

1. Introduction: *Fierabras* and *Otinel* in England

1.1 *From Chansons to Romance: The English Adopt the Matter of France*

As one of the three Christian figures revered among the Nine Worthies of medieval Europe, the mighty Frankish king Charlemagne was a frequent recipient of the exceptional literary veneration that such status brought these figures through numerous poems and songs over the course of many centuries. The English, no less than the other peoples of Europe, were greatly affected by the legends of Charlemagne and his Twelve Peers. Emil Hausknecht sees the literature written in England about Charlemagne as a result and indication of the “profound and unalterable impression on the minds of [Charlemagne’s] contemporaries” that the king’s rule had made (v). No figure, with the exception of King Arthur, loomed so large in the medieval imagination (Smyser 89). It is strange, then, that of the many tales from the Old French tradition that could have been translated into Middle English, a relatively small, select group of these *chansons de geste*¹ were embraced by the English literary culture and make up the entirety of the Matter of France in Middle English.² These romances are *The Sege of Melayne* (ca. 1400); *Roland and Vernagu* (ca. 1330); a fragmentary *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1400); *The Taill of Rauf Coilyear* (ca. 1515); *The Right Pleasaunt and Goodly Historie of the Foure Sonnes of Aymon* (1489); *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux* (ca. 1530); and multifarious renditions of the *Fierabras* and the *Otinel* stories. These last are *Firumbras* (1375-1400), *Sir Ferumbras* (ca. 1380), *The Sowdone of Babylon* (ca. 1400), *Charles the Grete* (1485), *Otuel a Knight* (ca. 1330), *Otuel and Roland* (ca. 1330), *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne* (ca. 1400). Of the more

¹ *Chansons de geste*, or “songs of deeds,” were the epic poems thought to have been composed by troubadours to celebrate the successes of past French rulers on the battlefield.

² An editor of a number of Middle English romances in the Matter of France, Sidney J. Herrtage, similarly wonders, “It is not a little remarkable, considering the great popularity of the subject—a popularity clearly proved by the frequent allusions in other works—that so few English versions of the Charlemagne Romances should exist, and that those which do survive are each unique” (*Sir Ferumbras* xii-xiii).

than eighty *chansons* extant,³ nearly thirty of which belong to the *geste de roi* cycle⁴ from which *Otinel* and *Fierabras* are taken, these few romances were adapted into the Middle English tradition. Moreover, *Rauf Coilyear* and *The Sege of Melayne* are original to England and Scotland as far as we can tell, and *Roland and Vernagu* belongs not to the *chanson* tradition, but derives from the popular Latin *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*.⁵ The Middle English *Chanson de Roland* is extant in only a single, fragmentary manuscript. *The Foure Sonnes of Aymon* and *Duke Huon of Burdeux* arrived much later in print and are fairly removed from the traditional Matter of France, having little to do with battles against Saracens and much to do with the more fantastical elements of romance literature that had become popular by that time (Smyser 98-100). If one considers all of the Charlemagne-related English romances, the whole of the Matter of France in England leans heavily on the sustained popularity of the stories of the Saracen knights Otinel and Fierabras, or Otuel and Ferumbras as I shall call them by one of their Middle English equivalents from this point forward.

This sustained popularity is interesting in that, at a time when crusading was still popular in England and the Saracen figure was typically the embodiment of what Christendom stood against, the romances in question chose Saracens not only as their protagonists and foci, but as

³ See Ailes and Hardman 43. The authors suggest a more approximate total of around one hundred *chansons*.

⁴ As defined by Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube, the author of *Girard de Vienne*. He is most well known for providing a “system of classification for the *chansons de geste* which we still follow” (Holmes 73):

N’ot que trois gestes en France la garnie
Du roi de France est la plus seignorie
 Et de richesce et de chevalerie;
 Et l’autre apres, bien est drois que je die,
 Est de *Doon* a la barbe florie
 Cel de *Maiance* qui tant ot baronie
 [.]
 La tierce geste ke moult fist a proisier

Fu de *Garin de Monglane* le fier. (*Girard de Vienne*, qtd. in Holmes 73)

The three types of *chansons* are those of the king Charlemagne, that of Doon de Mayence, and that of Garin de Monglane.

⁵ Known alternatively as *Historia Caroli Magni*, the *Pseudo-Turpin* is a twelfth-century life of Charlemagne, which was long thought to have been written by Charlemagne’s bishop Turpin himself. Found to be a forgery in the Renaissance, the *Pseudo-Turpin* enjoyed great success nevertheless among medieval European readers, and it is largely responsible for the dissemination of much of the Charlemagne legend throughout Europe.

their heroes. This study will demonstrate that there is nothing inexplicable about the acceptance that these tales found with English audiences. The poems associate themselves with one of Christendom's greatest ambitions of the time, the project of Christian reclamation, which was carried out and fuelled by crusading fervour throughout much of the Middle Ages. In the Otuel and Ferumbras stories, the concept of reclamation finds itself especially enacted through the Saracen characters who become the focus of the tales and the conduits through which the idealistic goal of reclaiming lost objects of Christianity is channelled. That instability caused by political strife between England and France and by the crusades created a perceived "grave threat to the unified Christian world" (Warm 88) further suggests that reclamation was a particular issue for the English in the fourteenth century. The portrayal of inevitable Christian unity in these romances assured a certain level of success with English Christian audiences. "Success," in this context, is largely determined by the manuscript evidence of these tales, though other determining factors will be later discussed, and it will be useful now to turn to the transmission history of these romances.

The transmission and redaction history of *Fierabras* and *Otinel* into Middle English is fairly complex and largely based on conjecture. Nevertheless, much can be inferred from the internal and external evidence that we have. *Otinel* is a *chanson* that was later translated into Anglo-Norman and found its way into the English tradition through a separate Middle English romance no longer extant. This romance is commonly referred to as *Charlemagne and Roland*, and it likely described Roland's battle with the giant Vernagu (or Ferragus), Otuel's fight with Roland and Otuel's subsequent conversion, the conquering of the Saracen admiral Garcy, and a version of the battle of Roncevaux described in the *Chanson de Roland*. This supposition is founded on the corresponding tail rhyme of the Middle English *Roland and Vernagu*, found only in the Auchinleck MS, and the Fillingham *Otuel and Roland*; scholars consider both romances to be fragments of a composite. Additionally, much of this hypothetical work may have been a translation of an Old French prose *Estoire de Charlemagne*, excepting the Otuel material. *Charlemagne and Roland*, it is suggested, was a translation of the *Estoire de Charlemagne* with an *Otinel* translation inserted (Smyser 88). The Auchinleck MS suggests a common lost Otuel romance which would be the source for both *Otuel a Knight*, which is found in the Auchinleck MS, and *Otuel and Roland* of the Fillingham MS, as there are a number of line correspondences between the two (O'Sullivan lv-lix).

From these proposed sources, the Otuel romance has three extant redactions in Middle English. The earliest is the Auchinleck *Otuel a Knight*, composed around the date of the manuscript, 1330-1340. The poem is in rhyming couplets and is missing its final folio, thus cutting the poem short, albeit not by much.

The Fillingham version, *Otuel and Roland*, although found in a late manuscript, has been dated before the Auchinleck MS because of the *Charlemagne and Roland* theory which requires this tail-rhyme composition to exist early in the tradition, placing it before 1330-1340. It relates the Otuel story and describes the famed battle of Roncevaux in an additional 1100 lines.

Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne is the latest redaction, dated around 1400, and is found in British Library, MS Additional 31042. It follows the *Sege of Melayne* in the manuscript, a poem thought to serve a function similar to that of the *Destruction de Rome* found before *Fierabras* in the Egerton MS by introducing characters and places that continue to be important in the subsequent poem.⁶ Like the others in the Otuel group, it is a free translation of the *Otinell* material, though it follows the plot closely.

Fierabras, the late twelfth-century *chanson* upon which the Ferumbras romances are based, underwent a similarly complex transmission in England. The *chanson* that we have, judging by the description of the thirteenth-century writer Philippe Mouskés,⁷ is a truncated version of what has come to be known as the *Balan*, which described the sack of Rome by a sultan named Balan and his son Fierabras and the retaking of Rome by Charlemagne with the aid of Fierabras, who has converted to Christianity by that time.

After the *Balan* was abbreviated to make *Fierabras*, a later author wrote the *Destruction de Rome* and placed it before *Fierabras* in the Hanover MS. The purpose of this new composition seems to have been to supply the lost first half of the *Balan*, though the two poems in the Hanover MS are not directly connected and “the poem of the *Destruction de Rome* cannot be said to be identical with the first part of the *Balan* romance” for various reasons (Hausknecht xiv), as the *Destruction de Rome* was “in no way adapted to form a consistent whole” with *Fierabras* (Smyser 82). This combination of the *Destruction* and *Fierabras* was later translated

⁶ See Smyser 93-94, for some discussion of why *Sege of Melayne* perhaps has been too hastily assigned a position analogous to the *Destruction de Rome*.

⁷ “In the *Chronique rimée* of Philippe Mouskés, written about 1243, we have a brief summary of a lost twelfth-century *chanson de geste* which we call the *Balan*” (Smyser 81-82). Purportedly, Mouskés treated the *chanson* “as sober history” (Barron 100).

into Anglo-Norman in the Egerton MS and served as the primary source material for the Middle English *Sowdone of Babylon*. Turning then, chronologically, to our Middle English redactions of *Fierabras*, we first have the Ashmole MS *Sir Ferumbras*, composed around 1380, which is an autograph close translation of the *chanson Fierabras*. That the translator and the scribe were one and the same is observable by the draft translation that accompanies the first segment of the English work along its bottom margins. There is a jarring shift in metre and rhyme at line 3410 which Marcus Konick accounts for by designating the first bit of the Ashmole MS Ash I and the second Ash II, positing from a study of other manuscripts of the Ferumbras tradition that Ash I follows what he calls the “Abbreviating” tradition, Ash II the “Vulgate” tradition. Konick sees Ash II as a copy of some other Middle English redaction, while Ash I is clearly the poet’s original translation (Smyser 85).

Another romance from the Ferumbras group is the Fillingham MS *Firumbras*, composed in the late fourteenth century, although the copy in the Fillingham MS is dated as late fifteenth-century. This version begins with the Twelve Peers, Charlemagne’s twelve esteemed knights, trapped within the Saracen princess Floripas’s tower, just before they expel the sultan from his dining hall through the window. The Fillingham redaction is seen, like the Ash II section in *Sir Ferumbras*, as coming from the Vulgate tradition.

The third redaction of the *Fierabras* tale, commonly referred to as *The Sowdone of Babylon*, is found in Princeton University Library, MS Garrett 140. The work is a translation of the source material also used in the Egerton MS, which contains an abridged version of both the Hanover MS *Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*. *The Sowdone of Babylon*’s composition has been dated around 1400 on the basis of echoes of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and other internal evidence (Hausknecht xlvi-xlvii).

The final Middle English version of the *Fierabras* material is found in Caxton’s *Charles the Grete*. Printed in 1485, the work is a close translation of a Swiss redactor’s *Fierabras*, which is actually more of a life of Charlemagne, though the *Fierabras* tale makes up the most bulky part of the book. This work will not be addressed at length in this study because of its late date; nevertheless it stands as an example of the continued popularity of the tale.

The complicated manuscript transmission shown here for both the Otuel and Ferumbras stories is generally accepted by scholars and indicates the peculiar attractiveness of these romances for an English audience. These theories rely on a number of permutations of the

stories, but also suggest a great number of other versions of the tales being copied into Middle English that are no longer extant. However, regardless of how many versions of *Otinell* and *Fierabras* were adapted into Middle English, the core of the romances remained the same.

The Middle English romances studied here, generally speaking, follow their Old French counterparts quite closely in narrative. Adapted from different manuscript traditions, they nevertheless share their central stories of the converted Saracen knight. The variations between the Middle English *Otinell* redactions and the differences between them and their Old French original are less than those in the *Ferumbras* group. The story narrated in *Otuel and Roland* begins with Otuel delivering an ultimatum from his sultan and uncle, Garcy, to Charlemagne. Having been refused, Otuel arrogantly challenges Roland to a duel the next day. During the course of the duel, when it becomes apparent that Roland will lose, Otuel is miraculously converted, and the Saracen joins Charlemagne and is baptized. Immediately, Otuel proposes that they bring the fight to Garcy in turn; much of the rest of the narrative is devoted to the war between Garcy and Charlemagne and the importance of Otuel demonstrating his loyalty to his new religion and allies. After Garcy is captured, *Otuel and Roland* continues with a version of the *Chanson de Roland*'s battle of Roncevaux. *Otuel a Knight* and *Rowland and Otuell* follow a similar narrative with the exception of the battle of Roncevaux, ending instead with the capture of Garcy; in the case of *Otuel a Knight*, the poem breaks off abruptly after Garcy's capture.

Although their variations are greater than in the Otuel group, *Sir Ferumbras*, *Firumbras*, and *Sowdone* are clearly following the tradition set out in their Old French originals. *Sowdone* begins with the extra material associated with the *Destruction de Rome*, in which the sultan Laban and his son Ferumbras sack Rome, stealing the sacred relics of the Passion, provoking a response from Charlemagne and his knights. Ferumbras visits the Christian encampment and challenges all of the Christian knights to a duel; he is subsequently converted in his ensuing battle with one of Charlemagne's Peers, Oliver. Ferumbras then becomes a valued member of Charlemagne's retinue and aids Charlemagne in defeating the sultan. Meanwhile, Ferumbras's sister, Floripas, receives a significant amount of narrative attention as she saves Charlemagne's Peers from captivity, providing them with a stronghold and provisions. In the end, Charlemagne, with the help of Ferumbras, rescues his knights and Floripas and, after unsuccessfully attempting to convert and baptize the sultan, has the sultan killed. The relics are restored and Floripas is formally baptized. *Sir Ferumbras* follows a similar plot, though it begins with Ferumbras's duel

with Oliver and, being a closer translation of *Fierabras*, runs for many more lines. *Firumbras* follows the same narrative pattern, but it is missing the entire incident of Ferumbras's duel because of damage to the manuscript, beginning instead with the Peers trapped in Floripas's tower.

The romances of Otuel and Ferumbras, as can be seen, are startlingly similar in their plots. If one wished to pare them down to their narrative essentials, the tales become ostensibly about one recurring theme in particular: conversion.⁸ This major theme plays out through the broader narrative focus of Christian reclamation in the narratives. Frequently the plot is moved along by the need for the Christians to reclaim what they have lost to the Saracens, a focus that is established assiduously by continual oath-swearing and frequent ultimatum-delivering envoys. That is not to say that the six poems do not include all of the knightly battles, fair maidens, gruesome monsters, and chivalrous banter of the other Middle English romances, but Otuel's and Ferumbras's tales revolve around Saracens, not only as monstrous opponents but as protagonists, and that revolution demands conversions.

The Otuel and Ferumbras romances are of particular interest, then, because their willingness to develop a hero out of the converted enemy indicates particular views of the Saracen in the fourteenth century. The question of why these particular stories seemed worth visiting repeatedly by Middle English redactors becomes linked to the very real ideas that were developing about how to deal with the "Islamic problem," to borrow a term from Richard Southern (13, 108-09). The romances' interest to a medieval audience, and indeed to a modern audience, is intrinsically and inextricably linked to their central subject of reclamation, a matter that was present in many minds in fourteenth-century England.

It may seem odd to neglect such exemplary romances as *The King of Tars* in a study of Christian reclamation in Middle English romance, but this exclusion is necessary because of the clear focal differences in the other romances. While the stories of Otuel and Ferumbras explicitly deal with the same issues of Christian reclamation which seem to have held a wide appeal for Christian English audiences, and have the same focus of the Saracen knight-convert, other works involving conversion have a focus quite separate from that of the Charlemagne romances. *The*

⁸ Or, as Janet Cowen would have it, "there are two themes which predominate in the Middle English Charlemagne romances in general: the miraculous demonstration of the genuineness of the relics of the Passion in Charlemagne's possession, and the theme of the converted Saracen" (153).

King of Tars, for example, approaches the issue of conversion differently, choosing to use the purity of its fair-maiden protagonist to demonstrate how faith encourages Christian conversion while highlighting the physical difference between believer and nonbeliever.⁹ Poems like *Bevis of Hamptoun*, on the other hand, while containing conversion, are clear in diverting their narrative attention elsewhere. The conversion of Josian in *Bevis of Hamptoun*, for instance, could not be said to be of the same narrative importance as conversion is in the Charlemagne romances.

Determining the popularity of any particular Middle English romance is never simple, and the yardstick by which popularity is gauged is not an objective one. Different understandings exist of what it means to be “popular,” and different evidence must be brought to bear accordingly. Harriet E. Hudson determines, “Whatever else the word popular may mean, it always carries the sense of widely known and well liked. Thus some quantitative measure of the audience or the artefacts is relevant to their status as popular culture” (35). Accordingly, “popular” in this study refers to the romances’ wide and positive reception in medieval England. Hudson considers the Charlemagne romances to have been an attempt of clerics to “popularize” particular romances and the ideals found within them, concluding that “there are relatively few romances relating to Charlemagne in English—the attempt to popularize them seems not to have succeeded” (38). I must disagree with Hudson’s assertion; while she is correct to state that there are relatively few of the romances, we possess both Otuel and Ferumbras romances in at least three versions each, and each version is unique. The romances were successful in comparison to a large corpus of Middle English literature in which many romances survive in only a single manuscript. Clerical intention or no, that the romances were of sufficient interest for writers in medieval England not only to copy, but *translate* multiple times, seems to indicate a success beyond the usual for a Middle English romance.¹⁰

⁹ For more on the issues dealt with in *The King of Tars*, see Gilbert. Siobhain Bly Calkin, in an unpublished essay, “Translating the Body: Conversion, Baptism and Spectacle in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Ferumbras*,” draws interesting parallels between the fascination of both *The King of Tars* and the *Fierabras* romances with bodily transformation and physical wholeness and baptism. Despite this similarity in theme, though, *The King of Tars* remains quite removed from the subject matter of the Ferumbras group of romances, and its success cannot be attributed to the same reasons as the success of the Otuel and Ferumbras groups.

¹⁰ In listing the most numerous extant romances by quantity, Hudson explains, “Few of the romances exist in many manuscript copies. *Titus and Vespasian* has the most, 11, *Robert of Sicily*

Significantly, the manuscript tradition is not the only aspect of these romances' history that suggests high popularity. In a number of unrelated texts, the *Ferumbras* romance is alluded to in a way that presents the tale as common knowledge. As Hausknecht demonstrates, "The *Fierabras* romance must have been well known and highly popular in England and Scotland [. . .] from the numerous references to this poem in various Middle English works" (viii). Such works include Barbour's *Bruce*, Skelton's *Ware the Hawk*, Lyndsay's *Histoire of ane Nobil and Wailzeand Squyer*, William Meldrum, and the *Complaint of Scotland* (Hausknecht viii-viv). The references in these works suggest that *Ferumbras*, at least, had become an accepted character in English folklore and had been integrated into the literary culture of the time.

What can explain the popularity of these two stories when one would expect poems such as the *Chanson de Roland*, with their focus on heroes like Roland and Oliver from identifiably Western Christendom, to far outweigh the popularity of two stories about Saracen knights?¹¹ I would surely contest Herrtage's claim that in *Sir Ferumbras* "[Roland] is far the most important personage in the poem, and it certainly seems a misnomer to call it after *Ferumbras*, whose actions fill only about one-fifth of the whole poem" (xvii). While *Ferumbras* may disappear from the action, the story is inextricably linked to *Ferumbras*'s conversion and the potential conversions of his father and sister. Critics have established the popularity of these romances,¹² and the complexity of differences between existing manuscripts implies an even greater popularity than can be ascertained by physical evidence, yet it is interesting that the tales should have been so favoured when there was such a wealth of material from which to choose in the

10, *Isumbras* 9, *The Sege of Jerusalem* 7, *Richard Cour de Lyon* and *Bevis of Hampton* 7, *Partenope of Blois* 6, *Guy of Warwick*, *Degaré*, *Libeaus Desconus* 5, *Amis and Amiloun*, *Eglamour of Artois*, *Seege of Troy*, *Earl of Toulous* and *Arthor and Merlin* 4 (though these are not all identical versions)" (35). Of the approximately 120 Middle English romances that we have in manuscript form, the *Ferumbras* and *Otuel* groups rank quite high, though in multiple versions.

¹¹ Robert Warm asks a similar question, although his interest stems from a different aspect of the romances: "Why was it that during a period of prolonged Anglo-French hostility, in a conflict which many commentators have identified as being instrumental in establishing a sense of English national identity, romances which dealt with French heroes, and French military successes, were being composed, copied, circulated and read throughout England?" (87). The answer that Warm reaches is different from mine, though not uncomplementary. He decides that "The Middle English Charlemagne romances are celebrating Christian heroes who happen to be French, rather than French heroes who happen to be Christian" (87).

¹² See Herrtage *Sir Ferumbras* x-xi; Hausknecht vi-ix; Smyser 81.

extensive Old French tradition. That the other tales were so thoroughly ignored by English redactors suggests that there were particular aspects of the Otuel and Ferumbras stories that resonated with English culture; furthermore, because each redaction's original date of composition falls most plausibly within the fourteenth century, excepting Caxton's *Charles the Grete*, there is an even greater indication of cultural currents particular to that time being addressed in the transmission of these stories. An approach to these poems that begins with such questions becomes mutually informative in addressing two concerns that are closely related: What about these romances made them popular, and what about England ensured their transmission and popularity? The romances have been noted for their general lack of exceptional poetic features,¹³ so it is likely that their popularity was dependent on their subject matter.

The conversion romances of Otuel and Ferumbras clearly met with a degree of popularity, and there must have been some aspect of English society that warranted the rehashing of old plot structure and characters rather than adapting anew one of the many *chansons* available. Just as popular Hollywood franchises result in sequel after sequel in quick succession, or a particular genre takes root in a culture for a brief period, so too did these tales of conversion and reclamation demand repeated revisiting.

1.2 Saracen Scholarship and an Approach to the Charlemagne Romances

Any study of the Matter of France would be incomplete if it ignored the abundance of scholarship there is on the Saracen and the *chansons de geste*. Much work has been done on the concept of the Saracen and Islam as medieval Europeans viewed them. Seminal studies such as Richard Southern's *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* and Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* adopted a somewhat apologetic tone in attempting to trace the

¹³ Smyser remarks that "the English Charlemagne romances are in the main undistinguished, to say the least" (80) and later that there is a "banality all too frequently found in most of the English Charlemagne romances" (92), and he detects a cleric's influence in the religious focus of the tales. Conversely, Marianne Ailes has suggested that we should be "neither too ready to point an accusatory finger at 'bad translations' nor too willing to assume that every difference between the original and the translation is the result of a deliberate decision on the part of translators who are, for the most part, remarkably accurate and consistent in the types of alterations they make" ("Comprehension Problems" 46). Ailes and Hardman go even further in their later essay "How English are the English Charlemagne Romances?" highlighting some of the *improvements* in narrative that the English redactors made, as well as explaining that the Middle English romances were ultimately "conform[ing] to a different aesthetic" (49).

hopes and desires of Western Europeans throughout their history with Islam. The consensus among these early critics is that the image of Islam was largely distorted as a way of bolstering Christian self-regard; this opinion has only been slightly modified by assertions that the representation of Islam was frequently used as a propagandist device for encouraging the crusades.¹⁴ Furthermore, scholarship directed more specifically at the literary Saracen found in the *chansons de geste* has determined that the representation found therein has little to do with reality.¹⁵ Again, the Saracen is seen as a device to encourage crusading values among readers of the *chansons*.

More closely related to the focus of this study is the recent scholarship which discusses the purpose of the Saracen figure in Middle English romance. Dorothee Metlitzki was one of the first scholars to attempt a sort of classification of the types of Saracens found in the romances, but says little about their purpose. Siobhain Bly Calkin (*Saracens and the Making of English Identity*), Robert Rouse (*The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance*), and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (*Of Giants*) all suggest that the romances make use of the Other through the Saracen; that is, the English people used the Saracen in romance as a way of identifying themselves. Of late, this has been the accepted way of understanding the odd distortion of Islam in the romances; Geraldine Heng¹⁶ contributes to this discussion of the Other by suggesting further that the romances involving Saracens frequently allowed medieval audiences to cope with the anxieties they felt over the crusades. Other studies have been done on different aspects of Islam and English culture in which the English understanding of Islam becomes increasingly convoluted; travel literature such as *Mandeville's Travels* (Higgins) and items such as the Hereford *mappamundi* (Leshock) have been closely scrutinized in an attempt to discern what relationship these works had with any real understanding of Islam in England. Frequently, the Saracen appears to be a composite of fantasy and reality, and Saracens became a more vague

¹⁴ See Tolan, Chapter 5 especially, in which he asserts repeatedly the propagandist intention of authors of the *chansons*.

¹⁵ See *Heroes and Saracens*; Jones; Comfort, all of which, after thorough analysis of the *chansons*, conclude that the Saracen character is not related in any way to real European perceptions of Islam.

¹⁶ See *Empire of Magic*. Heng's first chapter, entitled "History as Romance: The Genesis of a Medieval Genre," in particular details how the First Crusade resulted in a number of European cultural anxieties that resolved themselves in the fantastic depictions of otherness early on in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and later in Middle English romance tradition.

representation of Otherness, as in the *mappamundi*, which seems to conflate Islam and Judaism. This cursory look at past and current trends in scholarship demonstrates that interest in the Saracen is thriving; how does a study of reclamation narrative and romance integrate with these studies of the Saracen?

Scholarship has contributed to the understanding of the Saracen representation or the “problem of Islam” as medieval Europeans saw it, yet many of the studies remove the literature from their particular social contexts, focusing on broader generalizations, or reaching conclusions on a *European* scale. Those scholars who have engaged more directly with the Middle English romances have tended to discuss the use of the Saracen in developing a national English identity. In addition to this, I propose that the depiction of Saracen conversion and the reclamation of Christian relics in the Charlemagne romances indicates a major cultural interest in England which implies that fantasy and reality were combined in these romances as an act of wish-fulfillment.

While there is an historical component to an analysis of conversion in relation to romance, there must also be a literary component. It is for this reason that this study will proceed by, first, viewing the historical and social context of conversion in medieval England, but will then focus on the romances, reading them with an historical eye, but appreciating at once that literature is more than an historical artefact, and that every allusion does not necessarily acknowledge some larger cultural trend, nor are all literary conventions used with an ulterior motive and employed with a propagandist’s pen.

The England in which these romances were written was a place where leaving for crusade against Islam, or the Saracen, had become a regular aspect of Christian life, and opinions on the methods of dealing with the Saracen problem were varied and often quite critical of the violence that crusading encouraged. I will demonstrate that conversion was a prominent topic of interest and serious concern for medieval English audiences, as was the salvation of the virtuous pagan. This will be shown in Chapter Two through a brief outline of the developing concepts of Islam in the West, and a more specific analysis of Islam in English thought and Middle English literature. Once this preoccupation with Islam in England is clear, it becomes less likely that narratives that display an awareness of current cultural issues would do so to the exclusion of the single most prominent feature of their narratives, their Saracen converts. If there is evidence that the romances in question were appealing to cultural anxieties, and that conversion was a clear

anxiety for the English people, it is probable that the prominence of the Saracen convert in the romances was a primary reason for the romances' popularity and represents some aspect of medieval Christian feelings towards Islam. After determining to what extent conversion was considered in medieval English thought through documentary and literary evidence, I will demonstrate in Chapter Three how the romances correspond on a broader level with the actual project of reclamation being encouraged throughout medieval Europe. Through their depiction of Saracen and Christian mirror images, Saracen religion, the desire for foreign allies, and the need to reclaim sacred relics, the romances reveal an anxiety over the lost unity of Christendom and the need to reclaim aspects of Christianity for its reunification. Next, in Chapter Four after giving a cursory glance at medieval understandings of the conversion process, , I will address the attempted reclamation of characters by conversion in the romances; this too corresponds with popular anxieties and conceptions, but also demonstrates a practical understanding of conversion and the plausibility of such conversion as well as what types of converts one should expect and accept. The conclusion of this analysis will demonstrate that the success of these particular romances concerning Otuel and Ferumbras is a result of their romancing—that is, *idealizing*—of the project of Christian reclamation that was so prevalent in medieval Europe, most specifically through their portrayal of conversion, which takes the incredibly complex issues of the crusades, and makes them infinitely more simple.

1.3 Semantic Concerns of this Study

In a study that will deal at length with concepts that were vague at best in the Middle Ages, it is necessary to make some movement towards specific semantic guidelines for some of the more historically and culturally complicated terminology. The word *Saracen* is probably the most elusive of these terms. Although the ultimate etymology of *Saracen* is unknown, the word's meaning has undergone much change from its original use. According to the OED, the term was used “among later Greeks and Romans [. . .] for the nomadic peoples of the Syro-Arabian desert which harassed the Syrian confines of the Empire; hence, an Arab; by extension, a Muslim” (“Saracen”). The OED's definition is precise, but not comprehensive. It is not so much true that *Saracen* refers to Muslims by extension, as that, by the fourteenth century, *Saracen* and *Muslim* were interchangeable words and concepts for many medieval writers.

The problem of definition is complicated when we discover that *Saracen* was used to refer to both religion and ethnicity. Before the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the term “Saracen” was applied to Arabic peoples by Latin Christian writers. Arabs were explained as either “Saracens,” “Ishmaelites,” or “Agarenes” by relating their history to stories in Genesis. They were assumed by Western Christians to be the descendants of Hagar (thus, “Agarenes”) or Ishmael (“Ishmaelites”), but it was thought that they took for themselves the name “Saracen” in order to claim descent from Sara, the wife of Abraham. Additionally, even before Islam, Arabs were accused of practicing idolatry (Tolan 11), and Daniel asserts that *Saracen*, when used before the establishment of Islam, “meant simply ‘Arab’ ” (*Heroes and Saracens* 8). Nevertheless, the earliest discussions of the Muslim conquests among Christians paid little attention to the religious aspect of the people, continuing to refer to the invaders as “Arabs” (Tolan 42). The ambiguity continues about one hundred years after Islam was established by its Prophet, Muhammad. Daniel explains that at this point “academic and historical writers used *Saracen* to mean ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim,’ or both, according to context” (*Heroes and Saracens* 8). This single term for two aspects of a people, ethnicity and religion, would diverge into *Turk*, meaning Muslim, after the rise of the Ottoman empire, and *Moor*, meaning Arab.

But the early ambiguity can be found even in the eighth century, in the writing of John of Damascus, who lived among Muslims and served as a financial administrator to caliphates. John conflates the idea of Islamic religion and *Saracen* race by creating a Christian-*Saracen* dichotomy in his *Disputation Between a Saracen and a Christian*. This work, though brief, is focused on the argument between a Christian and a Muslim, with the Christian winning the debate. The work is all about religion, and there can be no doubt that by “*Saracen*,” John means “Muslim.” Daniel’s plan in *Heroes and Saracens* of using “*Saracen* for the fictional people” (10) is not as straight-forward as it sounds, then. One might also say that Franks were fictional people, as well, since Latin Christians were referred to as *al-Faranj* by medieval Eastern writers. Daniel is less careful in his 1960 work *Islam and the West*, in which he explains, “I have almost always translated the word *Saracenus* as *Muslim*; the word *Muslim* in a translated passage must represent *Saracens* or one of its equivalents, *Maurus*, *Ismaelitus*, *Agarenius*. (Occasionally *Saracenus* has another meaning, for example, when it is applied to pre-Islamic Arabs.)” (14). In his earlier work, then, Daniel sees no distinction between the concept of *Saracen* and *Muslim*, not even allowing that there are any ambiguities in his medieval source material. Dorothee

Metlitzki also makes no distinction between the two terms *Saracen* and *Muslim* in *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England*. She uses the two interchangeably throughout her work, regardless of the nature of her source material.

It is clear from late medieval texts, however, that *Saracen* became a reference more to religion than to a people.¹⁷ There is no mistaking that the famed thirteenth century English scholar Roger Bacon thought of Saracens as a religious sect: “[T]he Saracens, although they are governed primarily by the law of Venus, mix much from the law of the Jews and from the Christian law, since they employ various baptisms just as the Jews and sacrifices very similar in part.”¹⁸ In his *Opus Maius*, Bacon divides the nations of the world clearly into six sects: Saracens, Tartars, Pagans, Idolaters [Buddhists], Jews, and Christians (367). For Bacon, Saracens are never pagans, and it is only in a religious sense that he uses the word “Saracen.”

In speaking of Islam and (mis)representations of a religious group, then, it is best to do as many scholars have: the terms *Muslim* and *Islam* will be reserved only for the analysis of historic moments or when referring to persons and religious matter outside of the text; when discussing the literature, the terms used by the redactor, “Saracen,” “Turk,” “pagans” and the mishmash of vaguely labelled and more vaguely conceptualized enemies, will be used. Likewise, a distinction must be made when discussing the religion of the Saracens depicted in literature and the religion of Muslims. Accordingly, I will simply refer to “Saracen religion” when discussing the rites and gods used by the Saracens in Western literature, while real Muslim religion will be referred to properly as “Islam.” The name *Muhammad* will be similarly used for the historic or religious person, while the common Middle English “Mahoun” will be used when referring to the Saracen god in the romances.

The Saracen itself is an interesting concept that has received much critical discussion. That the Saracens in romance have nothing to do with real life Muslims is an assertion that might

¹⁷ However, it is certainly important to note that *Saracen* denoted no particular religious affiliation. Though there can be little doubt that the religion being commonly represented is usually meant to caricature Islam, there are times, such as in *King Horn*, that the Saracens are most likely Viking raiders. Diane Speed (“The Saracens in *King Horn*”) offers a differing opinion on the matter, asserting that the Saracens in *King Horn* could just as easily be Muslims, but there are a number of other instances where Saracens clearly reference some general paganism. For further discussion, see Cordery 89.

¹⁸ “Nam Saraceni licet principaliter utuntur lege Venerea, tamen miscent multum de lege Judaeorum et lege Christiana, quoniam variis baptismatibus sicut Judaei utuntur, et sacrificiis consimilibus in parte.” (Bacon, *Opus Maius* 371)

seem logical after a superficial glance at the texts, yet it is an assertion that becomes more dubious the deeper one digs. Europeans were not entirely ignorant of Islam. Dorothee Metlitzki has perhaps most specifically commented on the English awareness of Eastern cultures, and the romance portrayal of Saracens seems, in light of evidence, to be an insistence on wilful ignorance as much as a propaganda device. The most discussed feature of Islam in medieval romance, for example, its supposed polytheism and idolatry, stands in such ludicrous contrast to the reality of Islamic practice, a reality of which many such as Peter the Venerable, Guibert of Nogent, and Petrus Alfonsi were aware, that it seems that the insistence on that representation is responding to an unwelcome religious proximity to Christianity; that is, it means not that authors believed that Muslims were polytheists, but the opposite, that authors refused to align themselves religiously in any way with the Saracen. This rejection assured the perpetuation of the possibility of martyrdom in war and strengthened the righteousness of conversion. That many writers commented on the piety and steadfastness of Islam's monotheism only emphasizes the idea that, in presenting Saracen polytheism, idolatry, and carnality with such exaggerated specificity, the authors of the romances are demonstrating an almost paranoid refusal to acknowledge any relationship between Christianity and Islam.

The term *romance* in application to these tales is, of course, dubious, as the term often is, plagued as the Middle English scholastic community has been with trying to understand what is meant by the generic term. I follow W.R.J. Barron and Siobhain Bly Calkin in an admittedly hybridized idea of romance when discussing the primary romances in this study.¹⁹ The stories of Otuel and Ferumbras, translations and adaptations from the *chansons de geste* tradition as they are, inevitably seem to reflect more typically the epic quality of the *chansons* than the chivalric quality generally understood to define romance. There are similarities to both traditions, and it seems more plausible that they draw from a combined tradition (Ailes and Hardman 44-47). Barron goes so far as to suggest that the romances in question were actually drawn from “romanticized epics,” regarding *Fierabras* and *Otinell* as hardly *chansons* at all (98-99). The designation of the “Charlemagne romance” seems fair, and is quite common, when referring to

¹⁹ See Barron 106; after an examination of the confusing and somewhat conflicting scholarly discussion of the difference between *chansons de geste* and romance, Bly Calkin concludes that it may be “more helpful to consider English romance as a descendant of both French romance and *chansons de geste* in which the characteristics of both are intertwined more fully than in their French manifestations” (*Saracens* 22).

the Matter of France, as the romances in this group do all deal with Charlemagne and his knights, and the term “Saracen romance,” used copiously by authors such as Metlitzki, also serves a reasonable purpose when discussing romances focused on Saracens. However, Metlitzki includes the likes of *Bevis of Hamtoun* and a number of others that do not focus on a Saracen protagonist in this genre. There is some difficulty in discussing specific groups of romances without becoming monotonous, so I have opted to use the term “conversion romance” when discussing the primary texts of this study to indicate that I see a romancing of the ideal of conversion as the focus of these romances. Conversion, within the context of this study, will always refer to the conversion of a Saracen or a Muslim to Christianity unless otherwise specified, never the conversion of a Christian to Islam or any pagan to Christianity or any other combination. This definition of conversion romance must exclude texts such as *The King of Tars*, although that tale is certainly about conversion, to avoid ambiguity. Furthermore, while the term “crusade romance” has been applied to the romances dealing specifically with Christian and Muslim conflicts, the term is so vague that it would be impossible to be useful. The concept of “crusade” is about as disputed by historians²⁰ as that of “romance” by literary scholars, so it seems futile to use such a label.

Regarding the spellings of proper names, the main character names will be consistent, remaining Otuel, Ferumbras, Floripas, Roland throughout. The sole exception will be for the sultan character found in the Ferumbras group, whose name changes to Laban in *Sowdone*, instead of Balan. Often, when referring to the group of romances, the terms “Ferumbras group” or “Otuel group” will be used. Finally, the romances themselves will be referred to as *Sir Ferumbras*, *Firumbras*, *Sowdone*, *Otuel a Knight*, *Otuel and Roland*, and *Rowland and Otuell*.

Throughout the course of this study, in its analysis of English cultural and literary conceptions of Islam, of the correspondance between the romances and the real hope of reclaiming religious objects and allies, and of the desire to reclaim through conversion, the popularity of these romances can be seen to rely on one feature: the romanticizing of the project

²⁰ “Since the 1960s a debate regarding the unambiguous definition of the term ‘crusade’ has developed between the so-called traditionalists and the pluralists. The former hold that only those expeditions aimed at the recovery or defence of the Holy Land should be considered crusades, whilst the latter maintain that all expeditions authorised by the papacy with the concomitant crusade privileges, preaching and recruitment should be considered crusades” (Lock 289). See also Riley-Smith.

of Christian reclamation. Although it could never be said that the English as a whole, any more than the rest of medieval Western Europeans, looked with kindness upon the unknown and often vilified Islamic enemy to the East, these romances demonstrate a strong undercurrent of more complex emotions among their English audience. Their popularity cannot be credited to a simple love of seeing Saracens crushed viciously beneath the heel of Christendom; indeed, the most memorable moments of the narrative poems are during the key instances of conversion to Christianity. The keen interest that these romances enjoyed finds its source in the enthusiastic response that they generated through a fantastic depiction of a successful project of Christian reclamation.

2. Plans for Conversion in Medieval Europe

2.1 *Conversion and Crusade*

To understand the context of these romances and the ideals they exemplified for the medieval English people, one must start further back chronologically. Because of England's geographic position, being far from the geographical boundaries between Christendom and Islam, the reactions that England displayed to movement in the East were often the result of some movement in the continent. Although the English were often unique in their approach to common European issues, these approaches would be predictably delayed as information made its way through the continent. It is understandable, then, that a general survey of the evolution of the medieval European ideal of converting Islam would aid in contextualizing the later English reaction.

The first documented attempt at converting Muslims to Christianity occurred around 650, an attempt by Pope Martin I to distribute a *tomus*¹ (Kedar 3) that would rectify Islamic faith. Martin denied attempting any sort of conversion, as it would have branded him a traitor to the Byzantine Empire, since the Muslims in question were enemies to the Emperor of Constantinople. Because of Martin's denial of the charges, this incident is only potentially the first conversion attempt by a Christian, but that there is any record at all of this event suggests that there were early attempts at converting Muslims to Christianity. Oddly enough, such attempts did not seem to occur for a long while afterwards. The opening chapter in Benjamin Kedar's *Crusade and Mission* is spent trying to understand why attempts by European Christians at converting Muslims were largely abandoned from that point until the tenth century. Quite possibly, the Islamic interdiction about speaking against Islam stifled any attempts to evangelize (Kedar 9-14). Early attempts by Spanish Christians to refute and attack Islam in the 850s resulted in martyrdom, and, describing these deaths, Eulogius claims, "For the Saracens deem that only those who, having left their sect, turn themselves to the Christian faith, ought to be killed; or

¹ A "tomus," as Kedar notes, in this context must mean "a formulation of dogma" (3).

those who utter blasphemies against their Law-Giver.”² There was a common understanding, in Spain at least, that by speaking against Islam in an attempt to refute it, the evangelist was asking for an immediate death. Kedar further notes that, while areas directly in contact with Islam, such as Byzantium and Spain, were in the midst of polemical debate with Islam, Catholic Europe was largely ignoring the issue: “Catholic Europe of that age stands in sharp contrast to the other Christendoms by its lack of interest in Islam as a religion” (18). The perception of Islam in Western Europe at the time lacked religious associations and was concerned strictly with the potential military threat of the Eastern people.

“Interest in Islam *as a religion*” (my emphasis) is an important distinction to make. Western Europeans, though uninterested in Islam, were quite conscious of *Saracens* for a long time before regarding them as having any particular religious identity. Katharine Scarfe Beckett finds evidence of a concept of Saracens in Anglo-Saxon England. The word *Saracen*, when used by Anglo-Saxons before their knowledge of Islam as a religion, implies that there was as yet no religious identity associated with these people from the East. Although there was no interest in the religion of the Saracens, there was interest in classifying them as a people descended from biblical beginnings (160-64). That there was a growing knowledge of Islamic presence in the East among the Anglo-Saxons is demonstrated by the many artefacts, including coins with Arabic inscriptions, that have been found in England, while literary texts such as the *Vita Willibaldi* detail travels to the East that are markedly devoid of curiosity in the Saracen religion (Scarfe Beckett 46-52). When Islam became viewed as more than a mere cultural curiosity in England, it was as a military entity only, not a competing religion. Soon, thanks to writers such as Bede, the Saracens were thought of as a scourge of God sent as punishment for mankind’s sins, the *grauissima Sarracenorum lues* (Bede 5.23).³ This is not the kind of understanding that would encourage attempts to convert; the Saracens were a punishment, not potential brethren.

² “Ipsos enim solum vident saraceni interimendos, qui relictæ eorum secta, vertunt se ad Xpistianam fidem; vel qui blasphemias garriunt adversus legislatorem suum” (Kedar 10n16). Hereafter, translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

³ Or, as Boniface similarly suggests, “Just as happened to the other nations of Spain and Provence and the peoples of Burgundy; and they who withdrawing from God in this way, fornicating, until the all-powerful judge permitted the avenging punishments of such crimes to come and to rage through the ignorance of the law of God and through the Saracens.” “Sicut aliis gentibus Hispaniae et Prouinciae et Burgundionum populis contigit; quae sic a Deo recedentes fornicatae sunt, donec iudex omnipotens talium criminum ultrices poenas per

This lack of religious interest continued until the First Crusade, with its fervour and sheer multitude of participants, caused an eruption of religiously tinged military action against Islam, and the issue of religion was placed where it would remain, at the fore of relations between East and West. John Tolan recognizes in the depictions of Islam in European chronicles of the First Crusade an image used “to glorify and justify the crusaders’ exploits” (xx), which consequently allowed Europeans to equate *Saracen* with *pagan* more readily. Prior to the First Crusade, we are aware of but one depiction of the Saracen religion that distorted the monotheistic religion into outright paganism; this work is the hagiographic poem concerning the martyr Pelagius written by Hrotsvitha, a nun from a Gandersheim abbey around the year 1000 (Tolan 106-07). The hagiography goes to great lengths in depicting Saracens as polytheist, idolatrous, and carnal, an image that would penetrate European consciousness and be reiterated in literary works, such as the *Chanson de Roland, ad nauseam*.⁴ This depiction, Tolan asserts, “is not mere ‘literary convention,’ as Norman Daniel claims. This portrayal of Saracen idolatry grows out of a propagandistic effort to justify and glorify the actions of the first and second Crusades” (106). The concern with “Saracens,” then, although expressed in religious ways, still had little to do with religion at this point, and more to do with justifying war for Christians. It should come as no surprise that the prospect of converting Muslims was not particularly popular at this time for Europeans; without a properly pagan enemy to fight, Christians would lose the guaranteed absolution and potential martyrdom they felt was their reward for military service in the crusades. If it were admitted that the Muslims might worship the same God as the Christians, the issue would become even more difficult to address theologically. A morally infallible crusade required a pagan enemy, or at least an enemy dissociated with Christianity,⁵ so the image of the idolatrous, polytheistic Saracen took a lasting hold in the medieval European imagination.

ignorantiam legis Dei et per Sarracenos uenire et saeuire permisit” (Boniface, qtd. in Scarfe Beckett 165).

⁴ It must be acknowledged that Hrotsvitha, who wrote plays in the tradition of Terence, was likely writing with a particular agenda. Hrotsvitha’s portrayal of Saracens as pagans may be connected with her desire to justify pre-Christian Romans for Christendom; compared to the over-the-top paganism of Hrotsvitha’s Saracens, Romans begin to look far more acceptable to a Christian audience.

⁵ This is why there was such uproar over the Fourth Crusade, which is often viewed as the first truly misguided crusade. Crusaders captured Constantinople, a Christian city, because of increasing concerns with supplies (Lock 156).

It was only with the repeated failures of a number of floundering crusading efforts after the First that conversion of Muslims became a more important alternative to simply conquering the Holy Land. However, this movement can lead one to misunderstand the increasing focus on conversion to have been detrimental to enthusiasm for the crusades; this was not the case. Crusade and conversion were in no way diametrically opposed. It is necessary, perhaps because of the ease with which minds construct such dichotomies, to clarify the relationship between the concepts of crusade and mission.

The idea of crusade, a military movement sanctioned by papal authority, often with the goal of re-conquering the Holy Land, and that of mission, a movement to convert and evangelize among those that do not profess a belief in Christianity, are both distinctly religious; the latter is ideally concerned with the salvation of a nonbeliever's soul, the former with the violent conquest of the nonbeliever. The interesting thing about this dichotomy is that it does not seem to have existed consistently with respect to Muslim conversion attempts. In fact, from the early moments of Islamic-Christian warfare, religious conversion was integrated into the conflict. Kedar notes, "[W]arfare and conversion were already linked at the reduction, about 973, of the Muslim stronghold of Fraxinetum on the coast of Provence" (ix). During this conflict, a number of Muslims who had been routed by "magnates of Burgundy and Provence" requested to be baptized shortly after being captured. This is, Kedar asserts, "one of the earliest episodes of the Catholic European counteroffensive against the forces of Islam" (43), and it is noteworthy that it pairs a decisive Christian victory with the successful conversion of Muslims. Conversion of one's pagan enemy was also consistent with common military strategies used in the west by Germanic kings; the union of faith was a seal on the peace treaty as well as a sign of victory. The second chapter of Kedar's study *Crusade and Mission* illustrates that by the mid-twelfth century, conversion was touted as a goal, even the main event, of crusading. It is clear that crusading was not viewed, at least by the educated medieval mind, as incompatible with conversion; the contrary seems true. Conversion was thought to occur most easily within a conquered people.

Furthermore, it was not only that conversion and crusade were seen as complementary, but conquest was regarded by some as necessary for conversion to occur. Elizabeth Siberry describes the paradoxical practice of major clerical figures preaching the Fifth Crusade while also encouraging Muslims to convert: "Far from their being an obstacle to conversion, contemporaries, with a few important exceptions, seem to have regarded the crusades as a means

to that end” (17). Catherine of Siena was one such figure in the fourteenth century to whom I will return later in this study; she frequently suggested that true conversion of nonbelievers could be obtained only through the mysterious sacred nature of crusade. Certainly, it was judged wrong to force conversion upon Muslims, but it does not necessarily follow that violence against resistant Muslims was deemed immoral. After all, the concept of a “forced” conversion is fairly subjective in itself. If, for example, a Muslim was presented with the choice between the sword or the font, they still had a choice, and to many medieval writers, if baptism was the final outcome, the ceremony was valid. A conquered nation seemed more easily convertible and more likely to convert of its own will than a resilient one (Siberry 18). Even though the introduction of Mendicant orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth-century promoted the ideal of peaceful conversion, there is no indication that peaceful conversion was in opposition to crusading. The Dominicans and Franciscans embarked on numerous missions to many areas in the thirteenth century, but they also became “the papacy’s principal agents for preaching the cross” (Siberry 18). If those most concerned with conversion were also major proponents of military conquest, then it cannot be asserted that conversion and crusade were opposed to one another in the medieval European mind.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that one of the main criticisms of the crusading movement was of the unchristian encouragement of the violence inherent in warfare. By the late thirteenth century, Pope Gregory X hired Humbert of Romans to respond officially to the numerous criticisms of crusading. One criticism to which Humbert responds is that there is no purpose in attacking the Muslims, “For through this they [Muslims] are not called forth to conversion, but rather they are provoked against the Christian faith. Similarly, when we conquer and kill them, we send them to Hell, which seems to be contrary to charity.”⁶ Other critics spoke out for similar reasons against crusading in the second half of the thirteenth century. Roger Bacon, the English scholar, argued that “the crusades hindered the conversion of the Muslims” (Siberry 19), suggesting that they ought to be approached with learned theology through preaching and teaching:

Nor are they [nonbelievers] converted in this way, but they are killed and sent into hell. Truly, their remaining sons who survive after the war are aggrieved more and more

⁶ “per hoc enim non provocantur ad conversionem, sed potius provocantur contra fidem Christianam. Item quando vincimus & eos occidimus, mittimus eos ad infernum, quod videtur esse contra charitatem” (Humbert of Romans 196).

against the Christian faith on account of those wars, and are removed in an infinite degree from the faith of Christ, and they are inflamed to do all the evils they can to Christians. And so, on account of this, the Saracens are unable to be converted in many parts of the world.⁷

Prior to Bacon's time of writing, conversion and crusading had not been viewed as strictly opposed to one another (Siberry 19). However, Bacon's perceived opposition to crusading must be read with a caveat. He may have advocated conversion over warfare, but he did not hesitate to support the suppression of infidels who remained unconvertible. Thomaž Mastnak describes the fallacy that is often applied to Bacon's work: "[Bacon] is often praised as a critic of the crusade and, therefore, as a pacifist. Since Bacon argued for conversion of the Muslims, many commentators think that he rejected the Crusade. But Bacon's criticism of the crusade was qualified" (196). Bacon condones violent suppression under certain conditions, primarily as a last resort, but he allows for it nonetheless.

As a Franciscan, Bacon spoke against the violence of the crusades, but it was a Dominican monk, William of Tripoli, who expressed more radical views a few years later. The failure of the crusades to convert Muslims left William feeling that the crusades were inevitably misguided. The *De statu Sarracenorum* was written around the same time as Humbert of Romans' response to crusade criticism, supposedly at the request of Pope Gregory as well, so it is interesting that the *De statu* approaches Muslims in a sympathetic and optimistic way that disapproves of the crusade movement. It is in this work, sometimes attributed to William of Tripoli, that crusading is most explicitly placed in opposition to mission: "His whole tract is devoted to the idea that missionaries, not soldiers, should be sent for the recovery of the Holy Land" (Throop 120). The *De statu* is surprisingly sympathetic in its presentation of Islam, and this tone is taken up by more and more Dominican and Franciscan writers near the end of the thirteenth century. Throop suggests that William's criticisms were "deeply antagonistic to the militant crusading ideal of the twelfth century [. . .] The decay of the crusades is inseparably bound up with this revision of Christian values which brought a new monasticism, a new peace

⁷ "Nec sic convertuntur sed occiduntur et mittuntur in infernum. Residui vero qui supersunt post bella filii eorum irritantur magis ac magis contra fidem Christianam propter istas guerras, et in infinitum a fide Christi elongantur, et inflammantur ut omnia mala quae possunt faciant Christianis. Unde Saraceni propter hoc in multis mundi partibus fiunt impossibiles conversioni." (Bacon, *Supplementary* 121)

movement, and a new ardour for the spread of Christianity” (288). William’s writings questioned the nature of the relationship between East and West, eschewing praise of the crusade for the more loftily expressed ambition of correcting Islam and unifying Muslims with Christianity in a common faith.

Western European views of Islam were in a confused state by the fourteenth century. The previous century encouraged missionary activity, but often in conjunction with the crusading movement. As the thirteenth century progressed, there were increasing attempts to separate mission and crusade. The ideal of conversion was looked on with increasing favour, but this did not necessarily place it in opposition to crusade, as Bacon demonstrates.

2.2 Developing Methods of Addressing the Heresy of “Machomet”

Kedar notes that conversion steadily gained prominence among goals of crusading over the years. At the time of the First Crusade there was an emphasis on conquering, with conversion as an added benefit if conversion should happen (65). By the Second Crusade in 1147, European leaders would declare that their goal was “to visit the Sepulchre of the Lord and to cleanse it and our sins by the blood or conversion of the pagans, by the command of the highest pontiff.”⁸ In this statement we can clearly see the possibility of conversion instead of destruction. Kedar further points out that, although Bernard of Clairvaux never included conversion of Muslims in his call for the Second Crusade (Kedar 67), by the 1160s, Helmold of Basan, a north German priest, claimed that Bernard had urged the crusaders to Christianize and subjugate the Easterners:

That man [Bernard], I know not by what prophecies he was taught, undertook to encourage leaders and common people of the faith to set out to Jerusalem to suppress and subjugate the barbarous eastern nations to Christian laws, saying that the times approached, in which the fullness of nations is destined to enter, and thus all Israel would be saved.⁹

There is a clear change from early crusading sentiment in emphasizing the importance of bringing the Muslim into the Christian realm. Helmold evokes Paul’s letter to the Romans,¹⁰ in

⁸ “Visitare sepulcrum Domini [. . .] et ipse et nostra crimina, praecepto summi pontificis, paganorum sanguine vel conversione delere” (Odo of Deuil 70).

⁹ “Cepit ille, nescio quibus oraculis edoctus, adhortari principes ceterasque fidelium plebes, ut proficiscerentur Ierusalem ad comprimendas et Christianis legibus subigendas barbaras orientis naciones, dicens appropriare tempora, quo plenitudo gentium introire debeat, et sic omnis Israel salvus fiat” (Helmold of Basan 216).

which Paul emphasizes the mercy of God for unbelievers; the comparison between the Jewish beginnings of Christianity and Islam is clear in Helmold's writing. For the successful salvation of Israel, Jews, Christians, and Muslims must be united through God's mercy. Accordingly, the goal of later crusades was viewed by some, as our German priest, to be not the retaking of Jerusalem, but the curbing and converting of the "barbaras orientis naciones."

A further development in Europe for conversion of Muslims was the shift to understanding Islam as a Christian heresy. Heresy had been a continual disruption for centuries in Western Europe, but it was only when described as heresy that Islam began to draw attention as a threat to Christianity. By the word "heresy" we must understand any religious doctrine that was viewed by the church as directly opposed to, falsely derived from, or a willing perversion of orthodox or catholic Christianity. Any conception of Islam as heresy then tied the religion intricately to Christianity, and such a religion became an urgent threat to Christianity in the same way other heresies had been viewed as a threat. While earlier relations with Islam had been characterized, even in the crusades, by militarism rather than a desire to engage and grapple with a new theology, once it began to be regarded as Christian heresy, Islam became more significant to many prominent Christians.

Many medieval writers began to demonstrate an understanding of Islam as a schismatic Christian sect, more closely approaching a realistic, though still mistaken, view of the religion. As early as 1109, Guibert of Nogent describes Islam more accurately, dispensing with the common idolatrous and polytheistic picture of the Saracen. In discussing the "plebeia opinio" or "common opinion" on Islam, Guibert writes, "Mathomus rent them [his followers] from the belief of the Son and the Holy Spirit entirely. He taught them to depend on the person of the

¹⁰ "For I do not want you, brothers, to be ignorant of this mystery, so that you might not be wise in yourselves, since blindness has befallen in part in Israel until the fullness of nations should enter. And thus all Israel might be saved [. . .]. For just as at one time you also did not believe in God, now indeed you have gained mercy by means of their unbelief. So now they also have not believed in your mercy so that they also gain mercy. For God has confined all in unbelief, so that he might have mercy for all."

"nolo enim vos ignorare fratres mysterium hoc ut non sitis vobis ipsis sapientes quia caecitas ex parte contigit in Israhel donec plenitudo gentium intraret / et sic omnis Israhel salvus fieret [. . .] sicut enim aliquando et vos non credidistis Deo nunc autem misericordiam consecuti estis propter illorum incredulitatem / ita et isti nunc non crediderunt in vestram misericordiam ut et ipsi misericordiam consequantur / conclusit enim Deus omnia in incredulitatem ut omnium misereatur" (Romans 11:25-32).

Father alone as in a single God and creator; he also said Jesus was an innocent human [. . .].”¹¹ In this text, Guibert clearly describes Islam in relation to Christianity; even more, he portrays Islam as a derivation and a separation from it. Accordingly, medieval Christians frequently regarded Islam as a perversion of true Christianity, as with other heresies. Guibert also sincerely laments the lack of accurate information about Islam (Guibert of Nogent 94),¹² and this lack is something that Petrus Alfonsi, a Spanish Jew converted to Christianity, attempted to rectify a year later, in 1110. In his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos*, as a response to criticisms from Jews on his conversion, Alfonsi criticizes Judaism. Alfonsi engages in a learned debate with Moses concerning the faults of Judaism; related to this discussion is a question from Moses in the fifth chapter of Alfonsi’s work: “But, I wonder, when you left your paternal faith, why you chose the faith of the Christians and not rather that of the Saracens, with whom always you conversed and were raised.”¹³ Islam was related undeniably and inevitably to Christianity by the mutually acknowledged religious ancestry of both religions. For Alfonsi, though it was not the religion he chose, Islam was a logical step from Judaism in the same way that Christianity was. As a result, “[i]t should not come as a surprise that when twelfth-century Latin authors tried to come to terms with Islam, they also classified it as heresy and tried to refute it using the well-worn tools of antiheretical argument” (Tolan 137). The initial response to widespread heresy was, logically, a concerted effort at conversion, or correction, that heretics led astray might be brought back onto the path of proper Christianity. The effect of considering Islam as Christian heresy was to promote conversion; one of Alfonsi’s readers, Abbot Peter of Cluny, wrote a tract entitled *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim saracenorum* in 1143 or 1144 in which he entreats, “In this way I, least among the innumerable servants of Christ, love you; loving you, I write to you; writing, I invite you to salvation.”¹⁴ From flowery phrases such as this, we can see that the Abbot of

¹¹ “[Mathomus] quondam eos a Filii et Spiritus sancti prorsus credulitate diduxerit, solius Patris personae quasi deo uni et creatori inniti docuerit, Iesum purum hominem dixerit [. . .]” (Guibert of Nogent 94).

¹² Guibert briefly explains that, since there is no information concerning Mahomus and his teachings to be found among respected writers, he should not be blamed for depending on the words of eloquent speakers regarding the religion, suggesting that whether this information is true or false cannot be ascertained would be a vain dispute for the same reasons.

¹³ “Sed cum paternam reliqueris fidem, miror, cur Christianorum et non potius Sarracenorum, cum quibus semper conversatus atque nutritus es, delegeris fidem” (Alfonsi 91).

¹⁴ “Hoc modo ego de innumeris et inter innumeros seruos Christi minimus, uos diligo, diligens uobis scribo, scribens, ad salutem inuito” (Peter the Venerable 232).

Cluny's regard for Muslims as heretics left him more predisposed to the idea of conversion, and he made continual attempts to convince others of the importance of interacting with Islam on a theological level, which is demonstrated by his letters to important figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux for support. Moreover, Peter had the Koran translated into Latin by Robert Ketton in 1143, and, with this, hoped to address Islam in the traditional way of dealing with heresy, refuting its beliefs with scripture.

This perception of Islam as Christian heresy continued to thrive throughout Europe well beyond the twelfth century, as can be seen by Dante Alighieri's early fourteenth-century *Divina Commedia*. In his cataloguing of the many circles of Hell, the *Inferno*, Dante places Mahomet, his version of the prophet Muhammad, within the eighth circle, reserved for those who have consciously misled people. Mahomet is described as a schismatic who is responsible for causing discord between Christians; his schismatic nature is emphasized in his punishment, which is to be gruesomely cloven from head to toe repeatedly. It is notable that Dante chose to represent Mahomet's sin and mutilation in this way: "[He was] from the chin severed down to where we fart. / [. . .] [he had] sowed scandal, discord, schism when alive / and therefore [Mahomet and his son-in-law Ali] are cloven as you see" (28.24-36).¹⁵ Dante sees Islam as an errant Christianity, for he also has Mahomet warn Fra Dolcino, a well known Christian heretic active at the end of the thirteenth century, that, if the heretic wishes to avoid visiting the same circle of Hell as Mahomet too soon, Dolcino had best be prepared with plenty of supplies to ward off death for as long as possible if he is besieged (28.55-57). Dante clearly saw Dolcino as comparable to Muhammad, accusing them of the same schismatic sin.

Changing European views concerning Islam in the late twelfth to the late thirteenth century, which arose both from intellectual shifts within Europe and as a result of greater knowledge of Islam, cause Southern to label those years the "Century of Reason and Hope" (34-66). Although there are many reasons for this change in European outlook, a contributing factor was the formation of the Mendicant orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans. Formed in the early thirteenth century in part as a response to the Cathar heresy in Languedoc, the Mendicants failed to correct the Cathars through preaching, and the Cathars were massacred in the

¹⁵ The Italian text reads, "rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla. / [. . .] E tutti li altri che tu vedi qui, / seminator di scandalo e di scisma / fuor vivi, e però son fessi così" (28.24-36).

Albigensian Crusade from the years 1208-29. The Mendicants turned their attentions to other groups in need of evangelization, and Muslims were a natural focus for their energies.

In the thirteenth century, after Islam was established as a heresy in learned writing and as an idolatrous, polytheistic paganism in popular writing, conversion became a viable solution to the “Islamic problem.” Tolan notes that “the thirteenth century saw for the first time significant effort to convert Muslims to Christianity through mission” (172), and this conversion movement built a foundation for the idealism of the conversion romances a century later.

Early thirteenth-century Christians were filled with the hope that the end of Islamic power was near and that through either war, conversion, or a combination of the two, at last Islam would crumble. A chronicler of the Fifth Crusade, Jacques of Vitry, was among those who foretold the destruction of Islam. Writing in Acre, he reported that the Saracens were divided on religious issues and that frequently many of them came to him to be baptised:

But the Saracens, since they have many different sects, are greatly divided among themselves: moreover, certain of them keep the law of Machomet, while others pay it little heed, and as a result they drink wine and eat the flesh of swine against the command of Machomet, and they do not circumcise themselves in the manner of other Saracens.¹⁶

Jacques paints a picture of the East as a damsel in distress, in need of saving by the chivalrous West (Jacques of Vitry 112-13),¹⁷ and essentially a body of people waiting to be converted.¹⁸ This view of the East, coupled with distorted reports of a far Eastern Christian King David, or Prester John, whom Jacques mentions a number of times to be moving in on Islamic forces,

¹⁶ “Sarraceni autem, quia multas et varias habent sectas, valde inter se sunt divisi: quidam autem legem Machometi tenent, alii parvipendunt, unde contra mandata Machometi vinum bibunt <et> carnes porcinis comedunt, nec se more aliorum Sarracenorum circumcidunt” (Jacques of Vitry 95).

¹⁷ Jacques describes how Christians must rush to the aid of the holy land “so that they might share in the sufferings of their mother,” “ut matris sue compaterentur doloribus” (Jacques de Vitry 113).

¹⁸ Jacques romantically describes Eastern Christians’ and his own anticipation of the crusaders: “But I believe, as I have learned from the telling of many, that there are nearly as many Christians among the Saracens, as there are Saracens, who daily await with tears the help of God and aid of the crusaders. [. . .] But now in the city of Acre frequently I look to the sea with tears and with great longing, awaiting the coming of the crusaders.”

“Credo autem, sicut multorum relatione didici, quod fere tot sunt christiani inter Sarracenos, quot sunt Sarraceni, qui cotidie cum lacrimis dei <ex>pectant auxilium et peregrinorum succursum [. . .]. Nunc autem in civitate Acconensi frequenter ad mare respicio cum lacrimis et desiderio magno expectans adventum peregrinorum” (89-95).

bolstered Christian idealism. The Eastern king would turn out to be Ghengis Khan, another source of despair for Christians, but initially there was hope of converting the Mongols and creating a powerful new Eastern ally. These more militarily inclined hopes consequently affected those who were more missionary-minded with similar expectations. Both Oliver of Paderborn and Francis of Assisi attempted to convert Sultan al-Kâmil during the Fifth Crusade (Tolan 201). In a letter to al-Kâmil, Oliver notes the similarities in Muslim belief to Christianity, going as far as to suggest that Muslims often “unwittingly acknowledge [the Trinity] [. . .] when you recite David’s psalm praising God’s name three times” (Tolan 201). Oliver observes this similarity again in his chronicle of the fall of Damietta:

Behold under how many mistakes and contradictions is that blind nation labouring; three times they name God, but not knowing the mystery of the Trinity, they are unwilling to distinguish the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to the increase of their own damnation. (89)

Oliver depicts Islam as a “blind nation” that cannot see the truth, though that truth is expressed by them unknowingly. Tolan observes, “Oliver seems to think that little separates the Muslim from Christian truth and hopes to bring al-Kâmil to that truth” (202). This became a popular view of Islam; a religion, or heresy, that was so close to Christianity would require little more than direct confrontation with the irrefutable truth of Christianity to bring about wide-scale conversion of Islam.¹⁹ Indeed, though authenticity is questionable, reports and rumours that important Muslim figures were eager to convert to Christianity became frequent. Additionally, a number of attempts were made to Christianize the Mongols, when it was realized that they were not the hoped-for Eastern Christian allies; these attempts, however, often led to embarrassing exchanges instead of new alliances (Tolan 203). Even as late as 1300, rumours spread that the Mongols had taken Jerusalem with the intention of gifting it to the Christians. Clearly, the hope of a converted ally lived on despite the mixed results of crusading endeavours of the thirteenth century. The ideal of conversion had taken root.

The idealism expressed by Oliver of Paderborn is still later emphasized by William of Tripoli in his 1271 *Notitia de Machometo*, in which he describes the law of Islam as a composite mishmash of Christianity, Judaism, and the whims of the pseudo-prophet Machometus,

¹⁹ Jacques of Vitry, after some discussion of the state of the Islamic nation, similarly claims that “Saracens, if they heard sensible doctrine, as I believe, would easily be converted to the Lord.” “[Sarraceni,] si sanam doctrinam audirent, facile, ut credo, ad dominum converterentur” (97).

comparing the Koran to a “little black crow with plumage of various colours fitted to it.”²⁰

William encourages the Dominican missionary strategy in his work, sure that with proper theological and linguistic training, refuting Islam and converting Muslims to Christianity would be no large feat (Tolan 204). Later, in the *De statu Sarracenorum*, the anonymous author paints an optimistic picture of Islam being so similar to Christianity that peaceful conversion seems inevitable. In the *De statu*, Muslims are often described as pious, generous, and fair. The entire purpose of the *De statu* seems to be to set up the Saracens as entirely welcome allies, allies that will inevitably turn to Christianity of their own volition and contribute to the glory of Christendom. Near the end of his tract, the author concludes,

Therefore having demonstrated the aforementioned [points], which the Saracens believe in their hearts to be true, and [which] they openly profess by speech as the words of God written in their Alcoran, concerning the praising and celebrating of Jesus Christ, concerning his teaching and his holy Gospel, concerning his blessed mother Mary, and his followers, who believe in him, although they are wrapped in many lies and decorated with fictions, nevertheless, seeing that these [beliefs] are respectful, it seems sufficiently clear, that they themselves are neighbours to the Christian faith and near to the way of salvation.²¹

The author seems to write an apology for the Saracens, describing how the Koran “does not really reflect what Muhammad really taught; rather, he says, it is a mixture of Muhammad’s teaching and garbled passages of Bible, philosophy and history” (Tolan 207-08). The whole of Muslim faith, then, according to this author, is essentially based on a large misunderstanding, the source of which is the Koran, and Islam became not only a heresy, but an unwitting one. A concerted effort to convert these misled people need only be made to achieve success in ending the conflict between Christians and Muslims and to reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom.

Just such an effort was made by missionaries in the thirteenth century, specifically by Franciscans and Dominicans. Their primary concern was supposedly the conversion of Muslims, and many Franciscans made it their goal to gain the “martyr’s palm.” Sadly, it seems that these same enthusiastic missionaries often sought martyrdom over conversion as an end goal; this was rationalized by suggesting that conversion could be gained through the example of the martyr.

²⁰ “cornicula nigra plumis diversorum colorum accomodatis” (*Notitia de Machometo* 216).

²¹ “Demonstratis igitur predictis, que Sarraceni corde credunt esse vera et profitentur ore utpote Dei verba scripta in eorum Alcorano de laudibus et preconiiis Iesu Christi, de doctrina eius et suo sancto Evangelio, de beata Maria matre eius et eius imitatoribus, qui credunt in eum, licet multis sint involuta mendaciis et decorata figmentis, tamen, quoniam pia, satis manifeste apparet, quod ipsi sint fidei christiane vicini et ad viam salutis propinqui” (*De statu Sarracenorum* 360).

The Dominican approach was frequently more cautious and based in the idea that learned discussion was necessary for conversion. The thirteenth century saw the rise of these movements and their focus on victory through conversion rather than crusade while, especially in the case of the Dominicans, crusade and mission were combined; the goal of Christian communications with Islam throughout the thirteenth century was to annex the converted and conquered Muslims to the greater whole of Christendom.

2.3 Conversion in Fourteenth-Century English Culture and Literature

Southern and Tolan suggest that the idealistic optimism for easy conversion died shortly before the turn of the fourteenth century; however, where crusading sentiments persisted, the possibility of conversion remained. The Shepherd's Crusade of 1309, born from the "crusade enthusiasm amongst the peasantry in England, north-eastern France and parts of Germany" (Lock 187), is a testament to the longevity of the crusading ethos among people in Western Europe. Crusading was also quite popular among the aristocracy throughout the fourteenth century; knights regularly went on crusade to prove their worth.²²

What, then, of the English view of conversion by this time? There is plenty of evidence to indicate that much of England held specific ideas of Saracens and their potential for conversion. These opinions became particularly well-defined from the last half of the thirteenth century through the fourteenth. Medieval England was not removed from the conversion idealism affecting the rest of Europe. Petrus Alfonsi "exercised considerable influence in England," and likely came to England shortly after his conversion from Judaism to Christianity, around 1110, and achieved high standing with the court there as Henry I's *medicus* (Metlitzki 20-23). Alfonsi's work against Judaism, which contained a chapter on Islam, was widely read in England, and often imitated (Metlitzki 21). In her chapter "Arabium studia in England," Metlitzki demonstrates that a good number of the first Arabists in Europe were Englishmen, as is the case with the previously mentioned Robert of Ketton, who in 1143 became the first translator of the Koran into Latin.

None of these scholars of Arabian thought would compare in influence to the late thirteenth century English Franciscan Roger Bacon. Bacon's learning extended to many areas of

²² See Keen 101-19, in which Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" is discussed in relation to the continued popularity of crusades among the medieval English aristocracy.

study, but he was foremost a follower of Arabian scholastic methods. As a Franciscan, Bacon was concerned with the conversion of the Muslims, and his theories on methods for conversion were in many ways a response to the failure of the crusades. Bacon's great work, *Opus Maius*, which he wrote at the request of Pope Clement IV in 1266-68 (Tolan 225), addresses the issue of conversion, emphasizing conversion via preaching and philosophical argument, a suggestion which relied on Bacon's insistence that languages be taught above all so that Muslims might be persuaded more easily through their native tongue. Bacon used not the Bible as his source, but Graeco-Roman scientific and philosophical works, as well as descriptions of other religions from works such as Alfonsi's, to create a program for conversion. By the late thirteenth century one of Europe's most respected thinkers was advising against war and encouraging in its place greater learning for a peaceful conversion of nonbelievers. Bacon's view of conversion did not die with him in the 1290s. Though the fall of Acre in 1291 seems to have caused some decline in crusading fervour, the decrease in zeal was not universally felt, as the Shepherd's Crusade demonstrates. The fourteenth century for England revealed that neither the issue of Muslim conversion or the crusades were *passé* by any means, but a prominent subject among the English.

The salvation of the virtuous pagan was an especially prominent issue by the fourteenth century. Cindy Vitto notes that "by the fourteenth century a full-scale debate was underway; speculation about the virtuous pagan appeared in secular as well as theological writings" (2). Vitto cites the Middle English *St. Erkenwald* and *Piers Plowman* as two secular works that demonstrate debate over the spiritual fate of pagans. She further shows that, while Southern and others see the conversion effort as halting at the end of the thirteenth century, "this attitude was reversed during the fourteenth century, for missionary efforts took place in the early 1300s" (33). The ideal of conversion certainly did not die in England, and it saw its resurgence in romances such as those of Otuel and Ferumbras.

However, England held a peculiar position on conversion of other religious groups at the turn of the fourteenth century. In 1290 Edward I expelled all Jews from England; despite this, the *Domus Conversorum*, a house for converted Jews established in 1232, remained in operation throughout the fourteenth century; Henry Ansgar Kelly suggests that in the 1330s, the *Domus* "was given new life by Edward III, who assigned to it some children of converts" (131). So it can be seen that conversion, even during the outright expulsion of Jews from England, was an institution supported by the English monarchy. Muslims were viewed in a variety of odd ways by

medieval English people, thanks largely to such works as Alfonsi's *Contra Iudaeos*, which treats Islam as similar to Judaism. Muslims were seen not as complete pagans, but often as a people committing the same theological mistakes as the Jews. This particular view is especially well expressed in the Hereford *mappamundi*, on which Jews can be found at only one point:

Near the Dead Sea, a group of men kneel before an idol. The men are labelled Jews ('Iudei'). The idol represents the golden calf, and one on the map appears to be defecating, an activity upon which the eyes of the visible face of one of the Jews is focused. The calf bears the label 'mahum,' associating Jews with Muslims, and in the process denying any autonomous religious practice to either. (Leshock 211)

We see that Jews and Muslims were viewed as their own type of infidel, and that Muslims were seen to be committing the same sins that Jews once did in worshipping their own golden calf; accordingly, Muslims and Jews are reviled and slandered as one in the Hereford *mappamundi*.

It is interesting to note in conjunction with such artefacts as the Hereford *mappamundi* that the Domus Conversorum was always viewed as a house for converts *de Iudaica pravitate* (Kelly 133), but there were a number of instances where it seems likely that converts in England had in fact been Muslims. Certainly, there was paranoia concerning Muslims living in England, a fear evinced by the 1376 "Good Parliament," during which the Commons refers to the large population of Lombard usurers living in London, many of whom were suspected of being Jews or Saracens and were accused of practicing sodomy (Kelly 145). At the same time as this vein of paranoia ran through English society, English nobility were actively involved in converting Muslims. After reviewing the evidence, Kelly modifies an assertion made by Nigel Saul, "Exceptionally among English rulers, [Richard II] was vigorous in sponsoring the conversion of unbelievers," adding to this that the unbelievers to which Saul refers were Muslims, not Jews, and that "both Richard's immediate predecessor, Edward III, and his immediate successor, Henry IV, were active in supporting converts" (156). There was clearly a vogue among nobility in fourteenth-century England for sponsoring conversion. Richard II was even present at least once as godfather at the baptism of a Muslim, Richard of Sicily. This trend extended beyond the reaches of nobility; secular literature, as Vitto notes, took up this cause, depicting the idolatrous Saracen found in popular romance, but also frequently seizing upon the image of Islam as misguided heresy that must be welcomed back to true Christianity in conversion.

Of the literature in fourteenth-century England that gives attention to Islam, *The Book of John Mandeville*, or *Mandeville's Travels*, was among the most thorough in its depiction of

Islamic culture. First written in French around 1356 by Sir John Mandeville, who claimed to be an English knight, the book was translated into many languages and became quite popular in England before 1365, where it is extant in Middle English in thirty-three manuscripts and six fragments and extracts. The whole of Western Europe seemed taken with *Mandeville's Travels*, but the English were able to identify particularly with the worldly traveller “yboire in Engeland in þe toun of seynt Albanes” (5); the author claims an English perspective. His book details his travels over thirty-four years through Asia and Northern Africa, but it is not, as Iain Higgins explains, “what it professes to be [. . .] It is rather a compilation of others’ writings, many of them by genuine travelers to the East” (8). *Mandeville's Travels* is particularly interesting for understanding popular views of the East in the fourteenth century; if we trust that the author was at least from England, we may gather an idea of the resources that were available to a learned Englishman, and, likewise, the kind of rumours that were being expressed among regular people. That the work was so popular suggests a resonance with its audiences across Europe, and the manuscript evidence for its popularity in England specifically is quite strong.

Mandeville's Travels presents a far more sympathetic view of Islam than the majority of polemicists in Europe had shown previously. Likely this is due to the author’s source material. For example, the author borrows heavily from the surprisingly tolerant William of Tripoli and the *De statu Sarracenorum* (Higgins 9, 98, 113-15). Mandeville devotes a whole chapter of his travel book to the faith of the Saracens, titled “Trewþe of þe Sarasyns” (56). In this chapter, Mandeville describes specifically the Saracen views of traditional Christian themes: the virginity of Mary, the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, and Jesus’s death and resurrection. Particularly tolerant, it seems, is Mandeville’s description of the Saracen belief that Jesus did not die on the cross.²³ Mandeville explains the belief in tones of sympathetic confusion, even providing the reasons for the Saracens’ disbelief: “[F]or Sarasyns seiþ þat was not Ihesu / þat deide vpon þe cros, for Ihesu was Goddis sone and went into heuene al quyke and deide never” (58). Saracens seem far more rational once the narrator explains that Saracens believe Christ was the Son of God, which is why they do not believe that he could die on the cross; one can picture a Christian reading this passage and nodding his or her head sagely in sympathetic agreement: yes, it is *difficult* to believe. After further rationalizing Saracen beliefs, the narrator goes on to make a

²³ Which is, incidentally, one of a number of Muslim beliefs about which William of Tripoli and *Mandeville's Travels* are not mistaken.

particularly strong assertion: “[F]or as myche as þei trowe nere oure fey, þei beþ liztlich conuertid to oure fay whanne men preche to hem of oure lawe” (58). In *Mandeville’s Travels*, the ideal of conversion is not dead; the text encourages the belief that the Muslims are on the brink of easy conversion. The narrator goes so far as to hold the Saracens up as exemplary in their faith. Of course, this is not a new technique, as the author uses this idealized Saracen to criticize English society like writers before him,²⁴ but it demonstrates that not only is the ideal of conversion alive, but so too is the hope for living peaceably together in the distant future. To emphasize this potential union, Mandeville spends time with a sultan who treats him lavishly and even offers to marry one of his daughters to Mandeville. The English traveller cannot take this step because the sultan requires conversion to the Saracen religion for the marriage to take place. By demonstrating that the only obstacle to a union between Christian and Saracen is conversion, the author implies that unity of religion will lead to unity as a people.

Later in the fourteenth century, another popular Middle English text, *Piers Plowman*, expresses similarly tolerant and hopeful attitudes about Muslims. As with Mandeville, Langland describes Saracens’ faith in encouraging terms:

For Sarzens han somewhat semyng to oure bileue,
 For thei loue and bileue in o [lord] almyghty
 And we lered and lewede bileueþ in oon god;
 Cristene and vncristene on oon god bileueþ. (B.15. lines 393-96)

The comparison is made to emphasize the ease of conversion; the closeness of Saracen religion to Christianity should facilitate the movement from one faith to another. The gap between the two is already bridged by similarity; the author even admits that Christians and Muslims worship the same deity. Conversion is a simple movement, using those similarities as a guide. This observation places Christians in relation to Muslims similarly to the Saracen and Christian relationship in the romances; similarity encourages conversion, and this is a major thematic focus

²⁴ See Daniel *Heroes and Saracens* 12-13, in which he specifically recalls Ricoldo da Monte Croce, who “recounts his astonishment in Baghdad at the Arabs’ ‘care for studies, devotion in prayer, their pity for the poor, their reverence for the name of God, the dignity of their manners, their friendliness towards foreigners, and their harmony and love for one another’. He admits that he reports this ‘rather to confound the Christians than to praise the Muslims’, and some of what he reports seems exaggerated for his homiletic purpose.”

of the tales. Moreover, the accusation of polytheism was frequent on the part of both religions,²⁵ so Langland's assertion that Christians and Saracens believe in the same one God clearly attempts to create understanding between the faiths.

Langland places an emphasis on the Christian beginnings of Islam; Muhammad, as Langland describes him, was a "cristene [man]" whose greatest ambition was to be pope (B.xv.398-9). Being foiled in this, "Makometh" turned to sorcery and trickery to mislead the Saracen people. In the C-Text tradition of *Piers Plowman*, the speaker laments the victimization of the Saracens and looks forward to an eventual conversion:

Thus Macumeth in misbileue man and woman brouhte,
And on his lore thei leuen yut, as wel lered as lewed.
And seth oure saueour soffrede such a fals cristene
Disceue so the Sarrasyns, sothlyche me thynketh
Holy men, as Y hope, thorw helpe of the holy goste,
Sholden conuerte hem to Crist and cristendoem to take.
(C.17.181-86)

Here, Saracens are not to blame for the state of their souls. The blame is placed squarely on "Macumeth" who "brouhte" the Saracen people into "misbileue." By shifting the blame onto the heresiarch, the speaker portrays the simple, decent hearts of the Saracen people who have been so easily deceived. The responsibility for the redemption of the Saracen people lies with "holy men" who, with the power of the "holy goste, / Sholden conuerte hem" and reclaim them for Christendom. The speaker has gone a step further than Mandeville and not only suggests that conversion might be an easy, even natural, process, but removes the blame from the Saracens altogether.

Yet another major writer in fourteenth-century England held the view of conversion as a greater priority for Christians than conquest of Muslims. In the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower addresses the question of whether it is just to go on crusade to fight with Saracen armies. Gower's work puts considerable emphasis on morality in its exploration of confession and the cardinal sins, so the poem's inclusion of the crusades intimates the moral ambiguity that many people felt the crusades typified. It is especially fitting that discussion of crusading takes place in

²⁵ While Christians frequently depicted Muslims as polytheistic idolaters in literature, Muslims frequently criticized Christianity for the same, pointing to the Trinity as a sign of polytheism and to relics, statues, and other religious depictions as idolatrous.

Amans's discussion of the sin of Wrath. After he has been told that slaughter without reason is sinful, Amans asks his Confessor,

Mi fader, understonde it is,
That ye have seid; bot over this
I prei you tell me "nay" or "yee,"
To passe over the grete see
To werre and sle the Sarazin,
Is that the lawe?

(Book 3. lines 2485-90)

To which the Confessor responds,

To preche and soffre for the feith,
That have I herd the Gospell seith;
Bot for to slee, that hiere I noght.
Crist with his oghne deth hath boght
Alle othre men, and made hem fre,
In tokne of parfit charité[.]

(3.2492-96)

The position on using war to spread the faith is explicit in the Confessor's response. The question indicates that Amans is unsure, but also that this issue was contested and ambiguous for many in the fourteenth century. Amans demands a simple answer at last to the question that has been plaguing Christians since the beginning of the crusades, and there can be no doubt that to "passe over the grete see" specifically refers to the crusades in Palestine, across the Mediterranean Sea. When the Confessor responds, he condones missionary work for conversion but denies that slaying of Saracens, even for religion, is just. The Confessor explains that preaching is suggested in the gospels, but he has found no endorsement of killing; moreover, Christ, in his sacrifice, made all men free to choose for themselves.

The Confessor continues in this vein, explaining that Christ enjoined the apostles to preach, convert, and even suffer death, for in suffering, Christianity rose. Religious warfare is further criticized when the Confessor maintains that since Christians have taken up the sword, "A gret partie of that was wonne / To Cristes feith stant now miswent" (3.2512-13). The poem reports that only through preaching have desirable results been reached; in encouraging this, Gower sides with missionary strategies that continued to be popular throughout the fourteenth century. Warfare, on the other hand, does not fare so well in Gower's moral examination, as it is not condoned by scripture and has proven a failure over the years.

Amans contemplates the issue of homicide again in the fourth book on Sloth. He wants to know if his idleness in not killing is a sin; his rhetoric, however, suggests that there is some logic in his rationale:

For this I telle you in schrifte,
[.....]
for to slen the hethen alle,
I not what good ther mihte falle,
So mochel blod thogh ther be schad.
This finde I writen, hou Crist bad
That no man other scholde sle.
What scholde I winne over the se,
If I mi ladi loste at hom?
Bot passe thei the salte fom,
To whom Crist bad thei scholden preche
To al the world and his feith teche.
[.....]
To slen and feihten thei ous bidde
Hem whom thei scholde, as the bok seith,
Converten unto Cristes feith.
Bot hierof have I gret mervaille,
Hou thei wol bidde me travaile:
A Sarazin if I sle schal,
I sle the soule forth withal,
And that was nevere Cristes lore.
Bot nou ho ther, I seie no more.
(4.1656-82)

This long passage deserves close attention. Amans' argument runs thus: there is nothing good gained from spilling Saracen blood since Christ requests that men not kill one another, Christ urged preaching, the Bible urges conversion, and if you kill a Saracen, you kill the Saracen's soul as well. Compare this logic with that of Roger Bacon or with the criticisms of the crusades reported by Humbert of Romans. This is a restatement of the last argument presented in the book on Wrath, yet it bears even greater rhetorical weight. Military action is shown to be useless while the audience is reminded that "thei scholden preche / To al the world and his feith teche" and Saracens, "the bok seith," ought to "[c]onverten unto Cristes feith." The repetition of the modal "scholde" demands that a reader consider what is being done and what *should* be done: what is right? What *ought* we to do? Amans advocates conversion over the absolute destruction of Saracens. The ideal of conversion still thrived in England, and there were clearly strong opinions on the proper method of spreading Christianity.

It is clear that, from their first encounters with Islam only a few decades after its inception,²⁶ Latin Christians were unsure of how to approach this new religious and military entity. Were these Eastern people exponents or representatives of Christian heresy or were they pagans? When initial attempts at conversion met with outright failure largely because of the reckless approach of overzealous friars and the common interdiction against criticizing Islam within areas under Islamic control, an interdiction enforced by capital punishment, Western Europe largely tried to ignore what would become for them the “Islamic problem.” However, by the end of the eleventh century, after a mind-bogglingly successful religiously fuelled First Crusade, European rulers, theologians, and even common people were forced to take note of Islam as a military adversary and a religious threat. This new acknowledgement was tinged by the superiority that Europeans inevitably felt after the heady thrill of easy victory in the First Crusade; unfortunately for Latin Christians, the First Crusade would be the only crusading excursion unmarked by real failure.

The frequent and increasingly disconcerting failures of later crusade endeavours began to leave their mark on crusading idealism, and already within the first half of the twelfth century, critics began to question the moral justifiability of crusading while other Europeans turned to vilifying the enemy through slanderous misrepresentations. At the same time a method of combating Islam non-violently was being developed by theologians like Peter of Cluny, who sought to refute Islam through learning. Considering Islam to be a Christian heresy, these learned polemicists deemed conversion of Muslims as a more desirable outcome than complete extermination. From these beginnings, the ideal of conversion would grow and flourish in the thirteenth century, encouraged by the Franciscans and Dominicans, who both contributed much to the theories of conversion that were being developed. Roger Bacon wrote extensively concerning conversion at the request of the pope, describing his “science of religion,” in which even conversion of the infidel could be approached methodically and scientifically. Concurrently, William of Tripoli described the nature of Islam in detail, but seized on the hope that that religion was so similar to Christianity that conversion could be achieved simply with the right learning. These optimistic views of conversion developed at the same time popular

²⁶ Islam began around 610 when Muhammad began to proclaim his divine revelation. His death was in 632.

literature like the romances continued to slander Islam through a depiction of monstrous Saracens so that, by the end of the thirteenth century, views of Islam were confused and many.

The thirteenth century appears to have seen a dying out of crusading ideals in much of Europe,²⁷ but this was not so for England, where the fascination with Islam and with conversion of Muslims continued to grow. Furthermore, the English were aware of multiple views of Islam by the fourteenth century. Petrus Alfonsi had brought his learning to England in the early twelfth century, and a number of scholars including Roger Bacon and Robert of Ketton were self-avowed Arabists. Many of these scholars worked to discover a more learned approach to converting Muslims. The idea of conversion was quite close to home for the English people; with the presence and upkeep of the Domus Conversorum and the continual adoption and sponsoring by courtiers and kings of Jewish and Muslim converts, it appears that there was even a certain conversion vogue among the English nobility. This interest in conversion continued throughout the fourteenth century, and is explicitly expressed in a number of the most popular works of literature of the period.

The *Mandeville*-author, William Langland, and John Gower discuss the matter of conversion openly, and all of them regard it as preferable to violent engagement. Langland and Gower voice common criticisms of the violence of the crusading movement, but demonstrate that the popular appeal in the ideal of conversion and redemption for the pagan²⁸ permeated English literary culture. *Mandeville's Travels* demonstrates this through its reiteration of William of Tripoli's arguments for conversion, as well as through some original, if faulty, theological rationalizing. Langland's *Piers Plowman* reveals a liberal view of Islam that resembles that expressed in *Mandeville's Travels* to some degree. Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is even more direct in its refusal to allow any moral high ground for killing Muslims when conversion through preaching is specifically advocated in scripture. All of these works were tremendously popular in

²⁷ See Throop, who attempts to demonstrate that, by the end of the thirteenth century, the entire institution of crusade was criticized for its violence by a great number of influential Christian writers. Throop reaches the conclusion that criticism of crusade violence in medieval Europe led to more pacifist ideas concerning Christian relations with Islam.

²⁸ See Field 172, in which it is noted that the majority of "masters of late mediaeval English literature [. . .] are in various degrees aware of fashionable texts and relish fashionable intellectual issues like reconciling free will with divine foreknowledge, or the salvation of the virtuous pagan."

England, and they all describe similar opinions of the relationship between Muslims and Christians.

These works come late in the fourteenth century. They are a logical continuation of a development that the romance tradition introduced by presenting Muslims to the public as exotic and at times terrifying, but simultaneously, similar to Christians and utterly able to be reclaimed by Christianity. Middle English romance demonstrates a specific fascination of the common English populace with Saracens, and in the stories of the Saracen knights Otuel and Ferumbras, this fascination is most readily identifiable and easily definable. The story of the converted Saracen warrior responded to the context outlined above in many ways and was embraced by the same audience that would not much later embrace the ideas expounded by Gower and Langland in more sophisticated forms of poetry; in fact, it is likely that authors such as Gower and Langland would have read or heard the tales in their early years of artistic development. The romance enjoyed success as a form of popular literature itself, and these conversion romances were far from the least popular in the genre. This popularity was not unwarranted, for the conversion romances not only responded to common interests of medieval people but in so doing sought to perpetuate the ideal of reclamation for Christianity through conversion.

3. Reflected Image and Projected Desire in the Conversion Romances

3.1 *Romance and Reality*

As romance, the Otuel and Ferumbras tales are undeniably removed from reality; nevertheless, the tales inevitably reveal some of the popular ideologies of medieval English people. As has been noted, Europe was in a self-destructive state of constantly battling heresies and, at the same time, trying to rationalize the last two hundred years of crusading with little to show for all of the time and resources spent campaigning. Romance addressed the need for literature that would respond to common anxieties, calming and encouraging by idealizing past wars of a similar nature and giving present-day conflicts an illustrious tradition. Jeffrey Cohen explains that “romance solves the problem of the present’s intractability by constructing a lost past when Christian right and pagan wrong were rendered obvious through clearly oppositional modes of embodiment” (133). The conversion romances especially provide this “oppositional mode,” pitting Christian warriors and faith at every point in the narrative against a pagan Other. It is no coincidence that the majority of the Middle English Charlemagne romances provide conversion, a clear way of confronting the difference between Christian and Muslim, as a highly significant moment in their narratives that results in the major military successes of the Christians.

Notably, these romances make conversion as simple a process as possible while real life conversion had proven to be anything but easy. Converting Muslims to Christianity was not simple, and no amount of insisting by writers such as Ramon Llull, William of Tripoli, or Roger Bacon would change that. In fact, these intellectual writers were engaging in an activity almost identical to that of the romance writers, idealizing conversion as a simple process of pointing out the faults in Islam. Although the tales are certainly fictitious, Jones claims that “the Christian Church in the Middle Ages pursued with unrelenting activity its struggle against heresy and unbelief. Nowhere is this pious conflict more apparent than in the interminable Old French songs of geste, which present, as in a mirror, the reflection of militant and missionary Christianity as the Middle Ages conceived it” (201). Although Jones discusses the *chansons de geste*

specifically, the author's assertion may be applied to the Middle English conversion romances as well, since they find their roots in the Old French tradition. It is clear from the multiple adaptations of these romances that medieval writers felt the conversion romances, with their simplified portrayal of the conversion process, to be particularly powerful literature.

The question of what exactly, if anything, the conversion romances demonstrate about the conflict between Christians and Muslims may be answered by analyzing the romances and noting the particular resonances that they have with the anxieties of the medieval English people. If the poems can be shown to interact with and respond to specific concerns, it will become clear that the romances' focus on conversion is also a response to current events that were important to the English, in particular to the desire for a reclaimed Christianity. Additionally, these areas of correspondence are invariably tied to specific views of Islam and a developing need to address an increasingly competitive religious rival in a battle to reclaim lost components of Christianity, whether they were land, sacred objects, or misled people.

3.2 *The Mirror of Christianity*

In the recent criticism concerning Saracens and depictions of otherness in Middle English romance, there has been a focus on the potential of such narratives in constructing a national identity for England, specifically through opposition of an Other that, in turn, highlights what a particular nation is not (Rouse 84). These assertions do not usually include the conversion romances in their analysis, with the exception of Siobhain Bly Calkin's analysis of the Auchinleck MS, and understandably so since, while other tales of English heroes such as *Bevis of Hamptoun*, *Guy of Warwick*, and *Richard Coeur de Lyon* are easily related to a national identity geographically, there is no mistaking the French flavour of the Charlemagne romances. The interest in the romances of Otuel and Ferumbras is not easily rationalized by attempts at self-identification through a dichotomy of English against Other, although Bly Calkin has demonstrated this possibility; the popularity of the Saracen protagonist is most likely fuelled by an actual interest in the Saracen.

Not much effort is required for readers to realize that these romances are as concerned with depicting the "enemy" as they are with depicting the heroes. The frequent switching of narrative focus from the Frankish camp to the Saracen camp alone gives readers a feeling that there is equal narrative interest spread between groups. In *Sir Ferumbras* especially, sections of

the narrative are divided by the narrator with conventional perspective-shifting techniques: “Leue we her þan Amyrel liggyng in sorwe & care / & of þis barouns y wil 3ow tel þat to hymward buþ a-fare” (lines 1646-47). Clearly, the writer feels that there is worth in manipulating the perspective throughout the narrative, and the effect of such control is to balance reader attention between the opposing groups. Later, the narrator shifts back to the Saracen army: “Now leue will y þis matere of þys Barouns stille, / And turne a3eyn þar y lafte ere & of þe A[myral] y wil telle” (2138-39). These narrative shifts provide readers with a dual focus and a dual narrative.

Moreover, each group of characters, French and Saracen, follows its own plotline before meeting the opposing group, but there is a mirroring of the plots on each side. In *Sir Ferumbras* and in *Sowdone*, narratives are paralleled most obviously when Charlemagne assembles a group of his remaining Twelve Peers to go as envoys to the sultan to demand his conversion to Christianity and the return of his captured knights and holy relics (*Sir Ferumbras* 1426-504; *Sowdone* lines 1666-738). Immediately afterwards, the sultan, convening a similar council, decides upon the same action, sending a group of his best warriors out to Charlemagne to make demands of a similar nature (*Sir Ferumbras* 1512-46; *Sowdone* 1740-78). *Otuel a Knight*, *Otuel and Roland*, and *Rowland and Otuell* all display similar narrative mirroring. At one point, the Saracen Clarel is captured by a group of Charlemagne’s knights, but he is released because they are unwilling to kill him when he becomes a burden. Clarel, in turn, when he has Ogier the Dane at his mercy, spares him and actually defends the helpless knight. Otuel must also battle Clarel in a scene evocative of Otuel’s earlier battle, when Otuel was not yet a Christian, against Roland. This time, however, the focus has shifted to Otuel as the hero, giving him the opportunity, as Bly Calkin mentions, to put an end to his former identity by defeating Clarel, his old comrade (*Saracens* 37). Because of the Saracens’ similarity to Christian knights,¹ little is required of the Saracens to become members of the Christian forces; a demonstration of allegiance is necessary, as we see with Otuel and Clarel, but the Saracen knights know how to act and interact with chivalric society. Even their battles are fought in the conventionally mirrored fashion: knights charge each other on their steeds, equally armed; one knight kills a steed; the other does

¹ It has often been noted that there is little difference between the cultures of the Saracens and Christians of the romances and *chansons*. See, for example, Jones 224; Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens* 38-51, 263-64.

likewise; they proceed to fight on foot; they exchange increasingly impressive blows. The descriptions of the opposing sides of the battle are such that there is only one difference between them, and that is their religion. However, even this single difference is inextricably linked to the Christian society that Saracen culture mirrors in the romances.

Given how the Saracen peoples in the romances reflect their Christian enemies, it is not surprising that Saracen religion should similarly reflect Christianity. Nevertheless, it is hard to look at the Middle English romance portrayal of Islam and not at least smirk at what seems to be the most prominent feature of their depiction of the enemy faith, its polytheism. Choosing to depict as polytheistic a religion that has its foundation above all else in the doctrine of monotheism frequently has been regarded by scholars as one of the great jokes in medieval literature. Because of such ludicrous depictions, the Saracen's significance is often easily overlooked as having little to do with reality, and in the same way, study of the Saracens in romances and *chansons* has often ignored the potential for a relationship between real Islam and the Saracen figure. The depiction of religion in these romances has been relegated to the realm of "mere convention," worthy of little critical attention. Despite these sentiments and incredible as these representations may be, the romances' concept of Saracen religion is suggestive of the attitude that many medieval Europeans had towards Islam.

There were two pronounced Christian perspectives on Islam during Islam's early contact with Christendom. These views were contradictory; one held that Muslims were essentially pagan and polytheistic idolaters, attributing a number of slanderous practices and rites to the religion. The other view, in attempting and failing to achieve some level of real understanding of the religion, often regarded Islam as a Christian heresy. It is not, however, a matter of simply assigning one viewpoint to learned people and one to those who were not educated enough to know better. The two conceptions are often mixed, and certainly well-educated writers often propounded theories on Islam that must have been drawn from pure hearsay. Likewise, it is important not to assume any poet's naïveté, regardless of how ridiculous that poet's representation of Islam might be.²

The English romances markedly refuse to deviate from their Old French sources' Saracen characterization. This Saracen, which in the Old French poetry can earliest be seen in the

² See Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens* 16-17. Daniel remarks that, regarding the *chansons*, calling a poet naïve "is the most dangerous accusation of all to make."

Chanson de Roland, follows the idolatrous and polytheistic tradition; the character is often associated with devil worship, bowing before a number of deities. Among these gods, three names surface more often than the others, though frequently in different forms: Mahoun, Apollin, and Tervagant. The first fairly obviously derives from Muhammad, the second, it has often been assumed, from Apollo, and the third is still largely debated (Bellamy 268-72).³ They make up, as it were, an “unholy trinity,” which the Saracens worship in the form of gaudy idols, that stands in stark opposition to the trinity of the Christians. The persistence of this image in the English redactions of these works is significant in that it shows that the characterization of the Saracen was closely bound to the features of Christianity.⁴

By the fourteenth century, this view of Islam does not seem to have been so prevalent. Metlitzki highlights how the conception of Muhammad as “an instigator of heretical strife” and as a Christian cardinal disappointed in his ambitions to be pope fuelled “the clerical view that baptized Saracens were essentially prodigal sons returning to the Christian fold” (204-05). Knowledge of Islamic practice was available and read in England, as is demonstrated by William of Tripoli and *Mandeville’s Travels*; the choice of redactors of the Middle English romances to continue to emulate the early *chansons’* Saracen was conscious. However, Bly Calkin has suggested that at times the Saracens in the romances mirror the Christians to such an extent that speculation concerning their religion becomes useless: “Given his similarities to Christian characters, the Saracen knight cannot really engage questions of lived racial and religious difference in the Middle Ages” (*Saracens* 14). Despite this assertion, it is difficult to deny that, by their very concordance with each other, the Saracen and the Christian are more clearly differentiated from each other where their characters do not completely agree. Because Christians and Saracens and their societies are depicted similarly, the differences between them

³ After going through the commonly understood sources for the Saracen “trinity,” Bellamy explains his own intriguing theory of how the names Apollin and Tervagant are derived from the names of two people close to the prophet Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Uthman Ben 'Affan, the first and third caliphs respectively.

⁴ However, there was a certain ambivalence with which the poets seemed to employ the names of these gods. Take for example, the draft translation found in Ashmole MS of *Sir Ferumbras*, in which one line is translated, presumably from the Old French “þou sayst soþ, by Iubiter, þou hadedest ney3 . . . e now” (*Sir Ferumbras* draft 575). The final translation upon which our redactor decides, though, is “þou saist soþ, quah he, “by ternagan / þou haddest ney3 slawe me now” (*Sir Ferumbras* 575).

become the focus of their conflict, the source of Saracen otherness in the texts, and the impetus of the plot.

Clear examples of the necessary comparisons between the two religions occur often when Saracen warriors battle Christian ones in the romances. Frequently, the oaths that knights swear in the *Otuel* and *Ferumbras* stories are significant reminders of allegiance and religion. The vows “bi Mahoun!” and “by Ihesu crist!” and the assorted gods and saints that knights swear by act as narrative anchors within the stories, controlling the conflict in the many disputes between Saracens and Christians, continually reasserting both religious identity and difference while drawing attention to the only real source of conflict. It is often the case that the Christian and Saracen knights will take turns delivering some brief speech, but supply the appropriate oaths at similar places in their speech, creating a call and response effect. In *Otuel and Roland*, when the two knights are calling each other to a duel, Roland delivers his challenge, ending it by saying, “I schall wyte howe hyt [his sword] can byte / ffor thy wordys and thy dyspyte, / by Ihesu crist, my lorde!” (lines 183-85). Otuel’s immediate response ends with the same appeal to his deity: “[Men will see] wethyr swyrd bettyr byte schall / of Cursins & of Dorundale, / by Mahoun swete name!” (*Otuel and Roland* 204-06). The mirroring in their respective speeches is clear both structurally and semantically, but the difference in oath is especially marked by its position at the tail line of the stanza. This is frequent in the stories, for they all use a similar call and response technique, continually drawing the readers’ attention to the conflict between the religions. When Oliver fights Ferumbras in *Sir Ferumbras*, “As twey lyons þay furde riȝt þat wolde slen his preye. / Þe Sarasyn sayde to þe knyȝt ‘by Mahoun þou schalt deye!’ / Þan O[lyuer] ‘by god almyȝt y hope þou schalt leye!’” (lines 627-29). The knights are first made equals through likening them to two lions, but this is followed by Ferumbras’s oath and Oliver’s corresponding oath. Their difference in religion only is made explicit in the emphasis on the similarities between the Christian and Saracen knights.

The romances especially distort Islam into a form of paganism by their continual reference to the *mametrye* of the Saracens. The word, in its variant spellings, derives from the Anglo-Norman *mauhoumet* which in turn derives from the Old French *mahomet*, meaning “idol.” The OED defines this as “a use of *Mahomet*,[. . .] resulting from the common medieval Christian belief that the prophet Muhammad was worshipped as a god” (“mammet”). The terms *maumet* and *mametrye* are used frequently in the conversion romances to direct an audience’s attention to

the similarity and difference between Christian and Saracen religions. Furthermore, by choosing a term for Saracen religious practice that implies idolatry, Islam is made to look all the more wrong to Christian readers. An early juxtaposition of this sort occurs in *Otuel a Knight*, perhaps the earliest of the English Charlemagne romances. In the opening of the poem, the poet introduces his audience to the opposing kings of the romance, Charlemagne and Garcy, each receiving their own stanza. While Charlemagne is a “wol treu kniȝt, / & meintenede cristendom ariȝt” (*Otuel a Knight* lines 13-14), Garcy “leuede al in maumetrie, / & for-sok god & seint marie” (25-26). The opposition is quickly set up, and it is clear that “maumetrie” is meant to contrast with God, Mary, and the saints. Garcy also “for-sok” the Christian faith, a verb reminding Christian readers that Saracens are misled Christians, caught up in following a charismatic heresiarch. From the outset of the poem, Saracens are depicted as traitors to the Christian faith.

In *Firumbras* there are a number of examples of similar juxtaposition. During one of Balam’s less encouraging meetings with his counsellors, Burlaunt, a rather outspoken advisor, despairs: “fful Welle waketh for hem god þat thay louen ay, / And oure falce mametrye slepyn nyȝt and day” (*Firumbras* 769-70). In this moment, reminiscent of Elias’s mocking of the prophets of Baal after their religious contest (1 Kings 18:26-27), the gods of the Saracens are pitted directly against the Christian God, as often is the case in the romances; the crucial battle is as much between deities as between people. Again, the opposition of *mametrye* and God is made strikingly clear when Ganelon delivers Charlemagne’s ultimatum to Balam: “That thou for-sake Mahoun and al hys mametrye, / And by-leue on Ihesu crist and on hys modyr marye” (*Firumbras* 1499-1500). While it must be admitted that the meter of the poem often demands certain forms, it is still with an obvious frequency that Mahoun and his “mametrye” are placed opposite to Jesus and either the Virgin Mary, some saints, or even the Christian trinity.

Just as Christians frequently mistook Muhammad as a Christ figure in Islamic theology, the opposition of *trinity* and *mametrye* is made especially explicit in *Otuel and Roland*. It becomes quite clear that the redactor assumes that the Saracen religion usurps aspects of Christianity by means of the Saracen *mametrye*, which is readily associated with pagan deities. Charlemagne, responding to Otuel’s demand that he convert to the Saracen religion, declares,

That y schal byleue on termagaunt.
Ne on mametrye that ȝow by-stant,
Whyle me lastyth my lyf.

But, by the kyng in trinite,
Also sone as y may garce se,
Out off londe y schal hym dryve. (*Otuel and Roland* 126-31)

The rhetorical force of this passage falls on the contrast between the denial of *mametrye* and the acceptance of the Christian trinity. A similar parallel occurs later, during the battle between Roland and Otuel. Roland beseeches Otuel, “Sarisin, do by my Rede, / and leue on god almyȝt!” (510-11). Otuel responds, “[T]hat ne schalt-ou neuer se / to for-sake Mahoun, ne turme gaunt, that ys so fre, / ne Iouyn, the goddys thre” (*Otuel and Roland* 522-25). The grouping of those “goddys thre” is significant, and the force of Otuel’s rebuttal indicates not just an act of idolatry, but usurpation of that blessed number that is so often invoked by Christians. Yet again, when Otuel faces his alter ego Clarel, who remains devoted to the Saracen faith, Otuel’s final words before leaping into the battle against his old comrade are “ȝut to-day schulle we that se, / That god ys bettyr in trinite / Thanne Mahoun and all hys Ospryng” (*Otuel and Roland* 1389-91). The frequency of these juxtapositions suggests that, while redactors do not directly write that the Saracen religion is schismatic heresy, they are unable to avoid making it clear that there is something in common between Christianity and that other religion. It is interesting that a Christian writer would even compare the Christian trinity to a seeming pantheon of gods, but the recurrence of this imagery throughout the Saracen romances implies that the authors felt that the comparison was a good one.

Similarly, in the *Ferumbras* tales there is a strong inclination to relate the “goddess” or idols of the Saracens to the holy relics of the Christians. In *Sir Ferumbras*, Floripas on two instances leads the Christian knights staying with her to a shrine. The first time this happens, Floripas takes the knights to a “pryue plas. / War sche tok out of a shryn araid of riche golde, / þe relyqes precieuse & fyn” (2115-17). These sacred relics are housed in a beautifully decorated, but secret, shrine. The knights devoutly “worshepede hem þanne with al hure miȝt” (*Sir Ferumbras* 2132). Later, though, when the knights are pressed by hunger, Floripas admonishes them, “Hadde ȝe worschipped our godes free as ȝe ȝour han done, / Of vytailes had ȝe had plente maugre al ȝour fone” (*Sir Ferumbras* 2527-28). Roland then suggests that she lead them to her gods, so that they might try praying before them. Floripas accordingly leads them “to þe maumerye [. . .] / To þe Synagoge” (2535-36) where she opens a door and draws back a curtain to reveal a number of golden and bejewelled idols. The finery of the idols is described in great detail, but, rather than kneeling before them as Roland had led Floripas to believe they would,

the knights admire the wealth, ridicule the powerlessness of the gods, and proceed to smash the idols gleefully. Having thus demonstrated the idols' lack of any real power, the knights convince Floripas quite easily that her gods are worthless (2573-77). The similarities between the two incidents are significant. Floripas must lead the knights to both shrines, they are both lavishly decorated with gold, both are referred to as shrines, and they both contain holy objects. The knights even worship the relics, but their promised respect for the Saracen idols becomes an episode of mocking and abuse. The comparison is even pointed out by Floripas when she explains to the knights that "Hadde 3e worschiped our godes free as 3e 3our han done" they all would have been saved. The language of the passage does not exclude the idea that Floripas is referring specifically to how the knights had worshipped the relics. The nearness of the episodes to one other makes the result more poignant; the Saracen religion takes on the appearance of Christianity, but because of apparent similarity, the subtle differences are made prominent. The nearness with which Saracen religion approaches Christianity makes the enemy's religion seem all the more invasive and offensive, an impotent copy of Christianity.

The depiction of Islam in these romances clearly takes more from fictional accounts of Islamic practice than from any of the attempts to understand Islam that occurred over the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. There is a strong resemblance in the romances to tales such as that of Hrotsvitha. Lavish idolatry and polytheism are the real focus of the religion of the Saracens depicted in the romances. The use of the term "goddes" in all of the romances instead of "ydoles" or some variant emphasizes the concept of Islamic practice that English audiences had; the idols *are* the Saracen gods, not simply images of them. Especially in a culture where the use of images of saints, Mary, and Jesus in the form of statues or icons was often highly contested, it was important for Christian writers to differentiate between the idolatrous practice of the pagan or heretic and the Christian use of images.

The descriptions of Islam that were more sympathetic and often described Islam as a Christian heresy, such as those found in William of Tripoli, Jacques de Vitry, Peter the Venerable, and even Mandeville, often encouraged the understanding of Islam as similar to Christianity to the point that conversion would be inevitable given time. However, the romances discussed here take this claim of similarity and create from it a perversion of Christian doctrine. Rather than become troubled with difficult questions of theology that were being addressed by polemicists and theologians, these works simplify the relationship between Christianity and

Islam by demonstrating an unmistakeable mirroring of religions, but the religion attributed to the Saracens more obviously errs by consistently distorting parts of Christian religious practice. The trinity becomes a pantheon or *mametrye*; the images used by Christians as focal points through which to deepen worship of God become actual gods themselves. Any medieval Christian would note the difference and be able to understand just how mistaken Islam is. There is a comfort in simple solutions, and the conception of Islam as an identifiable perversion of Christianity on a number of repeatedly highlighted points would be palatable to an English audience.

3.3 *Christian Desire for Acquiring Allies*

Another appealing aspect of these romances was the affirmation that allies might be found among the ranks of the enemy. While Saracens are depicted as the greatest enemy of Christendom, they are also depicted as their greatest potential ally. The true focal point of these narratives is on the convert and the potential of new allies from a foreign land. This is a motif that responds to a specific desire experienced by Christians fighting in the crusades. The allure of the idea of a foreign ally that would finally end centuries of warfare in the East was strong enough that the idea would be revisited over the years by many Christians through a variety of media, be it in poetry, travel literature, letters, or legend.

Perhaps the greatest indication of this desire for an Eastern ally can be found in the rumours of Prester John that circulated throughout Europe. The complicated and incomplete history of Prester John, the Eastern Christian king, is shrouded in a good deal of mystery, but scholars have generally understood Prester John's character as an amalgam of legends.⁵ The rumours reported that a Christian king ruled over the immense and exotic country of India, on the boundaries of the Eastern world; he was said to be extremely wealthy, and his people were innumerable. Above all, Prester John was presented as a likely ally in the wars against the Muslims. Indeed, the letter that contributed so much to the holy king's fame throughout Europe made clear his intentions:

⁵ Such legends included that Prester John, or Presbyter John, was a descendent of the Magi from the East (Matt. 2). See Slessarev 9-31 for a detailed description of the development of this legend and its sources. The legend gained prominence among Europeans especially after a supposed letter from Prester John himself arrived in Europe in the twelfth century, addressed to European leaders (Slessarev 33).

I am a devout Christian, everywhere we defend and sustain by our alms poor Christians, whom the authority of our mercy rules. We are bound by oath to visit the tomb of the Lord with a great army, as is fitting to the glory of our dignity and authority to humble and subdue the enemies of the cross of Christ, and to exalt his blessed name.⁶

Such a letter was too good to be true, of course; the odd phrasing of the letter makes obvious how tailored its content was for a Western European audience, playing off of particular fantasies of the exotic East. Despite its obvious illegitimacy, the letter was initially seen as a real message from an Eastern king, and it more deeply instilled hope for some outside help against the armies of Islam. As early as 1145 the German Otto of Friesing recorded that

a certain John, king and priest of the people living beyond the Persians and Armenians in the extreme Orient, professing Christianity, though of the Nestorian persuasion, marched in war against the two Samiardi brothers, kings of the Medes and the Persians, and conquered their capital, Ecbatana [. . .]. Victorious, the said John moved forward in order to come to the aid of the Holy Church. (Gumilev 4)

The story continues that Prester John was merely waiting for favourable conditions for crossing the Tigris River to meet with European Christians. Regardless of whether or not there is any truth in this tale, that such rumours were being spread across Europe clearly demonstrates the anxiety that people were feeling over their own holy war; the people of Europe were waiting for some outside help in their battle. Prester John, apparently having had some success in the East already, was exactly what Western Europeans were hoping for.⁷

⁶ “Devotus sum christianus, et ubique pauperes christianos, quos clementiae nostrae regit imperium, defendimus et elemosinis nostris sustentamus. In voto habemus visitare sepulchrum domini cum maximo exercitu, prout decet gloriam maiestatis nostrae humiliare et debellare inimicos crucis Christi et nomen eius benedictum exaltare” (*Der Priester Johannes* 910).

⁷ As it would turn out, Prester John was, at least in part, being confused with the advancing Mongolian leader Genghis Khan (Slessarev 82), Ye-lu Ta-Shih, prince of a kingdom near Persia, and legends of a St. Thomas in the East. Regardless of who Prester John really was, though, if there is even an answer to the question, the massive amount of medieval speculation on the Eastern king demonstrates an intense hope for some saviour to appear from the East. As Thomas Suárez explains, “The lure of the tale was plain: no Christian army would be vulnerable to Islamic forces once it reached the impenetrable arm of the Kingdom” (11). The belief in Prester John was spurred on by the need for some hero from outside of Catholic Europe. This hope was shown in a 1221 papal letter:

King David, vulgarly called Prester John, a Catholic and god-fearing man, has entered Persia with a powerful army [. . .] His army is only ten days’ march from Baghdad [. . .], special seat of the Caliph, whom the Saracens call their chief priest and bishop [. . .] The Saracens [will be] dispersed to defend the frontiers of their land. (Southern 45-46)

Prester John came to epitomize the dream that aid would eventually come from far off to crush Islam and join with the Western Christian army. *Mandeville's Travels* would contribute to keeping this legend alive despite all evidence to the contrary, and the book described the "Lond of Prestre Ioon" (113) as separate from that of the "Grete Chan" (113). Moreover, Mandeville describes Prester John's war practice of marching his army with many bejewelled and golden crosses before them instead of his own battle standard (116).⁸ In being portrayed in this way, Prester John and his people become an alternate Christendom engaging in the same type of warfare as Western Christians with the potential to succeed where Western Christendom had been failing for so long. It is to be expected that Europeans would have latched onto this idea, especially the English, even farther removed from the main areas of the crusades' focus, to whom the idea of help from a foreign body might have seemed more believable. The conversion romances expand and capitalize on this hope for the sudden arrival of a foreign saviour.

In *Mandeville's Travels*, even greater than Prester John is the Khan, or "Grete Chane." The Khan is presented as a powerful ruler who encourages diversity in all aspects of his kingdom, including religion, but he is not open to conversion. His power is presented as so great that, as Higgins puts it, "his change of heart could change the world" (168). The Khan corresponded with something perhaps more tangibly real for all European audiences than the legends of Prester John, for the Mongols had quickly become a demonstrably potent force through their conquests of Eastern countries, and this belief in foreign aid is further reflected in the letters of 1245-46 sent by Innocent IV to Guyuk Khan in attempts to secure a Christian ally in the East.⁹ The result of the letters was disappointing for the Europeans, given that in the

The hope was that as Prester John drew the Muslims' attention to the East, the Europeans would be free to make their move to retake the Holy Land: "In short, the West was about to be released from the fear of Islam by a great Christian army advancing from the Far East" (Southern 46).

⁸ The *Mandeville* author's depiction must be, at least in part, taken from the same letter that began so many rumours about Prester John. The letter reads at one point,

When we enter into battle against our enemies, we cause to be carried before our face thirteen great crosses, exceptionally tall, wrought of gold and costly jewels, with a cart for each in place of banners, and behind each one of them there follow ten thousand knights and a hundred thousand foot soldiers.

Quando procedimus ad bella contra inimicos nostros, XIII cruces magnas et praecelsas, factas ex auro et lapidibus pretiosis, in singulis plaustris loco vexillorum ante faciem nostrum portari facimus, et unamquamque ipsarum secuntur X milia militum et C milia peditum armatorum [. . .]. (*Der Priester Johannes* 916)

⁹ See A nun of Stanbrook Abbey 73-77, 85-86 for an English translation of the letters.

Mongols Western Europeans saw “an ally who would help rid the West of a long-standing enemy” (Higgins 390), and Guyuk Khan made no such aid or alliance seem forthcoming. Despite this, the hope for Eastern allies lived on well into the late Middle Ages in England, as the popularity and acceptance of *Mandeville’s Travels* seem to indicate.

However, when less understood allies further East were not being sought, allies from within the Muslim ranks were always hoped for. Take, for example, the case of Louis IX’s second and final crusade to Tunis in 1270. It was explained by Geoffroi of Beaulieu, Louis’s confessor and counsellor on the campaign, that the primary goal of the crusade was to convert the sultan of Tunis and consequently the Tunisian people; the crusade was supposedly sparked largely by the sultan’s hints “at his readiness to receive baptism should the circumstances permit” (Kedar 166). Louis hoped to provide the appropriate circumstances for this conversion, expecting the sultan to be spiritually and morally bolstered by the Christian army’s presence to the point of accepting Christianity; the plan was that the conversion of the Tunisian leader would effect a top-down conversion, the subjects accepting and joining in the conversion of their leader. Louis is also said to have thought that the conversion of the sultan would lead to an eventual reclamation of the African lands that had been home to venerated church fathers such as Augustine (Kedar 166). Although Louis died waiting for this conversion to take place, that the promise of a convert ally would be enough to stimulate an entire crusading campaign reveals the continuing hope in Christendom that a converted enemy would be the answer to many problems.

The immediate actions of the Saracen heroes after conversion in the conversion romances take on greater significance when considered with the Christian desire for Eastern allies. After accepting conversion, almost as a condition for being converted, both Otuel and Ferumbras make an oath or promise to convert or destroy the people of their former religion. Although it would be expected that the protagonists would fight for the Christians, the readiness with which they pledge themselves is surprising and, in the obviousness and abruptness of the change of heart, even suggests satisfying some common cultural fantasy.

In *Otuel a Knight*, for instance, Otuel and Roland inform Charlemagne of the conditions of Otuel’s conversion. Charlemagne replies favourably, saying,

panne hadde ich þe & oliuer,
Otuwel, & gode ogger,
In all þe world in lenkþe & brede,
þer nis king þat nolde me drede. (*Otuel a Knight* 625-28)

Charlemagne immediately makes note of the benefit of a strong new ally. He sees the addition of Otuel in terms of potential to continue his campaign against Saracens. Charlemagne is well pleased, then, by Otuel's reaction to his suggestion that Otuel and the king's daughter Belicent be married soon. Otuel insists, rather,

For soþe ich nele hire neuere wedde,
 No neuere wiþ hire go to bedde,
 Er þi werre to þe ende be brouȝt,
 [.]
 Whan king garsie is slawe or take [. . .]. (645-49)

Otuel readily turns on his former countrymen and his former master and relative, Garcy. The Saracen knight has also prioritized the war against Islam above all else. As we find out later, Otuel's mission to have the sultan "slawe or take" results in Garcy having to choose between death or allegiance to Charlemagne, or, at least in *Otuel and Roland*, conversion.¹⁰ To this proposal, Otuel adds in *Otuel and Roland* that only after they have "all the sarasins ouercom" (621) shall he and Belicent be wed.

The version of Otuel's oath found in *Rowland and Otuell* uses the most powerful language, and his pledge is couched in terms of chivalry. He kneels before Belicent and declares,

I make a-vowe to mylde Marie,
 [.]
 that I schall wende to attale,
 and for thi lufe do cheualrye
 and distruye þe heythyn blode
 [.]
 In to the landes of lumbardye,
 Righte als we firste redde,
 For to distruye there goddes Enemy. (lines 643-55)

There is no mistaking the prominent features of this vow. Here the focus is even more on the impetus that Otuel brings to attacking the Saracen enemy. Otuel makes Christian vows, swearing by Mary, and he is a part of chivalric society now, fighting for love. The vow is not so much to end the war as it is to destroy heathendom. Recognizing the error of his old life, Otuel now seeks to extinguish his past sin by actively seeking out "goddes Enemy." A more complete convert could not be asked for, and Otuel's vow is in keeping with the Christian hope for a converted

¹⁰ We cannot be sure of Garcy's fate in *Otuel a Knight*, since the poem breaks off just as Otuel brings Garcy before Charlemagne.

sultan of Tunis or Mongolian leader. The outsider becomes the deliverance that Christians need to win their holy war.

In the Otuel romances, another ally has a notable impact on the narrative, and that is the Saracen knight Clarel, who has been called Otuel's "unconverted alter ego" (Metlitzki 180). Clarel, although he remains and dies faithful to the Saracen religion, is the embodiment of the sentiment expressed in the *Chanson de Roland*, "Deus! quel baron, s'oüst chrestientet!" (line 3164). Clarel, at one point captured by three of Charlemagne's knights, is released by necessity, since the knights cannot afford to be encumbered by a hostage. Ogier the Dane recognizes Clarel's potential as an ally, however, before leaving him:

Good hyt ys to lete hym go,
Clarelle, the kene kyng!
ȝut he may saue ous fro wo.
Among the sarisins altho
he ys a grete lordying. (*Otuel and Roland* 882-86)

Ogier's prediction turns out to be true when, surrounded by enemies and bleeding from numerous wounds, Ogier is rescued by Clarel, who kills his own people to save the Danish knight (*Otuel and Roland* 965-88). The event is found in *Otuel a Knight* and *Rowland and Otuell* as well. Clarel's behaviour reveals the Saracens not as simply enemies, but as potential allies. Clarel lives honourably, but he never converts to Christianity. Instead, by his simple proximity and similarity to Otuel, his potential as an ally is all the more felt and all the more desired.

The Ferumbras tales are, if anything, even more pronounced in their display of the potential in a foreign ally. Our first encounter with the concept is with Ferumbras's conversion, but Floripas's actions also emphasize the value that can be found in an ally from the other side. In *Sir Ferumbras*, after the lengthy opening battle between Oliver and the Saracen knight, the vehemence with which Ferumbras wards off his deathblow is shocking. Accepting that "My godes þat y me affied on buþ noȝt to haue on mynde" (756), he immediately swears to Oliver,

y schal scape hem niȝt & day þat bileueþ on Mahounde;
Cristendom by me schal encrested be sykerly if y may scape;
& for payenye, so mot y þe ful yuele wil y schape;
þanne schulleþ peynymes cristned be & hure lay for-sake. (759-61)

Ferumbras is explicit. His promises are in direct line with the hopes expressed by numerous medieval writers, and he declares specifically what he will do if spared while Oliver's sword is still raised, ready to deliver the final stroke. Cowardly though Ferumbras's words may be, their

appeal is none the less effective for a medieval audience. He promises to persecute Saracens, and, in doing so, to increase Christendom through conquering of heathens. He also promises to convert Saracens, again a hearkening back to the desires of monarchs such as Louis IX.

Later, Ferumbras's assurance that he will contribute to the expansion of Christendom is even more pronounced. When Charlemagne finds Ferumbras lying, almost dead, under a tree, the king is ready to kill Ferumbras because he believes the Saracen warrior to be responsible for the capture of Oliver. However, Ferumbras assures Charlemagne that he has been converted. He adds:

For wer ich mad a cristenman & my wounde faire y-helid
Heþemen schold y so greue þan þat þay shulle sore y-felid,
& þay þat now buþ Sarasyns schold turne to cristene lay
& elles þay scholde þolye pyns for hure false fay. (*Sir Ferumbras* 1052-55)

It is important for Charlemagne, in deciding to spare Ferumbras, to see the validity and potential in Ferumbras as an ally. Ferumbras guarantees that, if he is spared and baptised, he will, above all, contribute to the effort to expel the Saracen religion and spread Christianity. Ferumbras, as an outside force joining the Christian army, brings with him new hope for the righteousness and viability of the Christian war. It is after hearing this plea, this answer to the question of "Why spare the Saracen?", that Charlemagne agrees to have Ferumbras tended to and baptised. His use as an ally must first be demonstrated, and that use is almost exclusively Ferumbras's ability to turn other Saracens away from their religion.

The other prominent ally from the enemy forces in the Ferumbras romances is Ferumbras's sister, Floripas. Although her motivation is quite different from Ferumbras's, being almost entirely her love for the French knight Guy, she illustrates repeatedly that an ally from within the enemy forces is truly valuable. Floripas's tale is written in the tradition begun by an eleventh- and twelfth-century English monk, Orderic Vitalis, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Orderic describes the events of the First Crusade, relying largely on other sources, such as Fulcher of Chartres, for most of his information. He inserts, however, a number of romantic additions to his history, including versions of the events surrounding Floripas in the Ferumbras stories. Orderic details how Bohemond, prince of Antioch, is captured by a Muslim army and subsequently liberated largely through the aid of Melaz, the doting daughter of the emir who had imprisoned him. The emir's daughter converts to Christianity, and eventually marries Bohemond's nephew, Roger (Metlitzki 160-77). Later, Orderic describes the imprisonment of

Baldwin, count of Edessa, and his subsequent escape from prison and seizure of the tower in which the prison is. Thanks to the helpful advice of the sultan Balad's wife, Fatima, Baldwin and his men resist the siege of an emir, Ali. Fatima, when she is confined with Baldwin, explains,

We endure this confinement more willingly than to observe further demonic worship in union with idolaters. For we embrace your gentle ways, and rejoice in your faith and religion, hoping certainly to be baptized in the divine sacraments of the Christians, if, with God willing, we are able to escape hence with you safe and sound.¹¹

Her only desire is for her and her entourage to become Christians. The parallels with the Ferumbras story are obvious. In the Middle English tales, Charlemagne's knights, freed from prison by Floripas, take over the sultan's palace, ousting the sultan from his dinner table, also at the advice of Floripas. The Floripas section in the romances finds its roots in some earlier tale or history, and though we are not sure of Orderic's source material here, the idea that allies may be found among the enemy, even among the women, was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the romances' audience.

The potential of the female ally is demonstrated differently than that of the male, exemplified in Ferumbras. While Ferumbras vows to remove heathen religion from the world, Floripas makes no such vow. Instead, Floripas offers frequent support to the Christian knights in times of need. She is active in her role, yet that role is always as some form of support to the more directly involved male protagonists. The Saracen princess fulfills a maternal role that encourages the potential of the feminine as an enhancer, an added benefit to the Christian conquest of Islam. By way of example, observe the chief actions that Floripas takes during the Ferumbras tale. She becomes involved with the Christian knights solely because of her infatuation with Guy of Burgundy. As she informs the knights whom she frees,

And but he wole graunte me his loue,
Of you askape shalle none here.
By him, þat is almyghty aboue,
Ye shalle abyte it ellis ful dere. (*Sowdone* 1899-1902)

She is willing to free the knights, but she must be guaranteed Guy's love first. While this brings the reliability of her character into question, it places her firmly within the role of the

¹¹ "Libentius hanc patimur clausuram, quam daemonicam cum idolatris observare culturam. Benignos enim mores vestros amplectimur, fideique vestrae et religioni congratulamur, optantes, si, Divinitate favente, hinc sospites vobiscum evadere poterimus, profecto sacramentis Christianorum imbui coelestibus" (Orderic 255).

marriageable princess. Along with her position as the traditional booty of war in the form of a potential bride, which also signifies the potential for alliance, the potency of her alliance with the Christian knights is based almost entirely on her ability to perform a supportive role that simultaneously highlights her exoticism.

This occurs primarily in Floripas's role as a provider.¹² Repeatedly, when the knights are placed in dire circumstances, Floripas comes to their aid by producing something. Such is the case when the knights, Floripas, and her maidens, confined in the princess's tower, are starving. When Roland laments their situation, Floripas consoles the warrior, saying,

I have a girdil in my Forcer,
Who so girde hem ther-with aboute,
Hunger ner thirse shal him neuer dere,
Though he were vij yere with-out. (*Sowdone* 2303-06)

She has a magic talisman that prevents hunger. The use of magic items is never questioned; rather, the item becomes a sort of relic itself, sought by the sultan Laban immediately. The girdle figures less prominently in the other versions of the story, *Sir Ferumbras* and *Firumbras*, although the sultan still attempts to retrieve it. Early in the Christians' allegiance with Floripas, then, Floripas demonstrates that she is a valuable ally not by the conventional methods, but by her very exoticism and difference.

While they pass briefly over the magic girdle episode, *Sir Ferumbras* and *Firumbras* make up for it by including an episode in which the tower, set on fire by the Saracens below, is extinguished by Floripas. In *Sir Ferumbras*, the method by which Floripas douses the rising flames is a concoction of hot "melk of þe camele" and "vynegre" (3289-90), again emphasizing her exoticism and her affiliation with Eastern culture. In *Firumbras*, her repulsion of the fire is even more mystical. Seeing her new-found friends in great fear over the advancing flames, she declares,

"y schall turne the fyr and the flames that ben lyzt
Agen on the sarisins to brenne well bright,

¹² See Kuskin 534. Kuskin explores, among Floripas's other roles in *Charles the Grete*, her presence as an object that satisfies both sexual and alimentary desire. Much of the material that Kuskin describes applies to the other versions of Floripas's story discussed here. Bly Calkin's unpublished essay, "Translating the Body: Conversion, Baptism, and Spectacle in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Ferumbras*," similarly analyses Floripas's central role in expressing desire; Bly Calkin presents Floripas's conversion in light of Floripas's need to assuage hunger, feed desire, and protect her body from violation.

Thorow crafte that 3e couthe and queyntyse of gynne.”
And the fyr sche turnyd on the sarisins with-Inne. (799-802)

After this, the Saracen camp is burnt to the ground. In this version, it is not some mere concoction that extinguishes the flames. Floripas, quite ambiguously, turns the flames back against the Saracens below. Some magic is surely involved, and Floripas is made out to be an exotic, valuable, and dangerous ally by merit of her foreign nature. It should not be forgotten, either, that Floripas is also the caretaker of the holy relics that Charlemagne seeks. She produces these from a secret chamber to aid the knights in their time of need, inspiring them to battle with their besiegers. It is at her instigation that the knights pray before the relics. In providing for the captive knights, Floripas carries on the tradition of an essential Eastern female ally that appears in chronicles such as that of Orderic Vitalis. The reflection of a desire for real allies from the East is one of many resonances that these tales very clearly had with medieval European society.

3.4 Reclaiming Christian Relics

The prospect of claiming allies for Christendom from outside of it was just part of the larger project of rebuilding Christendom as it became less unified from within. Claiming new allies in an attempt to re-unify Christendom had less to do with reality perhaps than it did with fantasy, but the re-unifying urge found expression in other projects as well. The desire to reclaim holy Christian relics that had been lost was one of these projects that would prove to hold a fascination for Christians even to the present day. Christian relics became symbols of a crumbling Christian meta-nation when they were lost, but had the power to create a unifying sense of Christendom when they were found. Throughout the centuries that followed the beginnings of the crusades, and prior to them with perhaps less vehemence, holy relics were sought as a most important testament to the potency of the Christian faith. Tyerman says that “[s]uch was the flood of them [relics from the Latin empire] on to the western market that Innocent III issued instructions on how rationally to authenticate them [. . .]. These relics provided the Fourth Crusade’s most positive and lasting legacy in western Europe” (*God’s War* 557-58). The relics were viewed as a universal and common possession of all Christendom that rightfully belonged in Christian hands. The most prominent and successful of these relics were those that were thought to have been involved with the passion of Christ: the crown of thorns, the nails with which Jesus was crucified, the lance that had pierced his side, and the True Cross upon

which he was hung. Of these, the Holy Lance and the True Cross had very real effects on two important crusades, the First and Third.

The Holy Lance was, miraculously or not, responsible to some degree for the breaking of the siege of Antioch in June 1098 during the First Crusade. After a long siege, the crusaders had gained Antioch only to be besieged themselves within its walls by Kerbogha of Mosul¹³ for a twenty-five day period that was “the most stressful and testing period of the whole crusade” (Lock 140). The decreased morale of the starving and exhausted crusaders had reached its lowest point, but the discovery of the Holy Lance and the odd events leading up to this discovery inspired the crusaders with new zeal, and they burst forth in a foray that became legendary, driving off their surprised besiegers. Many of the accounts of this event attribute the success of their endeavour that day to the revelation of the Lance within the church of St. Peter in Antioch.¹⁴ The dire situation of the crusaders and their apparently miraculous victory, as well as the overall success of the First Crusade, added to the legendary status of this relic.

The True Cross was similarly responsible for the success of the English at the siege of Lisbon in the Second Crusade in 1147, a piece of it wielded by a zealous Anglo-Norman priest encouraging the demoralized troops (Tyerman, *England and the Crusades* 23), but the True Cross was also a central cause for the calling of the Third Crusade. After the Battle of Hattin on

¹³ Kerbogha, the atabeg (governor) of Mosul, was an opportunist who provided strong leadership to the divided Islamic forces; for a high fee, he was loyal to the Seljuk sultan in Baghdad. He formed a coalition against western invaders in 1098, gathering many allies “from as far apart as Damascus, Anatolia and northern Iraq.” It is assumed that Kerbogha had much larger ambitions, but his defeat at Antioch would put an end to these (Tyerman, *God’s War* 140-41).

¹⁴ Peter Bartholomew, a mystic from France, claimed to have visions of St. Andrew who told Peter to seek the Holy Lance in the church of St. Peter during the siege of Antioch. Peter, after much fanfare, convinced Raymond of Toulouse to dig in a certain spot in the church. After little success, Peter himself leapt into the hole and drew out what he claimed to be the Lance. This discovery and its dubiousness would be the source of much strife between Raymond and Bohemond later.

See Krey 163-94 for documentary evidence in translation of the effect that the Lance had on the besieged Christian forces. See also Orderic 554. Orderic recounts, “They found the Lance. When it was reverently lifted up, a public shout springs up, the crowded throng is driven to it, and kisses it warmly with complete devotion. Therefore, among them rises so much gaiety that, with all weariness of soul removed, thereafter they recalled no grief, and from then they had courage to speak of war.”

“[L]anceam reppererunt. Qua reverenter levata, publicus clamor exoritur, celebris ad eam concursus agitur, et tota devotione deosculatur. Orta est igitur inter eos tanta laetitia, ut, remota omni accidia, deinceps nullius meminerint moestitiae, et ex tunc ausi fuerint de bello tractare.”

4 July 1187, in which Saladin and his troops decimated the field army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the necessity of retaking the lands that were being subsequently conquered by Saladin was clear to the papacy, and a new crusade was preached throughout Europe. This call focused on not only the need to retake the lands lost, but also the “need for right intention and sincere repentance and amendment of their sins on the part of the intending crusaders” (Lock 152). The clear intention of the papacy to focus crusading zeal on more spiritual ideals was further encouraged by a fixation with reclaiming the True Cross from those who had taken it. Roger of Wendover, a thirteenth-century English chronicler, emphasizes the indignant feeling of violation that Christians would have experienced at the taking of their holy relic: “They who persecute the Tomb possess the Tomb! And those who blaspheme the crucified hold the Cross!”¹⁵ The language clearly encourages reclamation from those who defile Christianity simply by possessing a Christian relic; the loss of the True Cross increased the desire to reclaim concrete pieces of Christendom that had been taken while creating the impression that that desire was of a spiritual nature.

The papal bull “Audita Tremendi,” issued by Gregory VIII in 1187 as a response to the loss of Jerusalem, was no differently focused. The cross is used as a symbol, but it is central to the events related by the pope when he describes the battle at Hattin:

As one might expect, from the opportunity for dissention which was recently brought about on earth by the wickedness of man from the suggestion of the devil, Saladin came with a large number of armed men to those regions, and, when there stood in opposition to him the king, the bishops, the Templars, the Hospitallers, the barons and knights with the people of the land, and the cross of the Lord (by which from the memory and faith of the passion of the Christ, who hung [on it] and redeemed the human race, there used to be a sure protection and a desired defence against the attack of the pagans); when the attack had begun between them, and a part of our host had been defeated, the cross of the Lord was captured.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Sepulchrum possident qui persequuntur sepulchrum: crucem tenent, qui Crucifixum blasphemant” (Roger of Wendover 121).

¹⁶ “Ex occasione quippe dissensionis quae malitia hominum ex suggestione diaboli facta est nuper in terra, accessit Saladinus cum multitudine armatorum ad partes illas, et occurrentibus eis rege, et episcopis, et Templariis, et Hospitalariis, baronibus ac militibus cum populo terrae, cruce Dominica (per quam ex memoria et fide passionis Christi, qui pependit, et genus humanum redemit, certum solebat esse tutamen, et contra paganorum incursus desiderata defensio), facto congressione inter eos, et superata parte nostrorum, capta est crux Dominica [. . .]” (Gregorius VIII 1540A).

The emphasis on the capture of the most holy of Christian relics is meant to be particularly inspiring to potential crusaders. The bull expands its description of the cross for maximum rhetorical effect, and the contrast between the hope that the cross represented and its resulting loss is carefully worded. Even Islamic writers were aware of the intense importance that Christians placed upon the relic above all, as can be seen in the writings of Imad ad-Din, Saladin's secretary:

[The cross's] capture was for them more important than the loss of the King and was the gravest blow that they sustained in that battle [Hattin]. The cross was a prize without equal, for it was the supreme object of their faith. To venerate it was their prescribed duty, for it was their God, before whom they would bow their foreheads to the ground [. . .] So when the Great Cross was taken great was the calamity that befell them, and the strength drained from their loins. (137)

Regardless of how much Saladin's secretary might have exaggerated, there can be no doubt that the Islamic army felt the Cross to have been of grave importance for the Christian forces, to the point that ad-Din mentions its loss while ignoring how serious the loss of Jerusalem itself was for the Christians.

The True Cross would continue to be an object of the utmost importance for Christians. The so-called Children's Crusade of 1212 was inspired by the devotion of common people, French or German or both, to reclaim the True Cross and the Holy Land (Lock 166). The desire to reclaim the Cross was intense enough that the Fifth Crusade ended with a treaty that guaranteed an eight-year truce and the return of the Cross in 1221. Oliver of Paderborn lists the items of the treaty: "that they would restore the True Cross, along with all captives taken any time at all in the kingdom of Babylon, or all Christians held in the power of Coradin; and that when they had received Damietta with all its belongings, they would send us all away free, as well as all our movable goods, and would faithfully keep a truce of eight years" (90). The Cross is listed specifically, the only other demand being the safety of captured Christians. Despite this treaty, the Cross was never returned (Lock 169), keeping Christian desire for their most holy artefact unsatisfied. Given papal focus on the relic, it is unsurprising that, in Richard I's many attempts at negotiating with Saladin during the English king's crusading in the East, the restoration of the True Cross to Christendom was always among the items of the treaty. The Third Crusade had a major impact on the English, and this preoccupation with the recovery of relics was felt throughout English society.

The conversion romances respond to the preoccupation with relics in a number of ways through their concern with the veracity and potency of such relics and through the desire to reclaim the relics for Western Christendom. The first romance in the Otuel group, *Roland and Vernagu*, often seen as having been originally attached to the Otuel romance directly, begins by having Constantius present his potential saviour, Charlemagne, with a number of relics, beginning the tale through a demonstration of Christian relics and their veracity. *Roland and Vernagu*, a diptych in narrative construction, is focused on religious matters that would have resonated immensely with the English people; its first half primarily addresses the need for reclamation of Christian territory taken by Islam, while its second half deals with the conversion of Saracens.

In *Roland and Vernagu*, after Charlemagne has responded to a request for aid from Emperor Constantius of Constantinople, Constantius wastes no time in immediately introducing Charlemagne to the holy relics in his possession; among them are the “holy croun,” “a parti of þe holy crosse, / þat in cristal was don in close,” the Holy Lance, and one of the nails which had pierced Jesus’s feet (lines 110-24). It is interesting that both the lance and the cross are present in this collection, but even more interesting is that Constantius “gaf charls þe king” the Holy Lance (119-21), though whether this implies that Constantius is simply allowing Charlemagne to hold the lance or gifting it to him is not clear. Upon receiving the lance—“When charls had reseued þat þing” (125)—the immediate response of Charlemagne is not to utter any thanks or adoration, but rather

He bisouȝt ihū, heuen king,
 To sende him miȝt & space,
 For to wite þe soþe þere,
 ȝif þe relikes verray were,
 Er he þennes pase. (126-30)

The scene stresses that the veracity of holy relics cannot be assumed but must be proven. The relics under question are no less than the major relics that Christians held in the highest regard, those pertaining directly to Christ’s passion, which were also the subject of much debate among crusaders who had been in contact with them. The Holy Lance had been responsible for a major increase in morale in the First Crusade, but it had also been the subject of much dubious speculation (Krey 239-41). The Christian camp was divided regarding the truthfulness of the

relic; it is appropriate that *Roland and Vernagu* would introduce its audience to relics in such a way that their veracity is immediately questioned.

The author's position on the relics, is clear, for the speedy response to Charlemagne's petition is marvellous. A brilliant light dazzles all that are in the presence of the relics, and they feel as though "þai hadde ben in paradys, So ful it was of grace" (*Roland and Vernagu* 131-36). The Otuel cycle, then, begins by addressing popular concerns about the potency and veracity of relics, responding to lingering doubt within an English community that was flooded with such relics after numerous crusades (Tyerman, *England* 23).

While the Otuel group of romances leaves discussion of relics to focus on conversion and the converted, the romances of the Ferumbras group are in many places concerned primarily with the seizure of holy relics. In *Sowdone*, the only poem of the Ferumbras group extant with an introductory episode approaching the *Destruction de Rome*, the beginning episode sees Ferumbras and his father, Laban, ransacking Rome, killing thousands of Christians and seizing property. Anxiety over Christian relics is clear when Ferumbras, with great slaughter in the streets as he makes his procession, immediately makes his way to "Seinte Petris," the basilica, "And alle the Relekes he seased anoon, / The Crosse, the Crown, the Nailes bente; / He toke hem with him everychone" (664-66). The Saracen enemy is presented not only as vicious, but also as knowledgeable concerning the most valued possessions of Christendom, apparently wishing to seize and retain those objects above all other treasures. The holy objects continue to play an integral role to the Ferumbras tale in all its variations. The appeal of this plot device stems from the experiences with relics in the crusades; their power and importance to the crusades had been demonstrated in real life. As contemporary writers reported, when the Holy Lance was discovered, victory seemed miraculous; when the True Cross was taken away, it had a devastating effect on the Christian armies.

All versions of the Ferumbras tale involve the relics explicitly, and in a way the holy objects become central to the plot; there are three items that are the main terms of negotiation (regardless of how unsuccessfully negotiated) in the repeated ultimatum-delivering of the romances. These are the return of hostages, Charlemagne's Twelve Peers; the return of the sacred relics; and the conversion of the sultan. As seen in *Sowdone*, it is the destruction of Rome that inspires the retaliatory episode for Charlemagne, but as the tale progresses, it is of the relics and conversion that Charlemagne and his knights repeatedly speak to the Saracens.

The conflict in the *Ferumbras* group revolves around the sacred relics. At the beginning of *Sir Ferumbras*, the audience is informed of the many cruel deeds that Ferumbras committed; for his final act, after “þat Cite a struyede,” he bears away “þe relyqes fayre & free [. . .] þe croune & nayles three” (64). It is this act that will stick in the minds of readers for the remainder of the tale, since it is reiterated and is the final driving point of the narrative to be addressed. It is restated when Richard of Normandy describes Ferumbras to Charlemagne: “þys is he þat be-lay Rome þy gode Citee, / & þyn relyqes bar away þe croune & nailles three / þat þou & þine with strengþe of hond in heþnisse sum syme wonne” (134-36). Similarly, in *Sowdone*, the episode that begins the common *Fierabras* segment of the tale is Guy’s discovery that Rome has been burned and that the relics are gone. Guy resolves to “telle [Charlemagne] of this tithinge, / Howe Laban hath the Cite brente / And bore the Religes a-waye / And howe he hath hem to Spayne sente” (*Sowdone* 714-17). Accordingly, when Charlemagne arrives, Guy informs him that Rome has been burnt, the relics stolen away, and Christians persecuted (748). The relics are of the utmost importance in beginning the narratives, and they maintain a prominent place throughout; moreover, the loss of the holy relics of Christ’s passion would resonate especially with an audience who was consistently surrounded by actual relics and reports of relics from crusaders. The True Cross itself was never recovered, and the closest that Christendom ever came to obtaining it was during Richard I’s negotiations with Saladin, or so it would have seemed to an English audience. As a result, *Ferumbras* occupies a place in between reality and romance, as Saladin would come to as well: a chivalric Muslim, the equal to the greatest Christian heroes, who holds the potential for restoration of the most valued lost possessions of Christendom. The repeated emphasis on the relics from the outset of the romance demonstrates what appealed to the hopes of a Christian audience.

The importance of the return of the relics is again emphasized by the terms of peace that Charlemagne delivers to Laban/Balan: “His Nevewes home to him sende, / And Religes of Rome withoute strife; / And ellis getist thou an evel ende!” (*Sowdone* 1820-22). There is no mention of any bartering for possession of land; instead, Charlemagne demands the return of his knights and the relics only. In *Sir Ferumbras*, a more full translation of the Old French, the emphasis on the return of the relics is even greater at this point in the narrative. Rather than having but one messenger deliver Charlemagne’s terms, the author repeats the message seven times, with little variation, each time from a different knight. Their terms drive at the same goals noted before:

conversion, restoration of the hostages, and return of the relics (1806-1947). One can well picture a particularly enthusiastic audience getting worked up over the repetition of these demands—hopes that would have been felt by English people frequently as they prayed for the restoration of the True Cross to Christendom long after its loss.¹⁷

It is not enough that they would only include the relics in their narrative; the stories must demonstrate the potency of the relics, their veracity as true objects of the passion. As with *Roland and Vernagu*, once the relics are obtained by Christians, their sacred nature is dubious until proven. The *Ferumbras* romances do not disappoint in this respect, and the function of the relics mirrors the much celebrated and oft reported events at the siege of Acre and Lisbon. In fact, their inspirational capacity is the specific focus of the narrative on the relics, just as in those much-lauded real-life sieges during the crusades. In *Firumbras*, while the knights are besieged within Floripas's tower and they look on as Guy approaches the gallows, the situation seems hopeless when the tower is surrounded by Saracens, "mo thane y can telle" (610), until Floripas brings forth the sacred relics in her possession, the crown, the nails, and the spear (592-96). The eleven knights immediately fall to their knees and "criden to ihesu crist for hys holy name, / That he schulde spede hem that day & schylde hem fro schame" (597-98). They are inspired by these relics to become "coraious as a lyoun" (605) and sally forth into the fray of Saracens, eleven against presumably thousands, in short time freeing Guy from the hangman's noose. The breaking of the siege after the presentation of not only relics of the passion, but the Holy Lance, is highly evocative of the broken siege at Acre.

The power of inspiration, moreover, is not the only proof offered for these relics. In both *Sir Ferumbras* and *Firumbras* there is a moment when things are looking especially dire for the desperately besieged knights and their maidens, as the Saracens begin climbing ladders to the window of the tower. Duke Naymes, thinking quickly, seizes the holy relics, including the

¹⁷ There were at least a few fourteenth-century English guilds that continued to pray for the reclamation of lost pieces of the Christian identity. Tyerman provides evidence that "[t]wo such guilds were founded in Norfolk in 1384, the Fraternities of St. Christopher in Norwich and of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Wighall on the Ouse. Each began meetings with prayers for the recovery of the Holy Land: at St. Christopher's at Norwich, "for ye holy lond and ye holy crosse, yat Godd for his might and his mercy bring it oute of hethen power into reule of holy chirche" (*England* 261).

“voluper” and “sudary,”¹⁸ holding them out to the ascending Saracens, and the relics shine forth and blind the Saracens, causing them to topple to the ground below (*Firumbras* 1414-18; *Sir Ferumbras* 5039-68). The relics demonstrate their veracity as artefacts of Christ’s passion, smiting the religious Other, reaffirming both the righteousness of the religious conflict and the significance of holy relics for the Christian army.

The final demonstration of this preoccupation with the veracity of relics occurs in at least one of the romances, *Firumbras*, when the relics are at last presented to Charlemagne, and he has the relics approved by the bishop. It is assumed that *Sir Ferumbras* contained at one point a similar ending sequence, but our extant manuscript is missing its introductory and ending episodes. The bishop holds the relics each aloft, and, after a petition to God that their truth be demonstrated, he removes his hands as the relics continue to remain, miraculously, in the air (*Firumbras* 1786-1804). The relics are then, in both *Firumbras* and *Sowdane*, distributed among the different French lords by Charlemagne.

The romances place great significance on obtaining and protecting religious relics from Muslims. The crusades saw much loss and recovery of such relics, and the loss of the True Cross weighed heavily upon Christian minds. The romances exhibit the wish-fulfillment that the genre is famed for (Jameson 138) in recovering not only relics, but those related directly to Christ’s passion. However, wish-fulfillment in romance also emphasizes what has not come to pass in reality. The conversion romances may be relegated to the realm of simple dreams, but they engaged with the concerns of Christians in very real ways.

Contrary to what some critics have suggested, the romances reflect on a number of different levels the realities of Christian Europe. Moreover, the romances attempt consciously to construct an image of the Saracen that would correspond in some way with what people knew of them at the time. The redactors give narrative attention to both the Christian and Saracen forces; the shifting perspectives of the conflict and the mirroring of Christian and Saracen peoples and religions creates a poem that is more concerned with comparing the two peoples than is usual in Middle English romance. This approach differs markedly from other English romances that involve Saracens, such as *King Horn*, *Beves of Hamptoun*, or *Guy of Warwick*, all of which make no such attempt at a dual narrative focus and present a less complete image of the Saracen.

¹⁸ Veronica’s cloth used to wipe Jesus’s face on his journey to Golgotha and the cloth which was wrapped around Jesus upon his burial, respectively.

Additionally, the interaction with reality in these romances does not end with the Saracen representation. Prominent features of the narrative, such as the desire to reclaim the sacred relics and to make Eastern allies that would turn the direction of the crusades in Christendom's favour once and for all, are consistently present among medieval chronicles, letters, and tracts. Even the depiction of Saracen religion, which is so often disregarded by critics as simple Western European mean-spiritedness, reflects strong cultural anxieties concerning the religious status of Islam and a fear of religious usurpation. The prevalence of these themes in the romances demonstrates a keen ability of the writers in appealing to cultural issues. The popularity of the conversion romances is not surprising, given the topical material that can be found in them. Although they are romance, and entertainment, there can be no disregarding the gravity of their subject matter. Just as so many of these aspects of the poems respond in a real way to significant cultural issues of the time, the key issue evoked by the protagonists of the romances, that of Christian conversion, and the ways in which conversion is presented in the romances also provide modern readers with an idea of how conversion was viewed by medieval audiences. Above all, then, the romances respond to the anxiety of having lost some aspect of Christendom and the need to reclaim that loss. Since the romances' main plot lines play on these anxieties, the presence of the Saracen protagonists speaks to audiences in a way that is outside of the conventional role of the Saracen enemy. The Saracen protagonist is not there to be defeated, but to provide a medium of expression for the cultural desire of reclamation. Through conversion, the Saracens, like the relics and like the Holy Land, are to be reclaimed.

4. Christian Conversion in the Conversion Romances

4.1 *The Moral Partnership of Violence and Conversion*

The ways in which the romances involving Otuel and Ferumbras reflect the realities of Christian conversion of Muslims are fairly varied, and it is difficult to pin down a single overarching understanding of conversion in the narratives. There is some consistency, though, in the several ways that conversion comes about, and some consistency in what the English redactors chose to translate from the Old French. The Otuel and Ferumbras stories have enough similarities to indicate the same thematic interests for their English audience. Moreover, the relationship that conversion in the romances has with real concepts of Christian conversion is predictable, and a look at some of those who guided development of medieval Christian thought regarding Muslims and conversion as well as an analysis of some of the conventions of these particular romances demonstrate a surprising concurrence between the fiction and the reality of Christian conversion.

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of Charlemagne's era for a late medieval English audience. By the twelfth century, Charlemagne had become a legendary figure, and he was especially remembered in the *chanson de geste* tradition as the emperor of much of Europe who battled Saracens and strove above all for a spreading of Christianity through conversion. Because of Charlemagne's successes as a Christian ruler whose reign transcended national boundaries, Charlemagne's conquest of Spain becomes the perfect setting for the placement of tales that involve the conversion of Saracen knights to Christianity. However, Charlemagne's method of conversion was a far cry from the kinds of conversion espoused by the Dominicans and the Franciscans in the twelfth century, though, as we shall see, the line between the romance and reality of conversion is surprisingly fine. For Charlemagne, conversion "by liberal application of the sword" (Latourette 105) was not only morally sound, but incredibly effective.

Charlemagne's conversion of the Saxons "by many and diverse efforts"¹ was always remembered with reverence and only grew in the minds of medieval Christians as his legend and the *chansons* such as the *Chanson de Roland* developed.

Charlemagne was himself advised by religious authorities to convert pagans by force; Abbot Eanwulf in 773 advised:

Hurry to extend the Christian faith among the people subject to you; increase the zeal of your uprightness in the conversion of them; suppress the worship of the idols; overthrow the buildings of the shrines; also, edify the moral character of your subjects by great purity of life by exhorting, terrifying, flattering, correcting and demonstrating by example of good work so that you might find that he whose name and knowledge you will have expanded on the earth will render you your reward in heaven.²

The abbot, in turn, was quoting from Pope Gregory's letter to King Ethelbert (560-616) to convert the English. Gregory's suggestion that violence be used to overthrow pagan religions was easily extended to the destruction of people for the purpose of conversion (Duggan 58). This idea was quite in line with Augustine of Canterbury's attempts at righting the early Anglo-Saxon Christians when their doctrine differed from that ordained by Rome Bede praised Augustine for his attempts at rectifying the theology of Anglo-Saxon Christians:

Augustine, the man of God, is said to have prophesied, threatening that, if they were unwilling to accept peace with their brethren, they would be accepting war from their enemies; and, if the nations of the English were unwilling to proclaim the way of life, they would suffer the vengeance of death at their hand.³

The English accepted conversion by the sword, for their own forced conversion is praised in their respectable countryman's history. Conversion by the sword worked for them, and the conversion

¹ "multo ac diverso labore." See Nithard 448: "Emperor Charles the Great, called so not undeservedly by all nations, indeed converted the Saxons by many and diverse efforts from the vain worship of idols to the true and Christian religion of God."

"Saxones quidem [. . .] Karolus Magnus imperator ab universis nationibus non inmerito vocatus ab idolorum vana cultura multo ac diverso labore ad veram Dei Christianamque religionem convertit." See also Duggan 51.

² "Christianam fidem in populis tibi subditis extendere festina; zelum rectitudinis tuae in eorum conversione multiplica; idolorum cultus insequere; fanorum aedificia everte; subditorum mores et magna vitae munditia exhortando, terrendo, blandiendo, corrigendo et boni operis exemplo monstrando aedifica; ut illum retributorem invenias in caelo, cuius nomen atque cognitionem dilataveris in terra" (Eanwulf 409; see also Bede 1.32).

³ "uir Domini Augustinus fertur minitans praedixisse, quia si pacem cum fratribus accipere nollent, bellum ab hostibus forent accepturi; et si nationi Anglorum noluissent uiam uitae praedicare, per horum manus ultionem essent mortis passuri" (Bede 2.2).

romances encourage a romanticized vision of this sort of conversion continuing to work in other religious conflicts.

Charlemagne's position on the conversion of his pagan adversaries was even made official. His 785 decree concerning the Saxons declares, "If there is anyone of the Saxon people lurking among them unbaptized, and if he scorns to come to baptism and wishes to absent himself and stay a pagan, let him die" (Duggan 49). Such a clean-cut solution is found frequently in the *chansons* as well as in the romances.

The age of Charlemagne would appeal to later audiences specifically because the method of dealing with non-Christians is so simple. Repeatedly failed crusades where even the greatest heroes, such as Richard Lionheart, achieved little in the way of the actual spread of Christianity or the reclaiming of Christian heritage would only make Charlemagne more appealing and, no doubt, in reading the *chansons* or romances, medieval readers would have hoped for the arrival of some hero of Charlemagne's calibre that could achieve some real results from meeting Muslims in the field of battle.

It is tempting to suggest that, given the centuries that had passed between the reign of Charlemagne and the crusades, concern would have developed over a method of conversion that essentially leaves the convert with no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, this was certainly not the case, and even Christians who were often sympathetic in their approach to Islam did not necessarily look upon forced conversion as wrong. Although there was a clear increase in the focus of Christian writers on the conversion of Muslims and the importance of Christian conversion, it is a mistake to regard the enterprise of crusade as altogether separate from that of mission. As Tomaž Mastnak explains, "The view that the rise to prominence of the mission corresponded to the decline in crusading enthusiasm is now seen as one of the major errors of earlier historians of the late Middle Ages" (177). Crusade and mission were not exclusive, and the one was often seen as an integral part of the other. There is a resistance from a modern perspective to accept that the violence of a crusade and the values of Christian conversion could cooperate, and it makes the conversions in Middle English romance seem less sincere and more far-fetched. That conversion attempts must be free of violence was simply not the case for medieval people. We have seen from Charlemagne and Ethelbert's example that, as Kedar says, "by the mid-twelfth century, war waged with the intent of bringing Christianity to vanquished infidels, or even of forcing them to convert, had a long tradition in Catholic Europe" (67-68).

That mass conversion would be accompanied, even ushered in by, violent warfare was a given for Christians. The line between valid and invalid baptism was quite fine, and the ambiguity lent itself to forced conversion quite easily. “Muslims who became Christian and relapsed,” Norman Daniel says, “were pardonable only if they had been dragged bodily to what would then have been an invalid baptism; if they had only been forced by, for example, beating, the baptism was valid” (*Heroes and Saracens* 116). The coercion of the baptismal candidate was quite permissible, and, from a medieval Christian’s perspective, you were succeeding in saving a soul if you could convince a non-Christian to convert regardless of the methods. The will of the convert was required only at the final stage of baptism.

The basis for this type of conversion is found in fundamental Christian doctrine, from early Christian writers like Augustine and even from the Bible. Frederick Russell describes how Augustine of Hippo, in the biblical parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:16-24), found justification in the imperative *coge intrare*, “force to enter,” for coercion in conversion: “In effect God legitimized religious coercion carried out by his agents” (26). Forcing non-Christians to convert was not only desirable but required of a good Christian. Christian thinkers were not acting improperly when they seriously considered how to compel non-Christians to enter the Christian fold.

The frustration and futility of the conversion efforts of those in the mendicant orders that attempted peaceful conversion can be seen in the conclusion that Thomas Aquinas reached regarding the infidel. Supposedly upon request, Aquinas composed a “missionary handbook” in 1270, *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos Graecos et Armenos*, in which he “admonished his colleagues that, though Muslims were open to argumentation, one could not convert by reason; philosophy served ‘not to prove the faith but to defend the faith’” (Burns 1397). Aquinas went into greater detail concerning this point in his larger work, *Summa contra gentiles*:

The intention ought not to be for this, that our opponent be refuted by reasoned arguments, but that his own arguments, which he holds contrary to the truth, might be disproven, as has been shown, natural reason cannot be contrary to the truth of faith [. . .]. [Arguments should be] indeed for the training and consolation of the faithful, but not for the refutation of our opponents.⁴

⁴ “[. . .] non debet esse ad hoc intentio, ut adversarius rationibus vincatur, sed ut ejus rationes, quas contra veritatem habet, solvantur, quum veritati fidei ratio naturalis contraria esse non possit, ut ostensum est [. . .]. [Arguments should be] ad fidelium quidem exercitium et solatium, non autem ad adversarios vincendos” (Aquinas 9.2).

Aquinas's assertion raises the obvious question: by what means, then, if not by reasoned argumentation, are missionaries to convert infidels? The answer to the question was the same for many Christian thinkers; if Muslims could not be reasoned with, they must first be placed in a subordinate position in which they would be more receptive to Christianity.

One of the major promoters of the Second Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, viewed conversion as desirable, but not as a requirement for a successful crusade. His exhortation to go crusading "for the thorough destruction or certain conversion of those nations"⁵ is fairly explicit in the desire to deal with the Islamic problem once and for all, either through death or conversion. The choice that crusaders would be expected to present to Muslims upon victory would be no different: convert or die. Peter the Venerable certainly encouraged the conversion of Muslims, but he was not against the crusades by any means; he praised numerous successful crusaders and made it clear that, while conversion was preferable, he wanted Islam destroyed (Mastnak 181). Roger Bacon, another writer often seen as a critic of the crusades, was not so much opposed to the crusades as opposed to unnecessary bloodshed. He proposed a number of methods of persuading Muslims to convert in his *Opus Maius*, mainly by the use of science and knowledge of languages (Mastnak 205). If his methods of conversion failed, though, Bacon was quite willing to apply his scientific knowledge, such as the use of mirrors to create fires among enemy armies, for the suppression of the infidel. While conversion had become a clear focus of many writers, this was certainly not to the detriment of the crusades. In fact, it is clear that, where conversion failed, more likely than not, writers encouraged the destruction of Muslims. Mastnak explains that "by the end of the thirteenth century, violence provoked by missionary zealots had strengthened the conviction that an alleged Muslim prohibition against Christian preaching made peaceful evangelization in Muslim lands impossible. At the same time, an older conviction that the Muslims were inconvertible was reinforced" (191). These common sentiments regarding the inconvertibility of Muslims at a time when people were still commonly concerned with conversion but becoming disillusioned with failed crusade endeavours did, however, encourage the belief in another method of conversion. If Muslims could not be argued into conversion, and could not be forced successfully to it, the power of God was still a trump card; the miracle could succeed where humans failed.

⁵ "ad delendas penitus aut certe convertendas nationes illas" (Bernard of Clairvaux, qtd. in Kedar 70 n. 84).

Catherine of Siena, perhaps more than anyone, demonstrates the focus that was placed on the miracle of conversion in medieval Europe. A mystic who lived in the late fourteenth century and died in her early thirties, Catherine held an immense correspondence with prominent political figures across Europe, including the pope. She is often thought to have been a voice for the public and to have been especially representative of public opinions (Mastnak 345), and her view of the crusades is particularly interesting: “Her thoughts were beyond the duality of the crusade and mission. Conversion was the result of the crusade. Crusade was itself the mission” (345). The most interesting part of Catherine’s opinion on the crusades was that they were, by her time, elevated to the level of mystery in themselves. Although she accepts that converts were a result of crusading, she assigns the rationale of this development to the realm of mystery. How infidels were saved through crusading cannot be understood by the human mind. Catherine puts her faith in the miraculous nature of conversion.

A further element of Catherine’s letters is significant in understanding the common medieval perception of conversion of Islam. Repeatedly, in her petitions to powerful figures, Catherine encourages the recovery of Christian unity. The first step that she outlines in reunifying Christendom is the return of the papal seat from Avignon to Rome. After this, Catherine emphatically requests that the pope call another crusade. Catherine clarifies her opinion in one of her letters to Pope Gregory XV:

I am not, for all that, advising you, dear father, to abandon your legitimate children, who feed at the breasts of Christ’s bride, in favor of these bastard children who have not yet been legitimized through holy baptism. But I am hoping, by God’s goodness, that if your legitimate children go to them with your authority, with the divine power of the sword of the holy word, and with human power and force, these [unbelievers] *will return to their mother*, holy Church, and you will legitimize them.⁶

(248, emphasis added)

The language that Catherine uses in her letters is especially significant. Although she refers to Muslims as “figliuoli bastardi,” or “bastard children,” she is accepting that they are the children of God nonetheless. Furthermore, she describes their mother as being the same Church as that of

⁶ The Italian runs thus:

Non vi consiglio però, dolce padre, che voi abbandoniate quelli che vi sono figliuoli naturali, e che si pascono alle mammelle della sposa di Cristo, per li figliuoli bastardi, che non sono ancora ligittimati col santo battesimo; ma spero per la bontà di Dio, che andando e' figliuoli legittimi con la vostra autorità e con la virtù divina del coltello della parola santa, e con la virtù e forza umana, essi torneranno alla madre della santa Chiesa, e voi li ligittimerete.

Christians. Catherine places Islam within the realm of Christianity; she even establishes a Prodigal Son image for Muslims. Even more, Catherine's use of the word "torneranno" powerfully indicates her view that Islam began from Christianity. Her desire is that Christians reclaim Muslims through crusading, bringing Muslims back to where they belong, within the bounds of Christendom.

If Catherine of Siena suggested the popular opinion that conversion through war in the crusades was mysterious and miraculous and that Muslims needed to be reclaimed along with the holy relics, the romances put this belief into action in some of the most compelling scenes in their narratives. Both of the Saracen knight protagonists demonstrate miraculous conversion, and both of the conversions occur during the most heated and bloody battles of their respective tales.⁷

4.2 *Miraculous Conversion and Cultural Integration in the Otuel Group*

Otuel's conversion is the most obvious example of conversion through divine intervention among the romances. In all three versions of the tale, we are introduced to Otuel in much the same way. He arrives at Charlemagne's court as a messenger from the sultan, Garcy, boisterous and boasting, and demands to speak with Charlemagne. His disrespect, impatience, and crudeness are contrasted with the benevolence of Charlemagne and his Twelve Peers; nevertheless, Charlemagne's knights have their limits, and Otuel's arrogant demeanour instigates a brawl in which Otuel slays a man. Despite the abruptness of the Saracen knight's manner, Charlemagne guarantees the foreign knight's safety, asking him to deliver his message. In *Rowland and Otuell*, the message that Otuel bears is striking in its focus on one thing, that Charlemagne "un-cristen bee" and that he "leue appon oure ley" (218-28). There are no demands for land or possessions, but the objective of Garcy's campaign is to spread his own religion. Similarly, in *Otuel a Knight*, Otuel demands that Charlemagne "sscholdest cristendom a-legge," but even further, he should "maken þine men in eche toun, / For to leuen on fire mahoun" (240-41). After that, Charlemagne is promised that he might keep all of his land and possessions provided he convert to the Saracen religion. It is only in *Otuel and Roland* that Otuel's message differs in that the Saracen knight delivers his message "ffor the wyning off Spayne" (119), and less for the conversion of Charlemagne and his knights. Nevertheless, the tale begins with a

⁷ With the exception, perhaps, of *Otuel and Roland*, onto which much of the violent material of the *Chanson de Roland* is tacked.

threat to Christians both physically and spiritually. Otuel bears a message that sets the tone for each work; the central theme is the opposition not just of Saracens and Christians, but of the Saracen religion against Christianity.

Otuel's conversion is far more interesting than the message he delivers. After refusing Charlemagne's offer to "make the [. . .] a riche man in mi land" if he will be baptized (*Otuel* 315-22), Otuel prepares to battle Roland the following day. In both *Otuel and Roland* and *Rowland and Otuell*, Belicent, Charlemagne's daughter, is responsible for arming Otuel. She plays an even more active role in *Otuel and Roland* as the pure princess who wins her Saracen lord over to Christianity, advising Otuel kindly to avoid Roland's sword, Durendal, in the battle and blessing him (390-404). It is also significant that Otuel is not armed in his own gear; rather, he must request that Charlemagne provide armour for him (*Otuel and Roland* 333-35; *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell* 385-90). Clad in the armour of a Christian, then, he prepares to do battle. This episode stands in stark contrast to an episode found in the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*, in which a wicked Christian knight is dressed in the armour of a Saracen.⁸ When all of the preparations have been made for Otuel and Roland's duel, not only is Otuel dressed as a Christian warrior, but he also has the favour of a Christian princess. Already his integration into Christian chivalric society has begun. Otuel is presented as a figure who must be claimed by his Christian adversaries; he advertises his potential as a Christian in arming as and being armed by one.

After the arming scene with Belicent, Otuel and Roland engage in a fierce battle. The winner, unexpectedly, seems to be Otuel almost certainly, but divine intervention prevents this battle from ending poorly for Roland. Charlemagne, fearing greatly for Roland's life, kneels on the ground, palms raised, and twice beseeches God and Mary, the second time most urgently requesting, "Fro schame 3e Rowlande Saue; / And conuerte vs 3one gentill knyghte" (*Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell* 510-16). Charlemagne explains in his prayer that it would be a great

⁸ Duke Berard, in the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*, is an interesting character. Guy's adventures in this segment of the poem primarily revolve around defending Christendom against Saracens, as he defeats two Saracen giants. However, his Christian enemy, Berard, who is noted as being an especially wicked steward, is double-armed in Saracen armour: "Tvay hauberkes he was in weued / & tvay helmes upon his heued / Was wrou3t in Sarazine. / Upon his schulder henge a duple scheld / Beter mi3t non be born in feld" (*Guy of Warwick* 9159-63). Here, as with Otuel, the armour in which the steward is clad signifies his interior allegiance.

waste if such a hardy knight were to be killed, so conversion is preferable to killing the Saracen warrior. In *Otuel and Roland* it is Belicent who first prays for Otuel. Her prayer is followed by one from Charlemagne who, as in *Rowland and Otuell*, begs God for “the sarisin to be cristene” (507). These prayers are not that Roland win the battle, but rather that Otuel be converted.

At the same time as Belicent and Charlemagne make their prayers for Otuel, Roland, on the field, offers Otuel in all three versions of the story wealth, fame, or Belicent, or some combination of these, to convert to Christianity (*Otuel and Roland* 510-20; *Otuel a Knight* 513-18; *Rowland and Otuell* 517-28). Otuel is only enraged further by this, and he swears that nothing will make him renege on his faith. Indeed, Otuel is depicted from his first moments in Charlemagne’s court as stubborn and thoroughly inconvertible. Otuel’s conversion happens despite the Saracen’s protests, but it is only through the power of prayer that his will is turned to Christianity.

Finally, fearing even more for Roland’s life, Charlemagne makes his final prayer. In *Otuel a Knight* and *Otuel and Roland*, this prayer becomes especially significant because it is conducted through the community of Christians in Charlemagne’s camp:

As þe king stod in doute,
He spak to his folk aboute,
& seide to alle þat þere were;
“Lordinges, doth as ich 3ou lere,
Sitte eche man oppon his kne,
& biddeth to god in trinite,
For his grace & for hise miȝtes,
Sende seiztnesse bi-twene þo kniȝtes
& 3ive otuwel wille to day,
For to reneien his lay.” (*Otuel a Knight* 563-72)

The speech includes the community in prayer, and the text enforces the idea that a prayer becomes more effective with a greater number of people praying. The king, unsure of what to do as his best Christian warrior seems to be losing, relies on the community. The prayer is for “wille” (571), as well as a conversion. Bly Calkin is right to suggest that the inclusion of will is important in this prayer, for it appears that without the right will, conversion will never happen (*Saracens* 35-41). Charlemagne does not need to entreat his people to pray with him in *Otuel and Roland* (564-68); they begin by praying together, and the result of the communal prayer in both versions of the tale is instantaneous.

In a moment highly evocative of Christ's baptism in the Bible, the Holy Spirit descends upon Otuel in the form of a dove⁹; Otuel becomes an almost Christ-like figure in his conversion, and his identity as a Saracen is completely ousted by an iconic symbol of Christianity. The effect is immediate. Otuel declares that he has forsaken his gods, and he embraces Roland in friendship. Otuel is still granted the offered princess and wealth, but his conversion is clearly not because of these things; it is undoubtedly the result of divine intervention. The event is celebrated by Charlemagne and his people as a "miracle" that "otuwel hadde iturned his pouȝt" (*Otuel a Knight* 633-34). This conversion is in complete agreement with the sort that Christians like Catherine of Siena were advocating. Conversion is miraculous. The audience is shown repeatedly in Otuel's story that a Saracen will not convert for wealth or women; neither is there any room for theological argumentation on the battlefield. Otuel's conversion is not forced, though it is certainly not free of violence, but it is undoubtedly miraculous and mysterious. The appeal of this type of conversion is at least threefold: the Judeo-Christian God is shown to be all-powerful and able to overcome any obstacle, including that frequently invoked wicked other-god, Mahoun; the power of prayer is vindicated and demonstrated to be a potent tool of Christianity; lastly, Bly Calkin has suggested, I think correctly, that Otuel's conversion appeals to a fantasy that conversion is simple and clean-cut (*Saracens* 48). Otuel's conversion, then, would appeal strongly to a medieval audience, and for lay people in England, all the more removed from the centre of crusading action, the prospect that their prayers might actually accomplish something was nothing to be disregarded. The battle for reclamation of the Saracen soul is played out in Otuel's conversion. Thanks to the prayers of the Christians, a visible indicator of God's claim on the Saracen knight is revealed in the descent of a dove.

That conversion is impossible without some internal, independent will is exemplified by the Saracen knight Clarel. He is every bit the equal of Otuel and Charlemagne's Peers both in chivalric behaviour and in battle, but he does not convert, nor is any attempt made to convert him. The audience first encounters Clarel as one of Garcy's select knights who are out looking to battle Christians. They engage three of Charlemagne's knights, Oliver, Roland, and Ogier, in

⁹Diane Speed further addresses the point in an essay devoted to Otuel's conversion in *Rowland and Otuell*. Speed suggests, "Insofar as Otuel occupies the same place as Christ in relation to the Holy Spirit, Christ is translated into Otuel by typology, which focusses above all on narrative shape" ("Translation and Conversion" 241).

battle and Clarel's three companions are easily slain. Clarel, however, continues to fight, and he is presented as a wondrous opponent, with no hint of vilification:

kyng Clariell drawes Melle
And faghte agaynes þam all thre,
His Swerde was gude & fyne.
he said: "gud lordes, slees noghte me,
A noble cheke here wonn hafe 3ee,
My lyfe wolde I noghte tyne." (*Rowland and Otuell* 845-52)

Clarel is far more courteous than his countryman, Otuel, before Otuel was converted. He fights valiantly against three of Charlemagne's best, and beseeches them in kind and flattering language to spare him. They seize Clarel, "And when his vesage was alle bare / A fayrere knyghte sawe þay neuer are, / & Sett hym one a stede" (*Rowland and Otuell* 853-55). Not only is the Saracen warrior praised for his prowess in battle, but he is praised for his physical superiority as well. Far from killing him, the French knights spare the Saracen and make an ally that will come to their aid later, as they observe. Despite the comradely nature of their alliance, Clarel's conversion does not result from their encounter. That such an esteemed warrior is not saveable is surprising. Clarel seems a far better candidate for conversion than Otuel ever did, yet it is Otuel who is converted and Clarel who is damned.

This narrative conundrum is explained at the most important moment for Clarel in the narrative of the Otuel story: his confrontation with Otuel. Metlitzki observes that "[t]he climax in the Otuel story is not a battle between Christian and Saracen but a confrontation between Saracen and Saracen [. . .]" (178). The heart of the romance rests in this moment when Otuel must face his past ally. The event begins when Clarel and Otuel meet on the battle field; surprisingly, Clarel does not recognize his former comrade, requesting his name, to which Otuel replies, "O þu coward, [. . .] þu Ouztest my name know well,— / By good þat ys in trinite!" (*Otuel and Roland* 1172-74). Otuel claims that Clarel should recognize him quite well, yet, for some reason, Otuel is no longer familiar in appearance. Whether this is because of Otuel's conversion, or because he is likely still wearing the armour Belicent had provided for him, is not clear. Regardless, the exchange indicates that Otuel has changed physically from his former self. His miraculous conversion began the process, and the rest of his encounters in the romance stress his continuing integration into Christian society. Clarel's lack of recognition signifies that the process has begun; Otuel is no longer identifiable as a Saracen. In fact, Otuel reintroduces himself to Clarel by saying, "Now, mahound y haue forsake" (*Otuel and Roland* 1177). In

Rowland and Otuell, Otuel's answer is almost taunting, responding to Clarel's question with liveliness:

I highte Otuell,
For no man will I hyde :
And fro 3oure Mahoun ame I went,
And Cristyndome hafe I hent [. . .]. (1139-42)

In *Otuel a Knight*, Otuel's response is similarly brief, but informative: "Otuel is my cristine name: / Mahun ich habbe for sake" (1154-55). Otuel's meeting with Clarel is an immediate test for Otuel. He must identify himself properly to his old comrade in order to verify his new, converted identity. He passes the test, and Clarel mourns the loss of such a good knight, even attempting to convince him to convert back to the Saracen religion (*Otuel a Knight* 1159-60). Otuel passes this test as well, replying, "Fiȝ [. . .] / on mahoun & garsie bo" (*Otuel a Knight* 1163-4) and similarly in the other two versions. Otuel goes on to rebuke Clarel and his faith to the point that Clarel challenges Otuel to a duel the next day.

Clarel's function in this poem is clear. In confronting Clarel, Otuel is confronting his past identity, both temporal and spiritual allegiances, and making the ultimate statement about his converted self. The duel is inevitable because Otuel's suppression of his past self is a requirement if he wishes to integrate successfully into Christian society. As Clarel comes to represent the old Otuel, his survival and conversion become problematic. Clarel cannot be allowed to survive or the message of Otuel's triumph over his past self would be confused. Clarel cannot be converted for the same reason; he comes to represent Saracenness, incompatibility with Christianity. Metlitzki points out the necessity of Clarel's death "to demonstrate a higher cause" (179) citing the following passage from *Otuel and Roland*: "Kyng Clarell fyl tho a-down. / tho men myȝt se that ys god Mahoun / was but of lytyl myȝt" (1520-22). Clarel cannot be saved because his death represents the inefficacy of the Saracen faith. From the beginnings of the duel, the stakes are made clear. After Clarel is armed,

Tho thay fette here god Mahound,
And alle the sarsins of renoun,
And settyn hym a-myd the toun of Vtalye.
Than vppon here knees thay seten adown,
with alle the lordys of that toun,
And also kyng Garcye.
Thay sayden, "mahound, we the by-seche,
To-day thou be oure alder leche,
And on clarel haue mercy !

As thou art god, ful o mucche myȝt,
That he mowe sle otuel in fyȝt,
That doȝth the so mucche vylonye!” (*Otuel and Roland* 1247-58)

The Saracens pray to their god, Mahound, or in the case of *Rowland and Otuell* to Clarel’s “maumettes” (1214), begging for Clarel’s victory over Otuel, the former Saracen. The battle has the potential to demonstrate the power, or powerlessness, of the enemy’s faith. The prayer stands in contrast to the usual prayers made by Charlemagne for his knights, and it will be met by one of Charlemagne’s own before the battle is over (*Otuel and Roland* 1447-51).

Clarel comes out from the Saracen army and taunts Charlemagne, causing the king and many of his knights to wish to take up the fight against Clarel. In order to convince his Christian comrades that the battle is his, whose it must be for his own establishment of identity, Otuel tells them that he and Clarel had already vowed to battle, but he embellishes a little on the reasons:

y schall ȝow telle euery word,
how it be-gan, ende and ord,
The stryf be-twyn ous to.
he sayde that oure god vas nouȝt worth a tord,
And that he wold proue with dynt of swerd,
To whom that it wolde do;
And sayde that we were thourȝ hym y-lore,
That of a woman was y-bore,
and schent for euer-more;
ffor hys lesyng and for hys sawe
vppon a cros he was y-drawe:
Alle thus sayde he me thare [. . .]. (*Otuel and Roland* 1319-30)

Otuel describes to Charlemagne how he had then replied to Clarel and corrected him on matters of Christian doctrine, corrections which Clarel would not accept. The interesting thing about this retelling from Otuel is that it never actually happens in the tale. We are shown Otuel’s initial altercation with his old comrade, and there is hardly any dispute over Christianity except that Clarel demands vehemently that Otuel convert back to the Saracen faith. In both *Rowland and Otuell* and *Otuel a Knight* Otuel tells a similar lie. Otuel’s lie directs the focus of battle to the new divide between himself and Saracen religion, but also assures Otuel the appearance of a defender of his new faith. He is able to demonstrate his new loyalties and his acceptance of Christian doctrine at once.

With so much ideologically relying on Otuel and Clarel’s battle, there is simply no way that Clarel can be converted. As we have seen, conversion requires some independent agency

and will on the part of the potential convert; for Clarel to show even for a moment the necessary disillusionment or hesitation would undermine the ideological thrust of the battle. At no point is Clarel held at sword-point and ordered to convert, and his death is wordless and quick with little comment, with the exception of the emphasis placed on how powerless “Mahoun” is in *Otuel and Roland* or how Clarel’s soul went to Mahoun in *Rowland and Otuell* (1340). Moreover, Clarel’s death serves an even further role in disturbing the confidence of his sultan, Otuel’s old master, Garcy.

Garcy provides an example of the weak-willed Saracen, but, like Clarel, his most important function in the Otuel narratives is to act in a symbolic moment in which Otuel can demonstrate his successful integration into Christendom. In Otuel’s first defining moment as a Christian knight, Otuel chooses to put off his marriage to Belicent until he has aided Charles to “all the sarisins ouercom, / And y-slawe kynge Garcye” (*Otuel and Roland* 621-22).¹⁰ This decision on Otuel’s part decisively shows Otuel’s dedication to the Christian cause in his abandoning his close relative, the sultan Garcy.

The sultan in the Otuel romances is faceless until Clarel’s death; the death of his greatest warrior, since Otuel has left him, strikes Garcy deeply, and the event serves to shake his faith in his gods. Garcy’s first reaction to news of Clarel’s death is that he “corsede hise godes, as he were wood” (*Otuel a Knight* 1354), which is further expressed in *Otuel and Roland*:

why suffur 3e all thys thing,—
that Clarel hath lore the swete ?
[.]
All thou3 y make to the my mone,
3e stondyn style as ony stone,
No word nyl 3e mynne
y wene that 3e ben domne & def,
On 3ow was all my bylef
More thane to alle my kynne [. . .]. (1534-46)

The Saracen religion is completely ineffective, and Garcy acknowledges this. He proceeds to threaten his gods, to break them, and to throw them into the fire, a conventional sultan reaction found in many *chansons* and in the Ferumbras tradition as well. At least one version, *Otuel and Roland*, represents this moment as a turning point for Garcy, for the next segment of the narrative is introduced as the battle between Garcy and Charlemagne and “howe Garcy y-

¹⁰ See the corresponding passages in *Rowland and Otuell* 658-60; *Otuel a Knight* 649-50.

cristened was” (1562). The most thorough depiction that the audience gets of Garcy, then, is as a potential convert whose faith in his religion is completely shaken.

The disillusionment of a Saracen is frequently followed by his or her conversion, as we shall see with Floripas and, to a lesser extent, Ferumbras, and Garcy is no different. Dorothee Metlitzki draws attention to an interesting moment, in which Garcy vows more than simply to avenge Clarel; Garcy is prepared to defeat Charlemagne not with the aid of his gods, but rather to spite them:

And Euery man redy to fyzt !
and thus we schulle bete oure mametrye,
ffor þat thay nolde nouzt ous socurye,
Thus we schulle hem dyzt. (1567-70)

Oddly enough, Garcy has already lost faith in his gods. He fights to get back at them now, and he is left vulnerable for conversion. When, after the pitched battle between Charlemagne’s army and Garcy’s army, Garcy is routed, Otuel, Oliver, Ogier, and Roland give chase. Otuel calls after Garcy, “3elde 3e, traytours ! [. . .] And legge þy lyf þere to wedde, / But þou mahoun for-sade!” (*Otuel and Roland* 1660-61). Otuel’s declaration that Garcy must convert or die is not particularly surprising, and, given Garcy’s disillusioned state, his subsequent conversion is even less so.

In all three of the poems, Otuel is involved to some extent in the capture of Garcy in the end. In *Otuel a Knight*, Otuel informs the others of Garcy’s flight, and they all pursue the sultan; who takes him into custody is ambiguous. In *Otuel and Roland*, Otuel’s blow to Garcy’s horse brings the sultan down, and Oliver takes him as prisoner. In *Rowland and Otuell*, Otuel himself secures the sultan. In none of these, interestingly, is the sultan converted, except for *Otuel and Roland*. Presumably out of cowardice, but as we have seen also because he is bereft of his own gods, Garcy pleads for his life and promises his conversion:

Penne bede he Olyuer pur charite,
þat he ne schulde hym nouzt sle,
Hys hondys he gan wryngge,
And he wolde christen be. (1668-71)

Otuel and Roland seems especially concerned with Christian conversion, expanding further on its source material than even the other two versions. The French *Otinél*, in fact, has Garcy

thrown into prison where he dies.¹¹ Moreover, in *Otuel and Roland*, Garcy is baptized by bishop Turpin himself, and the salvation of Garcy's soul is guaranteed:

The erchebyschop, syre turpyn,
A swythe good clerk off dyuyn,
Crystened hym that day,
The soule of that sarsin
ffor to saue fro helle pyn. (1680-84)

Garcy is saved from the punishment assigned to Clarel. His conversion, regardless of the motive, is genuine.

Garcy serves at least two purposes in the Middle English romances. He provides Otuel with the opportunity to complete his own conversion to Christianity by confronting his former master and a member of his Saracen family, much as Floripas and Ferumbras must confront their father. At the same time, the Middle English Otuel romances remove from their source material Garcy's death. *Otuel a Knight*, whose manuscript breaks off at the key point when Garcy is brought before Charlemagne, gives the impression that Garcy's conversion is likely. *Rowland and Otuell* does not mention Garcy's conversion, but does not have him killed. It seems likely that his conversion would follow. *Otuel and Roland* makes an explicit attempt to right the wrong of the original French "pur charite" (1668), and Garcy is converted. His conversion, and his surrender, is self-willed. The sultan, disillusioned, prefers embracing Christianity to dying. This method of conversion, like the ones before it, encourages the mystery of crusading, in that war naturally leads to conversion through the disillusionment of the enemy.

4.3 A Feuding Family: Conversion of the Disillusioned

Ferumbras, who is similar to Otuel in many ways, also comes to his conversion by means of a violent encounter with Christianity. Yet, though Ferumbras is comparable to Otuel in many of his characteristics, one cannot help but notice, as Dorothee Metlitzki does, that "there is an understanding of Christianity in the Saracen Ferumbras which is totally absent in the characterization of Otuel" (183). Ferumbras may be brash and boastful, challenging as many as all twelve of Charlemagne's Peers to battle (*Sir Ferumbras* 102), but he is also courteous; he fights only for the honour that battle might bring him, refusing to fight anyone less than his

¹¹ See Herrtage *Sege of Melayne* 159.

match. We are told in *Sir Ferumbras* that the Saracen prince slew the pope, but in *Sowdone*, we are shown how he spares the pope after encountering him on the field of battle:

Fye, preest, god gyfe the sorowe!
What doist thou armede in the feelde,
That sholdest saie thi matyns on morwe,
What doist thou with spere and shelde?
I hoped, thou hadiste ben an Emperoure,
Or a Cheftayne of this Ooste here,
Or some worthy conqueroure.
Go home and kepe thy Qwer!
Shame it were to me certayne
To sle the in this bataile. (559-58)

In *Sir Ferumbras*, though he murdered the pope, Ferumbras also shows unexpected sympathy when he is reported to have slain “alle clerkes of honours boþe pore & reke, / Saue nunnes” (61-62). At times a dreaded warrior in battle, Ferumbras nevertheless hesitates to engage in certain actions that would be deemed dishonourable by Christian audiences; this hesitation brings out a sympathetic side of his character. His battle with Oliver encourages this view. At first, Ferumbras is unwilling to fight Oliver because Oliver claims that he is a lesser knight named Garyn (453); Ferumbras asks him, “þoʒ y slowe þe her in fiʒt what prys were þat for me ?” (*Sir Ferumbras* 467). The Christian warrior and the Saracen knight discuss their situation for some time, and Ferumbras shows great reluctance to kill a man whom he thinks would not be able to withstand his attack for long and would not bring the Saracen prince any glory. When Ferumbras notices that Oliver is bleeding from an old wound in his side, a fact that Oliver attempts to deny, the sultan’s son attempts to dissuade Oliver from the battle and offers the Christian the sacred and miraculous healing balm that anointed Jesus. Although Oliver refuses, the offer conveys the aura of chivalry that surrounds Ferumbras. While he is an arrogant boaster, he is as honourable as any knight of Charlemagne’s group; he seems the ideal conversion candidate, and Ferumbras’s monstrous size, which would normally highlight his otherness, is easily ignored.

The dialogue between Ferumbras and Oliver reveals Oliver’s goal immediately; the Christian knight is not there to kill the Saracen, he is there to make an ally and convert. Upon being asked why he has approached Ferumbras, Oliver replies, “Charlis þe sente be me to say þov torndest to crestendome, / & for-soke þy false lay & to folloʒt sone þov come: / belyue þou scholdest on god almiʒt” (*Sir Ferumbras* 396-98). Oliver will accept nothing less than that for which Charlemagne has sent him, and, although Ferumbras brushes off the offer of conversion,

the result is the same after an extended battle. Their battle is uninterrupted save for the one moment when Ferumbras can no longer believe that Oliver is a simple novice knight and politely requests Oliver's real name: "He drew him þanne apart & sayde 'y pray þe, iantaile kniȝt, / As þov louest þat ilke mayde þat baar þy god almyȝt [. . .] / Tel me þer-for þy riȝte name Wat calleþ me þe at hom'" (*Sir Ferumbras* 636-39). The tone that Ferumbras takes with his Christian adversary is a far cry from the usual angry berating that warriors such as Otuel and Roland hurl at each other. Ferumbras is a respectful Saracen, and his potential as a Christian ally increases along with the battle's intensity. The duel only ends when, at last, Ferumbras is pierced by Oliver's sword; this expected victory for the Christians, however, resolves itself in a conversion rather than a death.

How this conversion ought to be interpreted is largely up to the reader, but it seems both miraculous and self-willed; moreover, the conversion, like Otuel's, removes any agency from the Christian side of the battle. The conversion does not happen as a result of Oliver's proselytizing; that theological disputation belongs in the French original, in which Oliver's attempts to convert Fierabras go on for hundreds of lines that were removed from the Middle English versions. The excision of these lines emphasizes again how argumentation became less valued as a viable method of conversion. Despite this lack of argumentation, Ferumbras's conversion is no less sincere. Upon being impaled by Oliver's blade, Ferumbras kneels to the ground and utters, of all things, thankful praise to God:

His guttes þer-with gunne out falle & doun gan renne þat blod;
 & ȝut stod he strong & stif with-alles & ne batedede noȝt is mod;
 Of herte was he hol & sound & pleynede him þe ȝute no þyng,
 Ac sone he knelede oppon þe grond & þankedede heuene kyng.

(*Sir Ferumbras* 748-51)

The entire incident as described in *Sir Ferumbras* is brief, but some details of this moment of conversion can be teased out. Ferumbras's insides begin to surge from his body; his wound is deathly serious. Despite this, he stands "strong & stif," and his temperament remains vigorous. It is as though he is being supported by a supernatural force. The contrast between the dripping, gory wound and Ferumbras's sturdy posture suggests that there is something unnatural happening. Regardless of his wounds, Ferumbras is "hol & sound" of heart. The suggestion here is more than that the sword merely missed Ferumbras's most vital organ; instead, as before, the poet continues to draw out the contrast between Ferumbras's broken body and his sound, newly

healed soul. The most striking moment of this conversion is that, rather than crying out in pain or simply admitting defeat to his adversary, Ferumbras lowers his knees to the ground and gives thanks to God, “þe heuene kyng.”

Bly Calkin finds especial significance in the interplay between the ideas of wholeness and soundness throughout the opening section of *Sir Ferumbras* (“Changing One’s Religion”). Whereas Oliver is initially injured but whole in spirit, Ferumbras is gigantic and superhuman physically, but not whole spiritually because of his allegiance to a false religion. It is Ferumbras’s injuries that allow him to become like Oliver, who in turn resembles Christ in his injuries. Ferumbras himself is made to resemble Christ in his injury; Oliver’s sword “strok doun hit do nam v. ribbes of ys syde” (*Sir Ferumbras* 746).¹² Like Otuel’s, Ferumbras’s conversion is brought about by an enactment of Christ’s own experience. The Saracen knight is converted in a moment of Christ-likeness, and through his injuries, Ferumbras is made whole. He is wounded physically, but sound of soul.

Ferumbras’s conversion is also affected to some degree by his own loss of faith in his gods. He admits that his gods “moȝe no more do þan a ston” (757), and swears that he will now be baptized. However, his disillusionment with his past gods only serves to solidify his conversion, not to effect it. The conversion presented in *Sir Ferumbras* must come from within Ferumbras, not from some exterior motivation.

The *Sowdone* presents a different view of the same conversion. Though the plot follows closely, if more briefly, that of *Sir Ferumbras*, the redactor seemed to find less satisfaction in the mysterious nature of Ferumbras’s inner conversion, preferring to demonstrate the miracle more explicitly. Through this change, *Sowdone*’s conversion of Ferumbras resembles the visual nature of the conversion of Otuel. During Oliver and Ferumbras’s battle, Oliver is forced to his knees and Charlemagne, as in the Otuel romances, panics and prays for Oliver’s deliverance:

O Lord, God in Trinite,
That of myghtis thou arte moost.
[.]
Let not this hethen man
Thy seruaunte ouercome in fight,
That on the bileve ne kan
[.]
But graunte thy man the victorie,

¹² Also in *Sowdone*: “[the sword] carfe hym through-oute his syde” (1350).

And the Paynym skomfited to be,
As thou arte Almyghty God of glorie! (*Sowdone* 1311-21)

The prayer is similar to the ones that Charlemagne uses for the conversion of Otuel and the result is no less miraculous. An angel descends from the heavens to inform Charlemagne that God is with the Christian knight, and, as a result, when the definitive blow is struck, Ferumbras's sudden conversion bears the imprint of the divine hand of God. Unlike *Sir Ferumbras*, there is no narrative description of Ferumbras's conversion; rather, the Saracen knight immediately exclaims that he yields to Oliver and that he cannot stand any longer. His strength has left him along with his gods, whom he now claims have been "false by water and londe" (*Sowdone* 1357).

Both versions of Ferumbras's conversion have in common a complete removal of agency from the Christian knight to effect any kind of conversion. The difference between methods of conversion, that of prayer and visual response to prayer, or that of some internal miracle that is not as observable as an angel or dove is interesting. The difference is simply one of dramatic tastes, but neither conversion uses any direct human agent in converting the Saracen. There is something to Daniel's suggestions that the *chansons* were a way "of evading serious polemic" since there is "no trace in them of any knowledge of Islam" (*Heroes and Saracens* 236), but this suggestion assumes that one needed to be aware of the facts of Islam, or at least some idea of Islam, to make a serious attempt at conversion. As Catherine of Siena has shown, this was not the case. In the Middle English romances, at least, if conversion is a mystery, then it is not one for us to question; that crusading in some way might provide the holy with an outlet through which to enact mysterious conversion is all that needs to be known; the rest is in God's hands.

Floripas is probably the most frequently studied of the Saracens in these romances, although these studies often relate more directly to the *chanson* tradition than the Middle English romance. Her absolute disregard for the common tenets of decency regarding filial loyalty has never ceased to shock and fascinate readers. Writers such as Geraldine Heng encourage the view that the character of the "enamoured Muslim princess" tends "to be written by cultural fantasy as desiring, sexually aggressive agents, whose religious conversion is part of their bold enactment of their erotic attraction to particular Christian men" (187). While there is no doubt that Floripas exhibits an overt sensuality and sexuality, the suggestion that the convention's appeal is primarily erotic is an oversimplification. Jennifer Goodman finds that "romances

containing powerful fantasies of female conversion and missionary action like these [the enamoured princess and the Constance conventions] seem to have been read in a number of cases by mothers and daughters together” (116). The appeal of Floripas did not likely rest solely on her overt eroticism if audiences other than men enjoyed reading her story.

Even if we accept that Floripas reached a broader audience than men intrigued by her eroticism, the question remains: if Floripas is written as a fantasy, but she is so ruthlessly unfaithful to her family and despicable in the seeming arbitrariness of her actions, where is the fantasy? What is the appeal? Metlitzki sees no redeeming qualities in Floripas, wondering “how anyone can make a point of accepting her proudly into Christianity” (187). However, Goodman provides an answer: “Such romances helped [. . .] to crystallize their readers’ preconceptions of the psychology of religious conversion” (116). Part of the appeal of Floripas to a general European audience is her demonstration of one particular aspect of conversion: there are Muslims with a predilection for Christianity. Much is made by Norman Daniel about the nature of the enamoured princess: “[. . .] more unambiguously than most, she has no religious reason for her conversion” (*Heroes and Saracens* 198). This statement, however, if applied to Floripas, is altogether untrue. Daniel sees no double standard in allowing that Fierabras is converted because of disillusionment with his gods while not allowing Floripas the same. However, if anyone in the romances is converted as a result of disillusionment, it is she. Suzanne Conklin Akbari accurately assesses Floripas’s character when she suggests, “The conversions of Floripas and Fierabras are, in a sense, mirror images of each other. While both siblings convert to Christianity, they do so independently” (153). This independent will to convert is perhaps the most important feature in these narratives. Conversion does not come as a result of argumentation; rather, argumentation, or the resulting disillusionment, alters the will so that one is receptive to the grace of conversion which medieval Christians expected to be present in the conversion of others.

Daniel’s focus is almost entirely on the motive for baptism, rather than the method of conversion. Certainly, there is no doubt that Floripas wishes at least to be baptized because she is in love with Guy of Borgoyne, a hero known to her either by reputation alone, as in *Sowdone*, or because she has seen his prowess on the battle field from afar, as in *Sir Ferumbras*. However, this does not necessitate a conversion on her part. In both versions, Floripas states her motivation for becoming a Christian, explaining that, after witnessing his knightly deeds, “Fro þat day in-to þys myn herte haþ he yraft” (*Sir Ferumbras* 1418-20). In *Sowdone*, her statement runs:

A, him have I loved many a day;
 And yet knowe I him noght.
 For his love I do alle that I maye,
 To chere you with dede and thought.
 For his love wille I cristenede be
 And lefe Mahoundes laye. (1891-96)

Floripas states unequivocally that she will be baptised for Guy's love. Not only this, but she reveals the sole reason for her disloyal conduct towards her family. But this is not conversion; this is a promise of potential conversion after baptism, an important distinction to make. Certainly one might accept baptism for a variety of reasons, and those from other religions who had undergone forced baptism, or who had even freely accepted it, were frequently viewed with an anxious, suspicious, and prejudicial eye in medieval Europe. Conversion is separate from baptism, and one does not necessarily lead to the other. We see *Ferumbras*, who converts, worry that he will not be baptized before he dies; likewise, we are presented with Floripas, who promises to be baptized, but her status as a convert remains ambiguous for some time after her promise. In *Sir Ferumbras* and *Firumbras*, it is not until her gods are proven powerless that we see Floripas undergo a true conversion.

This event occurs while the knights, Floripas, and her maidens are besieged in Floripas's tower, and, starving, they begin to despair. Floripas, unable to resist, speaks: "Ful litel ys 3our god of my3t þat vytailes ne sent 3ov none; / Hadd 3e worschiped our godes free as 3e 3our han done, / Of vytailes had 3e had plente maugre al 3our fone" (*Sir Ferumbras* 2526-28). Once she has shown her gods to the French knights, she continues: "If 3e doþ as wyse men mercy 3e hem crye, / & prayeþ hem 3erne þat hy 3ov spede as þay buþ gode and hende, / & alþyng þanne what 3e ha need to 3ow wolleþ hy sende" (*Sir Ferumbras* 2560-62). This event is similar in *Firumbras*. With everyone starving around her, Floripas enjoins,

Best yt ys that 3e knowe of oure goddys my3ht,
 Mete & drynke y-nowe he woll sende 3ou aply3t.
 Ne thruft 3e no3t drede the toure schulde be nome
 Ne neuer in batayll to be ouercome. (*Firumbras* 235-38)

She also encourages devout prayer: "Cometh forth hyder in gode dyuocyoun, / And kneleth & cryeth to my lord mahoun, / To termegaunt, and a-polyn, and to oþere mametrye" (*Firumbras* 261-63). In both instances, Floripas shows no reticence in relying on her old gods in her need. Although she has already obtained her desired lover, since Guy has, reluctantly, accepted her as his betrothed without her baptism or Charlemagne's consent (*Sir Ferumbras* 2096-2105), she has

not become a convert. She promises her baptism for Guy's hand in marriage, but any promise of conversion is withheld; conversion is something that must take place in its own time, and it seems to be quite separate from baptism in the romances. Floripas, despite claiming that she is prepared for baptism, trusts in her old gods as providers and still believes them to be stronger than the Christian God.

The knights' response to Floripas's entreaty is both vicious and abrupt. In *Firumbras* and *Sir Ferumbras*, the French knights fall upon the idols and smash them with mockery. Roland calls to Floripas, "Cometh nere and se, / þat ere were myȝtful & goddys gret & wyse / And now þey beȝth a-doun no strengthe haue to ryse." To which Floripas responds,

þat y se and so thenketh me:
Thay ne be but metal and stynkke as an honde:
I be-take hem to þe deuyl þat lyȝth in helle y-bounde.
But pray we to god þat ys in mageste,
Pat y-bore was of a mayde in clene virginite [. . .]. (*Firumbras* 271-80)

After similar destruction of the idols and mocking in *Sir Ferumbras*, the response is the same as in *Firumbras*:

"Parfay," þan saide duk Rolond to þat maide briȝt,
"þyne godes buȝ naȝt in hond Wel litel ys hure miȝt,
for now þ buȝ a-doun afalle þay mowe noȝt up aȝene."
"þat is soȝ," saide þat briȝt in halle "& þat is now wel y-sene,
If ich hem worschipie after þis maugre mot y haue.
for þay mowe noȝt her y-wys hem-selue fram herme saue;
Ac y by-seche þat god of miȝt þat diede on þe rode [. . .]."

(*Sir Ferumbras* 2573-79)

The French knights' absolute destruction of the Saracen idols allows Floripas to be disillusioned with her past faith. She sees that her *mametrye* is not strong enough to compete with the Christian religion; only now can her conversion takes place. She beseeches the Christian God for aid, and her conversion is complete.

Often critics focus on the motivation of Floripas's desire for Guy when discussing her conversion. For Bly Calkin, that Floripas is attracted to Guy based on his reputation is used by *Sowdone* "to craft a portrait of the inherent and universal desirability of Christian knights, even when they have not been observed in action" ("Changing One's Religion" 12). However, not only does the character of the enamoured princess portray Christian knighthood as desirable, but it also casts Christianity itself as inherently desirable to non-Christians. The appeal of Floripas is

precisely that she is willing to destroy the Saracen people and religion from the inside not only on account of her love for Guy, but on account of her love for the ideals of Christianity. The romantic notion that there were Muslims who were essentially Christian but kept away from Christendom had high emotional value. Louis IX's expectation that the mere presence of his army at Tunis would encourage the sultan there to take that step into Christianity is a testament to the potency of this hope. Floripas is deceitful and disloyal to an ugly extreme, but she is still a Saracen. Her wickedness to her father is warranted in that he tries to keep her from joining with the Christian religion, from becoming what the Christian audience prays for. Floripas's conversion also emphasizes, as does Otuel's and Ferumbras's before, the complete lack of Christian agency in conversion. Floripas is converted not by the arguments of her Christian guests, nor by her love for Guy; she sees the worthlessness of her religion in the humiliating degradation and destruction of her gods at the hands of Christians. Her disillusionment provides the opening for her conversion, but that conversion is an internal matter. Her father will not be granted the same grace.

The sultan figure in the Ferumbras romances is often overlooked in favour of the more common and traditional protagonists, Ferumbras and Floripas, but the siblings' father is at least as important as they are. Even the fourteenth and fifteenth-century redactors seemed to think so, for, by the time *Sowdone* was written, the sultan had taken precedence over the other characters in the work as the focal point; the sultan's is the portion of the tale that bears the most dramatic weight throughout. The entire narrative of the Ferumbras romance can be traced in relation to the fall of the "kinge of hie degre" (*Sowdone* 29), the sultan, as first his family and then his faith are stripped from him. Bereft of all that he had relied on, the sultan appears to be in a situation favourable for conversion, but, in the most powerful moments of the narrative, especially in *Sir Ferumbras* and *Firumbras*, the sultan refuses conversion to the last.

The opening of *Sowdone* highlights the narrative interest of the work; God is described as a just and loving ruler of all, "But for the offences to God I-doon / Many vengeaunces haue be-falle. / Where-of I wole you telle of oon [. . .] (13-15). *Sowdone*, then, sets up the Ferumbras romance as the tale of a heathen who is punished above all for his offenses to God. The tale is not about only Firumbras or Floripas, but about how their conversions contribute to the fall of the once great king who dared to offend the Christian deity. The focal point of the Ferumbras

narrative is on the dissolution of Saracen unity in the microcosm of the Saracen family, as more welcome parts of the Saracen people are absorbed into a new Christian unity.

The sultan is even portrayed in a fairly sympathetic light throughout the poems. In *Sowdone*, Laban's love for his children cannot be doubted; when he first hears that Romans have robbed one of his major cargo ships, he turns to his children, saying,

Sire Ferumbras, my sone so dere,
Ye muste me comferte in this case;
My ioye is alle in the nowe here
And in my Doghter Dame Florypas. (93-96)

The comfort he takes in his children is presented so confidently that their subsequent betrayal of him is all the more poignant. His sole happiness is derived from his children at this point. In *Sir Ferumbras*, when news of Ferumbras's conversion reaches the sultan, his reaction similarly demonstrates how much he had vested in his son: "Alas ys my sone y-nome? / My ioye ys lost For Fyrumbras wat man is he bi-come." He continues to grieve, claiming that it is even worse that Ferumbras has become a Christian and that he would rather Ferumbras were drawn apart by horses (1136-51). Though this is certainly a voicing of his anger at being betrayed, one must also remember that for Balan, the sultan in this tale, to die a Christian would be far worse than to die a Saracen and be received by Mahoun in death. It is always Balan's joy and bliss that are lost with his children; the audience is given the portrait of a man abandoned by his children before he is abandoned by his faith.

In the tradition of the *chansons*, when things go poorly for the sultan, he bears the disappointments badly. Like Garcy, Balan violently rebukes his gods frequently for their ineffectiveness. It is Bruyllant, one of Balan's advisors, however, that first makes a complaint against their gods, and Balan maintains the appearance of faith:

"Hure god doþ euere helpe hem wel and þat we sore auynde;
Ac oure ne helpeþ ous no del þe schrewes buþ wax al blynde.
Wel y-fern þay holpe ous noȝt y trowe þai slepe vchone,
In al þe anger þat we buþ broȝt hylp on hem nys none."
Pan wax þe Amyral wroþ & sede "what! traitour art þou wod!
Go out of my sigt anon y rede þow trechour, þow wykked blod!"

(*Sir Ferumbras* 3205-10)

Bruyllant states aloud what most of the Saracens dare not say. The successes of the Christians have proven Mahoun and his ilk ineffective and impotent. The Christians' god, whom Bruyllant acknowledges to exist, does far better by his subjects. Balan's response, which is to call

Bruyllant a traitor, foreshadowing his later treatment of Ferumbras and Floripas, is overzealous, seeing that he next seizes a staff with which viciously to brain Bruyllant. Doubts have crept into Balan's mind, though, and from this point on, the sultan himself frequently hurls abuse at his idols. In *Firumbras* Bruyllant likewise speaks against the Saracen gods, and Balan responds similarly. In his excessive responses, Balan reveals his own insecurities, which are emphasized later by Balan's doubting and cursing his own gods.

Throughout all three Middle English versions of *Ferumbras*, the sultan rebukes and attempts to destroy his gods. Metlitzki sees this as the defining feature of the character type: "The most persistent characteristic of these sultans is their instant readiness to be 'woode' and to 'renay' their 'gods' at the slightest intimation of defeat or failure" (189). She sees the trope's purpose as primarily entertainment, suggesting that "the ritual of alternating blasphemy and appeasement is repeated three times and must have proved a high point of entertainment to medieval readers" (190). Although there was likely comedic value in seeing the enemy reduced to such confusion, the sympathy encouraged by the sultan's absolute destitution shades this comedy with tragic tones. A more serious purpose seems present.

Given the disillusionment that the sultan suffers, it is surprising that he does not convert in the end. Daniel agrees that "the whole theme of disillusioned belief must be related to this question of conversion" (*Heroes and Saracens* 204), but the sultan's refusal to convert flies in the face of all reason. The answer to this stubbornness comes in *Sir Ferumbras*, in the form of Mahoun himself. Yet, it is not Mahoun, but, as the poem describes, "[P]e deuel amonges hem there, / On lyknyssse of Mahoun pere" (5139-40). Satan, in the form of the devil, comes to Balan when he is most full of doubt and advises that the sultan carry on his assault. The sultan is unable to escape his false religion, and when he at last calls off his attack on the Christians, the devil himself will not allow him to cease.

The focus of *Sowdone* is quite similar. Laban, as do his counterparts, repeatedly attempts to abandon his gods. In his first moment of disillusion, he simply accuses the gods of sleeping, but shakes them and trusts that they have awoken and will protect him from then on (2107-18). However, the next time that Laban is let down by his gods, he claims, "I shalle you bren, so mote I spede [. . .] Shalle I neuer more on you bileve, / But renaye you plainly alle" (2431-36). Before he is able to cast them in the flame, his wise men interfere. They cry out to their liege lord,

Wole ye your goddis for-sake ?

Vengeaunce shalle than on you come
[.]
Ye moste make offrynge for youre offence [. . .]. (2444-47)

The priests convince Laban to repent, and they absolve him of his sin. Yet again, not a hundred lines later, Laban is ready to renege on his faith. He actually abuses an image of Mahoun, causing it to fall to the ground. Laban's priests are horrified; they urge him to humble himself in repentance once more, but Laban replies, "I shrewe you alle!" (2518). Nevertheless, the sultan is at last convinced that he must "knele a down / And aske forgevenes in that place" (2523-24). The sultan submits to their will and is reconciled with his faith. Laban's struggle with his faith reaches a fevered pitch when Laban's plans to have Guy hanged are foiled. More vehemently than ever, he swears to burn his gods. However, the sultan's increased disillusionment is met with increased prevention of his breaking from the Saracen faith; the Saracen bishop, Cramadas, kneels before Laban to plead with him. The bishop "charged him by the hye name Sathanas / to saven his goddess ychon" (2775-78). The sultan submits once more to this ultimate entreaty. Satan, as in *Sir Ferumbras*, is behind the sultan's faith as well as the sultan's inability to leave it.

The sultan's tale, especially in *Sowdone*, but in the other versions as well, emphasizes the Saracen king's continual battle with a faith that he doubts, yet is prevented from abandoning. Indeed, in *Sir Ferumbras*, Balan is disillusioned enough with his gods that he admits, "Fyrumbras my sone dude ful wel Wan he for-sok þe euery del, / þer-of may he beo fawe" (4933-34). Balan has, it would seem, reached an understanding of his son's conversion. The sultan's phase of disillusionment should be complete here, but he is not allowed to give up on his faith.

Because of his constant back-and-forth between abandoning and reconciling with his gods, the sultan's final scene in the *Ferumbras* romances is especially potent. This is the moment for which the audience has been waiting. The Saracen lord has been the only one in his royal family to reject conversion. From Charlemagne's first messages to him, in which the sultan's conversion was requested insistently, the sultan's adherence to his own Saracen gods has been under attack. The final movement of the romances is filled with repeated attempts by Charlemagne and *Ferumbras* to convert the sultan, but the Saracen ruler remains immovable.

In the three versions of the romance, the sultan is not killed on the battlefield specifically so that he might convert and be baptized. In *Firumbras*, Charlemagne asks *Ferumbras* in a moment of pity if it will grieve the knight to lose his father. *Ferumbras* responds by requesting

that Charlemagne, before killing Balam, offer him baptism, which is done (1451-76). Sadly, Ganeleon delivers the message to the Saracen lord with more vehemence than necessary. Of course, the sultan refuses. When Balam is at last captured, Ferumbras's first action is to convince his father to "ffor-saketh mahoun and 3oure mametrye, / And byleueth on ihesu crist and hys modyr marye!" (1647-48). Balam, somewhat taken aback by his son's audacity, rebukes him and the Christian faith. In *Sir Ferumbras*, Balan refuses conversion six times in the final moments of the narrative. Even when it seems that the sultan has finally accepted Christianity, at the last instant, standing before the baptismal font, he punches the bishop and derides Christianity. His final words describe his hate and disdain for the Christian religion:

“Sone,” sayde þe Amerel þan, “By Mahoun þou art a nycy man,
 Pat þou dost me rede
 To by-lyue on such a mon þat was on a croys y-don,
 For ys owe mysdede.
 Y diffye hym her and alle hyse, By Mahoun y nolde 3yue a pyse
 for cryst ne al ys my3te.
 Nel y neuere on hym be-lyue, Ne beo y-fulled on my lyue,
 To dye þarfore her rizte.” (5843-50)

After denying the mercy of the Christians and the might of Jesus, there is nothing left for the sultan but to be slain. Balan calls Ferumbras “sone,” but he issues a rebuttal that allows no argument. The sultan demonstrates that he will never be a convert; he will always hold with the Saracen belief. Norman Daniel struggles to understand this moment in the *chanson* tradition: “The lesson [. . .] in Balan’s [case is] that, although he is totally disillusioned about Mahon, he sticks to him and attacks Jesus, and so is rightly destroyed by the machinery of Christian justice” (*Heroes and Saracens* 204). Daniel’s observation rings true. The result of the attempted conversion of the Saracen king is to leave the audience with a sense that some Saracens are simply inconvertible. Not even by any fault of their own are they in the state of inconvertibility; Satan himself prevents some Saracen people from converting. As we have seen repeatedly, conversion must be effected from within the convert, and the sultan, though he verges on the proper state for saving grace, is simply unable to escape the clutches of heathendom.

4.4 *Christian at Heart*

Even a brief look at the history of conversion and conversion thought is enough to demonstrate that violent warfare was not seen as an inappropriate backdrop for attempted Christian conversion. From Augustine to Aquinas there was a general acceptance that, through conversion or destruction, non-believers must be dealt with. Because of this general understanding, the era of Charlemagne was the perfect setting to encompass a complexity of feelings about Muslims and the potential for their conversion. After all, Charlemagne had successfully forced the Saxons into conversion and was much admired by the English who themselves had found their Christian beginnings in violence. In the romances, the Saracens who are presented with an opportunity to convert each demonstrate a particular facet of the potential Christian, and we are left with a classifying and clarifying of Saracen types in relation to their convertability. In the end, we see, as found in Aquinas, that conversion is simply not determined by human argumentation, but it is the result of God's direct intervention and grace. The view of Catherine of Siena that conversion through crusade is a mystery that necessarily *cannot* be understood is also highlighted by the seeming arbitrariness of the converts in the romances and the obvious crusading evocations in the romances.

These Saracen types exemplify a variety of conversion situations. Otuel, by the miraculous nature of his conversion, demonstrates that the hand of God is directly present in conversion, and the will to convert is unaffected by offers of a temporal nature. Garcy, who is converted in one instance, further highlights the necessity of disillusionment to turn away from false gods, and Clarel, while he cannot be converted himself for narrative reasons, acts along with Garcy to emphasize the necessity of Otuel's absolute rejection of his old religion in completing his conversion. As with Otuel, Ferumbras, though he is prepared through some disillusionment, undergoes a conversion that is instantaneous and bears the markings of the supernatural. Even Floripas, a conventional character, emphasizes that a conversion follows closely when uncertainty is allowed; previously so obstinate, Floripas must relent to Christianity when her gods are destroyed before her. The uncertain heart lets down its guard for divine providence. The sultan figure, perhaps most vividly, demonstrates that there are some times when conversion is simply not possible. Try though Christians may, if God has not willed it and the non-Christian has not allowed for it or has not been able to escape his old beliefs, conversion will not happen. In the end, it seems that the sultan's message is directed at the poem's readers;

some Saracens will never convert, and, in their absolute refusal of the Christian gift, their lives and souls are forfeit.

In the conversion romances, the Saracens are treated much the same as lost Christian relics, and there is something of the stolen relic in the Saracen that promotes this treatment. Satan, the romances show us, plays a direct part in the misbelief of the Saracens. He has seized what has not rightfully belonged to him since Christ's redemption of humanity, potential Christians; moreover, while the Saracen religion is presented as a distortion of Christianity, the Saracen people are devout and loyal believers that should be practicing Christians. When demanding the return of the holy relics from the sultan in the *Ferumbras* romances, the Christian knights fittingly also demand the conversion of the sultan. Akbari notes a particular association between the Floripas character and the language of reclamation: "Like the relics of the Passion, like Jerusalem itself, Floripas is a beautiful prize which (in the ideology of crusade) is rightfully reclaimed from the dirty hands of the Saracens" (112). I would suggest that this feeling of an owed return from the "dirty hands" of heathendom is applicable to all of the Saracens in the romances. Real-life converts would have inspired this sentiment in Christian European hearts; Christians would be unable to resist the attraction of converts such as Abū Yahyā Zakariyā I, al-Lihyānī in the early fourteenth century, who, hoping to gain the advantage of Christian allies, continually suggested that he might convert, confiding, as Robert Burns says, that he "was a Christian at heart" (1392). The concept that all peoples are Christian at heart might be the most accurate way of summing up the portrait of Saracens in the *Charlemagne* romances. Though their religion is despicable, their conversion is desirable, and it is only natural that they turn by the grace of God to Christianity.

5. Romancing Islam

“Païen unt tort e chrestïens unt dreit.”

“Deus! quel baron, s'oüst chrestïentet!”

“En France dulce iert menee caitive, / Ço voelt li reis par amur cunvertisset.”¹

(*Chanson de Roland* 1015; 3164; 3674-75).

These oft-quoted and oft-discussed phrases from the *Chanson de Roland* exemplify the sentiments that carry the *chanson de geste* tradition and that contributed to the popularity of *chansons* like the *Roland*. In these songs, the world is a simple place: pagans are wrong and Christians are right; the difference between good and evil is often strictly one of religion; and, given the opportunity, non-Christians will convert “par amur,” for love. Two or three centuries later, these concepts still had the imaginative potency to fascinate a Christian English audience. The prospect of a much simpler world in which the Islamic threat would resolve itself through the natural progression of converting out of love and the idea that assimilation of Eastern converts was as simple as a moment’s changing of religions would find an audience as long as Christians were still concerned with the struggle against Islam, whether in Spain or in Jerusalem. The English, seemed to find particularly interesting the tales that hinged on Saracen conversion rather than tales that demonstrated only the crushing defeat of Saracens. Indeed, over the course of this study, the focus of these narratives concerning Otuel and Ferumbras can be seen to be, above all, a concern with reclamation of what properly belongs to Christendom; interestingly, the most significant and important objects to be reclaimed in these poems, the objects that are given the most narrative attention, are the Saracens that convert to Christianity. It is because of this correspondence between these poems and a people trying to reclaim a unity that they never really had through the crusades that these particular romances found such a receptive audience. The Otuel and Ferumbras Middle English romances became popular not because they distanced

¹ “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right!”

“God! What a baron, if he were Christian!”

“In France the sweet lady will be taken captive; her the king wants to have converted by love.”

themselves from reality, but rather because they spoke directly to Christians through an endorsement of Christian reclamation.

If the English were merely interested in stories that encouraged crusade warfare, or that focused on the war between Saracen and Christian in a way that was devoid of complexities, they had more than a fair selection from which to choose. Even the *Roland*, which is extant in Middle English in a single fragmentary version with a conjectured date of 1400, would have seemed a logical choice for the attentions of medieval English redactors. Of the *chansons* that we still have in Old French, the vast majority of them focus on the typical battles between Christians and Saracens, and there are even *chansons* that deal solely with matter relating to the First Crusade, such as the *Chanson d'Antioche* or the *Chanson de Jerusalem*. Many of these *chansons* would have been obvious candidates for English adaptation that stayed well clear of the issue of conversion if English redactors were looking to encourage the simple polar dichotomy of Christian and Saracen. The English, however, perhaps uncharacteristically,² favoured the encouragement of more complex ideals. Simply put, there was a wide array of *chanson* material to choose from that was not as provocative in subject matter as *Fierabras* and *Otinell*; the English redactors saw something exemplary in the romances of those two converted Saracen knights that appealed to the particular concerns of their English Christian audience.

That there was discussion throughout Europe of converting Muslims is demonstrated early in Christian relations with Islam, but the issue seems to have come to a head particularly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for much of Europe, the same time during which many of the *chansons* were being composed, with figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter of Cluny making definitive statements about the importance of dealing with the Islamic enemy. The Mendicant orders, in particular the Franciscans and Dominicans, also began to grapple with the issue of Islam as heresy and the need to prevent the spreading of the religion. Conversion

² Authors have repeatedly noted the different narrative aesthetic preferences of the English romances compared to their French cousins. Action is generally favoured to the exclusion of particularly complex narrative developments. Frequently, French source material was reduced or abridged in English redactions in what appears to be an attempt to streamline narrative for greater emphasis on the action of the poems than on their narrative complexities. This is not to suggest that the Middle English romance lacks something that its French relative possesses, but that the English saw worth in a different method of story-telling. For the particular example of *Ywain and Gawain*, see Friedman and Harrington xvi-xxxiv. See also Finlayson, especially "Definitions of Middle English Romance Part I" 50-52.

became an increasingly integrated part of the crusade movement, but historians and critics alike have often represented the increased interest in conversion and crusading as having slowly receded by the end of the thirteenth century, following the fall of Acre in 1291. This, however, was not the case in England; the English Franciscan Roger Bacon was an active proponent of conversion in England and the rest of Europe right up until the turn of the fourteenth century, crusading continued to be a popular and respectable occupation for knights young and old, and there seems to have been a popularity among nobles in sponsoring Muslim converts to Christianity in the fourteenth century. In particular, though, Middle English literature shows a continued concern with the salvation of the Muslim. From the English redactions of *Otinel* and *Fierabras* to *Mandeville's Travels* to *Piers Plowman*, English writers demonstrate a keen interest in positioning Islam in their theological understanding of the world. More and more frequently in English literature, Muslims are shown to have been falsely led away from true Christianity by a former Christian, usually bearing the name Machomet, jealous of the power of the pope; in having been misled by such a figure, Muslims are represented as able to be led back to Christianity.

The concern that the English had over conversion of Muslims is one way that the conversion romances obviously gained an audience, but an objection may be raised that, while conversion may have been a concern of the English, the romances are simply too far removed from any reality of the Christian-Islamic conflict to tell us anything about that reality. Against this objection, I have shown that the *Otuel* and *Ferumbras* romances also demonstrate an awareness of other issues, tied closely to the Christian-Islamic conflict, that would have had definite appeal among people from all levels of society. For example, the English *Otuel* and *Ferumbras* narratives exhibit a rare awareness among Middle English romances of the potential for multiple perspectives in a tale; the romances distribute their narrative attention frequently between the Saracen armies and the Christian armies. This technique would have encouraged not only some measure of sympathy for the enemy, but also a comparison between Christians and Saracens on more than the level of pure physical prowess found in Christian-Saracen duels. Furthermore, the reclamation of Christian relics of the passion, relics that were significant to Christians during the crusades, plays a significant role in the tales. The romances identify common anxieties concerning the relics and address them through demonstrating the relics' inevitable retrieval.

Moreover, the significance of reclaiming Muslims as Christians is not the only way that the Saracen acts in the role of reclaimable object for Christendom. The potential of foreign allies that might aid in bringing the crusades to an end was a frequent concern for Christians, and the potential of Saracen allies is highlighted in the conversion romances continually. Islam itself, represented as it is by the distorted blend of paganism, Islam, and Christianity that the romances choose to portray, is depicted as a perversion of Christianity. The mirroring of trinity and “mametrye” and the constant apposition of the oaths that the knights swear by their own deities encourage the concept of Islam not as a heresy difficult to direct to proper Christianity, but as a simple error requiring only slight correction to reclaim a misled people. The frequency of topical matter in these romances implies that, even though the poems are entertainment, people found these concerns particularly engaging. The Saracens, like the other subjects in the Charlemagne romances, represent the anxieties of their audience.

The main items of reclamation are the individual Saracens themselves in these romances—the method by which they are reclaimed, conversion. The inherent violence surrounding these conversions is surprisingly compatible with the doctrine of Christianity so that this, too, agrees with popular understanding of conversion at the time. As Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas much later, argued, force was often necessary when dealing with non-Christians; in fact, Aquinas highlights at the beginning of his *Summa contra gentiles* that Christians should not be expected to convince anyone to convert. Rather, the Christian faith is defensible as a truth, but conversion of Muslims must come by some means exterior to the Christian people; Catherine of Siena insisted that the crusade itself was miraculously responsible for the spread of conversion through divine agency. The romances of Otuel and Ferumbras repeatedly highlight this lack of human agency in conversion of Saracens. Otuel and Ferumbras demonstrate above all that personal conversion for those opposing Christianity is not influenced by Christians but by divine grace. Similarly, for other characters, disillusionment with their pagan gods leads the way to reception of the Christian faith. Through a weakening of their resolve against Christianity by means of disillusionment, divine intervention is possible, and a Saracen might accept Christianity by the divine grace of God. The strongest warriors and the fairest ladies belong naturally to the most righteous religion, and it is implied repeatedly that worthy Saracens are Christian at heart, that their conversion is only a natural return and reclamation of what Satan, in the guise of the Saracen gods, had stolen.

The Otuel and Ferumbras tales, then, given the concerns of the English over crusade and conversion as a joint enterprise and the ways in which the romances responded to a variety of related public concerns, achieved such popularity in England because they express the possibility of succeeding in the very real project of Christian reclamation, a project actively pursued in Spain, in Palestine, and in the northern reaches of Europe for centuries by the English and other European powers. Even in France and England, with the nations' own problems of local heresy, Christians were continually embroiled in movements attempting to reclaim the increasingly disparate parts of the Christian whole. Robert Warm highlights this appeal in his brief study of the Charlemagne romances:

In a sense, then, what these romances are providing is a narrative vision of the way the world should operate, as an antidote to the reality of an increasingly fragmented Christian meta-state [. . .] Despite being composed, copied and read throughout the time of the papal Schism, Christendom is represented as being unified rather than fragmentary. (88)

This particular idealization finds its logical home in the genre of romance, for nowhere else could such idealism be placed and accepted so readily.

At their most fundamental level, these tales are romances, written primarily to entertain; as romances, there exists in them the necessary requirement of the genre to break away from reality. At the same time, and equally necessary, the romances are joined to the reality from which they are removed. Barron, in his broad survey of Middle English romance, explains this phenomenon: "The romance mode, indeed, cannot ignore reality since its idealism is constantly challenged in readers' minds by their knowledge of the imperfect world in which they live" (4). The greatest ideal represented in these romances, concerned as they are with crusading, relics, religion, and, above all, Saracens, is that one day, as in the glorious past, all might be reclaimed. As Barron suggests, "The romance proper adds a social ideal based not upon life as it is known through the senses but as the imagination, inspired by a vision of what might be rather than by objective fact, dreams of it" (4). The poems of Otuel and Ferumbras are romances of hope which appealed to an audience that still optimistically anticipated Christian unity throughout the world.

This is not to say that the Charlemagne romances appealed to English Christians because of any exceptional English tender-hearted acceptance of Muslims as neighbours, nor because they found themselves attracted to embracing a centuries-old enemy. Indeed, the romances found their particular potency in communicating their themes through the familiar image of violent

crusade, and the romances foster, at their heart, a continuation of a crusade-and-conquer ideology. As early as 1774, Thomas Warton noted that the romances garnered success because of their “design of giving countenance to the crusades from the example of so high an authority as Charlemagne” (124), but too much emphasis should not be placed on this propagandist quality in the romances, as the romances proceed with the understanding that the result will be a greater unity and expansion of the world of Christ’s people, which will include those who have erred from the truth. As Warm suggests, “The idea that these poems were propaganda for the crusade misunderstands the development of the crusading ideal in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The crusade is not the terminus of these narratives, instead it is the means to an end” (87-88). Warm sees that end as the unity of the “fragmented Christian meta-state” (88); I extend this act of unification towards non-Christians as well, specifically through the inclusion of Saracen characters through conversion. However, this inclusion in the conversion romances requires some alteration of common thought regarding the Saracen in Middle English romance.

Conventionally, for many years now, the Saracen in Middle English romance has been identified as the Other, a vehicle for Christian self-identification and definition through a scrutiny of otherness or alterity. However, more than anything, the Charlemagne romances seem to encourage the acknowledgement of *sameness* between Christian and Saracen forces. It is because of their similarity to each other that the boundaries between West and East become so permeable, by means of conversion, in these romances. The texts contain a romancing less of the Other, and more of the near-Christian. The mirror images of the Saracen and Christian knights require that a reconciling take place that will reunify the important aspects of their social identity: chivalry, allegiance, and religion. The emphasis placed on this reconciliation further increases the emphasis on potential unity in Christendom.

The romances concerning Otuel and Ferumbras are ideal places for the themes of hope and reclamation of unity to operate. Fredric Jameson determines that

romance may [. . .] be understood as [. . .] a symbolic answer to the question of how my enemy can be thought of as being *evil*, that is, as other than myself and marked by some absolute *difference*, when what is responsible for his being so characterized is simply the identity of his own conduct with mine, which [. . .] he reflects as in a mirror image. (161)

Jameson hits on a key point in the popularity of the Otuel and Ferumbras romances for the English. The simple solution to the “Islamic problem” is the removal of the *difference* between

Christians and Muslims. In the romances, that difference is simple, and it is not by any Christian theological argument that that difference is removed. The romances suggest that Christians need to keep on doing what they are doing, fighting against that difference, and they will reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The mirror image of the Saracens and Christians in the romances greatly facilitates the movement from a perverse and erroneous faction to the other, pure and steadfast, and this, too, is due to the idealism of romance. The popularity of Otuel and Ferumbras was understandable. Their stories fit so well with the concerns of the time that no *chanson*, including the *Roland*, could have stood out for a general English audience as much. In the end, because of the romances' emphasis on conversion, the audience is left with the overwhelming impression that there is something in romance that can in fact be realized, that there is one ideal of the romances that can be believed in, and that there is universal truth and, by way of that truth, infinite possibility of reclamation, in Christianity.

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*EETS = Early English Text Society

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