

REINTERPRETING SARACEN ALTERITY AS A PROTO- CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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In the famous "Chanson de Roland," the repeated line "Paiens ont tort e chrestien ont dreit" - "Pagans are wrong and Christians are right" - has long been taken in scholarship as the standard for Christian views of Muslims in the Middle Ages: Saracens may be the equal of Christians in martial prowess, piety, honour, valour, and every other value worthy of a medieval knight, but they are wrong, and that is the only thing that matters. Matt Gillis, in his essay "Reinterpreting Saracen Alterity as a Proto-Christian Community," aims to complicate this critical commonplace. In his analysis of the *King of Tars*, a Middle English Romance, Matt shows the difference between Christian and Saracen is not just that one is right and the other is wrong, but that there is a difference in attitude towards faith and belief. For the Christians in the story, faith is an interior state, dependent more on internal belief than outward acts; the Saracens' faith, by contrast, is portrayed as mere show, conformity to outward appearances rather than inward conviction. This analysis casts new light on the figure of the Christian princess' horrifically deformed - or rather, unformed - baby: Matt shows the baby is not simply a manifestation of the monstrous, but is a material signifier of the superficial nature of Saracen belief.

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Scholars have sometimes treated the figure of the Saracen in Middle English romance as a mere foil for Christian virtue, perhaps overlooking the extent to which Saracen culture overlaps with Christianity's. In *The King of Tars*, however, the Saracens share more characteristics with the Christian community than one might expect, which is problematic for critics who wish to interpret them as simplistic, anti-Christian figures. On the contrary, the Saracens assume the role of a foreboding portent, a sign of warning to the Christians about the virtuous limits of a non-Christian life. In this respect, the Saracens are not anti-Christian so much as they are proto-Christian; that is, they foreshadow the necessity of Christianity while also demonstrating the highest virtue one can attain without faith in God. After conversion, the two cultures become indistinguishable in terms of race and identity, and this in turn proves that their cultural differences pertain to religious matters only. If the Saracens of *The King of Tars* are foils for Christian virtue, it is only because they lack Christian faith; in all other respects, they are equally as virtuous as the Christians.

In setting out to define the Otherness of the Saracens in *The King of Tars*, a problem immediately arises: is it even possible to describe the cultural identity of the Saracens? How can a culture that primarily serves as a foil for Christianity have a positive identity? The secondary literature about Saracens reveals that this is not just an issue for *King of Tars* scholars; in the *chansons de geste* as well as in the insular romance and chronicle traditions, the Saracens have been widely regarded as idolaters inseparable from Jews, Cynocephali, and other religious monsters (Strickland 166). Along with these other marginal figures, the Saracens embody Christian Otherness, but have few identifying features of their own. As a number of critics have pointed out (and rightly so), the primary feature of the Saracens is their non-Christian belief system, be it Islam, paganism, or otherwise (Strickland 168).

However, what does this imply about the Saracens as a literary phenomenon? That they are simply a monstrous force that acts upon Christian society from the outside? Such a suggestion is problematic for texts like *The King of Tars* where the Saracens oscillate between the categories of Christian monster and virtuous pagan. Perhaps it is more

appropriate to suggest – as Kathy Cawsey has put forth in her article “Disorienting Orientalism: Finding Saracens in Strange Places in Late Medieval English Manuscripts” – that the Saracens represent an ideological threat to Christianity that cannot be merely contained in the epithet “non-Christian.” In other words, Saracens do not just represent the religious Other (in a static and depraved sense), but rather symbolize a quasi-Christian community that has different aims and values which antagonize and redouble upon Christianity’s own tenets. Thus, fourteenth-century poets – such as Chaucer, Gower, and perhaps *The King of Tars* poet as well – aimed to nuance the identity of the Saracens to further distance themselves from that culture, ultimately differentiating their societal values by means of “religious motivation, personal rather than political faith in God, and [on] the grounds of piety and conversion” (Cawsey 393). The concern of this essay, then, is to complicate the simple binary that exists between the Saracen and Christian cultures much of the critical discourse; I will instead aim to reinforce the idea that Christian and Saracen concepts of identity are closely related in fourteenth-century English poetry.

Michael Uebel notes in his essay, "Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth-Century Responses to Saracen Alterity," that any construction of otherness always already involves an affirmation of the self's identity (265). Such a statement underscores the ambiguous status of figures like the Saracens because on the one hand, they circumscribe the limits of Christian society and demarcate a boundary between self and other, but on the other hand, they also reflect Christian values and help communicate them to the reader. Yet, if the Saracens are primarily described as "not-Christian," there is a circuitous logic that is employed here: as Uebel puts it, "how can [Saracen] identity be configured as both [an] effective limit and [as a] collapsible boundary?" (268). Or, put another way, how can the figure of the Saracen point toward the ideological limits of Christian society if so little can be said about their own culture and identity? Boundaries ought to be defined as clearly as possible, but the one that exists between these two societies seems to be murky at best.

Uebel's question primarily pertains to the treatment of the Saracens as a paradoxical foil for Christianity, but in some ways his question

speaks toward the uneven treatment of medieval monstrosity as a whole in recent decades. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills note in their introduction to *The Monstrous Middle Ages* that definitions of the Saracen¹ err in their misdirected desire to treat these figures as abjectly monstrous beings that society rejects unanimously and unequivocally. Their thoughts, which are worth quoting at length, reframe the medieval monster as a complicated and nuanced figure that defies simplistic titles such as “Other”:

As such, to deploy the word ‘monstrous’ simply in its normative, pathologizing sense would be to limit its sphere of application: monstrosity is a valuable category to think with because it implies a range of possible meanings that cannot be predicted in advance of a monster’s possible quotidian uses. Monsters, like periods of history, can become subject to linguistic and cultural resignification; as a process, this might be effected by using the term ‘monster’ against those who would deploy it in the service of dominant hegemonic aims, but it might equally be achieved by conceiving monsters *as* identities, identities that are lived and performed and desired. This is not to make a case for ‘monster power’ or ‘monster rights’, but to suggest that monsters

¹ Literally ‘heathen,’ but the same logic applies. Other marginal figures are discussed in relation to this monstrosity as well.

embody cultural tensions that go beyond the idea of monster as uninhabitable, unintelligible "Other." (Bildhauer 22)

With respect to the Saracens in *The King of Tars*, this definition of cultural monstrosity highlights their narrative function in the text. It is not adequate to describe them as "not-Christian" in a totalizing and narrow sense, as if to say that Saracen culture can only exist as a parasite that leeches off of Christian values. On the contrary, the Saracen culture in *The King of Tars* depicts a form of Christianity that is somewhat amiss - a culture that is fully formed and autonomous in structure, but nevertheless flawed in its failure to adhere to Christian doctrine. In this respect, the Saracens represent a sort of Christian ethos that has gone awry, symbolizing the unfortunate fate that will befall any society that praises a non-Christian religion. Fundamentally, the Saracens represent the dangers of misdirected faith: they have damned themselves through the objects that they worship, as opposed to their failure to be pious. At a basic level, this is a clear warning sign to Christians to always remember where their ecclesiastical allegiance lies.

In *The King of Tars*, this theme of Christianity gone awry is primarily reflected in the text's treatment of external and internal modes of faith, which are embodied in the values of the Saracen and Christian religions, respectively. These two divergent perspectives on faith come to a head when the Christian princess of the story is forced to convert to the Saracen religion by her new husband, the Sultan. In a scene that plays out in a richly ornamented temple (a fitting home for a religion that is perceived to favour external faith), the Princess affirms her belief in the Saracen gods through purely physical actions:

He [the Sultan] bad hir gon and kis swithe
 'Alle thine godes on rawe.'
 Sche kist Mahoun and Apolin,
 Astirot, and Sir Jovin,
 For drede of wordes awe.
 And while sche was in the temple ther
 Of Tervagant and Jubiter
 Sche lerd the hethen lawe.
 And thei sche al the lawes couthe,
 And seyde hem openliche with hir mouthe,
 Jesu foryat sche nought.
 Wher that sche was, bi northe or southe,
 No minstral with harp no crouthe
 No might change hir thought.
 The soudan wende night and day
 That sche hadde leved upon his lay,
 Bot al he was bicought.
 For when sche was bi hirselve on

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To Jesu sche made hir mon,
That alle this world hath wrought. (497-516)

By keeping Christ in her heart throughout her conversion to the Saracen religion, the Princess demonstrates that she must internalize her faith in order to truly believe in it; she cannot embrace her faith through physical actions alone. As if to underscore this point, the Princess swears oaths to the Saracen gods using nearly all of her senses: she hears the Sultan's words, speaks the Saracen prayers, gazes upon the Saracen temple, and agrees to consummate her marriage as a fulfillment of her newfound belief. Yet, in spite of her physical vows, her faith in Christ prevails because of her ability to go through the motions of conversion without believing in their efficacy. Therefore, the dominant theme behind the Princess's unflinching devotion seems to be that the Saracens can succeed in their piety, but nevertheless fail to turn their faith inward and save their own souls. This idea is reinforced by the poet's insistence on emphasizing the piety of the Saracens while he/she also carefully describes the grandeur of their culture; such an endeavour draws attention to the overwhelming strength of the

Saracen's (misdirected) faith, but only insofar as it relates to the righteousness of Christianity. As later events in the narrative will demonstrate, the poet is working toward a conception of the "virtuous Saracen" that is worthy of conversion to Christian teachings. However, as already mentioned, this ability of the Saracens to be converted speaks to their societal autonomy and lasting piety; it does not suggest, as some critics have claimed, that the Saracens exist only to serve as receptacles for the Christian faith.

As one might expect, critical discourse has not reached a consensus concerning the authorial motives that may have inspired the creation of the virtuous Saracen in Middle English romance. Debra Strickland, for her part, claims that the Saracens were sometimes glorified in order to serve as noble opponents for Christians:

The literary and imaginative current [of the virtuous Saracen] was developed in the *chanson de geste*, which were just as likely to describe the Saracen opponents as admirable foes embodying many noble and chivalric qualities as they were to characterize them as demonic and depraved. As already noted, the idea here seems to be that Christian victory would be all

the more glorious if the vanquished were both dangerous and worthy. (188)

Undoubtedly, the worthy failures of the Saracens are meant to redound to the greatness of Christian virtue, but Strickland's remarks seem to reinforce the Saracen-as-religious-vessel viewpoint stated above. In other words, she is claiming that the Saracens should pose a threat – put on a good show, perhaps – but that they should inevitably fail in the face of their Christian superiors. In *The King of Tars*, this perspective does not seem to hold weight; the Saracen armies exceed their Christian counterparts both in terms of strength and number, and their kingdom appears to be richer as well. Saracen piety is no less fervent than that of the Christians, and their temples are impressively ornate whilst comparable Christian buildings are notably absent. Furthermore, the Princess relies upon prayers to Christ to save her from the black hounds in her dream, suggesting that her weakness (and the weakness of her people) is protected by God's benevolence. By contrast, the Saracen religion is proven false², and yet the Saracens

² It is considered false due to the idols' inability to transform the lump of black flesh into a healthy babe.

have succeeded in their military conquests in spite of lacking divine aid. Collectively, this evidence demonstrates that the Saracens in *The King of Tars* are actually a greater society on the whole; however, their efforts to reign over the Christians are in vain because this poem is, ultimately, a Christian romance. Therefore, the Saracens do not represent an inferior culture, but rather the absolute limit of the virtue a pagan society can attain: they are rich, strong, and supreme in most respects, but are ultimately unable to overcome the will of God when the situation demands it. Such a reading of the Saracens is incompatible with idea that they are leeches of Christian virtue. On the contrary, they appear in *The King of Tars* as an autonomous and thriving culture where matters of faith are not concerned, and as such, their fate represents the best possible future of any non-Christian society.

Regarding the supposed superiority of the Christians, critics have argued that the blackness of the Saracens represents their racial or even bestial impurity. Cawsey notes in her article that these racial debates have dominated discussions of the Saracens for quite some time, and she further indicates that *The King of Tars* is unique in its portrayal of the racial

conversion of the Sultan (389-90). In spite of the obvious racial connotation of this transformation, however, both Cawsey and Strickland claim that the Sultan sheds his blackness as a sign of gaining virtue – a symbol of his spiritual, rather than racial, purification (Strickland 169). Similarly, Uebel notes that “the body was the principal paradigm through which the sacral community was imaged” in romances, which in turn suggests that it is not unusual for the Sultan’s blackness to represent his spiritual corruption (278). Perhaps this is the most compelling evidence for the monstrosity of the Saracens, since “in moral terms [. . .] monsters signify the condition into which an individual might degenerate, the result of the interior becoming as horrible as what was imagined to be exterior” (Uebel 281). The blackness of the Saracens, the formless mass of the Princess’s baby, and the diametrically opposed whiteness of the Princess all contribute to this idea that medieval monstrosity is inner turmoil turned outward.

Returning to the falsity of the Princess’s vows mentioned above, the formlessness of her child can be read in relation to her failure to take up the Saracen faith. When the baby is

born, it seems to be missing many of the bodily features that its mother used to (erroneously) affirm her belief in the Saracen religion:

And when the child was ybore
Wel sori wimen were therfore,
For lim no hadde it non.
Bot as a rond of flesche yschore
In chaumber it lay hem bifore
Withouten blod and bon.
For sorwe the levedi wald dye
For it hadde noither nose no eye,
Bot lay ded as the ston. (577-585)

The princess used her eyes to take in the splendour of the temple, her limbs to touch the Saracen idols, and her mouth to say the Saracen prayers, all of which fail to form on the baby's body. The Sultan seems to be aware of the relation between her lies and the baby's mutilation (589-600), but the Princess treats his accusations with incredulity. However, in spite of her denial, the Sultan seems to have a point; the baby's monstrosity appears to be a manifest symbol of the Princess' corrupt faith. Just as the Sultan's blackness symbolizes his sinful idolatry, the baby's disfigurement is a symptom of its mother's unbelief.

To remedy the situation, each parent prays to his or her God(s) in an attempt transform the

baby's body into something human. The Sultan's prayers and rituals are physically strenuous, bespeaking the externality of his faith:

The soudan toke that flesche anon;
Into his temple he gan to gon
Ther his godes were dight.
Biforn his goddes he gan it leyn,
And held up his honden tvein
While men might go five mile.
'A mightful Mahoun,' he gan to seyn,
'And Tervagaunt of michel meyn,
In you was never no gile.
Seyn Jubiter and Apolin,
Astirot and Seyn Jovin,
Help, now, in this perile.'
Oft he kneled and oft he ros,
And crid so long til he was hos;
And al he tint his while. (622-636)

Notice how the Sultan speaks his prayers aloud and how he prays to the idols in his temple. His constant kneeling and rising show that he is distraught, but also that he hopes his actions will move his gods to do *something* for his baby. By contrast, the Princess turns inward in her prayers for her child and she confesses that the baptism will only be successful if "God graunt it yif it be his wille" (744). She makes no comparable attempt to weep for the welfare of her baby, and she does not seem to believe that her actions will change God's mind to save her child. Thus, the baby's

disfigurement serves as the litmus test for the one “true” religion; the Saracens have been dominant in the tale up until this point, but – as the author seems to muse – will the Saracen’s faith take them any further? Confronted with a horrific monstrosity for which there is no known scientific cure, the text seems to question to what extent paganism and acts of external faith will aid the Sultan and his people in their plight.

Thus, the *King of Tars* poet seems to suggest that the cultures of the Saracens and Christians are mutually comparable, except in matters of faith and religious virtue. The Saracens have a measured response for most Christian problems: their military is strong enough to repel invaders, their economic prosperity protects them against hardship, and their social well-being is never really in question. But when it comes to matters of faith that only God can remedy, their society fails to find the solutions that are provided to the Christian people. At the same time, though, this failure highlights the status of the Saracens as proto-Christians and helps to point out the supremacy of Christian virtue by stressing the *similarities* of the two cultures, not their differences. As such, it is not fair to simply say that the Saracens are “not-Christian” in all respects – the societal traits they share with the

Christians actually help to flesh out and nuance both cultures. As Cawsey has noted when speaking about Gower and Chaucer, there is a vested interest on behalf of the poet to stress the purely religious sins of the Saracens in order to distance English religion from its Middle-Eastern roots. What better way is there to stress this religious difference than to make it the *only* grounds of distinguishing the two cultures? As an early to mid fourteenth-century poet, the author of *The King of Tars* seems to participate in the same general trend that Cawsey has described.

The criticism of Uebel, Cawsey, Strickland, and others can be read in relation to the narrative of *The King of Tars* in order reach new and interesting conclusions about Saracen identity. It appears that the Saracens of the tale share more similarities than differences with their Christian counterparts, and this has important implications for the treatment of Saracen identity in fourteenth-century England. The major distinction that this text brings to light is the fact that the Saracens highlight the benefits of the Christian faith without subverting *all* aspects of Christian culture. Such a treatment of the Saracens runs contrary to their common glossing as a Christian foil in the English romance tradition.

REINTERPRETING SARACEN ALTERITY

Saracen identity is framed as a sickness – a physical manifestation of a divine disease – but at the same time, this disease is treatable, which the Sultan’s baptism demonstrates. Furthermore, the cured patient becomes indistinguishable from a true Christian, and this in turn implies that the differences between Saracen culture and Christian culture are not so severe after all. As such, the Saracens should not be treated as the inverse of Christian society (anti-Christian) but should rather be glossed as a proto-Christian community that has not yet been cured of their infidelity.

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