Identifying, Understanding and Incorporating the Other:
Cultural Encounters in Medieval Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation illustrates the complex nature of Christian and Saracen relations by analysing fixed and fluid representations of cultural boundaries in three medieval tales. The first chapter discusses the Sultaness in Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale”; responding to feminist critics, I portray the extreme actions she takes as necessary to the protection of her Saracen subjects from Christian conversion. Rather than regard the Sultaness from her familial position, as so many critics do, and define her as monstrous for murdering her son, I view her in terms of her political standing and use John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* along with René Girard’s theory of sacrificial violence to interpret her actions as essential for the continuation of the Saracen culture. The second chapter contrasts opposing attitudes towards the possibility of integrating the other into Christian society in *The King of Tars* and *Aliscans*. The texts have yet to be read alongside each other by other scholars. This chapter is supplemented with scholarship by Siobhain Bly Calkin which discusses the ability to move between cultural and political groups, criticism by Susanne Conklin Akbari on crossing spiritual boundaries, and incorporates Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s understanding of the portrayal in late Medieval culture of biological otherness. The chapter concludes with a speculative account of the reasons why these two texts have such different views on assimilation.
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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis stems from my interest in cross-cultural interaction and religious conversion in medieval literature. I am especially attracted to Saracen and Christian women and their reasons for moving, or remaining, within their cultural group. Throughout my studies, I found that in the majority of late medieval texts the authors compare Christians and Saracens through a very simple binary: Christians have beautifully pale skin, are noble and pious, whereas Saracens have black skin, and are treacherous and irreverent. This simplistic binary is complicated when you look more deeply at the ambiguous nature of Christian and Saracen morality. For example, some Christian women, such as Katherine from *The Stanzaic Life of Katherine*, were admired for standing up to their Pagan persecutors on behalf of Christianity, while others, such as the Princess from *The King of Tars*, were admired for giving in. I also observed that some texts desired to maintain cultural integrity and separate the two groups by portraying strict biological differences between them\(^1\)—Christians must be white skinned and Saracens must be black—while others embraced these same biological differences and incorporated them in Christian society.\(^2\) As a result of these ideological variations I was compelled to ask: whether Christians had only one, “us” versus “them,” mentality, or, whether late medieval Christians viewed themselves and their Saracen counterparts from other perspectives.

\(^1\) In the majority of romances, a couple of examples being *The Sultan of Babylon* and *Bevis of Hampton*, Saracens are either predisposed to conversion to Christianity because their skin tone is already white, or, as found with the Sultan in *The King of Tars*, there is a transformation at the baptism which enables Saracens to assimilate into Christian society.

\(^2\) Parzival’s Feirefiz has black and white speckled skin which remains after his conversion to Christianity and is accepted in the Christian community. In *Aliscans*, Baudus’ black skin also remains after his conversion, and Rainoart’s gigantism is celebrated for being beneficial to the Christian community (3150-3156).
I began trying to address this question by examining existing scholarship on the Sultaness, a Saracen character from Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale” who kills her son in order to save her people from conversion to Christianity. I chose to look at this tale because the Sultaness is placed in, what modern day readers’ view as, a morally conflicting situation—she destroys her family for the sake of her people—yet she shows no signs of hesitation. The narrator further complicates the situation by taking a stand, deeming her actions morally reprehensible and portraying her as a villain. Of course the narrator’s response is not all that surprising, since the Sultaness is villainous because her actions prevent the spread of Christianity, but it does add another layer of analysis. I was much more surprised to find that the majority of critics also view her actions as monstrous because they define the Sultaness solely through her familial position, rather than look at her deeds in terms of her societal position as a monarchal figure. Jill Mann, for instance, argues that the Sultaness is a mannish or unnatural figure because she chooses to be active rather than to sit passively and watch the destruction of her culture; however, as a monarchal figure, the Sultaness has a responsibility to protect her people and take action. As a result, chapter one is mostly in response to these critics’ interpretation.

Although Geraldine Heng also views the Sultaness from a cultural perspective as a defender of her people, her entire argument fits into one brief paragraph. She describes her in terms of her gender position, as “usurping the functions of a man” (196), and remarks that she “responsibly acted like the political and religious leader of the Islamic nation” (196). My argument is much more in depth; I address problems in the existing criticism, use political theory to discuss the responsibilities of the king’s subjects to either
flatter their ruler or commit tyrannicide against him, and apply René Girard’s concepts of symmetry and sacrificial violence to show that the Sultaness’ reaction was essential to the preservation of cultural difference rather than simply monstrous.

Chapter two discusses and tries to account for *The King of Tars’* and *Aliscans’* differing stance on cultural hybridity\(^3\) and assimilation. These tales come from different periods and geographical locations, are written in different languages and belong to different genres, and so, one would think, it would be difficult to find a connection between the two. However, I decided to write about them both after noticing significant overlap in how the characters cross cultural spheres, their connection between physical traits and religion, and similarities in the other’s religious conversion. For example, the Princess, from *The King of Tars*, and William, from *Aliscans*, both feign conversion and move between Christian and Saracen groups by performing cultural identity. The Sultan and the lump child, from *The King of Tars*, and Rainoart, from *Aliscans*, both physically change at their conversions. Even with these similarities, and there are others that I address, these two texts have entirely different outlooks on the possibility of assimilation and accepting difference, which makes for an interesting and enriching comparison.

Although these two texts have yet to be linked together by other scholars, there is existing scholarship on each of the texts’ attitude towards assimilation. Siobhain Bly Calkin looks at *The King of Tars* and provides a useful analysis of the cultural significance behind the lump child’s biological deformity; however, her definition of a Saracen convert as someone who merely adheres “to the norms distinguishing a Christian

\(^3\) I use the terms “cultural hybrid” and “straddling spheres” in this chapter to identify characters who, either permanently or temporarily, cross cultural boundaries by moving between Christian and Saracen groups.
community from a Saracen one” (122) is simplistic because it overlooks the political and spiritual reasons behind conversion. Susanne Conklin Akbari discusses the correlation between biology and baptism in *The King of Tars*. Her explanation, that “bodily change is necessarily concomitant with spiritual change” (192), nicely applies to my analysis of the Sultan’s transformation and facilitates a discussion on the validity of religious conversion when it is forced. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen provides a valuable, yet brief, discussion on the effect of Rainoart’s monstrosity in *Aliscans*. Cohen’s interpretation of Rainoart’s conversion, signifying that the “deformity of difference is culturally constructed” (*Of Giants* 168), provides an especially useful contrast to *The King of Tars*’ belief that physical appearance and spirituality must, at all times, correlate.

Through the diverse topics and multitudes of analysis within this thesis, I hope to shed some more light on the variable and complex nature of Christian and Saracen relations throughout certain medieval texts.
Chapter Two: Humanizing the ‘Monster’

The Sultaness, from Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale,” is misunderstood. Feminist critics, and even the narrator of the tale, describe her as a monster for murdering her son. Carolyn Dinshaw identifies the Sultaness’ incestuous or independent desires as the reason why she murders the Sultan and the royal council (105); however, the Sultaness does not need independence nor does she have sexual desire for her son. The actions taken by the Sultaness against her own son seems to show her immorality and unnaturalness, but this is only because gender and motherhood are what critics use to define her. The Sultaness may be the mother to the Sultan, but she defines herself as a monarchal figure, and, more importantly, her main priority is to be a leader and protector of her people and her culture. The Sultaness’ murder of the Sultan is not monstrous, but a necessary deed which she commits in order to save her culture. Feminist critics use the idea of kinship bonds to illustrate the Sultaness’ monstrosity. I am going to use those same bonds to illustrate the Sultaness’ extreme loyalty to her faith. I will also discuss the council’s obligations to the king and instances when committing tyrannicide is a necessity. As well, I will use René Girard’s theory of sacrificial violence and symmetrical enemies to illustrate the reasons why the Sultaness had to murder her son.

Taking the Feminist out of the Sultaness

Margaret Schlauch believes that the mother-in-law’s jealousy comes from the matrilineal tradition where the family ancestry descends through the mother’s lineage. In this respect, Schlauch argues that the mother-in-law feels jealousy because the daughter threatens both her dominance in the household and the lines of inheritance. Schlauch points out, “filial
allegiance was beginning to shift towards marital allegiance ... [and] it is easier to understand the hostility of the mother-in-law to any arrangement which might shift her son’s allegiance and support from her own domicile to his wife’s” (34). However, in the case of “The Man of Law’s Tale”, Constance feels that she does not have any power over her new husband, but, as a result of her marriage, is now under man’s governance. Constance portrays her place in the kingdom when she states, “I wrecche womman, no fors though I spille! / Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance” (285-7). Constance believes that all women are under men’s authority, and, consequentially, have neither influence over their husbands nor any societal authority. Meanwhile, there is no mention of the Sultaness having a husband who rules over her, and the Sultaness has a council at her command that do her bidding for her, which shows the greater extent of her authority.

There is no textual evidence that the Sultaness is jealous of Constance. The Sultaness’ reason for murdering the Sultan and his royal party has nothing to do with anger at Constance’s marital presence. The narrator explains the situation when he says the Sultaness “Espied hath hir sones pleyn entente, / How he wol lete his olde sacrifices; / And right anon she for hir counseil sente, / And they been come to knowe what she mente” (324-7). The Sultaness is not personally jealous of Constance and the power she will gain over her, but is angry that the Sultan intends to “lete his olde sacrifices” and give up Islam. Furthermore, if the Sultaness was jealous of Constance’s power over the Sultan and wanted to rectify the situation then it would make more sense to murder Constance to regain her position of authority since Constance caused her familial
displacement. Jealousy does not explain the Sultaness’ actions because she loses all of her supposed matriarchal authority when she murders the Sultan.

Dinshaw argues that society in “The Man of Law’s Tale” follows a patriarchal social organization which runs on the exchange of all forms of commodity. She uses Lévi-Strauss to show that the exchange of women is just one of those gifts used in this exchange. Marriage is “the supreme gift” (Lévi-Strauss 65) and “the archetype of exchange” (Lévi-Strauss 483) because it creates reciprocity. Through marriage, and blood ties, the two groups are linked together and essentially are indebted to each other. Dinshaw portrays the marriage between the Sultan and Constance as an acceptable moment of exchange in the patriarchal social order because of reciprocity, since Constance is a value given to the Sultan in exchange for the Syrians’ conversion to Christianity (99). Dinshaw claims that the Sultaness’ jealousy towards her son’s marriage goes against the “masculine prerogative” (103), or social order, because it is actually a mother’s incestuous desire for her son. However, incest goes against the social order because there is no reciprocity between groups. With incest there is only one familial group, rather than two, and, because of this, there is no exchange, nor is there a feeling of indebtedness. It is here that Dinshaw’s argument becomes confusing. She believes the Sultaness’ “violent refusal to accept a change of “creance” (Dinshaw 104)” and the Man of Law’s explanation that “she hirself wolde al the contree lede ([Chaucer] 434)” (Dinshaw 104)” shows the “motive of the murderous mothers-in-law are either too well accounted for or left entirely vague” (103). She further argues that these two instances cast the Sultaness’ motive for committing murder into doubt. Dinshaw provides an alternative motive for the Sultaness’ actions, namely that the Sultaness has an incestuous
desire for her son. Dinshaw bases this conclusion on the grounds that the Sultaness’
textual portrayal, as an active agent with sexual desires, indicates that she is independent
of the patriarchal social order (103-105). She argues that since female independence is
contrary to the social order it automatically equates to incest (106-7). However, Dinshaw
does not, nor can she, provide an example of the Sultaness’ sexual desire for her son.
Dinshaw uses the term ‘incestuous’ to define the Sultaness’ independent nature and her
active desire as behaviour which goes against the patriarchal social order.4

The Sultaness’ active nature, while it is the opposite of Constance’s behaviour,
is not necessarily inverse to patriarchal societal order because she fits Lévi-Strauss’
definition of a woman as an exchanged commodity. Dinshaw and Lévi-Strauss assert that
women both speak and are spoken to; they are signs and values because they are both
“active generators of messages as well as passive constituents of them”, which is what
makes their exchange different from other commodities (Dinshaw 98). Lévi-Strauss says
that the fact that women are signs and values “explains why the relations between the
sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardour and mystery” (Lévi-Strauss 496). On
the one hand, the Sultaness exemplifies Lévi-Strauss’ definition because she is unlike an
object since she thinks for herself. In general, Saracen women in the tale are not as
passive as Christian women: Hermengyld converts behind her husband’s back and
Donegild actively uses letters to get Constance banished legitimately. On the other hand,
Dinshaw describes Constance as merely “‘a sign and nothing more’ whose value is
arbitrary and ascribed to her by men” (99). Based on Lévi-Strauss’ explanation of the

4 In this sense, Dinshaw’s argument that the Sultaness has incestuous desire for the Sultan is
problematic because the term describes a form of sexual desire going against the societal order. In
the case of “The Man of Law’s Tale”, it is only the Sultaness’ independence that goes against the
social order, and not her sexuality.
value of female commodities and Dinshaw’s definition that Constance’s lack of independent thought marks her as a “sign and nothing more”, one sees that Constance is deviating from the patriarchal system. If anyone is going against the patriarchal social order and, as Dinshaw would say, acting incestuously, it is Constance.

Feminist critics define the Sultaness’ character as abnormal because they look at her behaviour only from the perspective of her gender. Sue Niebrzydowski claims that when the Sultaness kills her son she becomes a monstrous other. She argues that the Sultaness’ actions against her son were inappropriate and unnatural because they go against the western paradigm of appropriate motherly behaviour (199). As already mentioned, Dinshaw looks at the mother-in-law’s independent will to explain what makes the Sultaness an unnatural creature (103). Jill Mann also argues that the Sultaness and Donegild are counterfeit or “männisch” women because they choose to be active and assert their opposition to the arrival of Christianity rather than suffer passively. Even the Man of Law bases the Sultaness’ morality solely on her gender. She is a “virago” (359) and a “feyned womman” (362), which are two terms used to describe her as manly; the terms “serpent” (361) and “scorpioun” (404) portray her as an unnatural creature because of her un-motherly behaviour. These interpretations are all incomplete because they confine and reduce the Sultaness’ actions by characterizing, and analysing, her solely from the perspective of a woman and a mother. “The Man of Law’s Tale” depicts the Sultaness performing other roles, much greater, and even admirable, deeds in the name of her land and her people. The Sultaness is also a subject of the king, a monarchal figure, since she is the Queen Mother and a defender of the Muslim faith. These are authoritative positions which I will discuss further in the next section. Based on these new definitions
is important to reanalyze why the Sultaness murders the Sultan and the effect her action has on the reader.

Throughout the Sultan’s engagement there is no moment when the Sultan consults his mother’s advice and the Sultaness never tries to provide her opinion. This is because the Sultaness has no maternal authority over the Sultan. The Sultan defines himself by his monarchal power, and the fact that he only asks for advice from his council, who are presumably all male, further exemplifies this classification. The Sultaness’ reaction to the Sultan’s marriage also illustrates the Sultaness’ sole responsibility as the king’s subject. She has no emotional response to her son’s marriage and it has no different effect on her, as a result of her familial relationship to the Sultan, than it does on other members of the council. She accepts his choice as his subject because he is her king and she must be subservient to his will. Furthermore, it is only through her position as a subject of the king and a member of council that the Sultaness is able to destroy the Sultan’s marriage and prevent the further spread of Christianity in Syria.

**Tyrannicide and the Duty of the Kingdom’s Subjects**

The Sultaness’ motive for killing the Sultan is straightforward; she believes that the Sultan is a danger to the kingdom because he plans to convert everyone in the country to Christianity. The Sultan arranges the marriage and brings Constance to Syria, and, at the same time, the Sultaness “espied hath hir sones pleyn entente, / how he wol lete his olde sacrifices / and right anon she for hir conseil sente / And they been come to knowe what she mente” (324-7). She sees her son’s intent to “lete his olde sacrifices” and abandon the
Muslim faith, and, because of this, she makes preparations to prevent the spreading of Christianity throughout the land. This passage also shows that the Sultaness is not alone in her observations. The phrase, they “been come to knowe what she mente”, shows that the Sultaness convinces her council that the Sultan was using his monarchal authority to fulfil his personal ambitions.

I have already shown that the Sultaness’ utmost reason for murdering the Sultan was to prevent the spread of Christianity. Would it not have been more beneficial to murder Constance? After all, Constance represents the perfect model of Christianity in the Middle East, and her beauty causes the conversion of the Syrian nation. Constance’s presence is what initiates these changes in Syria; is she not the one who should suffer? It is easier to first answer why the Sultaness kills the Sultan instead of Constance.

The Sultan has the most authority in the kingdom because he is the monarch. John Watts describes a king’s authority:

There was an important sense in which the king was, like parliament today, unrestrained. Under normal circumstances, he could not be resisted within his realm, since it was only by his authority, which depended on his personal will, that acts were done while he was king. This is not to say that kings felt free to do as they pleased—a range of pressures existed to encourage them to conform to law and counsel—but that, in the last resort, they enjoyed a monopoly of legitimate power. (17)

While the Sultan needs his council’s advice to help him initiate large-scale changes in the kingdom, such as the council’s guidance about law and their help in enabling his marriage to Constance, the Sultan’s authority still overpowers his council. For example, the Sultan tells the council to “hoold youre argumentz in pees” (228), and, as a result, they never speak a word of disagreement. It is only the Sultan’s misuse of power—I say “misuse” because it is his personal uncontrollable lust for Constance interfering with his
public responsibility—which causes the kingdom’s conversion to Christianity.

Constance, similar to the king’s council, has no real authority over the Sultan. It is the Sultan who has unrestrained authority and makes the choice to convert his land to Christianity and this is why Constance, as merely the catalyst, is innocent. By murdering the Sultan and his council, instead of Constance, it shows that the Sultaness is punishing them for their self-serving behaviour. By murdering the Syrian ruler, the Sultaness also makes an example of the Sultan’s deceitful behaviour to the rest of the kingdom and prevents the Sultan from ever using his rule for his own benefit. If the Sultaness had gotten rid of Constance, not only would the Sultan place the Sultaness at fault, but, the Sultan would still have the ability to misuse his authority by using his position to benefit himself at the expense of his people.

The Sultan does not convert because he believes that Jesus will save his people; he converts because it is the only way he can win Constance and fulfil his personal desires. The language that the Sultan uses to convince his council of his need for Constance is especially important for understanding the Sultaness’ motive for murdering him. The Sultan explains that he must have Constance. He takes actions to marry Constance for his own benefit and neglects his role as the representative of the Syrian kingdom. Watts defines a king as having unrestrained authority, so why should the Sultaness be angry that the Sultan rules by his own ambition? Should the king’s subjects not just accept the Sultan’s actions as legitimate? To respond to this question one must understand that there were limits to a king’s rule, and that these boundaries separated a king from a tyrant. Watts uses St Thomas Aquinas’ thirteenth-century ideas on the purposes of government to examine the limits of the king’s jurisdiction. Watts explains
that, while the king’s authority was unrestrained, they nevertheless governed the people for their common good, which

lay ‘in the preservation of its unity; or, more simply, in peace.’ As a result, a king, who was himself a unity, was the ideal form of authority for the realisation of this common good; while a tyrant, defined as ‘one man who seeks personal profit from his position instead of the good of the community subject to him,’ was the most damaging. (Watts 19)

The Sultan uses his position as the monarch to personally profit by marrying Constance. When speaking to his council about how he can win Constance, and, after learning that he must abandon his faith and convert to Christianity in order to be with her, the Sultan says,

Rather than I lese
Custance, I wol be cristned, douteless.
I moot been hires, I may noon oother chese.
I prey yow hoold youre argumentz in pees;
Saveth my lyf, and beth noght reccheless.
To geten hire that hath my lyf in cure;
For in this wo I may nat longe endure. (225-31)

The Sultan’s language and practices describe how he rules his country and they also define the Sultaness’ murder as an act of tyrannicide. This passage shows the Sultan continuously using possessive words to describe the actions he “moot” take to have Constance. There is no mention of anyone else but himself, and the Sultan greedily “moot been hires.” He puts his personal requirements ahead of his people’s best interests when he uses “my lyf” as the reason why he should marry Constance. He even describes the christening as something that only he has to undertake with the words “I wol be cristned, douteless,” when, in fact, we later learn that his entire council converts as well. The Sultan’s marriage to Constance solely fulfils the Sultan’s personal desires, which would not have necessarily branded the Sultan a tyrant, except that the effects of the marriage
were damaging to the rest of the Syrian kingdom. The Sultan’s lustful desires may be definitive of his gender, as Dinshaw suggests (99), but the greater threat to the Syrian kingdom is the Sultan’s inability to separate his own ambitions from what is best for his people.

The Sultan submits to Constance’s religion without any reference to the fact that he is sacrificing his own. Perhaps the Sultan does not feel that he is sacrificing by taking up Christianity but completely gaining by marrying Constance. At the same time, the Sultan, as a representative of his people, is sacrificing because he is forcing the rest of his people to convert without them gaining any benefits of marrying Constance. Although converting to Christianity may bring about the people’s redemption, which is, after all, the purported advantage of conversion, the Syrian people do not convert for this reason. Their conversion is not the result of their newly gained conviction that Christianity is the true faith, but entirely due to the Sultan’s personal desire to be with Constance. Furthermore, the council’s conversion is involuntary, which brings into question whether it even has any merit. In this sense, by marrying into a rival religion, the Sultan commits an act of sacrificial violence against his people since he sacrifices their religion for the sake of his own self-gain. Owing to these actions, the Sultan turns from an authority preserving unity or peace for the common good of the people, as Watts nicely articulates, into a self-serving tyrant and an enemy of the people.

John of Salisbury wrote a political treatise in the mid-twelfth century called the *Policraticus*, which helps the reader to understand why the Sultaness felt the need to murder the Sultan and why her actions were anything but monstrous. John discusses the circumstances under which tyrannicide is permissible: the king’s subjects should endure
a tyrant but “he must be slain as soon as it is apparent that his tyrannical behaviour imperils the ability of his subjects to live accordingly to virtue and religion” (Nederman 379). Of course, the Sultan prevents his people from practicing their religion when he decides he wants to be with Constance. John also states that once subjects recognize that their king is restricting their religious faith they have an obligation to bring an end to the tyrant, and all “those who renounce their duty are accused [...] of behaving like accessories to tyranny” (Nederman 369). The Sultaness and her council have a duty to kill the Sultan and the members of his privy council who convert with him, because they are accessories to his tyranny.

The Sultan’s council must remain in the Sultan’s favour through the use of flattery so that they can guide and advise him in order to maintain justice through responsible rule. When the Sultan’s actions happen to be self-serving, the council’s flattery enables the tyranny to continue, which, consequentially, makes the council accessories to tyranny. John of Salisbury believes that the act of maintaining justice in the kingdom is the council’s most important responsibility, so much so that “the good man has a duty to speak frankly and openly to the ruler, and even to criticize those royal actions which he regards as opposed to moral rectitude and orthodox faith” (Nederman 367). However, according to Salisbury, flattering a tyrant is also necessary when it enables the “protect[ion of] oneself and one’s community from the wrath and vengefulness which might guide the tyrannical ruler’s reaction to honest advice” (Nederman 367). In “The Man of Law’s Tale”, the Sultan tells his council to “hoold youre argumentz in pees” (228) and prevents them from challenging his decisions. The council might have defied the Sultan and refused to convert, but, based on the Sultan’s
insistence that his council convert, their flattery may be necessary for their own protection. At this point, in order to remain dutiful the Sultan’s council should have joined the Sultaness and murdered the Sultan.

The Sultan places his council in a position where they believe that, by facilitating this marriage and conversion, they are being responsible and even saving the kingdom. The Sultan masks his tyrannical behaviour by persuading his council that Constance is essential to maintaining his governance, which, consequently, makes Constance necessary to the stability of the kingdom. The Sultan describes the acquisition of Constance as a necessity and a cure because without her he will lose his life. The Sultan begins by saying that he needs to “han Cunstance withinne a litel space, / He nas but deed; and charged hem in hye / To shapen for his lyf som remedye” (209-10). By associating Constance with a ‘remedye’ or cure that only the council has the power to withhold or give, the Sultan gives the council only one option— save their king’s life or risk being negligent. The Sultan further evokes the council’s responsibility to protect him when he entreats, “beth noght reccheless / To geten hire that hath my lyf in cure; / For in this wo I may nat longe endure” (229-31). The Sultan convinces the council that if they do not submit to his will, maintaining his rule and saving his life by providing Constance, then they are not fulfilling their responsibility to serve the “common interest of the community” (Watts 27) and preserve justice through governance. The Sultan, while he persuades the council that acquiring Constance is for the good of the kingdom, is nevertheless a self-serving tyrant who needs to be disposed of. John of Salisbury’s

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5The council’s responsibility, as previously stated, is to maintain governance through responsible rule. The loss of a King creates instability which hinders all forms of rule including responsible rule (Nederman 367).
discussion of tyrannicide helps us to see the Sultaness’ act in a new light; the Sultaness is not committing a crime, but fulfilling a legitimate political responsibility.

**Symmetry and Sacrificial Violence**

Although the Sultaness directs her violence towards the Sultan, he is not its true cause. It is the Sultaness’ and Constance’s intense cultural rivalry, resulting from the formation of the two cultures and their constructed difference, which forces the Sultaness to murder the Sultan. René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* asserts that it is only possible to define one’s cultural identity through difference and that the loss of distinctions endangers the community. A loss of distinctions leads to a sacrificial crisis, a point at which peace, stability and the religious framework of society start to totter as “reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community” (Girard 49), because the community is threatened. At this point, sacrificial violence must occur in order to redefine difference and create stability.

While Constance and the Sultaness try to construct Christian and Saracen cultures as distinct from one another, these ‘distinctions’ ultimately display their similarities. Even though Constance calls Syria a “barbre nacioun” (281), indicating that she feels Saracens are inferior, her primary concern about going to this Saracen country lies in the fact that she is leaving her father and is now subjugated to a husband. Constance tells her father,

\begin{verbatim}
Ne shal I nevere seen yow morre with ye.
‘Allas unto the Barbre nacioun
I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;
But Crist, that starf for our redepcioun
So yeve me grace his heeste to fulfille!
I, wrecche womman, no fors though I spille!
\end{verbatim}
Wommen are born to thradom and penance,
And to been under mannes governance.’ (280-7)

Constance does not express nervousness about going to a barbarous nation which is very
different from her own; rather, she calls herself a “wrecche woman” because she is under
man’s governance. Constance does not see differences between Saracen and Christian
cultures, but instead she constructs a parallel between her father and soon-to-be husband.
Constance’s words imply that the similarities in patriarchal governing systems
overshadow all possible cultural distinctions.

The Sultaness tries to construct cultural differences as proof that converting to
Christianity will result in the loss of the Muslim culture; however, while constructing
these differences, the Sultaness actually reveals an underlying similarity. The Sultaness
explains that the difference between the two religions is in their laws. If her subjects
submit to these new laws they will have “thraldom to oure bodies and penance, / And
afterward helle to be drawe” (338-9). The words “afterward helle to be drawe” indicate
that the Sultaness believes that the breaking of their religious laws through conversion to
Christianity will result in suffering after death. However, while living, their conversion
to Christianity will not result in any actual changes. This is because these cultures are
virtually indistinguishable; their cultural differences are intangible and based on the
conviction that they are, in fact, different. The presence of distinct Christian and Muslim
laws shows that there must be apparent differences between the two religions, but they
are culturally constructed and exist because they are enforced. The Sultaness further
implies a lack of cultural distinctions when she tells her council, “we shul fi

cristendom to take— / Coold water shal not greve us but a lite! / And I shal swich a feeste
and revel make / That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite” (351-4). The Sultaness knows
the only way to noticeably switch from Islam to Christianity is by undergoing baptism, since this ritual displays the purification of all unsanctified beliefs. It is during the baptism that differences between these two religions would be noticeable since the convert is visibly stripping away all spiritual impurities associated with false religious belief. At the same time, the Sultaness asserts that by undergoing baptism, “water shall not grieve us but a lite”: no differences will reveal themselves because, without belief in those differences, there literally are none. The Sultaness’ composure about bathing in the baptismal water reveals her belief that religious distinctions are material or merely symbolic. Constance and the Sultaness demonstrate that cultural distinctions, if any exist, are constructed.

As previously stated, Constance represents the perfect model of Christianity in the Middle East. Likewise, the Sultaness’ character represents the constructed immoral nature of Muslims. Constance and the Sultaness are polar opposites, and the two women’s equivalence is precisely what makes them rivals. First one must understand how polar opposites can possibly be equivalent. The Man of Law portrays Constance as passive and completely virtuous, while he describes the Sultaness as active and as evil. Although Constance’s passivity does not seem active, it is this submissiveness which enables her to enter enemy territory and convert those present. Constance’s passivity and willingness to be domineered by men’s governance cause her to travel to Syria and advocate her religion. Her beauty drives others into action against their own faith, and while she is not physically violent as is the Sultaness, she is passively destructive. The Sultaness’ compliance and seeming passivity with her son’s wishes is what enables her to call her council, and her feigned conversion permits her to deceive and murder the Sultan
and his court. Although both these women have opposing characteristics, these differences enable them to achieve the same result, and both ultimately make sacrifices to protect their religion and their people.

Given their similarities, it is hard to call the Sultaness evil and Constance virtuous, since both these women are committing similar deeds and protecting their religion. In one sense, the Sultaness is actually being defensive, while Constance is being offensive. This is because the Sultaness is reacting to the conversion, while Constance is in fact spreading her religion. Is the Sultaness not therefore more justified in her deeds? At the same time, Constance is almost an unwilling soldier of her faith. She does not want to marry and travel into unknown territory, but does so at her father’s, and the Church’s, command. It is the Sultan’s uncontrollable desire which forces Constance into Syria, and it is the Sultan’s willingness to abandon his faith and the faith of his people that causes the Sultaness to murder. In reality, both women act in response to their situation.

Physical characteristics do not transparently reflect cultural differences in this text, since they do not disappear upon conversion. Nevertheless, the Sultaness’ and Constance’s opposing characteristics, as two individuals representative of their cultures, further reflect the fact that their two religions are actually equivalent.6 The Man of Law describes the Sultaness as an ‘olde’ (432) woman who is “lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde! / O feyned womman, al that may confounde / Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice / Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!” (361-4). It is the Sultaness’ deceptiveness which makes her ugly and revolting. On the other hand, Constance is young and has

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6 The text does not actually reveal the Sultaness’ and Constance’ physical characteristics—the Sultaness probably does not look like a snake—but the Man of Law’s description of the two characters’ morality also connotes their appearance.
“goodnesse as beautee” (158). Beneath the differences in detail lies a structural similarity in which age and appearance are connected to demeanour or morals. The descriptions are superficially different, but structurally identical. These women’s characteristics are the exact opposite, but, on both women, the emotional qualities reflect their physical characteristics. The Man of Law metaphorically constructs opposing characteristics based on his perception of each woman’s character. The Sultaness is likened to a serpent only because the Man of Law believes she is guilty of a crime. Conversely, Constance is beautiful only because he constructs Christianity as superior to Islam. Constance and the Sultaness’ different characterizations represent only the Man of Law’s personal view of their cultural affiliations; by looking beyond his depiction we see that, structurally, they are equivalent.

The structural parallels between these two women, a situation Girard refers to as mimesis, is what makes them enemies and instigates violence. They have the same religious objective and will both make sacrifices in order to accomplish their goal. Their mutual willingness and overall equality makes them a challenge and a threat to each other. Girard explains the effect this rivalry has on the two groups:

As mimetic rivalry leads to doubling, the recognition of loss of difference is often intolerable. This amounts to the loss of the necessary different other, the rival around which one has structured one’s life. One solution to this problem is to engender the hallucination of demonic, monstrous, or, alternately, divine other. The other is now imaginary, but derived from real human rivalry. Such a person ‘chooses, in short, to sacrifice his experience and his reason in preference to abandoning his desire’ (Girard, [Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World], 303) (Stirling 21).

The Sultaness clearly does not abandon her desire but transforms her understanding of this rival culture into a monstrous and demonic other which she must overcome. For the reader, these two women become doubles, whereas the Sultaness “mistakenly see[s] a
great difference between them [selves]” (Stirling 20). She does not eliminate the
differences but muddles and confuses them to create a monstrous doubling (Girard 161).
It is this perceived different, and monstrous, culture which the Sultaness must eradicate
from her community.

When two groups rival each other, one group aims to possess what the other has
in order to gain an advantage and become the superior group. Girard proposes that “all
humans learn their desires from other people in the culture around them by imitation or
copying. Furthermore this imitated desire is accompanied by an acquisitive drive to
possess what the other has” (Stirling 12). Girard calls this imitation “mimetic desire,”
and it is evident in the Sultan’s intense desire for Constance. Constance is the most prized
woman in Europe and the Sultan believes that attaining her will give him an advantage
over his enemy. To recap, the Man of Law explains the “commune voys of every man /
‘Oure Emperour of Rome- God hym see!- / A doughter hath that syn the world bigan,
Nas nevere swich another as is shee. / I prey to God in honour hire susteene, / And wolde
she were of all Europe the queene’” (155-61). When the Sultan learns of Constance’s
value as the intended Queen of Europe, his mimesis generates passionately experienced
perceived needs (Stirling 15). The Sultan must have her and he feels his survival depends
on it. By attaining Constance, although he must give up his religion to get her, he now
has the capacity to instigate desire from his enemies. This is a troubling paradox because,
according to the Sultaness, the Sultan, as we know too well, becomes the enemy when he
imitates them. Furthermore, each group aims to exceed the other in an attempt to display
prowess; however this ‘display’ inevitably leads to further conflict because neither group
can surpass the other. Girard further explains, “the transferral of the talisman of
supremacy or kudos involves a relationship in which the roles of dominating and dominated are constantly reversed” (Girard153). In this case, the Sultan acquires the advantage and becomes the supreme group, if only for a moment, then the Sultaness violently destroys that group and becomes supreme. The Sultaness’ superiority is only maintained until the first group, the Christians, return and enact reciprocal violence, which makes them the superior group once again. There is always an object desired by both because the ownership of that object by the opposing group gives it its value.

Exchange is another way to understand the resulting conflict between these two groups. Stirling describes the pattern of action and counter-action based on whether or not the exchange is fair or at least perceived to be. Stirling states that there is a tendency for groups to overreact, which escalates the mimetic rivalry (19). At this point the original desired object is lost, there is a fixation on the other person, and the rivalry becomes consuming. Girard calls this transformative, and seemingly overwhelming, coveting “metaphysical desire” (148). When relating this idea back to “The Man of Law’s Tale”, one realizes that the Sultan is not taking Constance, but exchanging her. In order to attain Constance the Sultan gives up his religion. The Sultaness does not believe that this is an equal or fair exchange and her rivalry with the other group has the exact aforementioned transformative effect. The Sultaness destroys the Sultan partly because she has a metaphysical desire to destroy the rival, and, since the Sultan is a Christian convert who is controlling the Muslim people, the Sultan is the rival group.

The Sultaness’ reaction to the Sultan’s marriage maintains the cycle of violence, although this is not her intention. Girard describes two different kinds of violence, impure and sacrificial, which are easily confused and have two contrary effects. Sacrificial
violence is a form of purification which serves to suppress further violence through sacrifice. Impure violence is violence without reason that produces more violence (40-2). The Sultaness believes her massacre of the royal court is a form of sacrificial violence, because by massacring or sacrificing, she attempts to stop the cycle. Girard believes that this sacrificial crisis and intense consuming rivalry “would eventually destroy the entire community if the surrogate victim were not at hand to halt the process and the ritualized mimesis were not at hand to keep the conflictual mimesis from beginning afresh” (148). This is because, “in destroying the surrogate victim, men believe they are ridding themselves of some present ill. And indeed they are, for they are effectively doing away with those forms of violence that beguile the imagination and provoke emulation” (86).

The Sultan is the surrogate victim, whose destruction is meant to prevent the destruction of the community. By using violence against a surrogate victim, the Sultaness is trying to prevent the greater violence which results from emulating the enemy. Commenting on a passage by Empedocles, Girard states, “the father kills the son who has changed form ... We are witnessing the degeneration of a rite into a form of reciprocal violence that is so irrational it conjures up the monstrous double” (164). The Sultaness sees the Sultan’s transformation when he converts; he has become a rival, whose destruction will prevent a much larger war. However, the Sultan is no longer the Sultaness’ kin, nor is he a member of her community, which is exactly the reason why her actions are, in reality, representative of impure violence since it produces further violence. The Sultaness only sees the Sultan as a monstrous double, and she is not sacrificing, but reciprocating the violence she believes her people received. The Sultaness is not sacrificing by murdering the Sultan, since now the Sultan and his council are Christians, and, consequentially, the
enemy. As a result of the Sultaness’ attempt to stop the cycle of violence, the Sultaness and her fellow Muslims ultimately receive the equivalent reciprocal violence from the Christians, who arrive to “brennen, sleen, and brynge hem to meschance” (963).
Chapter Three: Straddling Spheres: The White, Black and Grey Areas of Christian Identity

**Cultural Intermingling**

The lump child from *The King of Tars* physically straddles two different cultural groups—Saracen and Christian. The child is the offspring of a Saracen sultan and a Christian princess, and its existence raises the possibility of the integration of these two cultural groups. According to Dorothee Metlitzki, in late Middle English romances the offspring of an interfaith marriage “often symbolically half black and half white ... will bring about the harmonious union of two warring peoples” (140). However, in the case of *The King of Tars*, the product of a Saracen and Christian union is anything but harmonious. This tale portrays both an aversion to, and the impossibility of, cultural intermingling.

The text makes sure to show that the lump child embodies both the mother’s and the father’s identities; this romance clearly shows that the child is a hybrid figure representing the impossibility of cultural assimilation. The Sultan and the Princess are responsible for creating the lump child’s hybridity. At no point does the Sultan deny that the child is his, which would be an attempt to absolve himself from blame. The Sultan might have claimed the lump child is the result of an affair and that this affair is responsible for its deformity. Initially, the Sultan does point to the princess’ religious beliefs as the cause of the child’s monstrosity by claiming, “mi godes þou art forsworn, / wiȝ riȝt resoun y preue: / þe childe þat is here of þe born / Boþe lim & liþ it is forlorn / Alle þurth þi fals bileue” (590-4). With the words “of þe born” and “Alle þurth þi fals
bileue” (emphasis added) the Sultan is suggesting that the Princess is solely responsible for the birth of this monstrous child. However, the Princess responds that they are both accountable when she quickly asserts that the child was “ȝeten bitven ous to” (604). From this moment forth, the Sultan and the Princess both take responsibility for the creation of this deformed child.

The Sultan and Princess illustrate that the child’s deformity is the result of conflicting cultural differences when they both use religious rituals in their attempts to save it. Turning to God indicates that the Sultan and his wife know that their child is spiritually deficient. The fact that the child is a “rond of fleshe” (580), without limbs, blood, bone or face shows that it represents a failure of reproduction since together the parents could not give birth to a living, well-formed child. As well, the child’s deformity shows that it has no discernible characteristics from either its mother or father. According to Bly Calkin, “a lump insists that cross-cultural intercourse means the end of any ability to differentiate cultural groups and inheritances” (115). The child’s misshapen form signifies that there can be no life from a union of this kind.

From a biological perspective, the tale says the lump child both escapes identification, since it has no face, and cannot live because it is born “ded as þe ston” (585). Bly Calkin further explains that this child is illegal because it exists outside of all human laws:

It is the product of a union considered illegal in Canon Law, and it defies all customary laws about human appearance. It exists outside of language because it has no power of speech and no name. It also exists outside of religious identification; one cannot call it Christian because it is not baptized, but one cannot call it Saracen since it is so indeterminate. (118)
Although the creation of a child from two disparate cultural groups represents the possibility of a new entity outside of law (Bly Calkin 119), the lump child’s specific characteristics (e.g., its lack of form) indicate that cultural intermingling is impossible. This lump child acts as an example of the outcome of intercultural intercourse; the lump child is neither human nor living, which implies that there can be no living, fully culturally assimilated, creature.

_The King of Tars_ asserts not only the unfeasibility but also the undesirability of cultural assimilation. The common reaction to the birth of this child shows that there is an aversion to cultural integration: The women assisting at the birth feel “Wel sori” (578) when they see the child, the Sultan is so grieved that he “cried so long til he was hos” (635), and the Princess is so upset that she “for sorwe ... wald dye” (583). These troubled responses all take place after the birth and show that this child is not acceptable in their community; however, the Princess’ words even before she gives birth more fully indicate the seriousness of her situation. The text describes the Princess’ reaction to her pregnancy: “þerwhile sche was wiþ child, apliȝt, / Sche bad to Ihesu ful of miȝt / Fram schame he schuld hir schilde” (571-3). This passage shows that the Princess feels ashamed of being in a union with a Saracen and that their subsequent child will be indicative of this transgression.

It turns out that Jesus does shield the Princess from shame because the lump child’s baptism reveals that the Sultan’s Saracen nature caused the lump child’s deformity. The child’s form as a “rond of fleshe” (580), is a direct reference to Aristotelian conception theory, which contends that “the father’s seed imposes form on the shapeless matter provided by the mother” (Akbari 192). The lump child is matter and
nothing more—without limb, bone, or blood—and this indicates that father has failed to
imprint the child due to a defect in his spirituality. I believe that the defect lies in the
Sultan’s spirituality, rather than in his physical characteristics, because it is the baptism,
the source of spiritual renewal, which provides the child with the form that the father
lacks (Akbari 192). The fact that Christian baptism, and not any of the Saracen rituals,
transforms the lump child suggests that the Sultan’s religious beliefs are responsible for
the child’s deformity. Furthermore, the lump child’s transformation at his baptism
indicates that, in order to live, the lump child must wipe away all Saracen attributes and
position itself in only one cultural sphere. This text clearly asserts that the only true
sphere is Christianity.

Through the lump child, *The King of Tars* displays the unnatural and disastrous
outcome of intercultural marriage. This romance clearly illustrates that the differences
between groups are not merely cultural, but ontological and insurmountable.
Furthermore, this romance also provides a solution to the deformities that will inevitably
emerge through cultural and racial amalgamation, and that is conversion to Christianity.
*The King of Tars* also leaves readers thinking about the connection between conversion
and bodily change, and this is a topic I will discuss in reference to the Princess.

Confusing Conversions

*The King of Tars* illustrates the complex relationship between the body and the self as
depicted in the character of the Princess. Throughout the tale, the Princess straddles

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7 I am connecting the Sultan’s spiritual deficiency to the failure of the Saracen rituals. If I had
decided to simply attach the religions’ merit to the effect it has on the lump child, then the fact
that Christian baptism cured the lump child’s deformity also implies that Christianity is greater
than Islam.
cultural boundaries as she struggles to maintain her personal Christian beliefs after she publically denounces Christianity through her Saracen conversion. During this time, while trying to understand her own spiritual identity, the Princess figuratively questions the authenticity of religious conversion. As the Princess tries to resolve her own religious identity, she exhibits a rift between her cultural affiliation and religious beliefs, which forces readers to question whether external conformity is a reliable guide to inner spirituality. This text does not clarify or resolve the issue of authentic belief in the same way that it denies the possibility of cultural intermingling in the lump child; instead *The King of Tars* constantly grapples with the issue by contrasting the Princess’ superficial conversion with the Sultan’s miraculous one.

Readers are faced with the question of whether or not the Princess actually becomes Saracen, and textually there is no easy answer. Bly Calkin believes the Princess’ “appearance and behaviours are those of a Saracen woman” (111), yet, she says, “[t]he Princess however, is still Christian” (111). She further argues that, at the moment of conversion, the Princess is Saracen, but, that, immediately following, the text insists that she is still Christian. Bly Calkin bases this argument on the Princess’ thoughts immediately after her conversion: “No minstral wiþ harp no crouþe / No miȝt chaunge hir þouȝt” (*Tars* 509-10). According to *The King of Tars*, the Princess’ conversion is merely momentary. Readers are implicitly asked to overlook the fact that the Princess has just undergone a Saracen conversion ritual. Even though the Princess is outwardly following Saracen practices, demonstrating that she is part of the Saracen community, the text asserts that the Princess is deceiving those around her and is still Christian. Of course, the text does not explicitly define the Princess as either Christian or Saracen because it
believes, undoubtedly, that the Princess is still Christian, and it refuses to accept even the possibility that the Princess has undergone a sincere Saracen conversion. *The King of Tars* intentionally complicates the issue and forces readers to ask whether having Christian “pouȝt” makes one Christian, or whether following certain religious practices binds one to a specific religion.

Conversion, according to Bly Calkin, means “conformity to the cultural borders separating Saracen from Christian rather than compromise to them. A Saracen convert is defined precisely by his or her adherence to the norms distinguishing a Christian community from a Saracen one” (122). From this perspective, the Princess becomes a Saracen when she adheres to the Saracen norms and becomes a member of the Saracen community. However, is conversion not more complicated than this? On the day of her conversion, the Princess firstly renounces Jesus to the Sultan with the words “to Mahoun ichil me take, / & Ihesu Crist, mi Lord, forsake” (486-7); then she physically expresses her devotion when “Sche kist Mahoun & Apolin, / Astriot, & sir Iouin” (499-500). Lastly, she openly displays her knowledge of Islam when she “lerd þe heþen lawe. / & þei sche al þe lawes couþe, / & seyd hem openliche wip hir mouþe” (504-6).

Furthermore, her participation at the Saracen tournament after her conversion (519-552) indicates the Princess’ involvement in the Saracen community. This proves that the Princess both accepts the Saracen religion and also understands it. However, the entire conversion is based on the superficial demonstration of belief; this conversion does not prove that the Princess *spiritually* embraces this religion. This conversion is a political act whereby the Princess is transferring her allegiance. She is swearing her allegiance to a new lord and breaking ties to her old one, learning the laws of this new land, and kissing
representations of her new deities; the Princess is following feudal oath-taking rituals and practices. In her conversion, the Princess is complying with the Sultan’s wishes by accepting a new authority and recognizing that she is now part of a new culture. She does not spiritually accept this new religion.

The Princess’ ambiguous religious identity is further displayed at the beginning of the tale when the Princess explains why she must leave her people. The Princess adamantly tells her parents before she weds the Sultan, “forþi y wil suffre no lenger þrawe / þat Cristen folk be for me slawe” (271-2), and later she tells the Sultan that she will “help him at his nede: / No more folk nold he spille” (303-4). The Princess marries and converts only to prevent the impending death of her people; her actions are not driven by a desire to become Saracen. At the same time, the Princess remains spiritually affiliated to Christianity by insisting that, throughout her Saracen conversion, “Ihesu forȝat sche nouȝt” (507) and after the conversion “when sche was bi hirselue on / To Ihesu sche made hir mon, / þat all þis world haþ wrouȝt” (514-6). Even though the Princess has made her choice to renounce her Christian devotional practices in favour of sparing the Christian people further bloodshed, the Princess cannot reconcile her changed political allegiance with her maintained spiritual beliefs. It is this split in her public and private affiliation which leaves her religious identity ambivalent. This split remains until the lump child forces the Princess to choose.

The Princess publicly remains a Saracen until she has the lump child and allows it to undergo baptism. The lump child’s deformity gives the Princess the perfect opportunity to measure the powers of these two religions against one another. If the Sultan’s prayers to his Saracen gods transformed the child, then, perhaps, the Princess
might have become Saracen. However, this was not the case, and, once the Princess reverts to Christian practices and sees the transformation take place, she becomes Christian again. This cultural reversion is further shown after the child’s transformation when the Princess tells the Sultan, “Bot þou were cristned so it is / þou no hast no part þeron, ywis, / Noþer of þe child ne of me” (814-16). The Princess, with her son, rejects the Sultan and the Saracens after the transformation takes place. She openly affiliates with Christianity, renounces her Saracen ways, and, thus, becomes Christian.

Furthermore, the Sultan is now no longer a father or a husband because the lump child’s rebirth, through the conversion, redraws the boundary surrounding the family unit. The text firmly asserts that there can be no merging, not even a connection, between these two groups; now that the child is wholly Christian the Saracen Sultan has no link to him whatsoever.

_The King of Tars_ further complicates the issue of crossing cultural boundaries by associating physical appearance with religious conversion. During the Sultan’s and the lump child’s baptism, transformations take place: the Sultan’s skin “þat blac & loþely was, / Al white bicom” (928-9) and the lump child takes human form and breathes. Interestingly, the Sultan’s religious affiliation is characterized here by his physical appearance. His “blac” skin defines him as Saracen and makes him “loþely”, and so it is this trait which must change. For the Sultan especially, these transformations are proof of the power of Christianity, and, for the Princess, they indicate that a spiritual conversion has truly occurred since the biological changes show that both the Sultan and the lump child have been touched by God. In contrast to the Princess’ conversion, the Sultan does not merely change his religious allegiance; his spiritual and physical form changes. True
religious conversion, in which outward political affiliation and inward spiritual belief coincide, brings about more than just a change of clothing and the observance of rituals: it produces physical change. Thus the transformation reveals the connection between biology and spirituality. Akbari explains further:

In baptism, spiritual orientation and bodily origin come to a point of intersection, where corporeal transformation is simultaneous with the reorientation of spiritual devotion. Conversion (literally, turning toward God) entails metamorphosis, in which bodily change is necessarily concomitant with spiritual change. (192)

In this way, the text not only reinforces the belief that there are core differences, biologically, between Saracen and Christian, but also associates a true conversion with biological change. The transformations then point to the larger issue of the need for proof of religious affiliation. Readers cannot help but remember the Princess’ lack of transformation during her Saracen conversion, and they accept the text’s assertion that the Princess remains Christian after her Saracen conversion. The tale proposes a fantasy wherein inward spiritual belief is outwardly displayed on the body. It insinuates that biology is the only indisputable indication of one’s belief system. This fantasy binds Christians together by distinguishing them from Saracens, prevents the groups from merging, and resolves any uncertainty over religious affiliation.

However, the text undermines the capacity of biology to indicate religious belief when the Sultan converts those in his land by the sword. The Princess tells the Sultan that, if there are people who will not convert, then “Loke to þe deþ þat he be brouȝt” (959). According to Bly Calkin, the Princess is urging “her husband to prove his integration into the Christian community in the most concrete way possible: by turning his back on his former communal links with Saracens and forcibly severing those links with death” (126). In essence, the Princess is assimilating the Sultan into her own
community, rather than assimilating into his community, by forcing him to become a Crusader. The Princess’ need for further proof of the Sultan’s loyalty to Christianity shows that biology is not enough of an indicator of one’s religious affiliation. Later the Sultan explains, in a letter asking for help from the King of Tars, that he will “take his lond bi euerich cost, / & serche in his cuntry; / Who þat wold nouȝt cristned be / He schuld be honged opon a tre, / Wiþouten ani delay” (992-96). A forced conversion indicates that the Sultan’s people are in the same position that the Princess was formerly in: they publicly follow new rituals and customs while potentially remaining spiritually unchanged. The Sultan shows that, for his people, the validity of their religious affiliation is not as important as the ritual act of the christening itself. For the Sultan’s people, exterior displays of religious affiliation are far more important than inward belief.

_The King of Tars_ complicates the issue of religious affiliation by suggesting that there are multiple markers of religious belief and these markers are different for the rulers and the ruled. The Sultan, as a ruler who represents his people, must undergo a sincere spiritual, biological and political conversion. His subjectivity matters because it influences both the people in his entire land and those on the periphery. His subjects, on the other hand, function under their leader, and so their conversion must correspond with their ruler’s affiliation. Interestingly, the Princess’ conversion is the same as any subject’s, yet the text’s focus on her ambiguous religious identity suggests that her spiritual beliefs are also important. It is, after all, the Princess’ struggle with her own religious affiliation which enables her to baptise the lump child, convert the Sultan, and change the allegiance of an entire Saracen community. In regards to assimilation, _The_  

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8 In the conversion of the masses there is a point to be made about social class: the text is not concerned about the spirituality of non-aristocratic characters.
King of Tars maintains that there is an intrinsic boundary between Christian and Saracen groups that cannot be crossed, which prevents cultural intermingling. Aliscans provides an alternative perspective when it suggests that differences between groups are artificially constructed, rather than natural, and integration of the other can occur if differences are accepted.

Saving Identity through Mobility

The King of Tars and Aliscans view the possibility of assimilation and negotiate differences between Christian and Saracen groups in two completely different ways. While The King of Tars endorses loyalty and steadfast belief in the face of adversity and rejects the Princess’ obligation to transfer her allegiance, Aliscans posits mobility, especially in the face of adversity, as both redemptive and valuable. The King of Tars argues that cultural intermingling is obscene, and there can be no assimilation without the erasure of difference; conversely, Aliscans portrays the inclusion of difference in the Christian community as beneficial and at times essential to the survival of Christian identity. I will discuss Aliscans’ understanding of assimilation and how it compares to The King of Tars by examining Rainoart and William’s ability to shift between Christian and Saracen groups. Through their cultural mobility, Rainoart and William save Christian society from the invading Saracens and acceptably enable the incorporation of the other into the Christian community.

Rainoart’s mobility partially stems from his familial connection to the Christians and Saracens and his ties to both communities. His sister, Guiborc, is a Christian convert and married to William; Rainoart’s “devotion to Guiborc never / wavers” (Aliscans
XCIV-XCV), and he is loyal to William and fights the Saracens for her sake. Rainoart’s father and remaining thirteen siblings are Saracens whom Rainoart has not seen since he was a child. Rainoart is physically distinct from William and Guiborc because, similar to the rest of his siblings, he is a giant. As a boy, Rainoart separated from his Saracen family when he became angry with his tutor and ran aboard a ship travelling to France. During the next seven years, Rainoart had no contact with his family, did not attempt to return home, nor did he dwell on his past life. With time, Rainoart lost any allegiance he may have had to his Saracen people and he developed a fondness for his new, Christian, homeland. However, when Rainoart meets his family as adversaries in battle, his allegiance to Christianity is questionable, and his ability to easily switch allegiances is, once again, apparent. Rainoart actively kills much of his family on behalf of Christianity, yet, at the same time, he is also guilty because he believes that, by siding with the Christians and turning against his family, he has partially transgressed: “I am miserable, / for I have killed all the friends of my blood, / and crushed the body of my father / This sin will never be forgiven me” (6656-6659). This passage illustrates that, although Rainoart is undoubtedly fighting for Christianity, he not entirely comfortable with his decision to defend the Christians. As a result, this passage suggests that Rainoart’s position as a Christian fighting against the Saracens is not completely stable. Rainoart can easily transfer his allegiances, but he must be willing to do so.

The King of Tars stresses the importance of being steadfast; the Sultan forces the Princess to change her political allegiance to the Saracens, but, inwardly, her religious faith and her loyalty to the Christians remains strong. Even though the Princess moves between groups and becomes a Saracen, her unwillingness to wholeheartedly change her
allegiance prevents her from completely assimilating. Aliscans, on the other hand, illustrates Rainoart’s lack of steadfastness; his willingness to shift between Christian and Saracen groups enables his assimilation into Christian society because it illustrates that he can become a member of either of these groups. For instance, when William forgets to include Rainoart in the victory celebrations for winning against the Saracens, an act which essentially dismisses Rainoart as a member of Christian society, Rainoart is so upset that he decides to join the Saracens and destroy William along with the rest of the Christians. Rainoart explains that, since William excluded him, “I shall take all Orange away from him. / Now I shall make peace with my father, / I shall send for Saracens and Turks” (7520e-7520g). Further on, Rainoart angrily asserts, “I won’t believe in the almighty King, / but in Mohammad who is molded in gold, / and I’ll make William sad and angry” (7551-3). Rainoart’s willingness to switch sides, and his ability to move politically and religiously between these two groups, allows him to be integrated into Saracen society. This is further shown after the battle when William asks Rainoart, “Tell me, my friend, what we are wondering. / Do you want to be baptized or not, / To believe in God with good intention /... If you believe, we shall have you baptized” (7876-84). It is this willingness to fight for and become a Christian which enables his acceptance into Christian society. To put this in perspective, in The King of Tars, the Sultan’s also has a choice to make and must be willing to convert to Christianity; however, the lump child’s transformation proves to him the superiority of Christianity, which convinces him to convert and become Christian. In Aliscans, Rainoart does not need proof of Christianity’s supremacy; his willingness to be a Christian is enough to initiate his integration into Christian society.
The King of Tars and Aliscans have two distinct ways of negotiating difference through their association between physical appearance and religion. Cohen’s explanation fits perfectly with Tars’ perspective: “the body, soul and person were continuous, caught together in what gender theorists label a matrix of identity” (Of Giants xvi). In Tars, cultural identity is not based solely on one’s spiritual affiliation; physical appearance and religion are entirely contingent on each other and must correlate. This is especially evident in the Sultan whose black skin, representing his Saracen affiliation, must disappear before he can become a Christian. The lump child is also not Christian until his difference disappears through a transformation at his baptism. In Tars, Christian identity follows a fixed standard set in place by the laws of nature, which are maintained, not controlled, by the Christian people. The Princess has no control over the Sultan and the lump child’s transformation; God enables their entry into the Christian community. As well, the characters’ physical transformations show that there can be no figures of difference within the Christian community, which illustrates that the incorporation of the other is impossible unless the other becomes the same as other Christians.

Aliscans begins by following the same standard. However, in this text, the connection between race and religion is not a law of nature, but superficially constructed by the Christians themselves. Rainoart is racially different from his fellow Christians and King Louis maintains a connection between Rainoart’s physical appearance and spirituality when he will not raise or baptise him on account of his size and strength (Aliscans 3206). Furthermore, when Rainoart worked in King Louis’ kitchen, “The chief cook had him shorn during the night, / blackened and soiled with the fire-shovel, / his whole face has been smeared with charcoal” (3158-61). Rainoart has naturally white skin,
but the fire shovel and charcoal that the cook makes him use in the kitchen turn his face and body black, resulting in an explicit, and forced, expression of Rainoart’s racial difference on his flesh. Louis’ men are constructing difference where there is none in order to further separate Rainoart from the Christians. When Rainoart is finally baptised, the holy water washes away his black face to reveal a “fair countenance” (Of Giants 170). Rainoart’s black face suggests that the majority of Rainoart’s physical differences constitute a performance constructed by Christian society. This further suggests that the differences between Christians and Saracens are mostly fabricated constructions, and perhaps Saracens are not actually others after all. This situation would be strikingly similar to the Sultan’s in Tars—Rainoart is now a Christian, and, so his skin tone must correlate with his spirituality—except that Rainoart’s difference is not washed away. His abnormal size and strength remain because religious affiliation has no natural connection to physical appearance. Furthermore, as a result of the separation of physical appearance and religion, Rainoart can integrate into Christian society because, with the ability to undergo baptism despite his physical otherness, he is now spiritually affiliated, and he has also pledged political allegiance, to Christianity. As well, Rainoart’s brother Baudus’ baptism illustrates that skin colour is not spiritually significant. This is because after the baptism Baudus’ skin remains an “indelible ‘ink’ [and] no longer signifies anything about the body-text beneath it” (Of Giants 169-70). Aliscans illustrates that the body does not signify the self; the text shows that the other can be integrated into Christian society by pushing reader to look past the idea that physical appearance must also connote religion.9

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9 For further discussion of medieval ideas of race and religion as embodied in the skin and physiognomy see Jeffry Jerome Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment”.
A Speculative Explanation

How do we account for the differences between the two texts’ views on assimilation? Their distinctive genres and the period when they were written both influence the texts’ perspective on cultural intermingling. *The King of Tars* is a Middle English romance written in the early fourteenth century,\textsuperscript{10} whereas *Aliscans* is a Middle French *chanson de geste* from the Guillaume d’Orange tradition written in the mid to late twelfth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Sarah Kay explains that the romance genre was

stimulated by the rise of courtliness, [and] marks a new concern with interiority and the individual. Despite the romance hero’s involvement with ‘society’, as represented by the court, his relationship with the social group is dialectical: ... his actions contributing to the court’s prestige as the court’s recognition confirms his value, but his career remains that of an ‘individual’ who pursues private goals of emotional fulfilment and ethical self-valuation. (2)

*Chansons de geste*, on the other hand, are “representations of a collective experience; their concern is with feudal and religious consensus, the role of the hero being to embody in his actions the ideals of the group he represents” (Kay 2). According to Kay, scholars traditionally discuss the connection between these two genres as coinciding with a historical shift whereby the *chanson* made way for the romance (4). However, she argues that the two genres greatly overlap and even influence each other. The genres clearly overlap within these two texts. *The King of Tars* has evident political overtones, as indicative of the *chanson*, when familial relationships directly coincide with political allegiances. In *Aliscans*, Rainoart undergoes an internal struggle, typical in the romances, when trying to cope with the fact that he murders his family to save Christianity.

\textsuperscript{10} For a more thorough historical account of *The King of Tars* see Horstein’s “The Historical Background of *The King of Tars*”.

\textsuperscript{11} For more information on Guillaume d’Orange Cycle see the introduction from Ferrante’s *Guillaume d’Orange* (pg 1-61).
However, while the genres partially account for the texts’ similar themes, this still does not explain why these two texts view assimilation so differently.

I believe it is Aliscan’s humour, along with the genre, which enables the discussion of the possibility of assimilation. *The King of Tars* is a serious text that reconciles all issues by the end of the tale, while *Aliscans* is carnivalesque—Rainoart drinks all of the baptismal water before his conversion (7930)—and lets readers come to their own conclusions about the issues at hand. For instance, Rainoart breaks into a monastery, eats as much food as he can, and when a monk catches him in the act he “grabs the monk and draws him close, / then hurls him so violently at a pillar / that both his eyes fly out of his head” (3694-7). Later, after Rainoart has finished consuming all that he can manage, he “hears the poor people begging for bread ... he runs back to the refectory / where he finds an enormous basket; / he fills it with more than a hundred loaves / and as many quarters as it can hold ... and distributes the bread generously” (3707-17). Rainoart’s behaviour is outlandish and humorous, and, at the same time, this situation is essentially critiquing the church and how it treats those in need. After Rainoart finishes fighting, William and his men go back to Orange to celebrate, where they forget to include Rainoart in the festivities. Rainoart first laments, “I might well be enraged. / Count William treats me with little honor / he left me alone like a poor wretch / and did not send for me to eat with him” (7529-32). And then he angrily exclaims,

I won’t believe in the almighty King,  
But in Mohammad who is molded in gold,  
And I’ll make William sad and angry ...  
Orange will be taken, the country laid waste,  
And Gloriete, the palace, destroyed  
And he himself will be caught and bound ...  
And Aimeri will be raised on the gallows  
And all his sons will have their heads cut off.
In the chapel at Aix I’ll be crowned king,
For Louis will be thrown out of France
Because of his kitchen where he kept me for so long ...
And I shall do what I like with Aelis,
His noble daughter who is so lovely...
She needn’t complain if I marry her,
She will be endowed with all of Spain;
Puglia and Venice and Calabria
I shall give to her, before the year is out. (7551-7573)

From this passage one can see that Rainoart is clearly enraged because William forgot to include him at the feast, but his exaggerated threats undermine the seriousness of the situation. This passage is reminding readers that Rainoart’s mobility not only gives him the capacity to enter the Christian community but to also turn against it. However, the comedic nature of the situation, due to the hyperbole, causes readers and the other textual characters to overlook such a dangerous scenario and, later, accept Rainoart nonetheless. *Aliscans*’ humour enables a discussion on the possibility of accepting difference and integrating the other in Christian society.

*The King of Tars* and *Aliscans* show the complex and flexible nature of Christian and Saracen relations. Each posits an entirely different perspective on the place of the other within Christian society and their comparison helps us to better understand the construction of cultural difference throughout the medieval period.
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