

Christian Anxiety and “Saracen” Resistance in Domestic Spaces: The Unfulfilled Imperialist  
Narrative in *Bevis of Hampton*, *Emaré*, and *Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale*

Tania Nguyen

Department of English, McGill University, Montreal

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## Abstract

The “Saracen” is an archetypal figure recurrent in medieval romance who often functions as a vehicle for political ends. Christian authors commonly depicted Saracens either as willing converts to Christianity, emulative doubles, or morally degenerate monsters. The medieval romances *Bevis of Hampton*, *Emaré* (both anonymously written), and Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, all employ similar rhetorical strategies in their depictions of the Saracen figure. While many of these attempts sought to confine the Saracen to a Christian cosmos, the Saracen escapes this containment and instead becomes a reflection of racial anxieties in Christian culture. These anxieties, manifested in Saracen differences from Christians in the domestic realm, mark as myth the textual narrative of Christian superiority over Islam.

## Résumé

Le « Sarrasin » est un personnage archétypal récurrent dans le roman médiéval qui sert souvent de véhicule pour des buts politiques. Les auteurs chrétiens représentaient généralement les Sarrasins comme des convertis volontaires au christianisme, des doubles imitatifs ou des monstres moralement dégénérés. Les romans médiévaux *Bevis of Hampton* et *Emaré* (tous deux écrits de manière anonyme), ainsi que *Man of Law's Tale* de Chaucer utilisent tous des stratégies rhétoriques similaires dans leurs représentations de la figure sarrasine. Alors que plusieurs de ces tentatives cherchaient à circonscrire les Sarrasins dans un cosmos chrétien, ceux-ci s'échappent de ce confinement et deviennent plutôt un reflet des anxiétés raciales enracinées dans la culture chrétienne. Ces anxiétés, qui se manifestent dans les différences qui distinguent les Sarrasins des chrétiens dans le domaine domestique, dénotent comme mythe le récit textuel de la supériorité chrétienne sur l'islam.

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I must first thank my family, especially my beloved mother, for their love and support. My mother instilled in me the values of education and happiness of heart from a young age, and I continually strive to implement her immutable conviction in my own life.

I owe many thanks to the medievalist who guided my work at McGill University, Professor Michael van Dussen. He has been limitlessly patient and extraordinarily insightful, and I truly could not have asked for a better supervisor. Without him, my thesis may very well exist only as a series of half-realized ideas; he has aided in not only bringing the contention of my work to its realization, but also in improving me as a student, writer, and scholar. I will always admire his conscientiousness, and wealth of knowledge of the Middle Ages.

I credit Professor Margaret Pappano of Queen's University for sowing the first seeds of this project. It was one of her classes that introduced me to medieval literature, and in this same class I was introduced to the figure of the "Saracen," the pursuit of whom filled me with curiosity. I am additionally thankful to Professor Ruth Wehlau, also of Queen's University, for her inspirational passion for medieval studies and support.

While I am indebted to all the people in my life who have been with me throughout this journey (and, in the case of some, much longer), I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few treasures for their friendship and contributions. I thank my three fellow medievalists, Elisabeth Melattukunnel, Jasmeen Boparai, and Emma Towle, with whom it has been a delight to explore medieval literature; Arafa Anis, for her resilient idealism and firsthand knowledge of the Qur'an (which has informed my navigation of the "Saracen"); and Christopher Rice, whose humour and fresh perspective continually rejuvenated my work.

I end these acknowledgements with a short line to my past undergraduate self, who, in her third year—upon encountering Middle English in the untranslated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the first time—exclaimed, "I can't possibly read this!": you'll learn.

### **Introduction: Medieval Race and the “Saracen”**

The notion of medieval race is a contentious one. Some medievalists believe that using contemporary ideas of race to understand the Middle Ages is anachronistic and therefore inappropriate. Others argue that it is possible, even productive, to view the Middle Ages—which some view as a “pre-racial” society—through the lens of race. Lynn Ramey is of the view that the medieval conception of something akin to race predated the invention of scientific race in the 19<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>1</sup> “scientific racism was [simply] the inevitable outcome of the centuries of thought that preceded it.”<sup>2</sup> According to Ramey, the word “race” refers to “a group that shares some socially selected *physical* traits,” while “racism [...] places a valuation on these physical traits and ranks humans according to them, allowing for those with supposedly greater capacities to wield power over those with innately lower capacities.”<sup>3</sup> She cites *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1357), a popular travel narrative, to illustrate these concepts in a medieval context: “When John Mandeville describes the pygmies as being short, he is making a racial comment. Were he to imply somehow that being taller made another group of people superior to the pygmies, that would be a racist remark.”<sup>4</sup> Ramey judiciously argues that medievalists who exclude race from the conversation fail to understand how “meaning is also produced outside of etymology”: “it is not necessary to have the word race to have the concept of race.”<sup>5</sup> To disregard the fact that medieval peoples were capable of perceiving racial difference is to paint the period as “either a golden age of cohabitation or a time of hopeless infancy, where peoples may have held notions of prejudice but were unable to articulate them.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

However, Ramey's definition of race is insufficient insofar as it reduces race to its physiological aspects. Geraldine Heng aptly complicates Ramey's definition of race and racism by forwarding the view that in the Middle Ages, race did not solely pertain to physical traits. It was also often connected with religion.<sup>7</sup> It is not the purpose of this project to detail the history of race exhaustively, but it is useful to consider race in terms of religion as well as skin colour when it comes to Christian depictions of Muslims in fictional texts. Heng writes that "nature/biology and the sociocultural should not [...] be seen as bifurcated spheres in medieval race-formation" because there was much overlap between the two. For instance, religion "could function both socioculturally and biopolitically" insofar as it subjects "peoples of a detested faith [...] to a political theology that could biologize, define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different."<sup>8</sup> Heng redefines race as "a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences," and concludes that medieval peoples participated in "race-making"—a system in which "strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment."<sup>9</sup>

Treatments of Muslims in medieval Europe echo Heng's demarcation of race. A major "detested faith" for Christians was Islam, and Muslims seriously problematized the Christian worldview of Christian supremacy. The rise of Islam was rapid: by the later Middle Ages—well after the main crusading period (1096-1291)—Muslims controlled Jerusalem and much of the Holy Land, and they had made worrying inroads into parts of Europe such as the Iberian Peninsula. Many medieval authors worried over whether or not God favoured Islam—and if He

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<sup>7</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

did not, they needed to understand why He was allowing “the Muslims to conquer (and maintain) huge territories and to reduce their Christian inhabitants to the status of *dhimmi*.”<sup>10</sup> Some Christian writers, struggling to understand this Muslim threat in the context of their Christian worldview, turned to telling stories wherein Christianity prevailed over Islam. This may be part of a broader concern over Christian historiography; Christians needed to convince themselves and their audiences that even in the face of a powerful rival, the Christian faith was universal.<sup>11</sup>

In many of these stories, Muslims are coined “Saracens.” The word “Saracen” is a curious signifier in medieval literature. In texts of the early Middle Ages, it refers generally to various pagans and non-Christians. However, in the late Middle Ages (1300-1500), “Saracen” almost exclusively meant “Muslim” (a term that was not then in use). This shift in meaning owes itself to the growing threat Islam was perceived to pose to Christianity. The word “Saracen” is believed to have originated with St. Jerome (347-420 CE). According to Jerome, Saracens were “Ishmael’s descendants” and lived in the “desert of Paran.”<sup>12</sup> He claimed that Muslims fashioned themselves as “Saracens” in order to claim ancestry from Sara, Abraham’s legitimate wife, rather than from his “Egyptian maid Hagar” because they did not want to identify with slave heritage. St. Jerome also saw Sara as symbolic of the Church and a rightful inheritance, while Hagar was unworthy of any inheritance.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, Muslims (Saracens), as depicted by Christian authors, did not usually reflect real Muslims outside of fiction. In acknowledgement of the differences between the terms “Muslim” and “Saracen,” the present study uses “Muslim” to refer to historical Muslims, and “Saracen” to refer to the fictitious Muslims inside medieval texts.

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<sup>10</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 40.

*Dhimmis* are non-Muslims living in Muslim lands under the protection of Islamic law.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Tomaž Mastnak. *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press), 105.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the texts that feature Saracens are romances. Heng remarks that “fantasy is unusually conducive to conceptualizations of race and race discourse [...and r]ace itself, after all, is a fantasy with fully material effects and consequences.”<sup>14</sup> Medieval romance was far from frivolous, even if it abounded in stereotypically frivolous fairy-tale figures like knights, giants, and monsters. Romance was, in fact, one of the common genres that medieval writers used to explore difference and “complicated identities” such as race, class, and sex, as “romance’s preferred method is to arrange for an apparatus of the intimately familiar and pleasurable—figures of gender, sexuality, and varieties of adventure—to transact its negotiations with history, addressing what surfaces with difficulty, and exists under anxious pressure, through a loop of the familiar and the enjoyable.”<sup>15</sup>

Fourteenth-century romance in particular treats the Saracen with a unique mixture of condescension and anxiety. If the twelfth century was “indisputably [...] a century of crusade”<sup>16</sup> and the thirteenth was a period in which crusading efforts continued (albeit on a slightly smaller scale), the fourteenth century was, as Hans Eberhard writes, “an age when plans for reviving the crusades were discussed with enormous enthusiasm and in great detail; but all these plans were [...] unrealistic.”<sup>17</sup> Though the age of the crusades was over, the anxiety about Muslims lingered on. Christians feared that Islamic armies, having already taken control of the Christian Holy Land, would sweep into Europe. In an attempt to rewrite the reality of Christian weakness and Islamic strength, fourteenth-century romance portrayed Christians as far more powerful than Muslims. But authors could not escape the anxieties of their time, and their texts end up—

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<sup>14</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Eberhard Mayer, *The Crusades*, trans. John Gillingham (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 276.

perhaps inadvertently—creating a space for Saracen resistance to Christian control to manifest. Fictional Saracens continuously slip through their creators' fingers to challenge the textual framework of desired Christian supremacy.

The primary site of Christian anxiety and Saracen resistance in fourteenth-century romance is the domestic sphere, where notions of racial difference run rampant. I thus contend that through Saracen characterization in domestic spaces, the Saracen archetype transforms into the individualized Saracen that cannot be contained by Christianity. Saracen entities in the anonymous *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1324), *Emaré* (c. 1400, but originally written earlier), and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (1387), continually refute Christian attempts to assimilate them. These three texts vary in their treatment of the Saracen: *Bevis of Hampton* depicts the “exceptional” Saracen as a potential convert to Christianity; *Emaré* conceals and silences the Saracen in narratives of Christian conquest; the *Man of Law's Tale* paints the Saracen as either monstrous or an undesirable partner for the Christian princess. Yet all three texts have one point of convergence, namely the shared commitment to imperialist narratives of Christian superiority and Saracen inferiority. But these narratives are not left unchallenged; what emerges is not an absolute picture of Christian supremacy, but a picture of Christian anxiety over the Saracen and over Christian claims to universalism.

The first chapter introduces postcolonial concepts including imperialism and empire to navigate the power struggle between Christian and Saracen. It also illustrates how difficult it was to clearly delineate the boundary between Saracen and Christian. Though these Christian writers sought to prevail over the Saracen by controlling the Saracen narrative, elements of their stories suggest that Saracens and Christians shared more significant similarities than differences (similarities which amplified Christian anxiety about Saracens) and that a stable definition of

“Saracen” was elusive. These texts all attempt to mitigate the Saracen threat by using Saracen characters to reify imperialist narratives. Ultimately, they fail in this aim, instead opening up a space wherein Christian anxiety over the Saracen is exposed. As I have said, this anxiety is seen most strikingly and persistently in domestic contexts—a central object of analysis in this study.

The second chapter identifies the domestic sphere as a political one. Aspects of domesticity like love and motherhood are explicitly political and are made to subscribe to Christian crusading agendas. For Christian authors writing about Saracens, the goal of domesticity cannot be an end in itself; it must have the additional agenda of Saracen containment. But the Saracen cannot be fully contained: in domestic realms, Saracen women reveal themselves to be inherently different from Christian women, particularly in their exclusion from motherhood. Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* does not nurture her children at all; the emir’s daughter in *Emaré* is not given the chance to have children; the Sultanness monstrously kills her own son. These women are barred from participating in the Christian feminine ideal (as is discussed in Chapter 2) and as a result, complete assimilation becomes impossible.

The third and final chapter contends that the desire to contain the Saracen goes unfulfilled. Christianity never fully absorbs the Saracen world. The complexities of Saracen domesticity prevent these stories from fully forwarding a narrative of Christian control and supremacy and instead, the stories become sites of unrest wherein neither Christianity nor Islam emerges as dominant. The Saracen is neither fully eliminated nor converted, lurking continually at the center of the Christian world, and these texts (perhaps despite their own efforts) reveal as impossible the narratorial dream of Christian ascendancy and Saracen subjugation.

## Chapter 1: Imperialist Narratives and Permeable Boundaries

### **i - Applying Postcolonial Theory to the Middle Ages**

Though the terms “imperialism” and “empire” were not then used as we now use them in modern postcolonial discourse, imperialist practices (as delineated by postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said) certainly existed in the Middle Ages. Imperialism is consequently a useful lens through which we can better examine the power struggle between Christian and Saracen, and the emergent narratives of anxiety and resistance implicated in this struggle. Chapters 2 and 3, which focus on precisely these troubling narratives, will revisit in greater detail this introductory material on the application of postcolonial theory to the Middle Ages.

According to Said, “imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.”<sup>18</sup> For Michael Doyle, imperialism is the “process of establishing and maintaining an empire.”<sup>19</sup> Doyle aptly defines empire as “[a] relationship [...] of political control over a people [...] usually originat[ing] with a state.”<sup>20</sup> However, “the processes of imperialism” also exist beyond “the level of economic laws and political decisions.” They continually occur on the level of “national culture [...] within education, literature, and the visual and musical arts.”<sup>21</sup> The reification of imperialism thus partly depends on the development of narratives—and the medieval period abounded in such narratives.<sup>22</sup>

Imperialist narratives owed their popularity and ubiquity especially to the Crusades in the Holy Land, a series of holy wars fought between Christians and Muslims from 1096 to 1291.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Importantly, there are some unique considerations to bear in mind when using postcolonial language, some which will be elucidated in the next paragraph.

<sup>23</sup> This was considered to be the “main” crusading period, though the Crusades lasted from 1095 to 1492.

Frances Gies explains that because “the national state did not exist [and] patriotism had not yet been invented, [...] the only large, transcendent cause for which Europeans could fight was the Christian religion.”<sup>24</sup> The incentive to fight was made clear by Pope Urban II’s call to arms at the Council of Clermont (1095):

Let none of your possessions detain you, no solicitude for your family affairs, since this land which you inhabit, shut in on all sides by the seas and surrounded by mountain peaks, is too narrow for your large population; nor does it abound in wealth; and it furnishes scarcely food enough for its cultivators. Hence it is that you murder one another, that you wage war, and that frequently you perish by mutual wounds. Let therefore hatred depart from among you, let your quarrels end, let wars cease, and let all dissensions and controversies slumber. Enter upon the road to the holy sepulchre; wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves. That land which as the scripture says ‘floweth with milk and honey’ was given by God into the possession of the children of Israel. Jerusalem is the navel of the world; the land is fruitful above others, like another paradise of delights.<sup>25</sup>

Crusaders’ chief objective was to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims, a city long considered to be at the center of the world for medieval Christians. Jerusalem was also where Jesus ministered as well as where his death and resurrection took place; consequently, medieval people—especially pilgrims—“were easily convinced that it was intolerable for [Jerusalem and the Holy Places] to be in the hands of the infidels.”<sup>26</sup> Urban II’s predecessor, Pope Gregory VII (1015-1085), “gave the idea of holy war the impetus that made possible the Crusades [by promoting] a revolutionary theory of the relationship of the laity to the Church that proved to be of foremost importance to the knightly class [...]. In case of conflict, a knight’s loyalty to the Church superseded his loyalty to his lord and even canceled his oath.”<sup>27</sup> Prior to the Crusades, knights fought for money; war was both their “profession and sport,” and these fights typically

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<sup>24</sup> Frances Gies, *The Knight in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 31-2.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Urban II, “Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont, November 27, 1095,” in *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Gies, *The Knight in History*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.

had a more local and minor political significance. More often than not, petty wars were fought over “a right that had been violated or a piece of land that had been usurped, or in order to violate or to usurp a piece of land.”<sup>28</sup> Gregory VII redirected knights to the Church, mobilizing them to fight through a “powerful inducement: service as a ‘soldier of Christ’ would be paid by total remission of sins.”<sup>29</sup> With such a powerful and unified army at hand, Christians successfully conquered Jerusalem in 1099 and massacred the Muslims in the city.<sup>30</sup>

Urban II’s rallying speech exemplifies a religious line of imperialist thought: Christians had the *right* to these Holy Lands, which they saw as having been conquered and occupied in ways that might rightly be deemed imperialist—and Christians had a God-given responsibility to reclaim this religious territory. In spite of early crusading successes, Muslim powers eventually regained Jerusalem and much of the Holy Land. Additionally, they had made worrying inroads into parts of Europe such as the Iberian Peninsula. Aziz Atiya writes that “if the fourteenth century was the golden age of the later medieval crusade, the fifteenth was that of Muslim supremacy.”<sup>31</sup> While the fourteenth century may have been a “golden age” for crusading ideals, it was far from one when it came to actual battles against Muslims. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire lacked the resources to conduct a full-scale Holy War. The Hundred Years’ War took a substantial toll on England and France, countries which had previously given many fighters to the crusading cause.<sup>32</sup> Boggled down with “home troubles and home aggrandisement, ‘international’ co-operative movements based on wider motives, such as the crusades, grew more and more remote from realities.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Runciman, *The First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 188.

<sup>31</sup> Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1938), 480-1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

Interestingly, most narratives of the period did not reflect the realities of Christian defeat. Instead, they painted pictures of Christian supremacy and Muslim subjugation. Geraldine Heng observes that in romance, “the spoor of history and the track of fantasy creation become one.”<sup>34</sup> An ideal more than a reality, Christians needed to fit Muslims into a Christian cosmos whereby, with God’s help, they would emerge victorious. Heng notes that Christians believed they were “destined to win back the Holy Land [...] by becoming better Christians.”<sup>35</sup> God could simply not allow them to be conquered by the “infidel” Muslims. Nearly all medieval romances tell this same story. According to Said, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.”<sup>36</sup> I contend in this chapter that the medieval romances *Bevis of Hampton*, *Emaré*, and Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* all perform the ideological work of imperialism in that they each advance a narrative of Christian supremacy over Saracens and Saracen lands. Yet what this work unveils is not Christian supremacy, but the permeable boundaries between Christian and Saracen—boundaries which showcase the limitations of imperialist processes in narrative. In the same space that the Saracen imitates the Christian, the Christian imitates the Saracen and points to a culture of hybridization rather than hegemony. The imperialist aims of each text, demonstrated below, are therefore unsuccessful.

The imperialist narrative in each romance is unique. In *Bevis of Hampton*, the Christian protagonist Bevis underscores his superior strength by massacring entire Saracen armies alone. The implication is that a singular Christian knight aided by God has more power than a Saracen multitude. Bevis is constructed in the image of the ideal crusading knight: he fights for

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>35</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 70.

<sup>36</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii.

Christendom and is habitually victorious against his Saracen enemies, who are depicted as deceitful and weak. The Saracen princess Josian converts out of her love for Bevis, and the story ends with Bevis and his sons fully conquering Saracen lands. Bevis thereby appears to have eliminated the Saracen threat, though Josian's conversion is not exactly representative of reality. There is little historical evidence to suggest that Muslim women willingly converted and married Christian husbands. Simon Barton notes that "cross-border marriages between Muslim women and Christian men occurred only in exceptional circumstances."<sup>37</sup> In *Emaré*, the King of Sicily has conquered the Sultan and his people before the text even begins. From the battle, the king acquires a rich Eastern cloth made of costly and exotic jewels such as "ryche golde", "asowr", "topase", "rubyes", and "othur stones of myche pryse."<sup>38</sup> This item symbolizes both the king's triumph over the Saracen and his successful appropriation of the East's wealth. In the *Man of Law's Tale* (1387), Saracens are either monstrous—as in the case of the Sultanness, who kills her own son and exiles her Christian daughter-in-law, Custance—or unfit marital partners for Christians. At the end of the text, Christians invade Syria: "They 'brennen, sleen, and brynge hem [Syrians] to meschance."<sup>39</sup> This hagiographic romance depicts Christians as successful conquerors of Syria. The reality, on the contrary, was that with the Crusaders' loss of Akka (or Acre) in 1291, Syria was "complete[ly] consolidat[ed ...] under Muslim rule."<sup>40</sup> Though these imperialist narratives differ from one another, they all share a common goal: to depict Christians as superior to Saracens and reify crusading ideals by painting the Christian as the perpetual victor, whether or not that narrative was true outside of the text. Yet this neat narrative was often

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 32.

<sup>38</sup> "Emaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS, 1995), ll. 113, 139-140.

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 1987), ll. 963-5.

<sup>40</sup> Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages*, 10-11.



complicated by the difficulty Christian authors experienced in defining and containing the elusive Muslim figure.

The treatment of the Muslim subject in the fourteenth century varied. Significantly, the Muslim was different from the Jew. This difference owed itself to the fact that “the threat signaled by Jewish difference, unlike Islamic difference, is the threat of the intimate alien, active and embedded in multiple communities and countries in the heartlands of the Christian domus.”<sup>41</sup> Muslims, “with the limited exception of contact zones in the Mediterranean such as Spain, southern Italy, Sicily, and scattered islands,” were not living in such close contact to Christians and were thus a more distant and less imminent threat.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Christians considered Muslims to be better candidates for conversion than Jews, in part because of the key resemblances between the two religions. Jews did not recognize Christ as the Messiah and were consequently seen as blind and obstinate, and poor candidates for conversion (though this was by no means universal). Some thinkers such as Peter the Venerable (1092-1156) even held Islam to be a “summation of Christian heresies” rather than an entirely separate pagan religion.<sup>43</sup> These thinkers understood that while Muslims believed in neither the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit nor the “incarnation [...] redemption, and [...] resurrection of Christ,” they believed in the “virgin birth and the ascension” and “reverently regarded [Christ ...] as one of the [...] sinless [...] prophets of God.”<sup>44</sup> But defining the Muslim figure was a complicated endeavour for medieval peoples. Some perceived Muslims as heretics while others viewed them as pagans who worshipped idols like “Mahoun” and “Apolyn”;<sup>45</sup> some believed that Muslims

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 60-1.

<sup>43</sup> James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 141.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>45</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1999), l. 535, 538.

could fully convert to Christianity as they sometimes shared a chivalric and courtly code with Christians; others believed that the Muslim could never be fully Christian. This inherent slippage in defining the Muslim sets the stage for the permeable boundaries between Christian and Saracen in medieval romance.

Although this thesis identifies domesticity as the primary site of Christian anxiety and Saracen resistance, there are other sites in these romances that showcase these themes in subtler ways. Medieval Christian authors struggled to illustrate the Saracen because they had to distinguish her from the Christian but not render her beyond conversion. The end result, as is the case with Josian from *Bevis of Hampton*, is a Saracen that resembles a Christian. Curiously in these texts, there also exists the Christian that resembles the Saracen. Although Saracens in these texts seem to want to participate in Christian culture, Christians inadvertently participate in Saracen culture. By placing Saracens and Christians in close proximity, the two groups enter a space wherein they are able to influence each other and mutually weaken the boundary that is otherwise drawn between the two faiths. The emerging threat is Saracen culture influencing and perhaps even dominating Christian identity.

## **ii - The Question of Bevis's Englishness in *Bevis of Hampton***

Bevis, living in close proximity to Saracens, has to continually assert his Christian identity in order to prove that he is not "Saracenized." He is a mirror of the fears medieval Christians harboured about Christian crusaders in the East and their potential participation in a hybridized culture. These crusaders were at risk of losing their Christian identity in the face of Saracen culture. As Sarah Lambert argues, "Operating on the borders of Christendom, it was vitally important for [Christian crusaders in the East] to recognize and stick to the rules, to

identify fully with ‘us’ and to know and recognize ‘them.’”<sup>46</sup> For the most part, Bevis is raised on Saracen lands with Saracen customs, having been sold by his mother to Saracens at the age of seven: “Marchaundes thai fonde ferli fale / And solde that child for mechel aughte / And to the Sarasins him betaughte.”<sup>47</sup> The word “betaughte” signals that not only will Bevis be nurtured by Saracens, but he will also be taught by them and thus isolated from Christian knowledge. Consequently, Bevis has to continually prove himself as a Christian and showcase his inherent difference from those belonging to the Saracen community.

When Bevis arrives in Armenia and is presented to the Saracen king Ermin, the king laments that Bevis is not a Saracen: “‘Mahoun!’ a seide, ‘thee might be proute, / And this child wolde to thee aloute; / Yif a wolde a Sarasin be.’”<sup>48</sup> King Ermin’s words echo the lamentations of Christians when they encounter an exceptional Saracen. In the *Chanson de Roland*, for instance, the Saracen emir Balignant is depicted as a “tall, imposing knight, with fair skin and white flowing hair.”<sup>49</sup> Following this description, the narrator expresses regret that Balignant is not a Christian: “God, what a baron; if only he were made a Christian!”<sup>50</sup> Suzanne Akbari suggests that “the comment makes explicit a longing for assimilation, the integration of the pagan other in the Christian community.”<sup>51</sup> The longing for Balignant to convert to Christianity in the *Chanson de Roland* comes about because he resembles the Christian knight in appearance and behaviour. By contrast, Ermin desires Bevis to convert because he does *not* resemble the Saracen. The king remarks that he has never seen anyone like Bevis: “A fairer child never I ne

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<sup>46</sup> Sarah Lambert, “Heroines and Saracens,” *Medieval World* 1 (1991): 3.

<sup>47</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 506-8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 531-4.

<sup>49</sup> Qted in Akbari, p. 157.

<sup>50</sup> Qted in Akbari, p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), 157.

sigh / Neither a lingthe ne on brade, / Ne non, so faire limes hade!”<sup>52</sup> Bevis’s difference in appearance compared to the Saracens of Ermin’s court highlights his Christian identity. Because he does not look like a Saracen, he cannot be easily assimilated. That Ermin admires Bevis’s appearance suggests that the Christian identity is attractive to even the Saracen. Ermin offers to make Bevis his heir if Bevis agrees to convert to Islam, but Bevis roundly rejects this offer, exclaiming, “I nolde forsake in none manere / Jesu, that boughte me so dere.”<sup>53</sup> In response to Bevis’s faithfulness to Christianity, “The king him lovede wel the more.”<sup>54</sup> Ermin’s valuation of not only Bevis’s Christian appearance, but also his Christian values, emphasize the text’s narrative of Christian superiority. Bevis thereby cements his identity as a true Christian knight who, despite being far away from Christian lands, will remain faithful to his religion.

However, Bevis’s ability to perfectly impersonate a Saracen reveals that his Christian identity is imperfect. As Amy Burge contends, “Bevis occupies a hybrid position between typical English hero and foreign prince.”<sup>55</sup> Following Ermin’s betrayal, Bevis is jailed underground for “seve yer in peines grete,”<sup>56</sup> after which time he seeks to escape. A Saracen jailer climbs down into Bevis’s cell to attack him, but Bevis quickly overpowers and kills him. Bevis then, “with reuful speche,” affects Saracen speech to trick the second jailer: “For the love of Sein Mahoun, / Be the rop glid blive adoun / And help, that this thef [referring to himself] wer ded!”<sup>57</sup> The second jailer reacts immediately:

Whan he hadde thus ised,  
That other gailer no leng abod,  
Boute by the rop adoun he glod.  
Whan the rop failede in is hond,

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<sup>52</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 536-8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 566-7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 569.

<sup>55</sup> Amy Burge, *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69.

<sup>56</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, l. 1569.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1624-7.

Beves held up that gode bronde  
 And felde to gronde that sori wight,  
 Thourhout is bodi that swerd is pight.<sup>58</sup>

Homi Bhabha contends that “when colonizer and colonized live in the same physical place, a ‘third space’ arises where elements of both cultures become the norm, the culture of hybridity. This third space allows aspects of the cultures of both colonizer and colonized to mutate, collide, and take on new forms [...] the hybridized nature of the third space gives the colonized a certain amount of power to influence the colonizer.”<sup>59</sup> Bevis may be imprisoned, but he is still the Christian hero of the text who performs the imperialist narrative. Although the relationship between Bevis and the Saracens is not that of colonizer and colonized, it is one that involves a textually privileged religion (Christianity) and a textually unprivileged religion (Islam), a dynamic that resembles that of Bhabha’s colonizer and colonized. Bevis’s easy performance of Saracen identity shows how his years of Saracen nurturance have influenced him. He knows exactly how to behave like a Saracen, and the second jailer’s complete lack of suspicion indicates that Bevis’s performance is entirely convincing. Bevis is easily able to assume a Saracen identity despite being a Christian, and this fluidity problematizes his Christian identity and renders the boundary between Christian and Saracen in this text highly permeable. As Robert Allen Rouse contends, “if this act of verbal impersonation is all that is required for a Christian knight to masquerade as a Saracen, then the difference between Bevis and the Saracen Other is narrow [...] indeed.”<sup>60</sup> If Bevis can so easily pass for a Saracen through voice alone, the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., ll. 1628-34.

<sup>59</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 31.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Allen Rouse, “For King and Country? The Tension between National and Regional Identities in *Sir Bevis of Hampton*,” in *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Fellows & Ivana Djordjevi (New York: D.S. Brewer, 2008): 125.

Though this assertion might in turn suggest that Saracen conversion is no insurmountable feat, we will see in chapters 2 and 3 that this is not the case. While Christians can pretend to be Muslims, Muslims cannot pretend to be Christians.

reader can neither trust in his universal Christian identity nor the Christian identity of Crusaders heading to the East to fight on Muslim lands. Consequently, the anxiety over Bevis's proximity to Saracen culture is never fully assuaged and the imperialist narrative of Christian conquest thus cannot be fully realized.

In moments when Bevis feels his Christianity is threatened, he reacts with violence to overcompensate for an imperfect Christian identity. His first act of explicit violence occurs immediately after a scene in which a Saracen undermines his Christianity. A Saracen asks if Bevis knows what day it is, to which he replies in the negative. The Saracen then responds contemptuously:

The Sarasin beheld and lough.  
 'This dai,' a saide, 'I knowe wel inough.  
 This is the ferste dai of Youl,  
 Thee God was boren withouthen doul;  
 For thi men maken ther more blisse  
 Than men do her in hethenesse.<sup>61</sup>

As Christmas is the day that celebrates Christ's birth, Bevis's ignorance here is grave. In these Saracen lands, he has no Christian teacher and must depend on Saracens to learn. Bevis becomes more of a Christian through Saracen knowledge, which compromises his Christian identity. But Bevis soon makes up for his ignorance: he remarks to his Saracen companion that he remembers his father participating in many tournaments on this day of Christmas, boasting that he could fight with them all at once.<sup>62</sup> Disapproving of his boasts, the Saracens agree to slay "the yonge Cristene hounde."<sup>63</sup> Bevis fights all fifty Saracens and manages to massacre them all: "Ne was ther non, that mighte ascape, / So Beues slough hem in a rape."<sup>64</sup> He kills the people who

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., ll. 599-606.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., ll. 617-18.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., l. 621.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., ll. 641-2.

question his Christianity, and his violence against these Saracens redeems him to the Christian reader who, fearing that Bevis is Saracenized, is reassured that Bevis is still inherently different from the Saracens. He is exceptional in strength and virtue, and he can battle dozens of Saracens alone. Bevis's ignorance of Christmas becomes excusable in the face of such violence: even if he did not know about Christmas Day, he was able to massacre Saracens and thereby still honour Christianity by fulfilling a crusading agenda.

The text ends with Bevis's burial in the East, cementing Bevis's flawed Christian identity. Bevis and Josian choose to rule Mombraunt in particular for "twenti yer," and upon their deaths, there is no return of their bodies to Christian land.<sup>65</sup> Rouse argues that "Bevis's death and burial in the exotic East act only to reinforce his own troublesome relation to English identity."<sup>66</sup> Though Bevis engages in crusading missions all throughout the text, the imperfection of his Christianity renders his Englishness questionable and permeable. The imperialist narrative in this romance fails: rather than Christianity emerging victorious over Saracen religion and Saracen supremacy, Islam ends up blurring the boundaries between Christians and Saracens and continuing to be a threat to both Bevis and Christendom.

### **iii – Emaré's Participation in Christian Culture**

Much like the Saracen king Ermin, who admires the Christian's appearance and virtue, the emir's daughter in *Emaré* shows a level of appreciation for Christian culture. She embroiders four love stories onto a cloth she intends to give to her lover, the Sultan's son: one corner features "Ydoyne and Amadas"; the second "Tyrstram and Isowde"; the third "Florys and Dam

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<sup>65</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, l. 4589.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Allen Rouse, "For King and Country? The Tension between National and Regional Identities in *Sir Bevis of Hampton*," 125.

Blawncheflour”; and the fourth both the story of the emir’s daughter and Sultan’s son and the cloth’s creation:

Of Babylone the Sowdan sonne,  
The Amerayles dowghtyr hym by.  
For hys sake the cloth was wrowght;  
She loved hym in hert and thought.<sup>67</sup>

These first three stories were all popular European romances in the Middle Ages. Although Saracens were considered to be the enemies of Christians<sup>68</sup> and their religion sometimes made them “irretrievably other,”<sup>69</sup> the emir’s daughter seems to perceive no essential difference between Christian and Saracen when she embroiders her own love story alongside European love stories. Her choice to feature herself and her beloved amongst Christians and not other Saracens suggests that she sees European romance as somehow superior to Saracen romantic relationships. Envisioning herself as part of this longer European romance tradition, she champions the imperialist narrative of her availability for conversion to Christianity.

What might be called *Emaré’s* imperialist narrative is founded upon the story of conquest. As was mentioned earlier, the previous King of Sicily successfully conquered the Sultan’s son—the emir’s daughter’s lover—along with his people. The current King of Sicily speaks of his father honourably, telling the emperor, “My fadyr was a nobyll man / Of the Sowdan he hyt wan / Wyth maystrye and wyth myghth.”<sup>70</sup> That the King of Sicily characterizes his father as “nobyll” right before he conveys the successful conquest of the Sultan indicates that his father’s nobility is directly tied to his ability to fulfill the Christian imperialist narrative. As

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<sup>67</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 122, 134, 146, and 158-161 respectively.

This cloth will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>68</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 105-110.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>70</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 172-4.



imperialism often goes hand-in-hand with these narratives of dominion, Christian—and Saracen—characters must continually reify the imperialist narrative to privilege Christianity over Islam.

The emir's daughter further incorporates herself into European romance by depicting, on the cloth, her participation in European folklore:

The fayr mayden her byforn  
 Was portrayed an unykorn,  
 With hys horn so hye;  
 Flowres and bryddes on ylke a syde,  
 Wyth stones that wer sowght wyde,  
 Stuffed with ymagerye.<sup>71</sup>

Unicorns are significant symbols in medieval European legends. It was believed that they had powers of purification and only virgins could hope to catch the swift creatures.<sup>72</sup> The maiden depicted is the emir's daughter, whose close proximity to a unicorn aligns her with the primary maiden in the poem, Emaré. The similarities between the two women indicate that the maker of the cloth sees—or, perhaps, wants to see—no great difference between a good Christian woman and a good Saracen woman.

Even in self-inclusion, the emir's daughter is not fully subsumed by the Christian. Her personal love story contains serious markers of difference. It is said to be “stuffed with ymagerye”: the word “stuffed” suggests a form of excess, and as the cloth was made out of her love for the Sultan's son, her love is implied to be the root of this excess. This love threatens to transcend the boundaries of its corner to merge with non-Saracen stories and conflate categories of Christian and Saracen within this matrix of romance. The cloth's excess makes it extraordinary; while unique as a whole, the corner illustrating the love between the emir's

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<sup>71</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 163-168.

<sup>72</sup> Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002): 23.

daughter and Sultan's son distinguishes itself from the other three. The larger narrative ekphrasis highlights how striking and memorable it is in its difference and elaborate details. The emir's daughter wants the story of her relationship with her beloved to be remembered. The fourth corner's excess points to not only this desire to be remembered, but also a desire not to be contained. As Daniel Poirion writes, "writing allows the author to address a future."<sup>73</sup> Embroidery likewise allows the emir's daughter to preserve her love in the present and in the future. Through her embroidery, the emir's daughter thus rejects notions of Christian and Islamic difference, exposes the frailty of the divide between Christianity and Islam, and foregrounds the strength of her love in a tradition alongside popular European romances.

#### **iv - Resolution through Violence in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale***

In *Bevis of Hampton* and *Emaré*, the permeable boundary between Saracen and Christian threatens the narrative of Christian hegemony. Unlike the other texts, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* handles the threat by making it impossible for Christians and Saracens to coexist in a space where they can influence each other. The poem resolves the problem of the permeable boundary through violence, marking the intrusion of Saracens upon Christians as a threat to both peoples. In *The Man of Law's Tale*, the protagonist, Custance, is sent to Syria by her father in order to marry the Sultan and exhort his conversion. To oppose this religious transformation, his mother, the Sultanness, massacres Christians and potential Christian converts, thereby preventing the Sultan's conversion and Custance's subsequent integration into Saracen society. Custance arrives in and departs from Syria on the same day; she does not live there long enough to be influenced by Saracens. Moreover, despite the fact that it is possible for the Saracen to convert, the text

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<sup>73</sup> Daniel Poirion and Gretchen V. Angelo, "Literature as Memory: 'Wo die Zeit wird Raum,'" *Yale French Studies*, no. 95 (1999): 36.

makes it clear that a converted Saracen is not a suitable partner for a Christian princess. Prior to her coming to Syria, the Sultan has already chosen to convert out of his desire for Custance. In response to his private council's debate on Custance, he says with conviction, "Rather than I lese / Custance, I wol be cristned douteles."<sup>74</sup> The imperialist narrative of dominion here is absolute: even the Saracen desires the virtuous Christian. The Sultan's desire and Custance's (and by extension, Christianity's) desirability give rise to the threat of intrusion, painting Saracen intrusion upon Christianity as well as Christianity's imminent triumph over Islam as inevitable.

At this point of the text, the Sultan has not even met Custance, only hearing about her virtues from Saracen merchants. That these second-hand accounts of Custance are enough to make the Sultan want to convert for her underscores the supremacy of Christians and, in turn, Christianity: the desire for Christian virtue overpowers the Sultan's ties to his religion and culture. But neither the text nor Custance view the marriage as desirable. On the day Custance must leave for Syria, the narrator laments "I seye the woful day fatal is come."<sup>75</sup> Custance shares in this same lamentation, crying, "Allas, unto the barbre nacioun / I moste goon, syn that is youre wille! / [...] I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille."<sup>76</sup> The Sultan threatens to go to war with Custance's father if he is not given Custance to wed, and out of duty to her father and kingdom, she volunteers to go to the "barbre" Syria. Her rhetoric signals her reluctance to partake in this marriage. To Custance and her Christian community, Saracens are barbaric and unfit partners for Christian princesses. She effectively becomes the sacrificial lamb who, in order to protect Christendom, gives herself up to the "heathen" Saracens. Even if Custance must leave her native Christian land to convert a land of heathen Saracens, she cannot actually integrate into

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<sup>74</sup> Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 225-6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 261.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 281-2, l. 285.

this Saracen society. The text makes evident that the Sultan and Custance do not consummate their marriage, leaving her undefiled to seek a more suitable partner; the massacre occurs once Custance arrives at the Sultaness's feast of marriage celebration, after which Custance is sent away from Syria on a rudderless boat. The Sultaness's massacre resolves the issue of permeable boundaries between Christian and Saracen altogether by removing the Christian from Saracen society entirely.

Chapter 1 has introduced imperialism and empire as frameworks through which the power struggle between Saracen and Christian can be examined. The romances *Bevis of Hampton*, *Emaré*, and the *Man of Law's Tale* all advance an imperialist narrative insofar as they esteem Christian culture over Saracen culture. But, as these texts illustrate, the imperialist mission is also volatile. It renders the boundary between Christian and Saracen permeable: at the same time as it Christianizes Saracens, it "Saracenizes" Christians. These imperialist narratives thereby become more indicative of Christian anxiety over the Saracen figure than Christian supremacy. Nowhere is this anxiety more pronounced than in scenes of domesticity, which will be the focus of Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2: The Domestic Politic

This chapter contends that in the *Man of Law's Tale*, *Emaré*, and *Bevis of Hampton*, domesticity becomes the primary site of subverted Christian values and anxiety over the Saracen. In these romances, “domesticity” specifically refers to the locale wherein familial relationships exist and have interplay. In domestic scenes, Saracens exemplify clear differences from Christians: the *Man of Law's Tale's* Sultanness monstrously kills her son; gender roles are subverted; relationships between parents and children are fragmentary; motherhood is feared and not revered. It is within the domestic sphere that key power struggles between Christianity and Islam occur and narratives of Christian superiority are troubled. The tension that exists between Christian and Saracen in these scenes ultimately reveals authorial anxieties about the Saracen more so than it reveals Christian dominance. Authors' attempts to model their narratives on the medieval crusader fantasy of Christian ascendancy and Saracen subjugation end up highlighting deep fears of miscegenation and impropriety (though it is important to note that medieval authors like Chaucer were also capable of employing received subject matter critically, and at times does so in the *Man of Law's Tale*): Christians are afraid of Saracen bodies, Saracen desires, Saracen mothers, and Saracen love, which prevents them from fully exerting hegemony over Saracens.

It is difficult to discuss domesticity without turning to love, the precursor to domesticity in these romances. These authors use love as a political instrument that substantiates notions of Christian superiority. Sharon Kinoshita argues that in the medieval French romances *La Prise d'Orange* and *La Chanson de Roland*, “‘love’ is the means to [Christian] conversion” for both Orable and Bramimonde, initially Saracen queens.<sup>77</sup> Her argument is applicable to Middle English romance as well. Both Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* and the Sultan in Chaucer's *Man of*

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<sup>77</sup> Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 54.

*Law's Tale*, for example, readily agree to convert from Islam to Christianity to obtain the objects of their love. These Saracens hope to build families with Christian partners, in Christian communities, which in turn signals their desire for Christian domesticity. The characters involved are not average commoners, but people with high social standing whose domestic actions have bearing on many people besides themselves. Domesticity thus clearly has a political dimension in these medieval romances.

As ideal domesticity (which, for medieval women, meant appropriately carrying out the duties of a wife and mother), in the Middle Ages was commonly a constituent of ideal femininity, we must now turn to the Christian feminine ideal espoused by each text in order to juxtapose it with the conduct of female Saracen characters. In the fourteenth century, there were many romances that featured female protagonists; Geraldine Heng observes that these heroines, unlike their male counterparts, “never attempt anything like masculinized adventures [...because] it is conventional feminine performance [in these romances], not transgendered mimicry, that is desired.”<sup>78</sup> These romances praise women (who are almost always Christian) that conform to this “conventional feminine performance” at the same time as they denounce women (who are typically Saracens or pagans) that do not. The opposition put forth by these non-Christian women to Christian ideals is indicative of their inherent incompatibility with Christianity.<sup>79</sup>

### **i – The Feminine Ideal**

The Christian feminine ideal valued passivity, maternity, obedience, and chastity as traits befitting women. It characterized assertiveness, disobedience, and lustfulness as unfeminine, and even manly. These ideals were echoed in various texts in the Middle Ages, including romances,

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<sup>78</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 185.

<sup>79</sup> As a result, prospective conversions on the part of Saracens may be seen as suspicious.

conduct manuals, and courtesy books. Female Christian protagonists in *Bevis of Hampton*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and *Emaré* are easily able to embody the former set of traits and uphold the ideals of femininity. Conversely, Saracen women either struggle to participate in this Christian feminine ideal or unapologetically possess more masculine traits. This difficulty in assimilation suggests that the Christian feminine ideal is perhaps incompatible with the Saracen, and that, as a result, Christianity cannot have complete dominion over the Saracen in terms of assimilation.

The Christian cosmos in *Bevis of Hampton* esteems virginity and subservience in women. The text establishes early on the kind of woman that is *not* an example of ideal femininity, namely, Bevis's mother. Bevis denounces his mother as a "vile houre"<sup>80</sup> upon learning that she arranged his father's murder in order to marry her lover: "Allas, moder, thee faire ble! / Evel becometh thee, houre to be, / To holde bordel."<sup>81</sup> Bevis's lamentation over his mother's "faire ble" accords with medieval conventions whereby black skin signalled evil and white signified goodness.<sup>82</sup> Initially, the word "fair" meant "beautiful" and "agreeable," but during the time that *Bevis of Hampton* was written (the fourteenth century), it began to refer to complexion as well.<sup>83</sup> That Bevis rues his mother's complexion immediately before he says that it does not become her to act as a prostitute suggests that fair skin is at odds with "[e]vel," and that consequently, his mother's "faire ble" does not accord with her actions. In making this connection, Bevis includes fairness of skin in his (and the text's) imagined Christian feminine ideal.

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<sup>80</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1999), l. 302.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 307-9.

<sup>82</sup> Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), 2.

<sup>83</sup> "fair, adj. and n.1," *OED Online*, June 2020, Oxford University Press.

The first documented use of "fair" in reference to complexion took place in 1325: [*a*1325 - *Cursor Mundi* (Trin. Cambr.) l. 4225 - *Þi godenes & þi feire hew*].

For Bevis and the text's Christian worldview, being white ought to be a marker of virtue. This view is echoed in much medieval romance, including in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and *Emaré*. Pure Christian women like the *Man of Law's* Custance and *Emaré's* eponymous protagonist are almost always described as fair in complexion: Custance is the "glorie of wommanhede" and a "faire may,"<sup>84</sup> and *Emaré* is introduced to the reader as "the fayrest creature borne."<sup>85</sup> In the case of Saracen women, being white is a sign that they can be Christianized. Geraldine Heng explains this wonder as "a strategic bleaching that portrays the women as desirable and appropriate sexual companions for French [and English] knights, and conduces, also, to the women's eventual baptism and assimilation into Christian European polities."<sup>86</sup> The Saracen princess Josian, as a case in point, is "faire [...] and bright of mod," and consequently someone who resembles the Christian princess in appearance and can potentially be converted.<sup>87</sup> Bevis's mother interrupts this schema and, as a result, becomes figured as an unnatural woman.

Furthermore, Bevis's anger at his father's murder is not the only issue at play here; in calling his mother a "vile houre" and suggesting she behaves as if she were holding a "bordel," he reveals that he also takes issue with her disloyalty to Sir Gii and her seeming lack of sexual modesty. Murdering her husband to be with her lover is painted as a reprehensible act that is the product of uncontrollable sexual desire, but its reprehensibility is complicated by the fact that Josian commits the same act and is *not* denounced for it. Before Bevis is even born, his mother (then the "kinges doughter of Scotlonde")<sup>88</sup> loved another: "Of Almayne that emperur / Hire

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<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 1987), l. 851.

<sup>85</sup> "Emaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS, 1995), l. 50.

<sup>86</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 189.

<sup>87</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, l. 521.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 28.



hadde loved paramur.”<sup>89</sup> Her lover “[o]fte to hire fader a sente” to ask for “hire to wive,” but “[t]he king fo no thing alive / Nolde hire him take.”<sup>90</sup> The lady’s father instead chooses to wed her to Sire Gii, but she is unhappy with the marriage: “Me lord is olde [...] / Hadde ich itaken a yong knight, / [...] A wolde me loven dai and night.”<sup>91</sup> That Bevis’s mother does not kill her husband directly indicates that she is still, to some extent, contained within Christianity.<sup>92</sup> She sends for her old lover and requests “[t]hat he ne smite of his [Sir Gii’s] heved / [...] And whan he haveth so ydo, / Me love he schel underfo.”<sup>93</sup> This kind of manipulation on the part of a woman is a motif in medieval romance and is generally characterized as an unnatural act that is taken in bad faith. Marie de France’s lai *Bisclavret*, for instance, accuses the wife in the tale of faithlessness after she indirectly beguiles her husband into giving her information that leads to her lover stealing his clothes so that he must remain in werewolf form.<sup>94</sup> In *Bevis of Hampton*, there is an added component of religious and racial difference to this “evel” deed, particularly when compared with Josian’s murder of Mile.

Although Bevis’s mother was married to Sir Gii against her wishes, neither the text nor Bevis offers any sympathy towards her. Bevis curses her and wishes for her to be “to-drawe / And al to-twight!”<sup>95</sup> This punishment was common for those who committed treachery, or an infraction conducted in bad faith and which is seen to disrupt a social bond. Bevis’s mother’s actions thereby frame her as a traitor and not a heretic. The text laments the very day Sir Gii chose to marry her: “Allas, that he hire ever ches!”<sup>96</sup> This lamentation suggests that the ideal

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., ll. 34-35.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., ll. 37, 40-42.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., l. 58, 61, 64.

<sup>92</sup> The indirectness here will be important when we turn to Josian’s mariticide later on.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., ll. 101, 103-104.

<sup>94</sup> Marie de France, “Bisclavret,” trans. David R. Slavitt, in *The Lays of Marie de France* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 50.

<sup>95</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 302-303.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., l. 28.

Christian woman is loyal to her husband even if she is married against her will. Bevis's mother is ultimately denounced by both son and text, while Josian directly kills her second husband and leaves the scene unscathed, suggesting that the rules of femininity for Christian women are inconsistently applied to Saracen women—especially when the text has a greater mission in mind: cultural hegemony.

Although Josian's killing of her husband is gruesome, it is not without Hebrew precedent.<sup>97</sup> After "Sire Erl Mile" forcibly marries her, she kills him on their wedding night to prevent consummation: "Be the nekke she hath him up tight / And let him so ride al the night. / Josian lai in hire bed."<sup>98</sup> There is an intertext here: Josian parallels the well-admired Hebrew women in the Old Testament. The most famous example of these women is that of Judith, who kills Holofernes so that she does not have to be sexually defiled by him. Judith was also celebrated as a warrior-woman, and it is possible that the text does not pin blame on Josian because she is made more proximate to Christian values by first corresponding to a Hebrew exemplar that was respected by Christians (as Christians had no problem revering pre-Christian Hebrews). But Josian evades the Christian worldview at the same time as the text attempts to fit her into it. Judith's murder of Holofernes is bracketed by prayers to God: "she took him by the hair of his head, and said: Strengthen me, O Lord God, at this hour. And she struck twice upon his neck, and cut off his head" (Jdt. 13:9-10).<sup>99</sup> Unlike Judith, Josian makes no mention of God before, during, or after her act of murder. She depends on solely her agency and desire to retain her virginity (as will be examined in further detail in Chapter 3). Her disconnection from God separates her from the Christian exemplar of acceptable mariticide, forcing her into a liminal

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<sup>97</sup> Hebrew precedent was respected in the Christian tradition.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 3245, 3223-3225.

<sup>99</sup> All citations from the Bible in this thesis are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation.

space between Christianity and non-Christianity. Josian's murder of her husband also contains notes of sexual suggestion: she "let him so ride" and sleeps in the same room "al the night." Such sexual undertones are absent from Judith's murder of Holofernes, further underscoring Josian's ambiguous Christian identity and her inability to be completely contained within a Christian narrative.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the only judgment available for Josian is from Mile's people, who want to burn her alive (though she is immediately rescued by Bevis): "Sum hire dente thanne / In a tonne for to branne."<sup>100</sup> Jacqueline de Weever argues that, in their attempts to fit the Saracen into a Christian cosmos, Christian authors "sabotage the values of their own societies."<sup>101</sup> Though both Josian and Bevis's mother participate in murder to reclaim their agency and individual desires, the actions of Bevis's mother are seen as a betrayal of her wifely duties while Josian's are seen as, at worst, neutral, and at best, admirable insofar as they link Josian to a tradition of Hebrew women. According to de Weever, "[t]he higher good in these poems [...] is empire building, and all good and values are relative, bowing to the imperatives of the conqueror's agenda."<sup>102</sup> The poet denounces mariticide if committed by a Christian woman but forgives the act if committed by a Saracen woman because "gain obliterates the need for condemnation."<sup>103</sup> Since Josian kills Mile to remain faithful to Bevis, her Christian lover, and therefore to Christianity, her actions are not dishonourable. Yet in pardoning Josian for this grotesque murder while not managing to make her a perfect parallel to Hebrew women in the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., ll. 3259-60.

<sup>101</sup> Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland Pub, 1998), 22.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 129.

Old Testament, the text unwittingly portrays Christian values as situational and not absolute, and thereby diminishes them.

Virginity is another central aspect of the Christian feminine ideal, one that medieval authors reiterated time and time again in various texts. The widely-read conduct manual *Le Ménagier de Paris* (1393), for example, instructs young noblewomen to “remain continent and live chastely [...for] it is a certainty that all qualities are diminished in a maiden or woman who lacks virginity, continence, or chastity.”<sup>104</sup> In his journeying, Bevis encounters a patriarch who offers him marriage counsel along the same lines: “[The patriarch] forbed him [Bevis] upon his lif, / That he never toke wif, / Boute she were clene maide.”<sup>105</sup> The text also makes it clear that Josian cannot marry Bevis unless she is a virgin. When Bevis meets Josian again after a seven-year separation, he questions her about her arranged marriage with the Saracen king Yvor: “thow havest seve year ben a quene, / And everi night a king be thee: / How mightow thanne maide be?”<sup>106</sup> Josian replies by imploring him to take her home to his country, freely offering to be punished if he finds her not to be a virgin: “Send me aghen to me fon / Al naked in me smok alon!”<sup>107</sup> Prior to this reunion, Bevis muses about how he would be happy if Josian proved to be as loyal as his horse: “Wer Josiane [...] ase lele / Alse is me stede Arondel, / Yet scholde ich come out of wo!”<sup>108</sup> The horse in question is acquired by King Yvor following Bevis’s imprisonment. Despite the change in ownership, Arondel refuses to serve the Saracen king, throwing Yvor off whenever he attempts to mount.<sup>109</sup> The horse thereby makes it clear that his only master is Bevis. Through this comparison, Bevis draws an erotic parallel between Arondel

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<sup>104</sup> Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose, *The Good Wife’s Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 86.

<sup>105</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 1965-69.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2198-2200.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2205-6.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2033-5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2021-4.

and Josian: he wants her, like Arondel, to throw Yvor off if he attempts to mount her. Had Josian consummated her marriage with a Saracen king, she would have been disloyal to Bevis and gone against the Christian feminine ideal. A proper Christian noblewoman must remain chaste until her marriage to an appropriate Christian partner; for Josian, this partner has to be Bevis. Josian's preservation of her virginity allows her to successfully align herself with Bevis and, in turn, Christianity.

Josian's virginity confers protection and literally saves her from death, underscoring its importance to her spiritually. While Bevis is away, Josian enters a cave and comes face-to-face with "two lyouns at hur feete."<sup>110</sup> The lions cannot attack her because she is "a kynges daughter... quene and maide both."<sup>111</sup> This emphasis on Josian's confirmed virginity foregrounds her newfound Christian identity. Clarissa Atkinson argues that by the end of the Middle Ages, for Christians, "virginity [was] defined as a moral or spiritual state—as purity, or humility, or that quality of spirit belonging to those whose primary relationship was with God."<sup>112</sup> With the confirmation of her virginity, Josian can now be part of the Christian feminine ideal that includes Christian princesses like Custance and Emaré. However, as will be discussed later, Josian also deviates from this ideal in ways that noblewomen born as Christians do not.

Another critical aspect of the Christian feminine ideal is passivity, an aspect that no Saracen woman in any of the texts performs. Both Custance and Emaré are completely passive female protagonists while no Saracen woman in any of the texts is passive. The exclusion of Saracen women from Christian femininity is yet another indicator of Saracen identity that continually conflicts with Christian identity and prevents Christianity from fully erasing Islam.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., l. 2387.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., l. 2393.

<sup>112</sup> Clarissa W. Atkinson, "Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History* 8, no. 2 (1983): 133.

Custance's passivity is especially significant because it reveals the Sultanness as her foil: the Sultanness is *not* passive, and her inversion of Christian virtue and rejection of Custance are what make her monstrous—a claim which will be explored in the following chapter.

Custance, the embodiment of all Christian virtue, is exceedingly passive and is essentialized by male narrators. She enters the tale at the secondary level, with “the commune voys of every man” praising her: “To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde / Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tyrannye. / She is mirour of alle curteisye.”<sup>113</sup> Custance's voice is noticeably absent from her own introduction. The repetition of the word “alle” reveals how the men of Rome want to capture her essence in language. In doing so, they deny her any flaw that could spoil the illusion of perfect femininity. She is not just virtuous, humble, and courteous; she represents “alle” virtue, humility, and courtesy. The men's essentializing descriptions of Custance condition the reader to interpret her the same way they do, long before Custance herself enters the narrative. This early judgment silences her and frames her at the onset as a flat character who embodies nothing but “vertu,” “humblesse,” and “curteisye.” Heng notes that “[e]xcept for an erotics of maternity, desire for her child, and Christian piety, Custance is an inviting cipher, a blank.”<sup>114</sup> This blank allows the people in Custance's life, including the narrator, to project the feminine ideal they want to see onto her. As Sheila Delany contends, “Custance exists in the reader's imagination as an agglomeration of virtues rather than as a recognizable person.”<sup>115</sup> There is no space in this realm of perfect femininity for Custance's personal thoughts and feelings, and as a result, she becomes less of a character and more of a stand-in for Christian

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<sup>113</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law's Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 155, 164-6.

<sup>114</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 182.

<sup>115</sup> Sheila Delany. “Womanliness in the ‘Man of Law's Tale,’” *The Chaucer Review* 9, no. 1 (1974): 63.

virtue. The Sultanness, by comparison, is a character with complex motivations and desires, as will be examined in Chapter 3.

To return to the ideal of passivity, the passivity in Custance is also recognizable in Emaré and in the case of both Christian women, is closely linked to faithfulness. Both undergo similar trials whereby they must depend on God alone for their survival. Their passivity is instrumental in showcasing God's omnipotence, and the two are always rewarded for their faith. Emaré's father sentences her to a harsh exile after she rejects his incestuous desires: "She moste have wyth her no spendyng, / Nothur mete ne drynke, / But shate her ynto the se."<sup>116</sup> The narrator pities her state: "Now the lady dwelled thore, / Wythowte anker or ore."<sup>117</sup> In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Custance is also sent into exile on a rudderless boat (only by the Sultanness rather than by her father): "And in a ship entirely without a rudder, God knows, / They have set her, and told her to learn to sail."<sup>118</sup> Custance puts her faith in God without worrying about the lack of a rudder on the boat: "In hym triste I, and in his mooder deere, / That is to me my seyl and eek my steere."<sup>119</sup> In doing so, she reveals the purpose of this trope: the rudderless boat gives Custance's extreme passivity greater purpose and significance by highlighting her unfaltering faith. God provides for Custance and Emaré because they have such faith in him and both women survive the ocean exile. The emphasis placed on this kind of passivity for Christian women will be especially important to keep in mind for the next chapter, where I contend that Josian threatens Christianity due to her lack of passivity.

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<sup>116</sup> "Emaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 271-3.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 274-5.

<sup>118</sup> Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 439-40.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 832-3.

## ii – Anxieties over Saracen Motherhood

As it appears in each of these texts, the Christian feminine ideal includes virginity and subservience. Both of these characteristics inform the most important element of this ideal: motherhood. Motherhood was a crucial component of the Christian feminine ideal in the Middle Ages. Christian protagonists in medieval romances who become mothers characteristically take the nurture of their children very seriously. Political structures in romance often participate in a broader Christian supremacy: these Christian children borne of Christian mothers are heirs to Christian kingdoms. Securing a Christian heir assures these kingdoms a future of continued Christian ascendancy. This emphasis on motherhood is significantly diminished when it comes to Saracen motherhood, which reveals how medieval texts and authors abound in fears over Saracen motherhood—fears through which Saracen resistance can eventually materialize.

Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* offers up a monstrous version of the Saracen mother and of textual anxieties regarding Saracen motherhood in the figure of the Sultanesse. Sue Niebrzydowski marks "successful mothering" as "a key facet of the construction of the female body [in medieval culture], for on it depends not only the physical and social wellbeing of the child but also the continuation of society itself."<sup>120</sup> Niebrzydowski further identifies "the most maternal of behaviours" as "the sustaining of life."<sup>121</sup> From this perspective the monstrous mother is monstrous because she defies her maternal instincts. The Sultanesse becomes an exemplar of the monstrous mother by abusing her son's trust and sacrificing him to retain Syria's Islamic religion. She violates this sacred bond between mother and child.

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<sup>120</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, "Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," in *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 196.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



The text explicitly links the Sultaness's mothering to the monstrous by likening her to unnatural creatures such as "the serpent depe in helle ybound" and the "scorpioun."<sup>122</sup> She is additionally the "root of iniquity" and the "serpent under femininity."<sup>123</sup> The implication is that the Sultaness is really a serpent hiding under the guise of femininity: she is neither fully human nor beast, and her liminality underscores her monstrosity. She is also called a scorpion, a creature seen as "grotesque within the animal kingdom because it violated boundaries [...] through being a strange union of reptile and insect."<sup>124</sup> The Man of Law's continual comparison of the Sultaness to monsters emphasizes her monstrous mothering and, as Niebrzydowski concludes, "the murderous dispatching of her son can be seen to be true [...] to her bestial nature."<sup>125</sup>

The Sultaness is clearly an unfit mother in comparison to the selfless Custance, who prioritizes her son Maurice's wellbeing over her own.<sup>126</sup> The Sultaness's evident monstrosity serves a second purpose as well. In killing her own heir, the Sultaness interrupts Syria's line of succession and obscures her country's future. The text insinuates that there is little possibility of another Saracen heir being born: "This olde Sowdanesse, cursed krone, / Hath with hir freendes doon this cursed dede."<sup>127</sup> Prior to her act of murder, the text makes no mention of her age; it is only after that she is painted as an "olde [...] krone." Sue Niebrzydowski argues that "it is as if her rejection of her motherhood, as realized through her murder of her son, finally becomes written on her body [...and] the Sowdanesse [becomes] post-menopausal."<sup>128</sup> Betraying her

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<sup>122</sup> Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 360-1, 404.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 358, 360.

<sup>124</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, "Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," 203.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> It is important to note that the Sultaness is a political figure, and as domesticity is political in romances, familial matters may be sacrificed for perceived political and religious expediency; the Sultaness's motivations for this filicide will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>127</sup> Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 432-3.

<sup>128</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, "Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," 203-4.

“maternal body” means relinquishing all “reproductive potential since her womb has become the nest of every vice.”<sup>129</sup> Because the Sultanness cannot conceive another heir, the future of Saracen rule over Syria is uncertain. Here, the text exposes its anxiety over what Saracen motherhood could imply: a continued future of Saracen rulership. The text therefore uses the Sultanness’s monstrous mothering as an instrument through which the future of Syrians potentially becomes vulnerable.

Custance is the foil to the Sultanness’s monstrous mothering. She is inseparable from her son, and her relationship with her child becomes the epicenter of the text. Many medieval church fathers saw Christian motherhood as indispensable. In the First Epistle to Timothy, for example, St. Paul writes, “she shall be saved [from transgression] in childbearing” (Ti. 1:14). Motherhood had the potential to redeem women “if they continue[d] in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety” (Ti. 1:15). In Niebrzydowski’s words, “the primary function of married [medieval] women is motherhood, in order to populate the world with Christians.”<sup>130</sup> Similarly, St. Augustine writes that “woman was created by God to be man’s helper ‘for the sake of bearing children.’”<sup>131</sup> For Bernard of Clairvaux, “the maternal image is almost without exception elaborated not as giving birth or even as conceiving or sheltering in a womb but as nurturing, particularly suckling.”<sup>132</sup> In Sermon 41, Bernard establishes that a mother’s duty is “to suckle her babes, to provide food for her children,” linking this sustenance to the nourishment the Church offers its people by way of doctrine.<sup>133</sup> These sources demonstrate that Christian wives were expected to have children and nurture them appropriately for the sake of Christianity.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, “Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” 197.

<sup>131</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 115.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 118.

Custance carries out her “primary function” with care: when she and her son are exiled by Donegild (her husband, Alla’s mother), she prioritizes Maurice’s needs over her own.

Hir litel child lay wepying in hir arm,  
 And knelynge pitously to hym she seyde,  
 ‘Pees, litel sone. I wol do thee noon harm.’  
 With that hir coverchief over hir heed she breyde,  
 And over hise litel eyen she it leyde,  
 And in hir arm she lulleth it ful faste,  
 And into Hevene hire eyen up she caste.<sup>134</sup>

Here, Custance shields her son from the world with a “coverchief.” Though she, too, is afraid, she lulls Maurice to sleep and then prays for their safety. This prioritization of the child’s needs by the mother is another motif in medieval romance that signifies perfect Christian motherhood. For example, in *Emaré*, the titular character also performs this perfect Christian motherhood in a similar scene of exile: “She was aferde of the see, / And layde her gruf uponn a tre, / The chylde to her pappes.”<sup>135</sup> Like Custance, Emaré fears the sea but prioritizes her child’s comfort, nurturing Segramour with the milk from her breast. Heng contends that “[t]he domestic, familial circuit of the desire that condenses through this image of mother and child marks the transfer of desire [...] to an affecting, sentimental scene of primitive community.”<sup>136</sup> These scenes inspire great pity. To return to the *Man of Law’s Tale*, Custance and her child are placed in this position of pity, and everyone who opposes the pair become enemies. The text thereby effectively paints Custance and Maurice as the victims of injustice, and pagan queens, such as the Sultanness and Donegild, who reject Christianization as the perpetrators of this injustice. Custance’s relationship with Maurice is therefore critical to the construction of empire in this text. Family and empire are uniquely linked: through family, ties to Christian culture (which include ideas of Christian

<sup>134</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 834-40.

<sup>135</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 655-657.

<sup>136</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, 182.

superiority) are repeatedly reinforced. This is because, as Heng argues, “Christendom *is* a family in medieval English romance [...and] if the church is the institutional mother and the Virgin Mary the divine mother, Custance is the human mother whose affectionate, protective relationship with her child allows the imagined community of Christendom to come to fruition in the most immediately accessible, and poignantly intimate terms, as a family.”<sup>137</sup> The Christian audience ultimately comes to understand Christendom and identify with the Christian empire through Custance’s selfless mothering.

This careful nurture of children by Christian mothers is a crucial theme in *Emaré* as well. Emaré’s care for Segramour certainly pays off, as “When the chylde was seven yer olde, / He was bothe wyse and bolde / [...] So curtays a chylde was none.”<sup>138</sup> Both Custance’s and Emaré’s successful nurture of their sons allows them to return to their respective families and, in turn, Christian communities. Their enactment of ideal motherhood is consequently the most important aspect of their faith, as without it, they cannot be re-ensconced into the fold of Christianity. Alla recognizes his wife, Custance, in the face of his son:

Now was this child as lyk unto Custance  
As possible is a creature to be.  
This Alla hath the face in remembrance  
Of Dame Custance, and thereon mused he  
If that the childes mooder were aught she  
That is his wyf.<sup>139</sup>

The King of Galys immediately loves Segramour: “Neverthelese, he lette be, / And loked on the chylde so fre, / And mykell he lovede hym thoo.”<sup>140</sup> Heng notes that “in the discourse resolutely established by the Custance group, the offspring of female reproductive sexuality is

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>138</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 733-5, 738.

<sup>139</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 1030-5.

<sup>140</sup> “Emaré,” ll. 833-885.

overwhelmingly the offspring of his *mother*.”<sup>141</sup> Both Custance and Emaré are recognized in their children, and this recognition is especially important in the case of the former. Maurice’s remarkable likeness to Custance shows that the Christian seed is superior to the pagan one, as King Alla was a pagan before he converted to Christianity.<sup>142</sup> Maurice does not take after the pagan seed at all. For Custance, therefore, successfully mothering her son involves passing on the essence of Christianity onto the next generation. In accomplishing this mission, she has fulfilled her domestic as well as political duty.

The notion of a battle between a Christian and non-Christian seed can also be observed in *Bevis of Hampton*. Though Josian renounces Islam and converts to Christianity, her place in the fold of Christianity is always in question. She is not allowed to be the same kind of mother as Custance and Emaré, who come from Christian families and have Christian histories. The text’s anxiety over her conversion manifests itself when Josian gives birth to twins: “Else hii were out of the weie, / She hadde knave children tweie.”<sup>143</sup> Prominent philosophers had varying beliefs in relation to the conception of twins, but the common understanding was that twins were abnormal. Aristotle (385-325 BC), who was of course highly influential to medieval thinkers, views twins as “the faults of nature (*pecatta naturae*),” aligning them with the generation of “*monstra*” in his *De Generatione Animalium*.<sup>144</sup> He argues that large mammals such as humans “produce only one young one [...] as owing to their size the secretion of the female is all used up for the one embryo.”<sup>145</sup> In the rare case of a second embryo, “the mother cannot bring the second embryo to perfection.”<sup>146</sup> The widely-read Arabic philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037) offers an

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<sup>141</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, 205.

<sup>142</sup> Seed theory is discussed in the following paragraph.

<sup>143</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 3639-40.

<sup>144</sup> J.M. Thijssen, “Twins as Monsters: Albertus Magnus’s Theory of the Generation of Twins and Its Philosophical Context,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 61, no. 2 (1987): 240.

<sup>145</sup> Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* (South Bend: Infomotions, 2000), 84.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

explanation for the generation of twins: female sexual pleasure. Excessive “coital movements could cause the splitting of the semen into different regions of the womb.”<sup>147</sup> Albertus Magnus (1200-1280) drew upon Avicenna’s theory to conclude that “due to the delectation of the female [...] the division of the sperm, that is, of the generative material, and thus the generation of twins, is brought about.”<sup>148</sup> While he did acknowledge that there was some level of male responsibility in the generation of twins, specifically when a man “does not ejaculate his sperm in only one spout, but through several *impulsiones*,” these theories casted “a much greater moral and biological responsibility for twinning [...] on women.”<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, women who had twins were sometimes suspected of either sexual or moral improprieties.

As Lynn Ramey notes, “[c]onverted persons, real or fictitious, remained under suspicion even after living in Christian communities for years.”<sup>150</sup> Josian’s birth of twins, as a rare and abnormal occurrence, immediately renders her Christian character suspect and exposes the text’s underlying fear of miscegenation. In the Middle Ages, philosophers were deeply concerned with questions of reproduction. Aristotle is credited for the one-seed theory wherein women could not “generate life,” but could only “provide the physical space and the material from which the male seed forms the child [and the child’s soul].”<sup>151</sup> Other theorists such as Galen (130-200 C.E.) supported a two-seed theory, wherein both men and women could generate semen but only the man could give the child a soul. Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) forwarded a third theory: “the seed that produces a child is located in the father, in the mother, or in both [...] When intercourse

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<sup>147</sup> Gabriella Zuccolin, “Ancient and Medieval Twins: Medical Theory and Moral Implications,” in *Pregnancy and Childbirth: History, Medicine, and Anthropology*, ed. Constanza Gislon Dopfel (Saint Mary’s College of California, 2018), 101.

<sup>148</sup> J.M. Thijssen, “Twins as Monsters: Albertus Magnus’s Theory of the Generation of Twins and Its Philosophical Context,” 242.

<sup>149</sup> Gabriella Zuccolin, “Ancient and Medieval Twins: Medical Theory and Moral Implications,” 101-2.

<sup>150</sup> Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

takes place, the seeds of the father and mother do literal battle in the womb [and] the more powerful seed will determine the resemblance of the progeny.”<sup>152</sup> Ramey applies Isidore’s multiple seed theory to interfaith partnerships to conclude that “reproduction between a Christian and a Saracen or Jew could be similar to a *judicium dei*, yet another battle between conflicting forces, this one taking place in the bedroom rather than on the battlefield [...and in this] epic battle of the seed, children would take after their Christian parent, showing the superior strength of the Christian seed—and thus Christian thought—over the Jewish or Muslim seed.”<sup>153</sup> If the twins reflect Josian’s inherent Saracen difference and abnormality in a Christian world, then they also suggest that her conversion is incomplete.

Perhaps, as Avicenna and Albertus Magnus might believe, Josian’s twin children are the result of excessive sexual pleasure during intercourse. This possibility is significant because Josian first decides to convert not out of any particular faith in Christianity, but out of her lust for Bevis (a scene which will be examined more closely in Chapter 3). If her conception of twins points to an excessive sexuality, it also brings forth the uncomfortable fact that Josian’s lustfulness does not change with conversion. She does not become the modest wife that Custance is, who “moste take in pacience at nyght / Swiche manere necessaries been plesynges.”<sup>154</sup> The narrator in the *Man of Law’s Tale* believes that good Christian wives must “leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside. / And for the tyme it may no bet bitide.”<sup>155</sup> In other words, intercourse is something a good Christian wife must bear with rather than enjoy, but Josian not only enjoys intercourse, she enjoys it to the point of excess. The larger issue at hand here is that Josian changes very little, if at all, after converting to Christianity. After her baptism, she is neither

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 710-11.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., ll. 733-4.

given a new name, like the Saracen queen Orable in *La Prise d'Orange*, nor a new appearance, like the King of Tars, whose skin turns from black to white after conversion in compliance with the aforementioned medieval associations of white with goodness and black with evil.<sup>156</sup> Josian's twins mark her body as fundamentally abnormal, highlighting what little impact Christianization has actually had on her and indicating that her conversion—if not entirely unsuccessful—is incomplete.<sup>157</sup>

Josian is further set apart from Christian women by her exclusion from true motherhood.

She is conveniently removed from her children before she can nurture them:

Also she dilivered was,  
 Thar com Ascopard goande a pas  
 And fourti Sarasins, the Frensch seth,  
 Al iarmede to the teth.  
 For al hire sorwe and hire wo  
 Thai made hire with hem te go.<sup>158</sup>

The word “also” emphasizes the immediacy of Josian's departure: as soon as she delivers the twins, she is forced to leave them. Her emotions of “sorwe” and “wo” indicate that she does not leave them out of her own free will. She is completely denied the role that is of utmost importance to Christian women like Custance and Emaré. Josian is granted no hand in raising the children during their critical years, thereby undercutting her ability to participate fully in a Christian concept of ideal motherhood. The text views her as not Christian *enough* to raise the heirs to a Christian empire. Bevis, finding the children alone in the forest, takes the twins to a “forster”<sup>159</sup> and asks: “Wiltow lete cristen this hethen childe?”<sup>160</sup> Upon learning that the forester

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<sup>156</sup> John H. Chandler, ed., *The King of Tars*, Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2015), l. 923.

<sup>157</sup> Her unyielding Saracen identity actively resists Christianization (a topic which will be elaborated on in Chapter 3).

<sup>158</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 3641-6.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 3739.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 3734.



is able to baptize the children, Bevis entrusts him with raising them for “seven yer” because “[...] yong hit hath is moder forlore.”<sup>161</sup> Here, the agency of abandoning the children is assigned to Josian, whereas it was not her decision to make earlier. This attribution of agency suggests that Bevis blames Josian for her desertion even though he is already aware of the circumstances of her disappearance, having heard Terri blame the Saracen giant Ascopard for it: “Ascopard is treasoun and is gile.”<sup>162</sup> The fact that Bevis rejects Terri’s explanation and assumes that she chose to leave suggests that, despite her conversion, he is still suspicious of her Christian identity on account of her Saracen origins. As Ramey notes, “[r]eligious difference was [...] an obstacle to marriage in [medieval] Europe [...] and] marriages between Christians and former Muslims were problematic, as there remained a sense that somehow the conversion was inadequate or incomplete.”<sup>163</sup> Both the text and Bevis therefore see Josian as not Christian enough to nurture her own children. Bevis’s heirs are reared by a true Christian, thereby preventing them from taking after their mother’s Saracen roots. Josian cannot teach her sons as Custance does Maurice and Emaré does Segramour, because her knowledge, grounded in Saracen history and culture, is suspect.

On top of her inability to provide maternal instruction, Josian is strangely detached from her children. The text provides no evidence that she performs any motherly duties at all. The only interaction between mother and sons occurs when Josian, mistakenly believing that Bevis is dead, commands them to avenge their father in battle: “Now kethe ye ben noble knightes, / And wrekeþ your fader with your mightes!”<sup>164</sup> Here, she addresses them as “noble knightes” rather than as her children, choosing to focus on their social class, not familial identity. While it is

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., l. 3740, 3736.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., l. 3720.

<sup>163</sup> Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*, 78.

<sup>164</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 4465-6.

obvious that Custance and Emaré love their children dearly, Josian's love for her children is more ambiguous. She shows no love or devotion to her children apart from her devotion to their father, and her connection to them depends entirely on Bevis. When she reunites with Bevis and demands to see her children, it is Bevis who returns them to her: "Beves after hem let sende; / Than com the fischer and the forster / And broughte the children of fair cher."<sup>165</sup> The careful nurturing with which mothers like Custance and Emaré rear their children is absent in Josian's narrative, and the fact that Josian cannot participate in this Christian tradition of motherhood reveals that she is not considered fully Christian.

*Bevis of Hampton* engages in some level of historical realism in its treatment of Josian. Ramey notes that "coaxing a woman with the promise of a better husband or life was generally the best method [of conversion]," as "women were not expected to have the rational capacity to understand theology [and] threatening them with the sword was unseemly at best."<sup>166</sup> for a Christian convert like Josian, it is more important to devote oneself to a Christian husband than to one's children. Josian's love for Bevis is the means to her conversion: consequently, Josian's relationship with Bevis has to be at the center of her world. Turning away from her children allows her to turn towards Bevis and towards Christianity. At the same time, she rejects Christian motherhood and reiterates her difference. There is much at stake with Josian's conversion narrative, as it is political as well as domestic: a successful conversion would indicate that Christianity is superior to Islam and mark Bevis as a worthy crusader-type knight. But the text forces her to sabotage Christian values in order to assuage Christian anxieties about her conversion. This mission ultimately fails, as in the process Josian undermines those same values

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., ll. 3954-6.

<sup>166</sup> Lynn T. Ramey, *Black Legacies: Race and the European Middle Ages*, 80.

and subverts the dynamics of the medieval family. She can fit into a Christian domestic context as neither a mother nor (as will be shown in Chapter 3) a partner to Bevis.

*Emaré* takes this fear of the Saracen maternal one step further by including no living Saracens in the text at all. Anxieties over miscegenation, incomplete conversion, and Saracen mothers survive only as traces in the narrative. The only trace of Saracens to be found lies in a special cloth that was won by the King of Sicily's father in war – a fact that seemingly supports the superiority of Christendom. This cloth, discussed earlier in Chapter 1, is a work of exceptional embroidery:

In that on korner made was  
Ydoyne and Amadas,  
Wyth love that was so trewe.<sup>167</sup>

In that othur corner was dyght  
Trystram and Isowde so bryght,  
That semely wer to se;  
And for they loved hem ryght.<sup>168</sup>

In the thrydde korner, wyth gret honour,  
Was Florys and Dam Blawncheflour,  
As love was hem betwene;  
For they loved wyth honour.<sup>169</sup>

In the fowrthe korner was oon,  
Of Babylone the Sowdan sonne,  
The Amerayles dowghtyr hym by.  
For hys sake the cloth was wrowght;  
She loved hym in hert and thowght.<sup>170</sup>

According to Mortimer Donovan, in this cloth “we notice faint traces of other genres: legend, fabliau, and exemplum. The familiar lovers occur together: Ydoyne and Amadas, Trystram and Isowde, Florys and Blawncheflour, and the Son of the Sowdan of Babylon and the Amerayles

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<sup>167</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 121-3.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 133-6.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 145-8.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 157-61.

Dowghtyr.”<sup>171</sup> He notes that “Each pair of lovers has in common a reputation in medieval fiction, French and English alike.”<sup>172</sup> But it is insufficient to reduce the cloth to popular romances; the fourth corner is markedly different from the other three and merits attention. This final corner depicts the love story of the emir’s daughter and Sultan’s son, and tells of the cloth’s creation. The emir’s daughter embroidered the cloth herself out of her love for the Sultan’s son. These Saracen figures are thus more than stock characters in popular romance: they exist *outside* of romance, as real lovers who are antagonized by the previous King of Sicily. The king not only intrudes upon their lands, but also upon their love; he directly interrupts a scene of matrimony with violence, and in doing so, prevents their love from culminating in the creation of a Saracen heir.

Even if the emir’s daughter and Sultan’s son were left to freely pursue a marriage, however, the text still renders dubious the possibility of a Saracen heir. The rhetoric suggests that the love between the emir’s daughter and Sultan’s son is somehow disingenuous in comparison to the love between figures such as Ydoyne and Amadas, Trystram and Isowde, and Florys and Blawncheflour. Ydoyne and Amadas share a “love that was so trewe”; Trystram and Isowde “loved hem ryght”; Florys and Blawncheflour “loved wyth honour.” These characters’ love is presented as unquestionably mutual. It is only in the fourth corner, where a Saracen love story is depicted, that the love seems one-sided: “For hys sake the cloth was wrowght / She loved hym in hert and thowght.” This love story is left indeterminate. While the others’ love was fully realized, the love between the emir’s daughter and Sultan’s son remains incomplete. The absence of the Sultan’s confirmation of love for the emir’s daughter coupled with the deliberate Christian

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<sup>171</sup> Mortimer J. Donovan, “Middle English *Emaré* and the Cloth Worthily Wrought,” in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 339.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

intrusion upon this scene blocks the culmination of their union. The text's hope here is to eradicate the Saracen entirely; the emir's daughter and Sultan's son cannot be left to thrive together on the periphery of Christianity long enough to become threats. In spite of the text's efforts, the Saracen is not completely eliminated. In the absence of an heir to a Saracen empire, the cloth becomes a stand-in for the child that the emir's daughter and Sultan's son might have had. Upon entering the Christian community, this child becomes able to actively resist Christianization in place of its parents.

This chapter has contended that Saracen women fundamentally do not fit into the Christian feminine ideal. This marked difference has repercussions for characters like Josian, the emir's daughter, and the Sultanness: even if they want to convert or see themselves as somehow connected to Christianity (as in the case of Josian and the emir's daughter), they cannot detach themselves from their Saracen identities. In their treatment of Saracen women in the domestic sphere, Christian authors expose their anxiety over the Saracen, an anxiety which makes it difficult if not impossible for Christianity to assert an unchallenged dominance over Islam. Time and time again, the fictitious Saracen shows they cannot be contained by the Christian writer. These anxieties make the domestic realm the ideal breeding ground for Saracen resistance to Christian hegemony, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

### Chapter 3: Figuring Resistance

#### **i – *Emaré* in Eclipse: Unveiling the Eastern Cloth**

The tale told in *Emaré* is that of a conquered Saracen kingdom and a thriving Christian one. The titular character's long exile and subsequent reunion with her father and husband mark this text as belonging to the "Constance" group, a set of narratives popularized in the thirteenth century and named after the protagonist of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (Custance).<sup>173</sup>

Following this scene of reunion, *Emaré*'s son—like Custance's—inherits a Christian kingdom by birthright. At first glance, this Middle English romance does not seem particularly unusual as it adheres to common "Constance" tale tropes and its storyline aligns closely with that of other romances of its time. Yet *Emaré* sets itself apart from other tales in the tradition through the presence of a singular cloth—a cloth that proves itself to be more than mere object.

This cloth originates from the East and is the central source of tension in the text. Curiously, it is also the only remnant of Saracen culture left in this Christian community. It was won from the Sultan by the King of Sicily a generation prior—a victory that seems to signal Christian superiority. However, as Christians attempt to shape the cloth to their will, they find that they are unable to do so because the cloth actively resists and denies their desires. The cloth's resistance to Christian appropriation suggests that Christians are in fact not superior to Saracens, and with the unveiling of the Eastern cloth, the crusading dream of Saracen erasure is left unfulfilled.

As the primary Christian protagonist in the story, one expects *Emaré* to take center stage, but in fact her introduction is very brief: "Of a lady fayr and fre / Her name is called *Emaré*."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Elizabeth Archibald. "The Flight from Incest: Two Late Classical Precursors of the Constance Theme," *The Chaucer Review* 20, no. 4 (1986): 259-60.

<sup>174</sup> "Emaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS, 1995), ll. 22-3.

This description sets her up for a more insignificant role than one might expect her to have. More importantly, the minimalist description contains Emaré much like how the minimalist description of Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* contains her. Emaré is nothing *but* “fayr” (see discussion in Chapter 2, subsection i) and “fre”; these two adjectives alone capture her entire essence and the narrator effectively prevents her from being defined in any other way. This containment allows her to function as a paragon of Christian virtue. There is simply no room in her character for sin or ambiguity.

By contrast, the cloth—which has been discussed in the previous chapter—receives a much richer description that spans ten stanzas, arguably becoming the focus of attention. Emaré’s presence is largely eclipsed by the cloth, which successfully weakens Christian identity in the text. The cloth’s overshadowing of Emaré is a persistent motif throughout the poem, where other characters consistently emphasize the cloth over her. When her father, Syr Artyus, exiles her from her homeland, the people mourn her by “wepyng [..] / For that comely unthur kelle.”<sup>175</sup> Emaré is named as “the one who was with cloak.” The people of the land focus on the cloth even though they mourn for her. When she later washes up on the shore of Galys and meets the King of Galys’s steward, Syr Kadore, it is the cloth that alerts him to Emaré’s presence: “And a glisteryng thyng theryn, / Therof they hadde ferly.”<sup>176</sup> The cloth compels him to move towards the boat, where he offers her assistance and invites the famished Emaré to a feast. The King of Galys notices Emaré’s robe here and falls in love with her: “The cloth upon her shone so bryghth / When she was theryn ydyghth / She semed non erthly thing.”<sup>177</sup> The poem conflates the cloth and Emaré’s identity, which in turn refigures and inverts the subject-object relationship

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<sup>175</sup> “Emare,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 302-303.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 350-351.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 393-396.

between the two. A foundational statement by Bruno Latour is an apt reminder here: “[non-humans...] have to be *actors* [...] and not simply the hapless bearers of symbolic projection.”<sup>178</sup> He thereby indicates that objects also have agency and “might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on.”<sup>179</sup> For Latour, “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor.”<sup>180</sup> In *Emaré*, the Eastern cloth becomes the actor who actively alerts people to their desire and to Emaré’s presence, while Emaré is the actionless object of desire. It thereby becomes the more interesting *thing*, slipping out of the author’s hands to privilege itself over Emaré, the virtuous princess who is supposed to be a shining example of Christian virtue to all but is instead sidelined for an exotic Eastern treasure.<sup>181</sup>

To understand why it is significant that this cloth eclipses Emaré, we must return to its Eastern origins. Elizabeth Scala contends that Emaré’s cloth is “the most foregrounded object of desire in the story” and represents “a story [...] of the *uses* of romance.”<sup>182</sup> While Scala is correct in associating it with desire, her analysis ignores the cultural contexts that are necessary to a complete understanding of the cloth. This item was made specifically by an emir’s daughter for a Sultan’s son during their betrothal and, despite being wrested from the Saracens by Christians, winds up being more powerful than Emaré and all the other Christian forces in the text.

The poem introduces the cloth as a gift to the emperor, Syr Artyus, from the King of Sicily, whose “nobyll [...] father [...] / Of the Sowdan he hyt wan / Wyth maystrye and with myghth.”<sup>183</sup> Gift-giving was a necessary element of peace and diplomacy in medieval Europe.

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<sup>178</sup> Bruno Latour, introduction to *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, ed. Bruno Latour (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>181</sup> The cloth’s *thingness* will be discussed below.

<sup>182</sup> Elizabeth Scala, “The Texture of Emaré,” *Philological Quarterly* 85 (3), 2006: 228.

<sup>183</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 172-174.



Gifts fortified political relations and often preceded negotiations between realms.<sup>184</sup> In medieval courts, gifts “were supposed to be commensurate with rank, office, age and family relations [...] between the giver and the receiver.”<sup>185</sup> Considering these contexts, the King of Sicily likely intends no harm with the gift. It is an act of good will and peace: by giving the emperor this gift, he allows the emperor to co-opt its generational history of Christian victory. The cloth does not come directly from the East through trade; it was won from the Sultan by the King of Sicily’s father with “maystrye” and “myghth”, and the king then passed the cloth onto his son as an heirloom. This physical rhetoric foregrounds how the special Eastern cloth was won by strength, not trickery or luck. It thus participates in a history of victory and dominance in which Syr Artyus is now enmeshed.

Though this romance depicts the King of Sicily as a victor against the Saracen empire and Sicily as a thriving nation, Sicily’s reality was far less illustrious at the time. Its downfall began in the early fourteenth century and by the end of the century—around the time *Emaré* was written—“war, plague, and famine had killed hundreds of thousands [...] Sicily was in ruins physically, economically, and morally.”<sup>186</sup> Sicily was also at various points in history in Muslim hands and was a major locale of Muslim-Christian interaction.<sup>187</sup> A Christian defeat of Muslims here would assert Christian superiority and consequently, although Sicily’s downfall predates the production of *Emaré*, the nation plays the role of re-conqueror in the text. Edward Said claims that “European representation of the Muslim [...] was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient [... and its] subject is not so much the East itself as the East made known, and

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<sup>184</sup> Kim Siebenhüner, “Approaching Diplomatic and Courtly Gift-Giving in Europe and Mughal India: Shared Practices and Cultural Diversity,” *The Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (October 2013): 532.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 536-537.

<sup>186</sup> Backman, *The Decline and Fall of Medieval Sicily*, xi.

<sup>187</sup> Henry Barbera, *Medieval Sicily: The First Absolute State* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Legas, 1994), 43.

therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public.”<sup>188</sup> This claim holds true for medieval writers as well: the writer of this romance reimagines a history of continued Sicilian conquest in place of a narrative of failure and, by granting Christians this victory against Saracens, the Islamic threat is curtailed and seemingly controlled. The fact that the King of Sicily’s gift is won, not traded for, asserts dominance as trading requires both parties to be active agents. Should one party disapprove of the transaction, they have the option to reject it or negotiate better terms. If an item is won, there is no negotiation, no compromise; there is a clear victor and loser, and a clear divide between superior and the inferior. Sicilian rulers win this cloth from the Sultan—a figure explicitly from the Muslim East—and through their textual victory, Sicily and Christianity appear to assert their superiority to the East and Islam.

However, this victory is short-lived. As has already been suggested, the cloth is an actor, and actors must have agency. The cloth may now “belong” to Christians, but it still refuses to bend to the wills of its owners and never fulfills the intentions and desires of the gift-giver. In giving this cloth to Syr Artyus, the King of Sicily invites the emperor to participate in this generational victory over the East. His gift implies that while he may not see the Muslim world as equal to that of the Christians, he does see Syr Artyus as an equal and a worthy participant in this narrative of Western conquest. The cloth arrives in the hands of its owner through victory first, then as an heirloom, and finally, as a gift of peace. An heirloom is only an heirloom when it is kept in a family and continually passed down from one generation to the next. The King of Sicily therefore rejects his father’s heirloom by giving it away to someone outside of his family, at which point the cloth ceases to be an heirloom and transforms into a gift of good will. But the gift borne of the King of Sicily’s good will fails to offer anything good to Syr Artyus’s realm.

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<sup>188</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 60.

The emperor's prized kingdom soon faces disorder because he falls into sin through his incestuous desire for Emaré. The cloth enters his life and paints him not as a worthy conqueror, but as a man who cannot overcome his own desire and the cloth's wondrous properties.

Included in these wondrous properties is a sexual charge that seems to emanate from the cloth and is rooted in its Saracen origins. Joseph Massad contends that "sex was always an important feature of Orientalist fantasy."<sup>189</sup> Indeed, the East is often characterized by the West as the locale of "untiring sensuality [and] unlimited desire."<sup>190</sup> These associations of the East with excessive desire and sexual impropriety are bound up with the cloth and are continually transferred onto surrounding Christians. The cloth thereby reveals itself as a *thing*: as Bill Brown argues, "*the thing seems to name the object, just as it is, even as it names some thing else.*"<sup>191</sup> Seeing it for the first time, the emperor is awed and can only ask the King of Sicily "[h]ow may thys be?"<sup>192</sup> Syr Artyus exclaims, "Sertes, thys ys a fayry, / Or ellys a vanyté!"<sup>193</sup> The King of Sicily has no answer, and as a result, he can only reply by saying, "So ryche a jwell ys ther non / In all Crystyanté."<sup>194</sup> The emperor is so shocked by the existence of this cloth that he believes it must be either from the fairy world or an illusion. This frames the cloth as "other", as outside of anything Christianity knows.

This unknown nature of the cloth suggests that the cloth is not a mere object, but a thing. Michael van Dussen observes that "[a] thing for Chaucer, and for many of his contemporaries, could be an object whose human perceivers notice as surprising or unintegrated or as functioning

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<sup>189</sup> Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>190</sup> Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique* 1 (1985): 103.

<sup>191</sup> Bill Brown, *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5.

Italics original.

<sup>192</sup> "Emaré," in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, l. 102.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 104-105.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 108.

differently than they think it is supposed to.”<sup>195</sup> Bill Brown writes that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested.”<sup>196</sup> Though the cloth does not break down, it does disrupt what its perceivers understand to be the normal workings of nature and results in a reconfiguration of the subject-object relationship where “the agency of the source of surprise (the thing) is manifest.”<sup>197</sup> By asserting itself as something more than an object with its own agency, the cloth considerably undermines the notion of Christian superiority.

Indeed, it often seems to make conscious the latent desires of characters while rejecting the desires projected onto it by these same characters. As a case in point, it brings to the forefront Sir Artyus’s incestuous desire, and this newfound lust is contrary to the King of Sicily’s good intentions. In the stanza immediately following Sir Artyus’s acceptance of the gift, “[t]he Emperour aftur hys dowghtur hadde longyng.”<sup>198</sup> The emperor’s desire emerges abruptly: as soon as he receives the cloth, he starts to have sexually charged feelings for his daughter when previously he did not. His sexual desire becomes clear when he sees his daughter and grows “anamored”: “Wyth her he thowghth to worche hys will, / And wedde her to hys wife.”<sup>199</sup> The emperor’s decision to wed his daughter is made after he accepts the cloth from the King of Sicily, which suggests that his lust is tied to the cloth.

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<sup>195</sup> Michael van Dussen, “Things,” in *A New Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2019), 47.

<sup>196</sup> Bill Brown, *Things*, 4.

<sup>197</sup> Michael van Dussen, “Things,” 477-8.

<sup>198</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, l. 188.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 226-228.

European writers in the Middle Ages often imagined Saracens and the East as “insistently connected to the supposed exorbitance of their sexuality.”<sup>200</sup> The fact that the emperor’s sexual desire appears as soon as he accepts the gift signifies what cannot be contained within the cloth: exorbitant sexuality and the threat of the East. In his uncontrollable lust, the emperor becomes more Eastern and less Christian, and therefore less fit to rule a Christian kingdom. While the cloth was won by the King of Sicily’s father, it is not fully conquered. The Sultan may be defeated, but the Saracen essence—meaning the traces of Saracen culture and history the cloth carries into Christian communities—implicated in this war prize is not. It is this essence that makes conscious the emperor’s desire and undermines his claim to rulership. He ends up not being the worthy participant in a narrative of Western conquest that the King of Sicily thought him to be. The Saracen nature of the cloth has successfully infiltrated the emperor’s Christian kingdom by foregrounding his incestuous desire, destroying his perfect image in the process and revealing that Christianity has not yet fully conquered the Muslim East.

Elizabeth Archibald notes that “father-daughter incest was a disturbingly popular motif in medieval literature.”<sup>201</sup> Although the trope itself is not extraordinary, the incestuous desire in *Emaré* is in fact remarkable because it challenges how the poem sets Syr Artyus up as a character.

Sir Artyus was the best manne  
 In the worlde that lyvede thanne,  
 [...] He was curtais in all thyngge,  
 Bothe to olde and to yyngge.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 125.

<sup>201</sup> Archibald, Elizabeth. “Fathers and Daughters,” in *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>202</sup> “Emaré,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 37-40.

Emaré's father appears to be a respectable man and an adept emperor. The absolutist rhetoric in his description directly contradicts his incestuous desire for his daughter. He is not just a good man, but the "best" man. He is not just sometimes courteous, but courteous in "all thynges." Yet his sinful lust destroys this image of perfection and causes disruption to his Christian realm. The disjunction between the emperor's description and his desire suggests that there is some other origin of his desire, namely, the cloth.

The cloth either creates or exaggerates the emperor's lust. Once the Pope grants the emperor permission to wed his own daughter, the emperor refashions the Eastern cloth into a robe that Syr Artyus intends to give to his daughter as a wedding gift:

Than was the Emperour gladde and blythe,  
 And lette shape a robe swythe  
 Of that cloth of golde;  
 And when hyt was don her upon,  
 She semed non erthely wommon,  
 [...] Then seyde the Emperour so fre,  
 "Dowghtyr, y woll wedde the,  
 Thow art so fresh to beholde."<sup>203</sup>

The word "swythe" emphasizes the inappropriate haste with which the emperor acts. He has been set up as a perfect ruler only to fall short of this characterization by acting irrationally and impulsively. His masculinity consequently degenerates: he is not the Christian leader with perfect strength and rulership, but the incestuous father who cannot control his own desire. An inability to control one's emotions and desires is commonly associated with Saracens: both Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* and the Sultan in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* are governed by their desires, easily agreeing to convert to Christianity to attain the objects of their love. The fact that this emotional incontinence is now transferred to a Christian ruler indicates that the Saracen essence within the cloth has transgressed the physical boundaries of the cloth and affected

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., ll. 241-252.

change in its owner. The acceptance of the King of Sicily's gift coincides with the emperor's abrupt change in character, confirming that the cloth is responsible for his transformation. Moreover, Emaré wears the cloth when her father orally expresses his desire for her for the first time. Her unearthliness in the Eastern robe compels him to speech, and he commands rather than questions her, negating her agency in the process. Instead of asking Emaré if she will marry him, Syr Artyus tells her that he is going to marry her because she is beautiful. In the same way that the emperor reshapes the cloth in order to make it into a wedding gift, he attempts to reshape his daughter into his wife by clothing her in the robe. It is as if, for the emperor, the cloth has become an inescapable fetish.

Yet the cloth fulfills neither his intention nor his desire. It fails as a wedding gift because Emaré rejects his advances and urges her father to “[t]ake God [...] before.”<sup>204</sup> Her direct appeal to God highlights the monstrosity of Syr Artyus's desire, which not only undermines his authority and goes against the perfection of his character, but also goes against God. Instead of feeling remorse for his sin, he grows “ryght wrothe”<sup>205</sup> and sends his daughter into exile without food or drink, swearing “many a gret othe” that “deed shulde she be.”<sup>206</sup> Emaré floats away from her home in “the robe of nobull ble.”<sup>207</sup> Here, the emperor moves rapidly from lust to wrath, a characterization that matches that of Saracen men. But the cloth's wearer does not wish to marry the gift-giver. As the cloth does not fulfill the gift-giver's intentions for it, he sends it away with Emaré. His rapid movements from emotion to emotion are indicative of growing masculine degeneracy and an effeminacy that is often also associated with Muslims. Here, the emperor is completely controlled by his own desire and cannot see beyond it.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., l. 261.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., l. 265.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., ll. 266-267.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., l. 270.

Abrupt emotion strikes Sir Artyus again when he loses sight of Emaré and the Eastern cloth:

The Emperour hym bethowght  
 That he hadde all mysrowght,  
 And was a sory knyghte.  
 He fell down in sowenyng,  
 To the erthe was he dyght.<sup>208</sup>

Once the cloth disappears, Sir Artyus immediately regrets his actions, falling to the ground in a swoon. Barry Windeatt characterizes medieval swoons as “an absolute response [in which] further ability to think and feel is temporarily overpowered [...] the body is weakened [and] the heart suffers.”<sup>209</sup> Incestuous desire makes Sir Artyus fall both morally and physically. His intense emotion weakens his ability to be rational in this moment of swooning, which further detracts from his original characterization as a perfect ruler. Sir Artyus’s immediate regret and physical downfall make it seem as if he had not just previously sent her away himself, rendering the relationship between the Eastern cloth and Sir Artyus even more suspect. During these moments of incestuous desire, the text solely refers to Sir Artyus as “the Emperour.” Now that he regrets the repercussions of his incestuous desire, he returns to his identity as a “knyghte.” This return is significant because, before the cloth enters his life, Sir Artyus is characterized as a character who is more than an emperor. He was also a great and courteous man who ruled fairly. Becoming a “sory knyghte” in the absence of the cloth re-aligns him with his former life of courtesy. Though Sir Artyus was originally completely enchanted by the cloth, now he merely thinks of his daughter and how he has wronged her. The physical absence of the cloth coinciding with his great remorse renders the cloth more suspect. Its Saracen essence amplifies the

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., ll. 280-285.

<sup>209</sup> Barry Windeatt, “The Art of Swooning in Middle English,” in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann*, edited by Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan, 212.



emperor's illicit desire and thereby corrupts a powerhouse of Christian virtue, breaking a Christian stronghold and threateningly revealing that the East will not be appropriated by the West.

The only character in the text who can ignore the Saracen cloth is Emaré, who lacks desire. She is uninfluenced by the cloth: its exotic charms are invisible to her and have no impact on her. Although she always wears it, she treats the cloth as if it were any other piece of clothing and expresses no admiration for it in spite of its uniqueness. Although her lack of desire cannot erase the Saracen essence embodied by the cloth, which continues to pop up throughout the text, her lack of desire protects her from being led astray by it. It is this lack of desire that neutralizes the Saracen essence in the Eastern cloth for its user.

In *Emaré*, the cloth functions as a *thing* that resists Christianity by unveiling the desires of Christian characters while simultaneously rejecting these same desires. The King of Sicily's father gifts his son the Eastern cloth as an heirloom, but the son gives it away to the emperor as a gift of peace. As a gift, the cloth changes from an object to a *thing* that troubles subject-object relations and challenges the Christian community in which it participates. The emperor's realm does not experience peace; Emaré refuses to marry her father. These instances all suggest that the cloth in this poem represents a Saracen essence—meaning the traces of Saracen culture and history carried into the Christian community by the cloth—that refuses to be contained and silenced. Its place in a Christian community poses a challenge to Christian morality and serves as an emblem for a larger cultural dynamic between Christians and Muslims. The cloth, in its repudiation of Christian desire, reveals that it is impossible for the Christian to fully conquer the Saracen.

## ii – The Saracen Body as Rebel in *Bevis of Hampton*

Josian, the Saracen princess who converts to Christianity in *Bevis of Hampton*, demonstrates a more unintentional form of resistance in comparison to the cloth in *Emaré*. Born to King Ermin, the ruler of Armenia, she is set to inherit his lands and wealth upon her marriage to a suitable Saracen. However, Josian instead falls in love with Bevis, who is an unapologetically Christian knight. She desperately wants to be the ideal partner for Bevis, but cannot force her Saracen body to fit neatly into the category of Christian femininity (as Chapter 2 describes). Her body rebels against Christian domesticity, continually exposing her incomplete conversion. While love may compel the Saracen to convert, it cannot entirely erase one's Saracen identity. Christianity then, even in the case of a convert, cannot erase Islamic roots. It is important to note that conversion pertains to not only the convert, but the community who perceives the conversion and judges if the person is truly converted. In the absence of a divine miracle (such as a change in appearance from black to white, as is the case with the King of Tars), a Christian community would determine whether or not a conversion is successful.<sup>210</sup> To be a successful convert, Josian has to be accepted by both the text and her Christian community.

Outwardly, Josian is the ideal tropological figure in support of Christian conquest: she willingly converts to Christianity out of her love for Bevis, the text's foremost champion of Christianity. But her Saracen temperament and eventual incomplete conversion problematize this characterization. When Josian converts, she does so out of an uncontainable desire for Bevis, not a changed faith. While the conversion of Saracen princesses in romance is often motivated by love (as is the case with Floripas in *The Sultan of Babylon*, who betrays her father and Saracen

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<sup>210</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 78.

community out of her love for Sir Guy), Josian's case is unique because her love is lustful.<sup>211</sup>

Her desire to convert, therefore, might signify the uncontrollability of Saracen desire rather than the strength of Christianity. Curiously, the text does not condemn her lust and views her love for Bevis as genuine: "Josiane, that maide bright, / [...] lovede Beves with al hire might."<sup>212</sup> Still, as lust is one of the cardinal sins, the conflation of love with lust in Josian's case stands at odds with Christian values and reveals an inconsistency in their application. That the text characterizes Josian's love as lust suggests that true love, in the Christian sense, is not possible for the Saracen woman, just as true Christian motherhood is beyond her grasp.

Josian pines after Bevis multiple times before she finally agrees to convert. The first time, she laments to "Mahoun":

'Oh Mahoun' she seide [...]
 Al this world yif ich it hedde,  
 Ich him yeve me to wedde;  
 Boute he me love, icham dede.<sup>213</sup>

In this scene, Josian lies ill with lovesickness, waiting for Bevis to return safely from his battle with a monstrous boar. For Josian, the world is meaningless if she cannot have Bevis. Her second expression of desire is a direct proclamation of love: "'Beves, lemman, thin ore! / Ichave loved thee ful yore."<sup>214</sup> She demands that Bevis love her and do with her what he will: "Boute thow me love, icham dede, / And boute thow with me do thee wille."<sup>215</sup> Josian's request is implicitly sexual, but her sexual desire for Bevis becomes more explicit when she says she would rather have Bevis's "bodi in thee scherte naked, / Than al the gold that Crist hath maked."<sup>216</sup> In

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<sup>211</sup> "The Sultan of Babylon," in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1990), ll. 1891-6.

<sup>212</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1999), ll. 913-4.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 890, 893-5.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1093-1094.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1096-1097.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1107-1108.

her repetitive expressions of desire for Bevis, Josian displays a lack of modesty and a hypersexuality that cannot be contained, both characteristics ill-befitting of a potential Christian wife. Because Bevis continually rejects her, she turns to Christianity to make her plea and shifts from thinking of Mahoun to thinking of Christ. In her seduction, Josian seems to agree with Bevis that the world was made by Christ. After Bevis rejects her again, however, she immediately curses him with Mahoun: “Mahoun thee yeve tene and wrake!”<sup>217</sup>

John Tolan explains that medieval thinkers often conflated Muslims and pagans, both of which were peoples thought to worship idols: “many [...] refer[red] to pagan idols by the name of Muhammad, in various corrupted forms (Mahomet, Mahon, Mahoum, Mawmet).”<sup>218</sup> Peter the Venerable (1092-1156), the eighth Abbot of Cluny, disagreed with these thinkers and argued that Muslims did not worship idols and were therefore not pagans. He saw them as heretics, contending that “Islam may be considered a summation of Christian heresies.”<sup>219</sup> Nonetheless, Mohammed (or “Mahoun”, in this text) was a figure who aroused much suspicion. Peter the Venerable’s *Summa totius heresis Saracenorum* (The Summary of the Entire Heresy of the Saracens) characterizes Mahoun as “very wretched and wicked” and accuses the prophet of having “condemned almost a third of the human race by some unknown judgment of God and by unheard-of, raving-mad tales, to the devil and eternal death.”<sup>220</sup> A Saracen who invokes “Mahoun,” then, aligns herself with wickedness and reveals herself to be an unworthy potential candidate for Christian conversion.

To prove that she can be converted, Josian has to entirely forsake Mahoun, but she does

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., l. 1118.

<sup>218</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 126.

<sup>219</sup> James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 141.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 123.

not. In times of anger and frustration, she returns to Mahoun. When Josian still cannot convince Bevis to love her through words, she decides to take action and sneak into his chambers: “And, what ever of me befall, / Ich wile wende in to is halle!”<sup>221</sup> She cannot restrain her own sexual desire, and actively plans to seduce him. Bevis overhears her plans and rejects her again, which finally compels her to agree to convert to Christianity: “And ich wile right now to mede / Min false godes al forsake / And Cristendom for thee love take!”<sup>222</sup> Josian figures her gods as “false” now, but the proximity of this claim to her earlier lament to Mahoun is suspicious. Her inconstancy when it comes to religion also renders suspect her initial desire to convert to Christianity. Josian’s conversion, largely motivated by sexual desire, is ingenuine, and her sexual excess—a defining trait of Saracens in much medieval romance, according to Geraldine Heng—prevents her from being an unproblematic candidate for conversion.<sup>223</sup>

Josian’s Saracen nature reveals itself again when she commits murder to avoid being raped. In medieval hagiography, there is a long tradition of Christian women resisting rape. Most of these women retained their purity through divine retribution or by inadvertently dispatching the perpetrator. For example, Custance in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* is almost raped by “a thief”<sup>224</sup> and “cride pitously,” retaining her image as the helpless Christian woman whose survival depends on her faith.<sup>225</sup> Custance is then miraculously saved by the “blisful Marie.”<sup>226</sup> She does struggle against her assailant “wel and myghtily,” but in the process, “The thief fil over bord al sodeynly / [...] And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance.”<sup>227</sup> The phrase “al

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<sup>221</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 1177-1178.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1194-1196.

<sup>223</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 187.

<sup>224</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 915.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 919.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 920.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 922, 924.

sodeynly” indicates surprise and effectively absolves Custance of any responsibility in the matter. Her struggle is thereby sidelined while God’s role in her rescue is brought to the forefront. The threat of rape here is not actually about Custance; it is about her ability to resist through faith alone and maintain her identity as the paragon of Christian femininity.

Josian, on the other hand, does not exactly leave her fate up to God. She displays no weakness and does not cry like Custance; instead, as mentioned in Chapter 2, she murders Mile after he forcibly weds her in order to rape her: “Be the nekke she hath him up tight / And let him so ride al the night. / Josian lai in hire bed.”<sup>228</sup> This scene is grotesque in its detail. Josian hangs Mile with a rope, and then sleeps soundly and unrepentantly throughout the night with his corpse in the room. The jarring image demonstrates the incompatibility between Christian femininity and Josian’s character. She is loyal and virginal but cannot suffer men’s desires and prefers killing to submitting. Her characterization seems to self-consciously recall Judith’s murder of Holofernes, though it does not go so far as to make Josian another Judith as, unlike Judith, Josian does not turn to Christianity in her murderous act (see Chapter 2, subsection i). She is unapologetic in the aftermath of Mile’s murder, nonchalantly announcing to Mile’s people:

Yesterndai he me wedded with wrong  
 And tonight ichave him honge.  
 Doth be me al youre wille,  
 Schel he never eft wimman spille!<sup>229</sup>

Josian preserves her own virginity, but her rejection of Saracen sexual excess in others coupled with her murder of Mile showcase her difficulty with reconciling two religious and cultural identities. She cannot mirror ideal Christian femininity, and as a result she continues to be a

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., ll. 3223-3225.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., ll. 3253-3256.

source of anxiety in the text. Her potential for an imperfect Christianization poses a serious threat to Bevis and Christianity.

Josian further resists Christian feminine ideals by continually undermining Bevis's Christian masculinity and retaining her agency throughout the text. Her engagement in Bevis's battle with the lions cements her Saracen Otherness and underscores the problem of her prospective conversion: she might remain incapable of full assimilation. In this battle, Josian fears for Bevis's safety and attempts to aid him by holding down one of the lions. Bevis has to correct Josian's non-Christian behaviour twice, both times refusing to allow her participation in the battle. His first reprimand is a warning:

Thou shalt never umbraide me,  
When thou comest hoom to my contré:  
But thou let hem goo both twoo,  
Have good day, fro thee I go!<sup>230</sup>

Bevis's warning indicates that he is concerned with how Josian will behave in his own country. He does not know whether or not Josian is capable of assimilating to her new role as a Christian queen, and he worries, moreover, that she will compromise his prowess. Kathryn L. Lynch observes that "if the East is geographically and culturally Other in the West, it is also made sexually strange, especially acting as the site where gender distinctions are blurred, the threat of the feminine more explicitly acknowledged, and the relationship between the sexes subtly and fundamentally defined."<sup>231</sup> Josian is a significant threat to Bevis's masculinity in this scene. The more active she is, the more passive he becomes. To address his fear of her continually undermining his authority, he tells Josian that she can never oppose him again once they return

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., ll. 2417-20.

<sup>231</sup> Kathryn L. Lynch, "East Meets West in Chaucer's Squire's and Franklin's Tales," *Speculum* 70 (1995), 532.

to Hampton. He also threatens to leave her unless she releases the lion so he can fight two of them at once.

But the threat of his departure is not enough for Josian, and she continues to run interference. Bevis has to threaten to kill Josian for her to allow him to fight alone:

[Bevis] swor be God in Trinité,  
 Boute she lete that lioun be,  
 A wolde hire sle in that destresse  
 Ase fain ase the liounesse.<sup>232</sup>

The cave becomes a site of contest where the two lions reveal the disjunction between Bevis and Josian. While the lions are paired, the couple are at odds and cannot agree on how to proceed with the fight. Engaging with the lions causes disunion between Bevis and Josian, which may suggest that their two religions are ultimately incompatible with one another. Bevis needs to continually correct Josian's behavior, making it unlikely for her to become the ideal Christian queen. His extreme response to her second interference reveals his fear of her incomplete Christianization. He says that he will kill her as gladly as he kills the lioness, should she not heed his command to release the lioness. Here, Bevis perceives Josian as a threat to both his Christian and masculine identity. If she cannot remain passive in battle and neatly fit into the category of Christian femininity, he sees her as no more than another beast he must kill for the sake of maintaining his masculinity. His viciousness implies that Josian's worth, in Bevis's eyes, is directly tied to how successful her conversion will be. Heng argues that "conversion is the cornerstone of Christianity."<sup>233</sup> Josian matters only because of the implications a successful conversion would have on Bevis's ability to be a political figure who wields power in a culturally prescribed way. A successfully converted Josian marks him as a victorious crusader

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<sup>232</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 2475-8.

<sup>233</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 78.



and quintessential Christian ruler. An incomplete conversion, on the other hand, figures him as an ineffectual Christian ruler who fails to eradicate the Saracen, instead bringing the Saracen threat home.

Not only does Josian threaten Bevis's masculinity as a Christian crusader knight, she also threatens his maturation into a complete Christian hero. She intercedes for the giant Ascopart, protecting him from being killed by Bevis and also preventing Bevis from completing a necessary rite of passage. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that in crusading romances, it is often a necessary trope for heroes to battle monsters such as giants: "the giant's destruction [allows] the knight to accomplish the feat that will provoke public recognition of his true identity as hero, as a man powerfully aligned with masculinity."<sup>234</sup> According to Cohen, the traditional beheading of the giant is crucial to the hero's growth.<sup>235</sup> Though a fight with a giant is often a major action in a hero's career, even if it does not always define the hero. Bevis successfully fights many other monsters in the tale. But Bevis is not able to fully defeat Ascopart, the quasi-Saracen giant who goes on to betray him by returning Josian to her Saracen husband, King Yvor.

During their fight, Bevis overpowers Ascopart and "wolde have smiten of is heved," but "Josian besoughte him, it were beveled: / 'Sire,' she seide, 'so God thee save, / Let him liven and ben our knave!'"<sup>236</sup> Josian's intercession for Ascopart prevents Bevis from being the unchallenged hero of the romance. She stops him at the exact moment he intends to behead Ascopart and consequently, Bevis's desired identity as a perfect Christian knight is deferred because he cannot defeat what is arguably his most important opponent. Ascopart is the only named monster that Bevis fights. Bevis's other foes are either named collectively ("fifti

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<sup>234</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 73.

<sup>235</sup> See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, pages 73-4.

<sup>236</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of England*, ll. 2543, 2544-6.

Sarasins”) or are nameless wild beasts (“the bor”).<sup>237</sup> That the text gives this giant a name suggests he is a significant opponent, more so than the multitudes of Saracens and beasts Bevis defeats easily.<sup>238</sup> Ascopart is the physical embodiment of Saracen monstrosity in this text, and defeating him would confer a certain kind of Christian knighthood onto Bevis. Though the trope of fighting giants in romances does not automatically confer religious significance, Ascopart is a giant explicitly aligned with the Saracens and consequently Islam. He is loyal to the Saracen King Yvor. Ascopart stands in the way of perfection for Bevis: Cohen notes that Ascopart’s “very name figures a resistance to incorporation [...] ‘Ascopart’ is a proper noun that designates ‘a desert people of the Near East.’”<sup>239</sup> When Ascopart is invited to convert to Christianity, he recoils from the priest and proclaims: “Icham to meche to be cristine!”<sup>240</sup> Ascopart’s rhetoric suggests that his excessive giant’s body is too much to be converted to Christianity, which in turn suggests that a monstrous body cannot convert and be saved. He is innately a non-Christian. Bevis’s masculinity in this text thus depends on not only his ability to defeat fierce monsters, but also his ability to defeat Saracen and quasi-Saracen monsters as a Christian knight. His inability to defeat Ascopart here indicates that his Christian masculinity is incomplete. Much like Josian is at risk of not becoming a complete Christian, Bevis is at risk of not becoming a complete crusader. Josian keeps him from pursuing his hero’s journey as he may have otherwise done, ultimately suggesting that in his partnership with her, he can neither live up to his full potential nor attain perfect Christian masculinity. The Saracen body becomes too much of a threat to be ignored.

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., l. 635, 806.

<sup>238</sup> This may be a wider motif, as something similar is found in *The Sultan of Babylon*: giants and their families are named and even belong to the Sultan’s forces. By contrast, however, *Bevis of Hampton* names no other monsters apart from Ascopart. Bevis does fight another giant who is the brother of “Grandere,” a non-giant Saracen king (l. 1876) – but this giant is only ever referred to as “the geaunt” (l. 1875, l. 1881, l. 1900, l. 1903).

<sup>239</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, 173.

<sup>240</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” in *Four Romances of England*, l. 2596.

Unlike Ascopart, who is a completely unsympathetic character in his betrayal of Josian, Josian is humanized and thereby more sympathetic. She is not a monstrous Saracen, but an imperfect quasi-Christian. It is her “otherness” as a Saracen princess that causes anxiety for the Christian reader, as this “otherness” repeatedly prevents her from being fully incorporated into Christianity. Josian’s limited faith in the Christian God due to her “otherness” undercuts her prospective conversion. Bevis is in part so perturbed by her intrusion because he wants to fight both lions and leave his victory or loss to God. Unlike his lover, he has complete faith that God will protect him. Conversely, Josian chooses to place her trust in herself rather than in the Christian God when it comes to protecting her beloved. These shows of impropriety dehumanize her in Bevis’s eyes, as it is not love and protection he seeks from her, but obedience and the promise of complete Christianization—neither of which she can provide. Bevis harbours the hope that things will be different after Josian converts. This does not quite happen: her limited faith crops up again post-baptism and near the end of the text. Bevis goes into battle and, believing him dead, Josian immediately sends her two sons to avenge him: “Now kethe ye ben noble knightes, / And wrekeþ your fader with your mightes!”<sup>241</sup> Bevis, saved by his two sons, expresses his gratitude to Jesus: “And thankede Jesu, our saviour, / That hadde sent him so gode sokour.”<sup>242</sup> Bevis misattributes the cause of his rescue to God rather than Josian, who continues to interfere for her husband even though he wants to trust God over human action. Her choice to do so interferes with Bevis’s Christian faith because what he believes are divine miracles might simply be the result of Josian’s lack of faith.

The success of Josian’s conversion to Christianity is questionable at best. There is no indication that her lustful and assertive temperament undergoes any change post-baptism. As

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., ll. 4465-6.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., ll. 4525-6.

evidenced by her distance from Christian ideals and beliefs, she is not a suitable partner for the ruler of a Christian empire. Her incomplete conversion attests to the impossibility of Saracen erasure: as long as there remains some constituent of the East, the power struggle between Saracen and Christian will continue and Christianity cannot assert full dominance over Islam. This impossibility of complete erasure was previously observed with the cloth in *Emaré*, and will also recur in the figure of the Sultanness in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*.

### iii – The Peril of Loyalty: Saracen and Pagan Resistance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*

Geraldine Heng asserts that “there should be little doubt that what [Chaucer's] Custance accomplishes in her story is the enactment of a successful crusade.”<sup>243</sup> For her, Custance is yet another example of “a beautiful woman succeed[ing], wagering her sexuality, in cultural fantasy.”<sup>244</sup> Though Custance may succeed in converting Saracens and pagans, Christianization efforts in the text as a whole remain incomplete due to the presence of two figures of active resistance: the Saracen Sultanness in Syria and the pagan Donegild in Northumberland. John Tolan notes that the term “Saracen” was often linked with “pagan” in the Middle Ages: “for many western Europeans [...] Saracens were pagans, and pagans were Saracens.”<sup>245</sup> The two female antagonists in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* represent both, and parallel one another as Custance's successive mothers-in-law.

Though the Sultanness appears very briefly, she is the heart of Saracen resistance in the poem as well as the heart of monstrosity. This coalescence is not coincidental: the Sultanness is a

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<sup>243</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 189.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>245</sup> John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 128.

Tolan elaborates on this point: “[t]he image is so common that writers on Islam who know better—from the twelfth century on—go to great pains to explain that the Saracens *are not* pagans.”

monster not because she is a Saracen (as other Saracens in the text are not depicted as monstrous), but because she actively resists Christianization through violence and other unnatural means. From the beginning, the Sultanness is characterized as irredeemably evil and is explained away by the text as part of Satan's greater plan. She is presented as a "welle of vices" as soon as she enters the text.<sup>246</sup> While Chaucer's narrators cannot always be taken at face value, it must be noted that the reader is not given the chance to judge the Sultanness independently (though they can judge the narrator's credibility and the merchants' credibility in their descriptions of Custance); the narrator judges her for them, permanently painting her in sinful colours. The message here is clear: resisting Christianity is a sin, and everything the sinner does must be understood as unambiguously evil. This image of sin follows the Sultanness – she is the "roote of iniquitee"<sup>247</sup> and the venomous "serpent under femynynytee."<sup>248</sup> In likening the Sultanness to a serpent, the narrator aligns her with Satan, who once disguised himself as a serpent to tempt Eve and bring about the fall of mankind. Addressing Satan, the narrator exclaims, "Thou wolt fordoon this Cristen marriage. / Thyn instrument so, weylawey the while, / Makestow of wommen whan thou wolt bigile."<sup>249</sup> Like Satan, the Sultanness wishes to stop the marriage between her son and Custance and, in turn, the alliance between East and West that would only be advantageous for Christians; like Satan, the Sultanness opposes Christianization. She intends to slaughter her son and his supporters, which is a monstrous act in itself. However, the narrator consciously chooses to insert her into a Christian cosmos by describing her as an "instrument" of Satan, thereby placing her agency in a secondary position. Satan, the worst

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<sup>246</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 1987), ll. 322.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 358.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 359-360.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 369-371.

enemy of all Christians, acts through the Sultanness and is the one to blame for her monstrosity, not her own desire to rule Syria and preserve her religion. The narrator thus tries to dwarf the Sultanness by explaining her actions through the concepts of Christian good and evil.

Yet the Sultanness's characterization contradicts this tidy explanation. She unveils herself as an agent who makes logical choices based on her loyalties. She is therefore not unambiguously evil: her evil lies in her faith to her country and religion, a faith which would be commended were she a Christian and not a Saracen. Rather than allow her son to convert all of Syria to Christianity, she "for her conseil sente"<sup>250</sup> and conveys the threat of Christianity to her people: "What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe / But thraldom to oure bodies and penance / And afterward in helle to be drawe?"<sup>251</sup> The Sultanness exclaims she would rather die than renounce her faith: "The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte / Than Makometes lawe out of my herte!"<sup>252</sup> In her faith to Islam, the Sultanness also exhibits loyalty, albeit the wrong kind of loyalty.

Jacqueline de Weever points out that "faced with the Saracen Other, the values of [...] the society producing the poem are placed in the service of political propaganda [...] are subverted, then erased and destroyed [and] the value of loyalty [...] is gutted of its importance when it is shown to be relative."<sup>253</sup> But the Sultanness is not the only character in the text who privileges country and religion over family; Custance's father does the same. The text explains "[t]hat in destruccioun of mawmettrie, / And in encrees of Cristes lawe deere, / They been acorded."<sup>254</sup> Custance's people, along with her father, decide that it is worthwhile to give up the "mirour of

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., l. 326.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., ll. 337-339.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., ll. 335-336.

<sup>253</sup> Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland Pub, 1998), 112.

<sup>254</sup> Chaucer, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 236-238.

alle curteisye” (Custance) in order to destroy an Islamic Syria.<sup>255</sup> Although Custance’s father, unlike the Sultaness, does not engage in deception or filicide, he too gives up a child to eradicate a threat to his kingdom and faith. The narrator’s silence suggests acceptance of his decision, while conversely, the narrator judges the Sultaness at every turn. The Sultaness and Custance’s father are evidently held to different moral standards. It is understandable for the emperor to relinquish his daughter to protect the Christian realm, but demonic for the Sultaness to relinquish her son to protect the Saracen realm. Christian values in this romance become relative, dependent on appropriate “ideologies of empire and superiority,” and are thus diminished because between establishing empire and maintaining Christian values, the former is almost always prioritized.<sup>256</sup>

The Sultaness’s resistance to Christianity is not only because of her faith to Islam, but also to her autonomous womanhood. She understands early on that compromise between Saracen and Christian femininity is unachievable and that the only acceptable response to Christianization is therefore radical rejection. The Sultaness’s criticism of Christianity mirrors what Custance has already submitted to: “What sholde us tyden this newe lawe / But thraldom to oure bodies and penance.”<sup>257</sup> Earlier, when Custance reluctantly goes to Syria to marry the Sultan at the behest of her father and his people, she muses: “I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille! / Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance.”<sup>258</sup> The Sultaness, in contesting this point, reveals that she does not believe it is woman’s role to submit. She rejects this form of living, choosing to preserve her own agency and desire. Custance frames her words as a statement of fact, showing her acquiescence to ideal

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., l. 166.

<sup>256</sup> Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*, 130.

<sup>257</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 337-339.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., ll. 285-287.

Christian femininity; the Sultanness, on the other hand, positions her words as a question, upsetting Christian gender roles and power structures as Christian women are to acquiesce and not question things. Clearly, a Christian femininity is not the kind of identity the Sultanness wants to assume. For her, it is slavery without reward which she rejects to retain her claims to political power, freedom of speech, and agency. In this text, all these things are possible to have as a Saracen woman and impossible for a Christian one. The Sultan's death represents the radical ending of one phase and the beginning of another: for both Syria and the Sultanness, this beginning is the continuation of Islam under woman's rule.<sup>259</sup>

The Christianity endorsed by the *The Man of Law's Tale* through Custance ultimately offers less space for autonomous femininity than the Saracen tradition belonging to the Sultanness, a fact which compels her to resist Christianity and maintain her faith even though her son—the Sultan—willingly converts. She completely refuses to submit to these patriarchal structures, representing a femininity that poses a threat to traditional Christian masculinity and perhaps to Saracen masculinity as well, which is suggested by the fragmented rule. Her “conseil” is not characterized as being part of the Syrian political structure,<sup>260</sup> while the Sultan has a “[...] baronage / And alle hise liges” at his disposal.<sup>261</sup> The Sultan lords over people who are part of this feudalist structure and are naturally expected to accompany rulers. The difference between the Sultanness's and the Sultan's entourage mark the Sultanness as doubly unnatural, to Christianity and even to Islam.

The romance frames her femininity as Other: it is antagonistic and in direct opposition to Custance's, whose Christian femininity is of the ideal, intercessory variety. The Sultanness's

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<sup>259</sup> This kind of structure would have been inconceivable in Islam.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., l. 326.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., ll. 239-40.



overt rejection of Christianity and Custance's femininity implies that while Christianity may have some benefits for male converts, it has little to offer female converts. Christian women like Custance, who are to represent the ideal of Christian femininity, cannot wield power themselves; they must serve as channels through which power can travel. In rejecting this kind of secondary power, the Sultanness seeks to retain her agency and individualism. It is not borne out of any particular monstrosity, but a logical choice. Though the Muslim being blind to a greater Christian reality is a common trope in medieval texts, the *Man of Law's Tale* offers no evidence that the Sultanness is unable to see this reality. Her fear of the "newe lawe" bringing "[...] thraldom to oure bodies and penance"<sup>262</sup> echoes Custance's earlier statement: "Wommen are born to thraldom and penance," suggesting that the Sultanness does in fact understand Christian law (at least in part) and actively chooses Islam.<sup>263</sup> The conclusion of her story ending in filicide<sup>264</sup> reaffirms how an exclusively Christian space is incompatible with such autonomous femininity.

Like the Sultanness, King Alla's mother, Donegild, is a pagan woman with much power at her disposal, even if it is a coercive power. This power suggests that there is more liberality and mobility in a non-Christian femininity than a Christian one. The messenger, in seeking to benefit himself, chooses to approach Donegild and not Custance: "This messenger to doon his avantage / Unto the kynges mooder rideth swithe."<sup>265</sup> Though Custance is now queen of Northumbria,

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., l. 338.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., l. 286.

<sup>264</sup> The Sultanness's story does not exactly "end" in filicide. After killing the Sultan, the Sultanness continues to live on as Syria's ruler, and the Roman emperor eventually attacks her country (960-64). However, the filicide is the great consequence of the arrival of Christian masculinity in Syria.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., ll. 729-730.

One could argue that the messenger consults with Donegild instead of Constance because he wants to deliver the happy news of Custance's son's delivery—and it would not make sense to tell Constance first, as she already knows (734). However, the messenger's goal is to cultivate favour. If Custance had had any substantial power as queen, the messenger would speak to her first with perhaps a congratulatory message. It is relevant that he does not—and the

Donegild still wields more power. She can grant favours and command men even in the absence of her son, King Alla. The Christian Custance cannot bestow such redress without the approval of a male authority figure. As Paul Strohm explains, the ideal fourteenth-century queen was “one seeking redress rather than one able to institute redress in her own right, and *intercessory*, in that it limited its objective to the modification [and not the overturn] of a previously determined male resolve.”<sup>266</sup> If a queen were to intercede, she did so in a very prescribed, even diplomatic way. She operated within the established value of the king’s mercy, allowing the king to avoid humiliation by always placing herself in an inferior position. The interceding queen might kneel, for example, or request something she admits she has no right to demand. Donegild operates outside of this Christian framework. Unlike the ideal Christian queen, she does not depend on a king’s “previously determined [...] resolve” to act. After judging her son’s marriage to Custance as unfair to herself and to her pagan religion, she takes matters into her own hands and “institute[s] redress” by falsifying the messenger’s letters to her son. Her acts of forgery result in Custance being exiled. Not only can Donegild “institute redress”; she can also have her own feminine domain and enter the domains of others—namely, the domains of men—without compromising her individual identity. Marjorie Wood argues that by intercepting and falsifying the messenger’s letters, Donegild “participates in an economy of exchange ... that was meant to occur only among men, namely, the constable, King Alla, and the messenger.”<sup>267</sup> Donegild successfully permeates this all-male realm, illustrating how she does not fit into the space

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reason he does not is because he knows Donegild has more power to benefit him than the Christian queen Custance does.

<sup>266</sup> Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014), 95-96.

While upper-class women were frowned upon if they intruded into traditional male power roles, this did not mean they avoided doing so in reality. Depicting Saracen and pagan women overstepping the bounds of the Christian ideal of femininity (not the norm) highlights the stereotype of the Christian woman as the ideal.

<sup>267</sup> Marjorie Elizabeth Wood, “The Sultanness, Donegild, and Fourteenth-Century Female Merchants: Interesting Discourses of Gender, Economy, and Orientalism in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 76.

Christian femininity allocates to women in this text. She even offers “ale and wyn” to the “messenger,”<sup>268</sup> who becomes inebriated:

And stolen were his lettres pryvely  
 Out of his box, whil he sleep as a swyn;  
 And countrefeted was ful subtilly  
 Another lettre [...] <sup>269</sup>

The messenger’s drunkenness limits his perceptive abilities, causing him to overlook Donegild’s forgery. He is the passive bystander here, while Donegild is the active agent, moulding future events according to her personal desires through deceit. The comparison between the messenger and a pig debases his humanity. His passivity makes him effeminate and even subhuman, which further elevates the active Donegild’s station. Donegild’s pagan femininity is visibly unlike Custance’s: the former has power to act, while the latter’s power lies in obedience. Donegild’s deceit reveals her absolute unwillingness to renounce paganism for Christianity. If she were a Christian woman, she would not have the power to participate in this exchange of information between men. She would have to renounce her autonomy and submit to male authority like Custance does. Her forgery indicates that for Donegild, this kind of fate is unacceptable. She cannot relinquish the power to act and craft her own fate, and consequently elects to reject Christianity.

The culmination of the Sultanness’s and Donegild’s respective stories—one involving filicide (“The Sowdan and the Cristen everichone / Been al tohewe and stiked at the bord”) and the other ending in matricide (“Alla out of drede / His mooder slow”)<sup>270</sup>—showcases how in Christianity, there is no space for autonomous womanhood. Consequently, Saracen and pagan women like the Sultanness and Donegild must resist Christianization. Their violent conclusions

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<sup>268</sup> Chaucer, “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, l. 743.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 744-747.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 429-430, ll. 893-894.

diverge from Custance's subservient ending, where "[d]oun on her knees falleth she to grounde."<sup>271</sup> Custance's kneeling implies humility and subjugation: she, as the Christian feminine ideal, must submit to all figures of male authority, her father and the Holy Father included. The stark contrast between these women's stories suggests that Saracen as well as pagan femininity and Christian femininity cannot coexist. When they do convene, death is the inevitable result.

The problem of the Sultanness is never fully resolved even by the end of the text, and her failed erasure troubles Custance's happy ending. While the text ends with Custance's son, Maurice, securing his right to rule over many Christian kingdoms, the Sultanness is conspicuously absent. Donegild was very clearly killed by her son, but the Sultanness's ending is ambiguous. After she successfully wrests control of her realm from her son the Sultan, Syria is not mentioned again until the emperor sends his lords "On Surryens to taken heigh vengeance. / They brennen, sleen, and brynge hem to meschance / Ful many a day [...]."<sup>272</sup> The Sultanness's invisibility in this massacre makes it possible for the Sultanness to lurk continually on the periphery of the Christian world and never be fully eliminated or converted. The looming threat of East intruding on West prevents Christianity from fully superseding Islam in the *Man of Law's Tale*, as well as in *Emaré* through the cloth and *Bevis of Hampton* through the characterization of Josian.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., l. 1153.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., ll. 963-965.

## Conclusion

The Saracen is a recurrent figure of interest and even fixation in medieval romance. I demonstrate in Chapter 1 that the Saracen's place in the works of various Christian authors often suggests an implicit imperialist narrative, which frequently treats the Saracen either as a form of threat or as a potential object for Christian conversion. This implicit hierarchical supremacy of Christian over the Saracen, evidenced in my selection of texts by a general Saracen desire to participate in Christian culture and enter into the interior spaces of Christianity, is more subtle and sophisticated than the rhetoric of crusades. Yet I reveal the emergent representational problem that entangles the various Christian authors of such romances: the Saracen becomes too close to the Christian, influencing him and rendering the boundary between the two peoples permeable. The Christian can take on Saracen traits just as the Saracen takes on Christian ones, indicative of a culture of hybridization and not hegemony. From this position, the Saracen slips through its creator's fingers, becoming too difficult to pin down without destroying or eliminating entirely. The imperialist narrative, being unsuccessful, expresses great anxiety over the Saracen rather than endorsing a straightforward narrative of Christian supremacy, and this anxiety frequently finds its habitation within the domain of domesticity.

Chapter 2 focused on the domestic politic in these texts and identified domesticity as the primary site of Christian anxiety over the Saracen. It is specifically within the domestic sphere that Saracens show themselves to be incompatible with Christian ideals. Most significantly, domestic motherhood becomes a crucial focal point for Christian anxiety regarding Saracen integration. Saracen mothers are never natural figures in these romances: they tend to be monstrous, absent, or long since dead. This treatment of Saracen motherhood prevents the Saracen woman from fully participating in Christianity, as engaged motherhood is almost

uniformly a crucial characteristic of ideal Christian princesses. In adhering to their fears of miscegenation and Saracen nurture, these texts reveal that the Saracen cannot ever be fully adopted into Christianity and consequently, without assimilation, cannot be erased in these uneasy incorporations.

Chapter 3 argued that as the Saracen cannot be erased, they will resist within their domestic spheres. The Saracen cloth in *Emaré* subverts the subject-object relation to compel the Christian community; Josian in *Bevis of Hampton* continually proves herself as an unfit partner and wife; the Sultanness in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* rejects Christian femininity in favour of her own femininity. This resistance indicates that Saracen characters cannot be contained, moving past how their authors define them. The narrative of Christian ascendancy and supremacy that these medieval writers espoused as they rewrote the failed reality of the Crusades ultimately fails, showcasing the impossibility of manipulating the Saracen—even a fictitious one—to Christian ends. These tales tell a different narrative: that of Saracen persistence.

These contentions show that controlling the Saracen—in real life and in fiction—was a difficult and even impossible task for Christians of the Middle Ages. Even the narratives they write trouble the distinction between Christian and Saracen rather than reinforce it. Saracen characters warp the imperialist narratives these texts attempt to espouse, always deferring and leaving unfulfilled the narrative of Christian supremacy. Considering the current climate of Islamophobia, it is increasingly important to examine portrayals of Muslim characters in writings and imaginations of the past. The analysis forwarded in this thesis is a useful starting point for the study of related medieval texts containing Saracen and pagan characters and cultures beyond romance.

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