

Romancing Islam:  
Reclaiming Christian Unity in the Middle English Romances of Otuel and  
Ferumbras

A Thesis Submitted to the College of  
Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
through the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the peculiar success that a number of Middle English romances achieved in fourteenth-century England. The romances, *Otuel a Knight*, *Otuel and Roland*, *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne*, *Sir Ferumbras*, *Firumbras*, and *The Sowdone of Babylone*, are narratives about the Saracen knight Otuel or Ferumbras who convert to and fight for Christianity. Given the particular cultural preoccupation with the crusades in Europe and the common vilification of Islam throughout European literature, the popularity of a Saracen hero for the English is unexpected.

In accounting for the popularity of these figures and their tales in medieval England, I analyse through a socio-historic approach the concepts of Islam and views of conversion in medieval Europe and England, the particular resonances between English concerns and these narratives, and the converts and conversions in these romances. I approach this subject with an eye to source material from historical documents, comparing the subject matter of the romances to the preoccupations of medieval Christians demonstrated in the historical material. Through this discussion, it becomes clear that the popularity of these romances was assured because of the unwavering promotion and idealizing of the project of Christian reclamation and unification exemplified through the tales. Differently from much scholarship on romances that extensively use Saracen characters, this study demonstrates that the Saracens in these romances become less of an Other and more of a misled aspect of Christianity that must be led back to the church for the complete unification of Christendom to take place.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Yin Liu, for her advice and suggestions on this project. Not only did she make her invaluable knowledge and experience in the field available throughout the writing process, she provided much needed discussion in the development of the ideas addressed in this study. She has been an inspiration during my growth as a scholar, and I have learned much from her that will aid me in the future.

Many thanks to Dr. Sharon Wright for her advice on the historical aspects of this study and for help cleaning up some shoddy translating on my part.

I thank the other members of my advisory committee as well: Dr. John Porter for all of his time peering over Latin texts with me over a cup of coffee, and Dr. Brent Nelson for chairing my committee and keeping things running on the administrative end of things.

My gratitude also goes to the many involved with the Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies program who took the time to give me friendly advice throughout my MA and to aid in my studies by contributing to my courses.

I also gratefully acknowledge the Interdisciplinary Program and the University of Saskatchewan for the financial support that made this project feasible. Debbie Parker, the Secretary for the Interdisciplinary Department, deserves many thanks for keeping me up-to-date on what needed to be done for the completion of this degree.

The Department of English was also kind enough to provide a home for me on campus, by way of a mailbox, an office, and paying work. My thanks to Nik Thomson, Pat Harpell, Kathy Weiman, Dr. Lisa Vargo, and Dr. Douglas Thorpe.

My good friend Darren Wagner supplied a much needed morale boost at particularly bleak times and provided our office with the competitive air that fuelled many of my longest and most productive sessions of study.

My wife, Erica, without whose support I rarely accomplish anything, deserves my deepest gratitude.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| PERMISSION TO USE .....   | i   |
| ABSTRACT .....  | ii  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....   | iii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS .....   | iv  |
| <br>  |     |
| 1. Introduction: <i>Fierabras</i> and <i>Otinel</i> in England .....        | 1   |
| 1.1 From Chansons to Romance: The English Adopt the Matter of France .....  | 1   |
| 1.2 Saracen Scholarship and an Approach to the Charlemagne Romances .....   | 10  |
| 1.3 Semantic Concerns of this Study .....                                   | 13  |
| <br>  |     |
| 2. Plans for Conversion in Medieval Europe .....                            | 19  |
| 2.1 Conversion and Crusade .....  | 19  |
| 2.2 Developing Methods of Addressing the Heresy of “Machomet” .....         | 25  |
| 2.3 Conversion in Fourteenth-Century English Culture and Literature .....   | 32  |
| <br>  |     |
| 3. Reflected Image and Projected Desire in the Charlemagne Romances.....    | 43  |
| 3.1 Romance and Reality .....   | 43  |
| 3.2 The Mirror of Christianity .....  | 44  |
| 3.3 Christian Desire for Acquiring Allies .....                             | 52  |
| 3.4 Reclaiming Christian Relics .....                                       | 61  |
| <br>  |     |
| 4. Christian Conversion in the Charlemagne Romances .....                   | 71  |
| 4.1 The Moral Partnership of Violence and Conversion .....                  | 71  |
| 4.2 Miraculous Conversion and Cultural Integration in the Otuel Group ..... | 77  |
| 4.3 A Feuding Family: Conversion of the Disillusioned.....                  | 86  |
| 4.4 Christian at Heart.....   | 99  |
| <br>  |     |
| 5. Romancing Islam .....  | 101 |
| <br>  |     |
| WORKS CITED .....   | 108 |