

Somatic Figurations of the Saracen in Sir Thomas Malory's

Le Morte Darthur

Wajih Ayed

لم يكن الجسد أهمّ ما يحدّد الانتماء العرقي في الفكر المسيحي الوسيط، بل كانت العقيدة هي التي تصنّف الناس إلى مؤمنين أو كُفار وثُلُونهم بيضا أو سودا وتصورهم بشرا أو غير ذلك. فالمسيحية في العصر الوسيط كانت تنتج أجساد معتنقيها، لا بالاستناد إلى مرجعية عرقية معيّنة، وإنما بالرجوع إلى اعتناق أصحابها للدين السائد بأوروبا آنذاك أو بإعراضهم عنه. فالمسيحيّ بشريّ سويّ كامل وسواه يُنسب إلى سلالة "قاييل"، يكتسي سواد بشرته ويسكن جسده الأثم ويعيش في ظلمات قلبه.

حاولنا في بحثنا هذا، اعتمادا على مقاربة "ما بعد الكونولالية"، أن ندرس في مرحلة أولى صور جسد المسلم في غريب مظهره وعجيب تكوينه وعنيف فعله وجامح رغبته من خلال تحليلنا لقصة "موت الملك آرثر" للكاتب البريطاني الوسيط "السير توماس مالوري" ونقارنها بصور جسد المسيحيّ، ذلك الذي يُقدّم كمقياس مرجعيّ يُمنح به الانتماء للعرق البشريّ الواحد الكاثوليكي. أما في الجزء الثاني من بحثنا فقد تناولنا حكاية الفارس "بالومايديز" المُسلم الذي يتوق إلى اعتناق المسيحيّة، فرأينا أنّه كلّما تعمّق إيمانه بالدين الجديد ارتقي بجسده وأضفي عليه صفات بشرية وحرّره من السواد إلى البياض، فإذا به جسّد حسنّ سليم يسرّ الناظرين. نستنتج إذاً، أنّ الدّين في الأدب البريطاني الوسيط لا يحدّد العرق فحسب، بل يُنتج الجسد و يجعل منه قناة إيديولوجية يخرع بها الآخر المختلف ليثمن به وهمّ الذات المنزّهة المتعالية.

[T]he Christian body did not have a race (just as, ideally, it did not have a gender or a sexuality), because the body of the Other always carried that burden on its behalf.

J. J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, p. 193

Introduction

The Saracen is the master trope of alterity in English literature of the Middle Ages.¹ No matter how traumatising it can be, perception of otherness is a foundational prerequisite for identity formation. Edward Said credibly argues that human cultures “spin out a dialectic of self and other, the subject ‘I’ who is native, authentic, at home, and the object ‘it’ or ‘you,’ who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different, out there” (*After the Last Sky*, 40). There is no escape from alterity, but, as Said lucidly explains, representation of the Other is usually skewed because it “operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting” (*Orientalism* 273). From this analytic stance, I contend that the religious expediencies of “racial purity” and “racial apartness” (Goldberg 72) in late Medieval British culture bracketed the normality of the Saracen body and made it a paradigm of deviancy against which the standardised morphology of the Christian was validated. Radical sequestration of racialised adequacy distanced the ethnically marked Saracens from the sphere of normalised humanity and represented them negatively to demarcate a fictive borderline between Christians and non-Christians. My purpose is to show that the alterity of the Saracen was not a fixed construct, but a fluid concept which was variably deployed or withdrawn depending on the failure or success of religious investment in the normalisation of the Other.

¹ It is a commonplace of contemporary research in medieval British literature not to conflate *Saracens* with *Moslems*. In the Middle Ages, however, Europeans used these and the following words interchangeably: *Mauri* (Moors), *Ismaeliti* (descendants of Ishmael), *Agareni* (descendants of Hagar), and *Poeni* (Carthaginians); the term *Saraceni* (probably, progeny of Sara) eventually gained currency as the most commonly used generic appellation for Moslems (Lamoreaux 9-11). It is to be noted that *Saracen* is a gender- and class- neutral lexical marker of race used to signal religious difference.

1. Alterity of the Saracen in Medieval European Race Theory

Medieval and modern race theories assign biology to radically different levels of relevance in somatic figurations of the body. Joan Cadden has persuasively argued that dermal pigmentation and physiological difference cannot be seriously considered as racial signifiers in the Middle Ages (163-65), and Robert Bartlett has influentially evidenced that the medieval European conception of ethnic identity encompassed power, language, law, and blood (197-242). For the two scholars, these determinants of race subsumed biology in a monologic process of cultural assimilation through which selfhood and otherness were perceived in terms of homogeneity, which means that medieval ethnic difference was a matter of nurture, rather than nature. Figuration of the Other was also “always hierarchical” because “the other was perennially inferior to what passed as normal” (Uebel 16). In the speech that set in motion the train of events leading to the Crusades (as reported by Robert the Monk), Pope Urban II eulogises the supposed ethnic superiority of his French audience when he honours them as, the “race chosen and beloved by God as shines forth in very many of your works set apart from all nations...by your catholic faith and the honor of the holy church,” then he warns them that “an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God ...has invaded the lands of...Christians” (“Speech at the Council of Clermont: Five Versions of the Speech”). In the Pontiff’s Manichean discourse, the Cross is the key to secure admission into the kingdom of human normality² and the pedestal granting racial superiority.

Because the dependence of race on biology was a matter of mere contingency, ideologically sidetracked cultural fantasies about otherness eventually percolated into reductive figurations of Others as radically different morphs. Although ethnicity was culturally produced, it was somatically inscribed from a perspective where situating the Self in the centre of biological normalness required discarding the Other as a beast, demon, or monster. The political expediencies of the Crusades catalysed this usable

² In *Piers Plowman*, Will realises that grace, in principle, extends to all, including Moslems, heretics, and Jews: “Crist cleped us alle, come if we wolde— / Sarsens and scismatikes, and so he dide the Jewes” (11.119-20). The Christian faith is presented as the default human race, and non-Christians are portrayed as aliens.

radicalisation of ethnic alterity. As pointed out by Said in the passage quoted above, scrutiny of representation should be sensitive to the motivation thereof. In his notorious speech, Urban II is reported by the chronicler Fulcher of Chartres to have railed at the Saracens, that “despised and base race, which worships demons” (“Speech at the Council of Clermont: Five Versions of the Speech”).³ This heated invective, which inaugurates a long tradition of hatred for all non-Christians, springs from a political agenda that warrants the demonization of the Other to justify the exorcism of alterity done through mob justice and cynic inquisition.

Contending that the relationship between Christendom and the Islamic world dramatically veered to the worse after the onset of Crusades in 1095 A.D., R. W. Southern succinctly comments that “[t]his event did not bring knowledge” (qtd. in Cohen 190). The spatial contiguity and cultural intimacy resulting from the religiously mandated military frictions in the Middle East counterproductively generated a fictionalised racial separateness that occluded the inevitable hybridity of the warring neighbours and overlooked the transparent imbrications of their identities. In his highly perceptive study of *Medieval Identity Machines*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains that “Crusade propaganda figured Islam as an inassimilable *body* exorbitantly marked by racial difference and threatening the corporate integrity of Latin Christendom” (200). The spatial proximity occasioned by the Crusading incursions in the Middle East produced a (deliberate) misrepresentation of Moslems, collectively misnamed *Saracens*. For Michael Uebel, the latter became the “antitypes of humanity” (13) and “the imaginative repository of fantastic men and beasts with bizarre enjoyments” (15). Because the racial production of alterity was made “to demarcate the limits of the Christian possible,” Cohen aptly comments, “there was no real Saracen in the Middle Ages” (202). The composite category *Saracen* emerged as a plastic construct meant primarily to arrest the circulation of Christian subjectivity⁴ into an inclusive category

³ Startling misconception of Islam in medieval Christendom made Moslems idolaters worshipping the prophet Mohammad, misspelled as *Mahound* or *Mahun* and misrepresented as a schismatic anti-Christ.

⁴ Mladen Dolar shows that the West deployed cultural fantasies of remote and tyrannical Others figured exclusively as enjoying subjects in order to conceal its internal political agendas axed on repression of desire and maintenance of lack (xxii).

that discounted somatic otherness and validated a coercively implemented totalising conception of the Christian body.⁵

2. Somatic Figurations of the Saracen in Le Morte Darthur

2.1. Saracen Monsters, Christian Slayers

Figurations of the bestial and the monstrous thrive in *Le Morte Darthur*,⁶ but the giant hunting the heights of Mount Saint-Michael and marauding the peaceful meadows of Brittany is the archetype of the demonic Other in the Arthurian romance under scrutiny.⁷ Fortified by his superhuman size and power, the giant is a Grendel⁸ whose physical ugliness is paralleled only by his moral defilement. Of monsters, this perilous titan is the most hideous, for he is a ripper, a rapist, and a cannibal. In fact, he is literally an ogre. Being a predator with an insatiable appetite, he has “slain, murdered and devoured much people of the country, and had been sustained seven year with the children of the commons of that land” (V.v). A ruthless destroyer of women, he has killed Duchess Helena of Brittany, presumably after having raped her (V.v). His demonic nature is graphically exposed in the fireside scene where Arthur surprises him at supper, feasting on a human barbecue: Insouciant, the beast sat “gnawing on a limb of a man...and three fair damosels turning three broaches whereon were broached twelve young children late born, like young birds” (V.v). The cannibal is a hybrid figure who bridges the culturally forbidden gap between the human and the bestial, one that erupts into the veneered self-conception of the Arthurian community, tangibly evoking the threat of atavism and promptly alarming the most martially capable figure of the community (King Arthur) to the urgency of pruning the excess and suppressing the menace of its contaminating the core of courtliness.

⁵ Extant records of the holocausts and diasporas of heretics, Moslems, and Jews during and after the Crusades bear the scars of a violently implemented Christian perspectivism.

⁶ This is a Middle English romance written by Sir Thomas Malory (*d.*1471) in the ninth year of King Edward IV's reign (1461-83). It was edited and printed in 1485 by William Caxton, who divided it into twenty-one books and subdivided each book into an uneven number of chapters.

⁷ Examples of encounters with monsters are rife elsewhere in the romance: On his first visit to Corbenic, Lancelot kills a hideous serpent (XI.i); Bors dispatches a mighty dragon in the Grail Castle (XI.v); Galahad kills a foul fiend haunting a grave in the abbey from which he obtains his shield (XIII.xii); etc.

⁸ Grendel is a monstrous creature killed by the eponymous hero of the Old English epic *Beowulf*.

In her pioneering monograph about the politics of cultural fantasy in Middle English⁹ romance, Geraldine Heng insightfully notes that the “charge of cannibalism is one of those instrumentally useful technologies of definition by which the malignant otherness of cultural enemies and outcasts can be established and periodically renewed” (29). The danger of atavism is strategically distanced from the Christian community by its imaginative transfer to the demonised Other. The displacement of cannibalism from the centre to the periphery thus amounts to a sanitary evacuation of bodily excess and malfunction into alien morphs that can be mutilated, dismembered, and excised. Arthur challenges “this devil” (V.v), whose iron club¹⁰ is of no avail in front of the conqueror who takes off his genitals, stabs him to death, strikes off his head, and has it impaled on the truncheon of a spear. The paradigmatic cannibal and the superlative hero “both constitute figurations of European culture imagined at its demonic and sublime extremes (Heng 36). The public display of the gruesome trophy signals the ethnic cleansing and the ethical evacuation of somatic excess from the dominant chivalric culture. Arthur terminates the demon that came from Hispania, which reminds him of having slain another giant called Ritho on Mount Araby. Heng demonstrates that both locations are situated in the Orient, with Hispania referring to the interior regions of Syria and Araby to the Middle East in general (37). Tracing back the origin of the titans to Moslem dominions posits the East as the locus of monstrosity threatening the organic apartness of the Arthurian community,¹¹ which coincides with medieval Christendom.¹²

The violence of representation is concomitant with the violence of territorial aggression hooded in self-defence. Early in the Roman campaign, King Arthur’s spies

⁹ The phrase *Middle English* was coined by philologists in the nineteenth century to designate a period in the history of the English language extending roughly from 1150 to 1500.

¹⁰ The “characteristic weapon of giants and a symbol of brutality and social inferiority” (Whitaker 18), the iron club is also a phallic symbolic pointing at the giant’s threatening, superordinate masculinity (also manifest in his avid collection of kings’ beards). I believe that this is why Arthur’s first stroke emasculates the oversexed creature. The castrato throws away his club and Arthur stabs him to death by a dagger, in a symbolic penetration image that follows the castration scene.

¹¹ Saracens appear as the superlative threats to both Arthurian and non-Arthurian Christian dominions. Passages instantiating their traumatising otherness are rife in the romance. Merlin tells Arthur in the battle with the eleven kings that God is wrath with him because he reduced a Christian army from sixty thousand to fifteen thousand, and, by implication, weakened Christianity in front of a Saracen invasion: “These eleven kings have more on hand than they are ware of, for the Saracens are landed in their countries, more than forty thousand, that burn and slay, and have laid siege at the castle Wandesborow, and make great destruction” (I.xvii).

¹² Historical evidence to the contrary, King Arthur conquers the Holy Roman Empire and becomes the most powerful Christian ruler.

tell him that Emperor Lucius' army includes "fifty giants which had been engendered of fiends" (V.ii).¹³ With a host of Saracens, these assassins and pyromaniacs waste Christian people and scorch Christian lands. Not only does their ethnic identity debase them, but also their violence underscores their disregard for the chivalric code, the swearing of which on Pentecost points at its specifically Christian nature. In the Roman war, Arthur is implacable in his resolve to exterminate his demonised enemies; no gold under God will save their lives (Whitaker 19). In the final battle alone, his mounted and foot warriors kill more than a hundred thousand Romans, Saracens, and giants (V.viii). Like their commander, Round Table knights "never spare giants and churls, whose uncivilized appearance, outfit, and rituals suggest that they are non-aristocratic outsiders undesirable as the targets of political recruitment" (Kim 78). Martialy capable members of Arthurian chivalry decimate alien bodies with extreme prejudice because of their alleged threat to the religious identity of the society posited as the ethical centre against which otherness is measured and found lacking, the repository of a presumably essential mode of being and the synthesis of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Scansion of the episodes where Arthurian knights interact with the shipwrecked in alterity reveals the intersection of power, language, religion, and race in figurations of Self and Other, and sheds light on the mechanism translating representation into justified antagonism.

Hunting for the human, animal, or composite alien betrays a bipolar vision of a world where identity is constructed antithetically to all that deviates from the religious ethos of the chivalric code of conduct. Interaction with the Other identifies the Self differently, confirms belonging to the courtly community, asserts solidarity with its members, and claims superiority over the peripheral selves painted in colourised race markers. Associated with aliens are physiological attributes that legislate for their exclusion from the inner circle of the Arthurian community on the basis of their ethical

¹³ Saracens in non-Arthurian Middle English romances also have non-normative bodies. In *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, a "heathen soldan" (130) has "a hideous rout / Of giants strong and stout / And uglie to looke upon" (131-34). Emphasis on the somatic disfiguration of heathens is also prominent in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, where a mighty Saracen giant has "eyghen blake, / So grim he is of sight" (908-09). Similarly, *King Horn* condemns the "ille / Sarazins blake..." (1330-31), and *Sir Gowther* condones the decimation of the "tho Sarsyns blake" (479). Race is morally colorized into the whiteness of Christians or the blackness of Saracens. An implicit link is here established between black skin and black soul. Racial prejudice thus determines figurations of the Other.

incompatibility with its ethnic standards. The darkly pigmented Saracens with whom the protagonists of the romance cross paths contrastively function to valorise the mythologized racial supremacy of Arthurian chivalry and to highlight its Christian affiliation. More importantly, it legitimates the erasure of colourised Others (via suppression or conversion) by the operatives of Arthur's regime. Lances levelling to pierce Saracen bodies and swords swinging to scatter heathen heads are the tools of knightly prowess incisively acting against ethnic others. Alterity in the romance is a gamble on which courtly ideology places a high bid to indoctrinate actual and potential operatives of militarised Christianity.

2.2. Was Sir Palomides a Saracen?

Sir Palomides is initially estranged from the totalised Arthurian structure of belonging where racial identity is sanitised. Appended to his chivalric title and personal name is either a racial sobriquet, *the Saracen* (IX.ix), or a religious cognomen, *the pagan* (IX.xxxviii). In a characteristic chivalric manner, he introduces himself through his alien ancestry, but he acknowledges his difference in religious, not racial terms: "my name is sire Palomydes sone and heyre vnto kynge Astlabor / and ... I was neuer crystened" (X.lxxxii). His otherness is evoked, although dimly focalised, when he is spied in a fit of rage, making "many straunge sygnes and tokens" (IX.xxxii). Sir Palomides is exempted from the bullying somatic rhetoric typical of Saracens in Middle English romance, but his pitch-black chivalric accoutrements flag his racial affiliation:

thenne was sire Tristram ware of a lykely knyght rydyng vpon a grete black hors /
and a black couerd shelde / what knyghte is that said sire Tristram with the black
hors & the blak sheld he semes a good knyght / I knowe hym wel said sir Persydes
he is one of the best knyghtes of the world / thenne is it syre Launcelot said sir
Tristram / nay said syre Persydes / hit is syr Palomydes.... (IX.xxvii)

Ensnconced in his black chivalric accoutrements, Sir Palomides elicits respect and invites conflation with Sir Lancelot, the flower of Arthurian chivalry. He is not

represented in opprobrious terms like the Saracens in the Roman campaign. The race markers inscribed on his steed and steel condense a definitional divide between Self and Other which stalls his naturalisation into a Christian community bound together by a fiction of sameness.

Sir Palomides functions as any errant knight in the realm when he looks for honour through chivalric feats of arms, but he distinguishes himself by undertaking the perilous adventure of the Questing Beast. The text weaves around his helmet laurels of praise, yet it remains economical with details about his physical portrait. A rare detailed description of Sir Palomides is made when he reaches Cyte. The city-dwellers warmly welcome the Saracen in King Arthur's court, then "they beheld hym / and sawe that he was wel made / clenely and byggely / and vnmaymed of his lymmes / and neyther to yonge nor to old / and soo alle the peple preysed hym" (X.lxiii). Physiologically, he is blessed with the normative attributes of a superlative member of the Round Table, the elite chivalric force in Logres. This scene shows that biological difference is only one part of a multiplex vision of alterity that glides into secondary consideration when cultural parameters of belonging are satisfied. The inhabitants of Cyte know that their guest is "not crystened yet," but they are also aware that "he byleued in the best maner / and was fulfeythful and true of his promyse / and wel condycyoned" (X.lxiii). In fact, *The Book of Sir Tristram* brims with praise for Sir Palomides, the "good" (X.iv) and "noble knyght" (X.xx) who is celebrated as "one of the best knyghtes lyuyng in this realme" (IX.xxxvi). Because he clearly, possesses the courtly qualities ceaselessly extolled in the romance, it is not surprising for him to be "wel cherysshed with the kynge and the quene" (IX.ix). His propinquity to Arthurian ethical standards distances him from the Saracen demoniacs of the romance and foreshadows the thickening sameness of his profile.

As his chivalric talent is revealed, Sir Palomides is propelled into a centripetal trajectory of becoming in the process of which he is edged away from the periphery of otherness. As his potential for religious reconfiguration is increasingly evidenced, he defends himself with a shield that is "endented with whyte and black" (IX.xxxvi), then he rides a "whyte hors" (X.lxix). The gradual whitening of his chivalric accoutrements seems to bespeak the metastasis of his acculturation. His composite

body is gradually cleansed from the trappings of otherness, which intimates that his race identity undergoes a slippage along a chain of metamorphosed racialised markers. Of the Saracen, it turns out, he has only the name, for “in to this land I came to be crystened / and in my herte I am crystened / and crystend wille I be” once he has done “seuen true batails for Ihesus sake” (X.xlvii). The description of Palomides the racially marked Saracen modulates into that of a Christian.¹⁴ This is instantiated later on when he reaffirms his new faith: “in my herte I bileue in Ihesu crist and his mylde moder mary / but I haue one batail to do / and when that is done I wil be baptysed with a good wille” (XII.xiii). Palomides syncretises inward sameness with outward otherness, so expectation of his conversion becomes the avenue to his assignment to a radically different racial affiliation. The initial pigmentation of Saracen markers is washed away into the transparency of normalised Christian bodies. The racialised demarcating rift between Self and Other is proleptically sealed through the imminent conversion of Sir Palomides.

If race is a cultural construct, then it may not sideline plausibility to claim that Sir Palomides performs his chosen racial identity as a Christian, an act of will that whitens the ebony generically besmearing the skin colour of otherness. To attend to the theoretical implications of this argument is to subscribe to Lee Patterson’s case for “culturally determined [medieval] identities” (8). Recent research in medieval cultures has credibly shown that, *pace* essentialist conceptions of race, alterity in the European Middle Ages was woven through racialised parameters in which the importance of the biological given was downplayed. As instantiated by Sir Palomides’ metamorphosis, racially marked medieval otherness was fluidly open to being accommodated into sameness. Through his foreshadowed conversion, the knight from the East performs a reversal of his racialised identity from a Saracen to a Christian. In the romance scrutinised, the plasticity of the Arthurian construal of alterity produces a hybrid subject whose difference recedes into an optical illusion once he satisfies the Logrean Christian society with respect to the immanence of his sameness. Because difference

¹⁴ It is useful in this respect to recall Cohen’s apt remark that when Saracen women convert to Christianity, their embrace of the new religion appears as a revelation of what they have always been—Christians—rather than a conversion (202).

in the cultural context where Sir Palomides initially functions as a Saracen is not critically assessed on physiological grounds, stereotyped markers associated with his ethnicity recede into irrelevance in determining his race.

Medieval processes of religious othering seem to require acts of colourised translation when processed through the machinery of race production. These acts of representation are done and undone through artistic channels, among which the romance stands prominent. Because representation is always ideologically mediated and motivated, it may be safely asserted that in the religious politics of the Crusades, distorted figurations pertinent to Saracens vilified them to vivify the spirits of religious zealots and maintain the flow of willing warriors. Acts of representation turn the blackness of Sir Palomides into whiteness; similar acts probably turned the hearts and minds of (potential) crusaders to wreak in reality the havoc that sanguinary King Horn and his assimilated soldiers inflict in Saracen dominions:

Hi sloghen and fughten,	<i>they killed and fought</i>
The night and the ughten.	<i>early morning</i>
The Sarazins cunde	<i>kind</i>
Ne lefde ther non in th'ende.	<i>None remained in the end;</i>
Horn let wurche	<i>ordered built</i>
Chapeles and chirche;	
He let belles ringe	<i>be rung</i>
And masses let singe.	<i>(King Horn 1389-96)</i>

Was Sir Palomides a Saracen? This query can be answered in the affirmative *and* in the negative: Between racial de-territorialisation and desire for religious re-territorialisation, his identity is consigned to the future in which King Horn, not King Arthur, performs the desired over-territorialisation of alterity by sameness.

Conclusion

If distance lends enchantment, the proximity of Christianity and Islam in the high and late Middle Ages lent disenchantment to a view where collision displaced

cohabitation and friction took over fraternity. A fierce clash of conterminous religions, the First Crusade was coextensive with a radical othering of Moslems, collectively baptised Saracens. Middle English romances capture the poignancy of this demonised alterity in literary figurations of Others, an inclusive category where Saracens bear Cain's curse. Christian Manichaeism was instrumental in the conception of a racially defiled subaltern whose pigmented otherness was conveniently transferred to the Moslem. Because the fictionalised homogeneity of the trans-historical and trans-geographical Christian community sidelined ethnicity, medieval Catholicism was the ambit of racialised normalness where religious alterity was cloistered in colourised spaces. *Le Morte Darthur* is the main literary text scrutinised to this effect in the paper because it offers a unique perspective on the mutability of race through religious translation of identity. The Saracen body of Sir Palomides is gradually assimilated into the image of the Self which is regularised in Arthurian culture; indeed, his optative quest for religious reconfiguration warrants the re-pigmentation of his chivalric accoutrements, symbolic of his racial whitening. As this naturalisation process continues, the narrative defocuses attention to the Saracen knight's ethnic difference, which becomes immaterial when his ethical sameness is evidenced. The instability of the process of somatic representation in Middle English literature transforms Sir Palomides' body into a palimpsest, a text where racialised identity is inscribed as a Saracen, then re-inscribed as a Christian.

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