qui vauroit bons vers oir/Del deport du  
viel antif,/De deus biax enfans petis,/Nicholete et Aucassins,/Des grans paines qu'il



soufri,/Et des proueces qu'il fist/Por s'amie o le cler vis ?/Dox est li cans, biax (est) li dis,/Et cortois et bien asis./Nus hom n'est si esbahis,/Tant dolans ni entrepris,/De grant mal amaladis,/Se il l'oit, ne soit garis,/Et de joie resbaudis,/Tant par est douce.



Now it is said, shared and recounted how the Count Bougars de Valence started a war against the Count Garin de Biaucaire, a war which was so great and so wondrous and so deadly that no day dawned where he was not at the gates, and at the walls and at the barriers of the town with a hundred elite cavaliers and ten thousand knights on foot and horse. He burnt his land and laid waste to his country and killed his men. The Count Garin de Biaucaire was old and feeble, and had outlived his time. He had no heir, no son or daughter, except one single youth. I will tell you what he was like. The young lord's name was Aucassin. He was full of grace and fair, and tall, and had well-formed legs and feet and body and arms. He had light-coloured hair with small curls, and grey-blue laughing eyes, and his face was bright and well-proportioned and with a high and well-set nose. He was so endowed with good qualities that there were none bad. But he was so overcome by love, who is victorious over everything, that he did not want to be a knight, or take up arms or go to



the tournament, or do any part of whatever he should do. His father and mother said to him:

‘Son, now take your arms, then mount a horse, then defend your land, and aid your men! If they see you among them, they will defend themselves better - and their possessions, and your land and mine.’

‘Father’, Aucassin says, ‘What do you speak about now? If I were a knight, God would not give me what I ask of Him, nor if I mount a horse, or go to combat or battle where I strike some knight, or I am struck, and you do not give me Nicolette, my sweet companion, whom I love so much!’

‘Son’, the father says, ‘This cannot happen. Let Nicolette be! She is a captive who was brought from a strange land, then the Viscount bought her from that town of the Saracens, and brought her to this town. He lifted her to the font, and baptised her and made her his God-daughter. One of these days, he will give her some young commoner, who will earn bread for her honourably. You have nothing to do with that. And if you wish for a woman, I will give you the daughter of a King or a Count. There is no man so rich in France that his daughter is not yours, if you want.’

‘Look, Father!’ says Aucassin, ‘There is no honour on earth so high that it could not be bestowed aptly on my very sweet companion, Nicolette. Being Empress of Constantinople or Germany, or Queen of France or England, would be less than she is, she is so noble and courteous and gentle, and endowed with all good qualities’.

Or diënt et content et fabled

que li quens Bougars de Valence faisoit guere au conte Garin de Biaucaire si grande et si merveilleuse et si mortel, qu'il no fust uns seux jors ajornés qu'il ne fust as portes et as murs et as bares de le vile a cent cevaliers et a dis mile sergens a pié et a ceval; si li argoit sa terre et gastoit son païs et ocioit ses homes. Li quens Garins de Biaucaire estoit vix et frales, si avoit son tans trespasé. Il n'avoit nul oir, ne fil ne fille, fors un seul vallet; cil estoit tex con je vos dirai. Aucasins avoit a non li damoisiâx; biax estoit



et gens et grans et bien tailliés de ganbes et de piés et de cors et de bras. Il avoit les caviax blons et menus recerclés, et les ex vairs et rians, et le face clére et traitice, et le nés haut et bien assis; et si estoit enteciés de bones teces, qu'en lui n'en avoit nule mauvaise se bone non. Mais si estoit soupris d'amor, qui tout vaint, qu'il ne voloit estre cevalers, ne les armes prendre, n'aler au tornoi, ne fare point de quanque il deüst. Ses pére et se mère li disoient:

- Fix, car pren tes armes, si monte el ceval, si deffent te terre, et aïe tes homes! S'il te voient entr'ex, si defenderont il mix lor cors et lor avoires et te tere et le miue.

- Pére, fait Aucassins, qu'en parlés vos ore? Ja Dix ne me doinst riens que je li demant, quant ére cevaliers ne monte a ceval, ne que voise a estor ne a bataille, la u je fiére cevalier ni autres mi, se vos ne me donés Nicholete, me douce amie que je tant aim!

- Fix, fait li péres, ce ne poroit estre. Nicolete laise ester! Que ce est une caitive qui fu amenée d'estrange terre, si l'acata li visquens de ceste vile as Sarasins, si l'amena en ceste vile; si l'a levée et bautisie et faite sa fillole; si li donra un de ces jors un baceler qui du pain li gaaignera par honor. De ce n'as tu que faire. Et se tu femme vix avoir, je te donrai le file a un roi u a un conte. Il n'a si rice home en France, se tu vix sa fille avoir, que tu ne l'aies.

- Avoi! péres, fait Aucassins, ou est ore si haute honers en terre, se Nicolete ma très douce amie l'avoit, qu'ele ne fust bien emploïie en li? S'ele estoit enpereris de Colstentinoble u d'Alemaigne, u roïne de France u d'Engleterre, si aroit il assés peu en li, tant est france et cortoise et debonaire et entecie de toutes bones teces.



It is sung now:

Aucassin from Beaucaire ever,  
and a castle like no other,  
loved Nicole, god-made wonder  
of such beauty no minds wander.

But his father tries to hinder  
and his mother's threats are bitter:  
'Heavens! Fool! You both must sever!'

'She has grace, is joyous, mother'

'From Cartage, she's cast hither,  
sold, a pirate's price upon her.

Drag yourself to a wife, wherever,  
but take one who's rank will matter!'

'But how could I do it? Never!

Nicole is debonaire and clever,  
form and face so fair forever,  
her grace shines in my heart, now, ever.

It is right if we're together,

*so much the sweeter.'*





Or se cante./Aucassins fu de Biaucaire,/D'un castel de bel re-paire./De Nicole le bien faite/Nus hom ne l'en puet retraire,/Que ses pères ne li laisse;/Et sa mère le manace:/- Diva! faus, que vex tu faire!/Nicolette est cointe et gaie;/Jetée fu de Cartage,/Acatée fu d'un Saisne./Puis qu'a moullier te vix traire,/Pren femme de haut parage!/- Mère, je n'en puis el faire./Nicolette est deboinaire;/Ses gens cors et son viaire,/Sa biautés le cuer m'esclaire./Bien est drois que s'amor aie,/Que trop est dou-ce.

Now it is said, shared and recounted:

When the Count Garins de Biaucare saw that he could not distract Aucassin, his son, from the love of Nicolette, he hauled the Viscount, who was one of his men, from the town, then addressed him:

- Now, Sir Viscount, take away Nicolette, your God-daughter! Damn the land since she was brought to this country! Now because of her I lose Aucassin, who does not want to be a knight, or do any part of whatever



he should do. May all of you know that if I can seize her, I will burn her in a fire, and you will be surrounded by fear.

-Sir, says the Viscount, it weighs heavily on me that he goes to and fro, speaks to her. I had bought her with my coins, and I had lifted her to the font, and baptised her and made her my God-daughter. Then I would have given her a young commoner, who would earn bread for her honourably. Your son, Aucassin, would have had nothing to do with that. But since it is your will and pleasure, I will send her to such a land, and such a country, that his eyes will never see her.

- Watch yourself! says the Count Garins; great harm could come to you from this.

They leave.

And the Viscount was a very rich man, and had a rich palace beside a garden. He had Nicolette placed in a chamber, on a high story, with an elderly woman for company and society, and had bread and meat and wine and whatever they needed placed there. Then he had the entrance sealed, so there was no place one could enter or leave, except that there was a rather small window on the garden, from which a little fresh air came to them.

Or diënt et content et flablent.

Quant li quens Garins de Biaucare vit qu'il ne poroit Aucassin son fil retraire des amors Nicolete, il traist au visconte de le vile, qui ses hon estoit, si l'apela:

- Sire visquens, car ostés Nicolete, vostre filole! Que la tere soit maleoite, dont ele fu amenée en cest païs! Car par li pert jou Aucassin, qu'il ne veut estre cevaliers, ne faire point de quanque faire doie. Et saciés bien que, se je le puis avoir, que je l'arderai en un fu, et vous meïsmes porés avoir de vos tote peor.

-Sire, fait li visquens, ce poise moi qu'il i va, ne qu'il i vient, ne qu'il i parole. Je l'avoie acatée de mes deniers, si l'avoie levée et bautisie et faite ma filole; si li donasse un baceler qui du pain li gaegnast par honor. De ce n'eüst Aucassins vos fix que faire.





Mais puis que vostre volentés est et vos bons, je l'envoierai en tel tere et en tel païs, que jamais ne le verra de ses ex.

-Ce gardés vous! fait li quens Garins; grans maus vos en porroit venir.

Il se departent. Et li visquens estoit molt rices hom, si avoit un rice palais par devers un gardin. En une canbre la fist metre Nicolete, en un haut estage, et une vielle aveuc li por compagnie et por soïsté tenir, et s'i fist metre pain et car et vin et quanque mestiers lor fu. Puis si fist l'uis seeler, c'on n'i peüst de nule part entrer ne iscir, fors tant qu'il i avoit une fenestre par devers le gardin, assés petite, dont il lor venoit un peu d'essor.



*To be continued*

