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Teaching about the Discourse of Otherness in *The King of Tars*

Abstract

The present article is a teaching guide for a class or a series of classes about the discourse of Otherness, as employed in the medieval romance *The King of Tars*. It proposes an in-class discussion that reveals how the romance tells a story of an encounter with the Other and how it perpetuates the discourse of Otherness while doing that. Various strategies used in the tale to perform Othering are analyzed. These include the presentation of Muslims as a dehumanized out-group, with its main representative – the Sultan – being portrayed as a beast missing the rational part of the soul; contrasting the said presentation with that of the rational Christian Princess; employing and modifying the motif of monstrous birth to define the Sultan further through his failure as a father and through the absence of what the tale sees as the essence of the human soul; setting the transforming power of the dominant group's rituals against the ineffective, empty rituals of the out-group; the use of the rhetoric of proximity, i.e. pointing to certain similarities between “us” and “them” only to make the differences even more pronounced. The analysis of these strategies helps to recognize that while the characters within the represented world of the romance other Muslims through their actions, the narrator does the same through the use of the discourse of Otherness. The article is also devised as a review of criticism on the romance in the context of Otherness, so it can be useful as a starting point for those willing to research this matter further.

Keywords: Othering, *King of Tars*, Middle English, college teaching, medieval literature

The present article explores the didactic possibilities of using the medieval romance *The King of Tars*¹ as a resource to teach about the process of Othering. When read against the appended teaching guide with study questions and selected fragments for close reading, it outlines the

¹ The Auchinleck version of the text has been used. Compiled in the 1330s, Auchinleck is the oldest of the three manuscripts containing the poem. An online edition by John H. Chandler, available at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/chandler-the-king-of-tars>, is quoted in the appendix and its glossary has been used when preparing the modernized version of the selected quotes provided in the appendix alongside the Middle English original. A side-by side modern translation of the whole romance, by Blake Hahn, is available online at https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/sites/all/modules/custom/vm/VersioningMachine/texts/King_Tars_0.html. This translation, however, substitutes some of the offensive wording of the original with more neutral equivalents, which makes it slightly less suitable for the needs of the analyses proposed in the present article than the literal modernization offered in the appendix.



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directions which the in-class discussion may take and suggests ways to steer it in those directions. The proposed segments are devised and arranged so as to form a coherent whole, with the analysis and interpretation of Otherness in *The King of Tars* unfolding and expanding as the lesson progresses, but some of the sections may also serve as independent exercises in close reading, so the teacher may only select the segments they deem the most relevant for the needs of a particular course they teach. The material offered here will either cover a single class or a series of classes, depending on their length and level.

The overall aim of the proposed in-class discussion is to examine how *The King of Tars* tells the story of a confrontation with the Other, and at the same time participates in the discourse of Otherness, i.e., how it itself performs Othering. As a result, students will get a better understanding of how various discursive strategies of Othering work. Either a deductive or inductive approach could be assumed to achieve this aim: the theoretical framework could be established at the outset, with the following analysis and interpretation referring to that framework, or, alternatively, the discussion could delve into the analysis and interpretation of the romance from the outset, with the subsequent elements of the theoretical framework being gradually induced from it. The former approach will perhaps be a default option if the whole course is centred around the discourse of Otherness in literature and culture and an in-depth theoretical understanding of the concept as applied in various disciplines (such as cultural and literary studies, but also philosophy, sociology, anthropology, geography, and psychology) is arrived at first, before the course proceeds to analysing some particular manifestations of the discourse in the primary sources. The latter strategy may work better if time constraints do not allow for such an introductory theoretical discussion, Otherness not being the main subject matter of the course taught.² While the present article stems from the practice of teaching *The King of Tars* as part of a course on Otherness, it will nonetheless follow the inductive approach, as more universally applicable also outside the context of a course devoted to that single subject.

Defining In- and Out-Group³

The opening of the romance is aimed at defining two opposing groups, represented by two rulers, which are readily distinguishable in terms of both religion (Christian-Muslim) and geography (Tars-Damascus) (Rajabzadeh 174). One may pay special attention to the adjectives used to describe both rulers: the “trewe” (“true”) King of Tars in line 4 and the “hethen” (“heathen”) Sultan in line 5, which are aimed at portraying the King of Tars in a good light from the very outset (Boyadjian 56). The opening six lines thus provide us with two elements that are the *sine qua non* for talking about Othering and it may be elicited at this point of the class that these are first of all the division into “us” and “them” (in- and out-group/the dominant and the dominated), and, as can be

² If the course is not devoted to the issue of Othering/Otherness, but the teacher would like students to have a general understanding of the terms before discussing *The King of Tars* in this context, recommended background reading may include, for example, excerpts from M. Rozbicki and G. Ndege’s *Cross-Cultural History and the Domestication of Otherness* (1–2), Riva Kastoryano’s “Codes of Otherness” (79–80) or J.F. Staszak’s entry on “Other/Otherness” in the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (43–44) (the term is explained in an accessible and universal way in these studies).

³ The proposed lesson plan is focused on textual analysis rather than the history of the text. Those interested in outlining the historical background and the genesis of the story told in the romance are advised to consult the following studies: Hornstein’s “The Historical Background of the King of Tars”; Geist; Boyadjian (51–54).

deduced from the choice of the descriptors, the hierarchical relationship between those, “us” being above, i.e., better than, “them.” It may also be observed already at this point that the religion of the out-group is identified based on exclusion and absence – “heathen” may be defined as one who does not belong to the widely held religion, and “true,” when set against the “heathen” Sultan, implies that the latter is defined through him lacking that truth.

The Presentation of “Saracens”: Imagery

In this segment of the discussion, the presentation of the out-group is to be further explored, with attention being paid to the animalistic imagery evoked when the representatives of that group are mentioned. To put the discussion in a broader cultural context, the teacher may first ask students to try to identify the figure of the prophet Mohamed and a Muslim ruler in two pictures from an illuminated manuscript *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (both figures are portrayed there as dogheads).⁴ Having pointed out the popularity of the idea of Muslims being dog-like in the Middle Ages, rendered not only through a commonplace “race of dogs” to denote them, but also through literal pictorial representations of them as dogheads (see Strickland 223), the discussion may now proceed to finding instances of the use of analogous imagery in the romance. Students may be encouraged to quote specific fragments where Muslims are referred to as dogs,⁵ as well as comment on the symbolic role of the prophetic dream of the Princess, which features hundreds of black hounds chasing the heroine, led by one that is later transformed into a white knight. It may be pointed out that the transformation foreshadows what is going to happen to the Sultan later in the romance. Having established who the black dog, turned in an oneiric manner into a white knight, stands for, students may further investigate what role the three devils accompanying the dogs play – Aman Nadhiri argues, for example, that the devils may be a mockery of the Christian Trinity and symbolize “the ‘Saracen trinity’ that Saracens were believed to worship” (97). Students may also notice already at this point that the animalistic imagery is not limited to using the word “hound” to refer to Muslims but is also conveyed through the description of the Sultan’s behaviour as that of a wild boar in lines 97–111 – the fragment may be discussed in detail here or in the next segment.

Students may now be encouraged to think of what such a presentation of the out-group reveals about the discourse of Otherness. One possible conclusion is that it treats the representatives of the out-group as a homogenous mass with few common essential characteristics – all we learn about them is that they are indistinguishably animal-like and perhaps also devil-like. What is more, the fact that the Other possesses some discernible characteristics does not mean that they have their own, independent group identity. To the contrary, they are defined through absence – in this case, the absence of humanity. The effect is achieved through the use of imagery that relates Muslims to animals and to devils, i.e., animalizes and demonizes them, both strategies leading to dehumanization.

⁴ Both illustrations are available online through the University of Cambridge digital library: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-MM-00005-00031/173> and <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-MM-00005-00031/374>; they are also reprinted and discussed by Debra Higgs Strickland (223–224); see also figure 13 on p. 51 in Strickland for another representation of Muslims as dogheads. I owe this reference to the pictorial representations of Muslims to Czarnowus (77).

⁵ See selected fragments in the appendix; the fragments are also enumerated in Gilbert (108).

The Portrayal of the Sultan and the Princess: A Comparative Analysis

Having analysed the presentation of Muslims in the romance, the discussion may now focus on the most important representative of this group, i.e., the Sultan. As students may have already noticed, he too is portrayed as animal-like when his rejection by the Princess is described: he is compared to a boar and then to a lion. The Sultan's fit of anger, in the form of him tearing his clothes apart and demolishing his chamber, lasts the whole day and night, during which time no one is able to control him and so everyone leaves him alone, as if escaping from a wild beast that cannot be tamed (Czarnowus 79). One may notice that the Sultan symbolically dissociates himself here from civilization – humans, unlike animals, wear clothes, eat by the table and live in a community of fellow humans, and the Sultan rejects it all in the said scene.

Such emotional, irrational responses are characteristic of the Sultan throughout the tale and are worth comparing and contrasting with the reactions that the Christian Princess displays. When the Sultan learns his child is born a formless and lifeless lump of flesh, he reacts emotionally and immediately starts accusing his wife and her false conversion of being the reason behind the tragedy (lines 583–597; notice how many exclamation marks are used in this fragment, implying the Sultan's emotional tone). The difference between his and the Princess' reaction is striking – she, far from falling into despair and assuming an accusatory tone, devises a logical, methodical, two-step plan of saving the child (lines 598–617). When the Sultan's prayers fail to make the child transform into a human, he displays yet another uncontrollable fit of anger that again stands in sharp contrast to the Princess' response (lines 634–681; notice the violence of both the Sultan's actions and language, as contrasted with “that good woman” answering “well courteously” [lines 670–671]).

The comparative analysis of what the Sultan and the Princess say in these situations and how they say it points to the underlying dichotomy employed in constructing the two characters and it may be elicited at this point that the opposition in question is one of irrationality and rationality, or emotions and reason.⁶ Students may now be familiarized with or reminded of the Aristotelian idea of the three degrees of soul (nutritive, sensitive, rational — a division later adapted by St. Thomas Aquinas), since it further illuminates the contrast between the two characters. Namely, in the light of this concept, the Sultan, unlike the Princess, is presented as not possessing the part of the soul exclusive to human beings.

The Newborn and Its Symbolic Significance

Once the contrast between the Princess and the Sultan is established, the discussion may proceed to the analysis and interpretation of the episode involving their child. Students may now be asked to paraphrase the description of the newborn (for the teacher to make sure they understand that the child is in fact a shapeless lump of flesh) and then try to put forward their hypotheses as to the reasons behind this kind of presentation of the baby and the fact that the focus is on the parts of the body that are non-existent. The child has no bones or blood, so no structure of a human body, it has no limbs, which is to emphasize that it is unable to move, and no eyes or nose, which makes it unable to see and smell, that is to make contact with the outside world. As Sarah Star notes, “the lump's body, if it can be so called, is both undeveloped and unanimated” (452). While parts of the human body are mentioned, it needs to be underlined that the newborn is in fact not really a chaotic ensemble of

⁶ See also the Princess' calm and reserved speech when she decides to become the Sultan's wife and announces it to her parents. That speech is yet another example of the Princess containing her emotions and allowing her rational side to guide her.

unstructured human body parts, but a shapeless lump, with no sign of what this matter was supposed to be. The parts of the body are only enumerated to underline their lack.

The teacher may remark at this point that various versions of the legend underlying the story of the monstrous birth in the romance were in circulation in the fourteenth century⁷ and that some of its analogues differed in the exact form in which they related the child to have been born. Some of them say the child was born hairy all over its body or that it was half-hairy, others describe it as half-animal or half white and half-black (Hornstein, “New Analogues” 434–439). A question to be considered at this point is what these incarnations of the “monstrous birth” motif have in common with how the child is described in the romance and in what respect they differ. It is clear that regardless of the version, the child is never presented as an ordinary human being, but the difference between *The King of Tars* and other renderings of the story is that here, rather than being an incoherent hybrid that in most cases is not fully human, the child is monstrous in the sense of being uniformly shapeless (Florschuetz 104). In other words, while the variants of the legend point to the incompatibility of the parents that results in a child which lacks coherence, here the matter of the two parents’ contribution is not as self-evident, and so it begs further exploration.

The tale itself draws attention to the question of the fault for the newborn’s deformity when it relates how the Sultan accused his wife of falsely converting and thus being the one to blame for the tragedy. While the Princess does not formulate an analogous accusation explicitly, her remark concerning what the child is missing in line 755 is worth noting. She states there that, if christened, the child should acquire a form. A form, then, is what, as the Princess rightly observes, the child is missing. Students may be asked at this point to share any ideas on how this formlessness implies what went wrong during the conception of the child. A distinction that may be explored here is one between the body, which the newborn is missing, and the flesh, which is how the child is kept being referred to before the transformation. According to Jane Gilbert, the former was “a symbolically ordered entity allied with the soul but the latter vulnerable and excessive. Body was gendered masculine, flesh feminine” (106).⁸ The discussion may also be once again steered onto Aristotle’s thought, this time his theory pertaining to the four causes.⁹ Any object may first be used as an example to explain what the four causes are and then it may be discussed how that translates into the four causes behind the existence of a human being: the material cause being the matter out of which a human is created; the formal cause – the form i.e. the shape of a human being; the efficient cause – what makes the material take the form it is supposed to take, i.e. bringing life (human spirit) to a lifeless matter; and the final cause – the purpose that a human is to fulfil. If students are not familiar with this concept, they may be asked to make an educated guess as to who, following Aristotle’s ideas, would be the material cause for a human being (i.e. who would provide the matter) and who would be the remaining causes (i.e. who would provide the form, spirit and purpose). The answer is that a mother was believed to be responsible for the former, and the father for the latter – a baby was supposed to be formed in its father’s image, animated by him

⁷ Lilian Herland Hornstein identified as many as seventeen accounts of the story in Anglo-Latin, Franco-Latin, German, Germano-Latin, Hispano-Latin and Italian sources (Hornstein, “New Analogues” 434).

⁸ See also Walter (119–120).

⁹ Gilbert (105), Calkin, (“Marking Religion” 228–229), and Akbari (192) all discuss the conception of the child within the framework of Aristotle’s theory of four causes. Calkin also mentions the Princess’ awareness during the conception of the sinful nature of her inter-faith union as one possible explanation of the child’s deformity (“Marking Religion” 229). Heng suggests that it remains understated in the romance whether the monstrous birth is the fault of the Sultan being Muslim or rather of the Princess pretending to renounce her faith or conceiving a child with her husband before converting him (228). I would argue that the tale puts the blame on the father rather unambiguously.

and its purpose was to follow the father's footsteps. Thus, while in the other variants of the tale the father contributes to the creation of the child, providing its animalistic or racially divergent half, *The King of Tars* implies that the Sultan utterly failed to make his contribution and so the child ended up being the mere formless matter. Much as the tale focuses on what the child is missing, thus emphasizing the failure of the father, it also repeatedly draws attention to what the child is, pointing to the success of the mother to make her contribution. The conclusions of this and the previous segment can now be combined to address the question of why the Sultan is unable to fulfil his role as a father.

For one thing, the Sultan is presented as missing the highest form of soul reserved for humans (see section 3 above), and so is perhaps unable to contribute to the creation of another human being – as Nadhiri observes, “[t]he birth of a deformed child recasts the marriage (and sexual union) of the Soudan and the Princess as something unnatural, an inter-species union rather than an interfaith/interracial union” (97). A closer look at the formulaic expressions used between lines 478 and 681 further hints at who exactly grants the ability that the Sultan lacks and, consequently, why the Sultan cannot possess it. Students may now devote some time to finding the commonplaces related to religion in this fragment and look for any patterns and regularities. As it will turn out, all the formulaic expressions used in the selected fragment point to the creative power of the Christian God. As Roger Dalrymple observes, “Creator-formulae are strategically deployed” at this point of the poem (105) and it may be considered why this is the case, i.e., how the choice of these particular commonplace expressions, which could be seen as mere fillers, actually underlines the message of the poem. The use of such formulae, alongside the miraculous transformation of the child produced by the ritual of baptism, are there to highlight that it is the Christian God that created mankind and is still responsible for the creation of fully-fledged human beings. As Geraldine Heng notes, “Christianity, it seems, possesses a spiritual essence with the power to reshape biological fleshly matter and, we must assume, also to confer a divine soul in the process of making a human being” (229). The formulaic expressions thus foreshadow the final result of both parents' endeavours to save their child.

Alongside the allusions to the Christian God's power to create humans, the impotence of the Sultan's religion is demonstrated in the story. The imagery used in the scene of the Sultan's prayer may now be analysed in some detail to identify this contrast. When the Sultan brings his child to the temple, the picture composed by the narrator is that of a lifeless, stone-like lump of flesh set against the background of stone sculptures representing the Sultan's gods. As it turns out, the sculptures are just that – they remain unresponsive to the father's prayers and the child remains the lifeless lump. Thus, both the child and gods are confined to the material world. When the Sultan smashes the sculptures, he destroys the illusion that they are anything more than a formless, inanimate stone matter, just like the child (Gilbert 106).

As Siobhain Bly Calkin observes, “the sultan in *The King of Tars* seems to have failed to perform adequately in the conception of the lump. The sultan's defining characteristic in this text, however (as is shown by his lack of any other appellation than the Saracen-linked “Soudan”), is his Saraceness. Thus, his religious identity can be seen to have been inadequate to the task of shaping a Christian woman's matter” (“Marking Religion” 229). Gilbert explains this inadequacy in the following way:

In KT's stark schema the lump-child represents not some naive popular belief that certain historical peoples could literally not procreate, but the ideological contention that non-Christians are incapable of exercising the paternal function. And without symbolic paternity human beings cannot reproduce, in the sense that they cannot pass on the cultural qualities that distinguish people from animals.

Therefore KT, like the analogues, makes the father responsible for the child's monstrosity. Whereas in those versions his heathen presence imprinted itself as physical irregularity, in the Middle English romance his religion is interpreted as a symbolic absence which leaves his child fatherless, unable to take the crucial step from maternal flesh to paternal body. (Gilbert 110)

The tale is determined to prove time and again that Otherness is always to be defined negatively through the prism of what it lacks.

The Power of the Christian and Muslim Ritual

The present segment of the discussion serves to elaborate on the issue of the two religions as presented in the romance. I suggest it starts with analysing the moment of the Princess entering into the Other culture and comparing it to an analogous moment of the Sultan being incorporated into the Christian community. The similarity between the two scenes is that in both of them a character undergoes a transformation to make them fit into the new community. The difference lies in the nature of this metamorphosis. The Princess has her clothes changed to look like any other Muslim woman, but lines 388–393 emphasize the ineffectiveness of the incorporation (the contrast between her and other Muslims' appearance is still stark) and its superficiality (she seems happy on the outside but deep in her heart is suffering).

Later in the tale, the Sultan is incorporated into the Christian community through the ritual of baptism. Calkin undertakes an in-depth analysis of the communal dimension of this ritual, i.e. how it serves not only as a means of religious transformation, but also how it performs the social function of making the Sultan part of the Christian community ("Romance Baptisms" 105–112). First of all, the teacher may ask students to enumerate what elements the ritual consists of: these are the presence of a priest who is a representative of the Christian community and who has the authority to administer the ritual; the use of water, which is a physical sign of the ritual being fulfilled that the whole community can see; and acquiring a Christian name which is pronounced publicly. One more element which is of utmost relevance is the physical metamorphosis that the Sultan undergoes and which, unlike the Princess' temporary and reversible transformation, is permanent. Since the Sultan takes part in the ritual stripped naked, this change of the colour of his skin is yet again a clearly visible physical sign that everyone present can readily discern. As Calkin explains, both in the case of the Sultan's and the newborn's baptism,

the text suggests that baptism physically incorporates outsiders into the Christian community by making them look like other Christians, such as the beautiful Princess of Tars who is "As white as fetef of swan" (line 12). The physical effects of baptism prove irrefutably that the lump and Sultan are Christian and should be accepted as such. Indeed, the text even states that the Princess knows well the Sultan has forsaken his Saracen beliefs "For chaunged was his hewe" (line 945). In this text, baptism is a predominantly physical, visible process that effects physical, visible results to prove the veracity of the convert's new religious identity to the larger Christian community. ("Romance Baptisms" 111)

The fact that the emphasis is put so clearly on the communal aspect of the ceremony, i.e., on including the Sultan in the Christian community, is indicative of the relevance of the ritual for the discussion of the matter of Otherness. Namely, the ritual is clearly aimed at making the Sultan become part of the in-group, as much as it is to bring about his spiritual transformation. In order for that assimilation on the earthly level to be possible, the Sultan needs to blend in. The latter is assured by the change of his skin colour and the change of name – two elements that have very tangibly set him apart. The message that this fragment of the tale communicates is that there is no place for diversity in the in-group – it needs to be eliminated so that the in-group remains coherent.

An attempt at summarizing the difference between the two acts of incorporation can be made at this point. It is self-evident that one is more powerful and effective than the other because while the Princess undergoes only outward, symbolic change, the Christian ritualistic gestures are presented as having the power to actually shape the reality. The students may now be asked to share their thoughts on why the Muslim rituals – that of incorporation of the Princess, but also that of marriage – are ineffective. What the tale seems to suggest is that the Muslim law is not a true one. It is rather an empty ritual that does not effect any real change. A true law should be able not only to provide the frameworks to perform some symbolic actions, but to grant an actual change of reality through those. The ritual of marriage, for example, is supposed to elevate the union between two people from the level of mere biological, sexual relationship to the level of a cultural bond reserved for human beings, as the tale aims to prove. While procreation is possible outside of marriage sanctioned by the true law, such legitimization is presented as a precondition for the rightful, and thus successful procreation and inheritance.¹⁰ The romance tries to prove in a very graphic way that the Muslim marriage does not have such power, since it does not grant the Sultan the potential to become a father of a human being. Likewise, the ritual of the incorporation into the Muslim community does not actually serve its purpose as it has no bearing on the Princess' inward sense of belonging. In other words, the actual opposition in the tale is not between two different laws: Christian and Muslim, but rather between the presence and the absence of the Christian law; the conclusion is yet again that the Muslim law is defined negatively, not through what it is, but through what it lacks.¹¹ As Gilbert puts it, “[i]t seems that the desire to produce oneself and others as true human beings by adhering to the tenets of a symbolic law is common to all human creatures; but, according to the poem, only dupes believe that a ‘hethen lawe’ (504) can fulfil this symbolic function” (108).

(Apparent) Inconsistencies and the Rhetoric of Proximity

So far, the discussion focused on the differences between the two cultures represented in the romance. The aim of this segment is to explore the matter of the apparent similarities and their role in the tale. While *The King of Tars* frequently underlines the incongruity of the Muslim and Christian faith, students may now be asked to try to identify any fragments where the opposite effect is aimed at, i.e., where the focus is on how the two religions coincide in some respects. The most prominent example of the latter would be the narrator's remark that the Sultan, just like a Christian man, would not marry a woman unless she professed the same faith as him (lines 406–409; see Calkin, “Marking Religion” 222). Another instance of the representatives of both religions being presented in a non-contrastive way is at the beginning of the story, when the King of Tars' and the Sultan's fierceness and rage on the battlefield are portrayed in a similar vein (cf. lines 181–186 and 193–198).¹² A debate on the possible reasons behind employing the analogies may ensue at this point. Students would be encouraged to share their views on whether the similarities weaken the “us” and “them” division (i.e., undermine the binary opposition on which the tale is

¹⁰ See Gilbert (107) for the discussion of the role of a father and of the marriage ties in distinguishing humans from animals, which is discussed within the Lacanian framework.

¹¹ Star also sees Sultan's religion as not having any essence of its own: “For the author of *The King of Tars*, religion is figured chiefly in terms of presence and absence and is determined according to either the belief in, or ignorance of, Christ. Within this framework, the Sultan is thus a “Sarazin,” not because he follows any written doctrine, but because he lacks knowledge of Christ” (442).

¹² See Elias (52–53) for a discussion of the similarities between the King of Tars' and the Sultan's displays of anger at the beginning of the tale.

based). One possible approach is that the analogies do to an extent make the tale deconstruct the opposition it rests on. An alternative interpretation may be that the similarities are to foreshadow (Elias 53) or enable (Burge 113) the eventual conversion of the Sultan, signalling from the outset that he is closer to Christianity than it may seem.

Yet another reading that is worth exploring, especially in the light of the tale's engagement with the issue of Otherness, is one that asserts the analogies are there to in fact strengthen the overall effect of Othering. I base this reading on Susan Schibanoff's idea of the "rhetoric of proximity" that she identifies as being used in the discourse of Otherness to seemingly bring the opposing groups closer together, but only to make the key differences even more prominent in the end. The underlying mechanism is that the more proximate the Other appears to be, the stronger the need to define the boundaries of the in-group and to continually protect them through the differentiation from the Other. The role of the rhetoric of proximity is thus to maintain "rigid binary oppositions by temporarily destabilizing them" (Schibanoff 251).¹³ Schibanoff employs the concept to analyse Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," and her argument is that in the tale, "[t]he Man of Law renders Islam threatening not by depicting it as different from Christianity – as idolatrous – but by revealing its dangerous closeness to his own religion." Through the rhetoric of proximity, then, Islam is portrayed "as an insidious heresy that mimics Christianity" (Schibanoff 250). This approach is all the more applicable here given that Chaucer's tale may be seen as an analogue of *The King of Tars*.¹⁴

The analogies between the two faiths and their representatives in *The King of Tars* may be interpreted in a similar vein to how Schibanoff sees such analogies in Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," that is, as serving to ultimately make the differences even more pronounced and to point to the inferiority of the Other. Islam is to appear to the reader as a misguided imitation of Christianity and, in this sense, it is to be seen as closer to heresy than to a different, independent religion.¹⁵ In the end, any analogies turn out to be superficial in the light of the ineffectiveness of the Sultan's pleas as opposed to the miracle granted by the ritual that the Princess initiates. Likewise, the Sultan's rage, though seemingly resembling the King of Tars' anger, is, as Marcel Elias notes, ultimately presented as excessive and self-destructive, i.e. aimed at his comrades and gods as much as his enemies, which stands in sharp contrast to the righteous and justified anger of the King (53). Assuming that the message of the tale is that the proximity of the Other poses danger, the undifferentiated, and therefore monstrous, lump of flesh may be read as a warning against too close a proximity between the in- and out-group that ignores or downplays the differentiation (see Calkin, "Marking Religion" 227–228).¹⁶

¹³ Schibanoff derives her concept from Jonathan Dollimore's observations on the anxiety evoked by sameness of the Other made in his book *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). As Schibanoff explains, "[i]n Dollimore's terms, 'similarity' or 'proximity' indicates the intimate relationship that exists between supposedly opposite binaries. Such 'intimacy' ultimately stems from the Christian anti-dualistic notion of evil as good's privation, not good's opposite, of vice as the perversion rather than antithesis of virtue. Evil and vice are thus 'the more dangerous and potentially subversive for being in intimate relation with good'" (Schibanoff 275, footnote 17; see also pp. 250–251). Defining the Other through the prism of what it lacks, and not what it is, is thus related to defining evil as the privation of good.

¹⁴ The discussion of the representation of Muslims and women in Chaucer's tale as dangerously proximate Others, based on Schibanoff's study, would serve as a perfect complement to the classes proposed here that would consolidate the conclusions about the process of Othering and enable students to apply them in a new context, i.e., that of antifeminist discourse.

¹⁵ See Schibanoff (254–256) for the discussion of the manifestations of the idea of Islam being a Christian heresy in the Middle Ages.

¹⁶ Calkin not only interprets the product of the hybrid marriage as signaling the danger, but also sees the outward transformation of the Princess as dangerously ambiguous and possibly tantamount to actually betraying her Christian

The Position of the Narrator and the Implied Audience of the Romance

The King of Tars may seem to be inconsistent in that it draws analogies between Christians and Muslims while emphasizing the differences in such a pronounced way, but, as was argued in the preceding section, that apparent confusion may be cleared up once the tale is recognized to participate in the rhetoric of proximity. There is, however, yet another potential source of inconsistency in the tale, this time originating not in the presentation of the Saracens, but in the at times controversial portrayal of Christians, who are otherwise idealized. The discussion in this segment may be opened with students coming up with some examples of Christian characters' actions that seem morally questionable. The matter of the Princess' double dealing is one such example. Her actions are, after all, based on deception that involves false conversion and what could even be seen as blasphemy, given that she pretends to renounce her faith and praise other gods. And yet, they are in fact presented as justified and even commendable.¹⁷ As Anna Czarnowus observes, the Princess' strategy, far from drawing condemnation, "merely displays her intelligence in implementing gradual Christianization of the Orient. Ethical values, such as honesty and truthfulness, undergo relativization" (74). Another example of relativization is the tale's approach to violence. The brutality of Christians, including their king, may be seen as justified in the case of the battle that opens the romance, since at that point they just respond to the Sultan's attack and defend themselves. However, the ferocity of their assault on Muslims who have refused to convert at the end of the tale is much more controversial, at least from the modern ethical standpoint. Still, the narrator is far from condemning violence and murder as long as it is committed by Christians, including the neophyte Sultan. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes,

The bloody actions which "the soudan that was blac" (l. 799) undertakes early in the text, so central to his racialized identity, are later performed by the King of Tars with the aid of the same sultan, now "al white bicom" (l. 929). The two men crusade together against "hethen houndes" (l. 1097). The murders, persecutions and imprisonments which characterized Saracen Damascus come to mark Christian Tars, a place where those who refuse conversion are decapitated, "'hong & drawe," burnt, or incarcerated (120).

The question that arises is then how Christians remain unambiguously positive characters throughout the tale despite those moral flaws, i.e., how it is possible that cheating, lying, pretending and slaughter do not discredit them as protagonists. Students may notice at this point, or their attention may be drawn to the fact that in order to perceive the Christian characters in a positive light, the audience needs to share certain assumptions concerning the means that are justified when trying to achieve

faith. I, however, agree with Lomuto that the Princess' identity remains unambiguously stable throughout the romance (Lomuto 180–182) and so I see the tale as putting emphasis on the necessity of the Other to either become fully assimilated or to remain clearly separated (or even annihilated, as the ending of the tale suggests), but not as the criticism of the particular method the Princess adopts to achieve her goal.

¹⁷ If time allows, the matter of the Princess' potentially blasphemous acts may be further debated at this point. Students may be encouraged to attempt at justifying her actions within the frameworks of the text's own logic and conclusions drawn so far – my interpretation would be that the Princess acting out her conversion is not problematic within the represented world of the tale, because the religion she pretends to convert to is presented as only having the surface level, so in fact it is not even possible for the conversion to be anything more than a meaningless performance. As proven later in the story, the Saracen gods are just empty surface forms of the sculptures, so in fact the opposition boils down to either being a believer (by definition a Christian believer) or believing in nothing. The Princess does not undergo any change because she does not lose her faith – she remains a believer and does not turn to believing in nothing. That does not in itself mean that the Princess' actions cease to be controversial even within the represented world of the tale, since they still involve lying.

certain goals – and the ultimate goal that justifies any morally questionable actions in the romance is spreading Christianity. The assumption, therefore, is that this religion is superior to others, and the implied audience of the text is expected to share this view. In other words, the addressees of the tale are people who already believe in the power of Christian belief – it literally preaches to the converted.

That brings the discussion to its conclusion and the final question to be considered as part of this analysis and interpretation, which is whether *The King of Tars* is designed so as to perform the same thing it talks about. If we assume that what the romance tells is a story of a miraculous conversion, then what has been established about the implied audience clearly rules out that possibility – the aim of the story is not really to convert anyone, as it requires already believing that what it teaches about Christianity is true in order to accept the binary opposition it is based on without ever questioning the clearcut division into noble Christians and evil Saracens. Yet, as the discussion so far has already proven, *The King of Tars* is as much about the interaction of the in-group with the Other as it is about the conversion of a non-believer. Students may now be encouraged to consider whether the romance performs what it is about in this respect. In order to do so, they should try to pinpoint who exactly performs Othering in *The King of Tars*. An initial response may be that these are the Christian characters who aim at the separation from, assimilation or eradication of the Saracens. These scenarios all assume the necessity of maintaining the hierarchical division into the in- and out-group. Within the represented world of the story then, the characters perform the Othering of Saracens through their actions and attitudes. Once it has been established that the Muslims are othered on the intradiegetic level, it remains to be scrutinized what happens on the extradiegetic level, i.e., in terms of how the story is told.

This level has been, in fact, under scrutiny throughout the whole discussion, so what remains to be done is to define it explicitly, which can be done through analysing the narrative voice of the story. Students may either be asked to describe the type of the narrator on their own, or may be given some characteristics to choose from: are we dealing with a narrator who describes the events or describes and comments on them? Is the narrator's tone judgmental or non-judgmental? Does the narrator take sides or remain impartial? Examples of the narrator offering a commentary instead of merely reporting the events, being judgmental and taking the Christian side abound in the text, and they include the already discussed opening lines (the use of the adjectives "true" and "heathen"), the fragments where the narrator sides with the Christians when describing their battle with the Muslims (e.g. lines 210–213), or the lines where he expresses his sorrow at the sight of the beautiful Princess standing next to her "faul mate" (lines 388–390 – here not only the religious but also the racial prejudices of the narrator come to the fore since he focuses on the Princess' radiant complexion and how it contrasts with that of the Sultan). Once it is established that the narrator is very much involved and biased, the conclusion emerges that he, just like the implied audience, belongs to the in-group and assumes its perspective in his storytelling. The Saracens are thus not only othered within the represented world of the story, but also through the language used by the narrator to tell it. The partial tone, dehumanizing imagery, and evaluative adjectives create a biased perspective that affects the reception of what is told. Resorting to the rhetoric of proximity is yet another example of the narrator re-enacting the message of the tale on the level of the language used to tell it. While the story itself illustrates the dangers of too close a proximity of the in- and out-group through the figure of the monstrous lump, the rhetoric of proximity sometimes used by the narrator recreates the same danger on the discursive level. The tale does perform what it talks about in the sense that it not only relates the story of Saracens othered by Christians but also participates in the act of Othering through perpetuating the discourse of Otherness and directing it against the group of people that the implied audience is encouraged to differentiate themselves from, define themselves against, and remain hostile towards.

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Appendix: Study Questions and Fragments Selected for Close Reading

The selected fragments of the original text are quoted from:

The King of Tars. Ed. John H. Chandler. Medieval Institute Publications, 2015. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/chandler-the-king-of-tars>

I suggest that the questions **in bold** and the selected fragments **are shared with students in advance**, so that they can use those as a reading guide when preparing for the in-class discussion. Follow-up questions (not in bold) may be asked to advance the discussion in case students need some extra prompting, or to further expand its scope (some of these questions would already imply answers to the preceding ones if given to students in advance).

1. Defining In- and Out-Group

- **How does the text of the romance establish from the very outset who the two conflicted groups are going to be? How does it suggest which of the two groups is to be deemed praiseworthy?**

Lines 1–12

<p>Herkneth to me bothe eld and ying, For Marie's love, that swete thing, Al hou a wer bigan Bituene a trewe Cristen king And an hethen heye lording, Of Dames the soudan. The king of Tars hadde a wive, Feirer might non ben olive – That ani wight telle can. A douhter thai hadde hem bituen, Non feirer woman might ben – As white as fether of swan.</p>	<p>Listen to me both old and young, For Mary's (i.e. Blessed Virgin Mary's) love, that sweet person, All (i.e. the whole story of) how a war began Between a true Christian king And a heathen high lord, The sultan of Damascus. The king of Tars had a wife, Fairer might none be alive – as anyone can tell. A daughter they had between them, No fairer woman there might have been – As white as the feather of a swan.</p>
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2. The Presentation of “Saracens”: Imagery

- **What imagery is used when the text refers to the Sultan's men?**

Lines 169–180

<p>Ther hewe houndes on Cristen men And feld hem down bi nighen and ten; So wilde thai were and wode That men might sen alle the fen¹⁸ Of Cristen both fremd and ken, The valays ren on blod. The soudan and his folk that stounde Hewe adoun with grimli wounde Mani a frely rode. Allas, to wele sped Mahoun! The Cristen men yede al adoun Was nought that hem withstode.</p>	<p>There hounds chopped Christian men [to pieces] And felled (i.e. cut) them down by nine and ten; So wild they were and mad That men could see all the bloody mess of Christians both strange and known, The valleys ran with blood. The sultan and his folk at that moment Have inflicted grim wounds [During] many a noble foray (i.e. raid, sudden attack). Allas, to victory hastened Mohammed! The Christian men suffered defeat [There] were none who them (i.e. sultan's army) withstood.</p>
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¹⁸ John H. Chandler's note: "*That men might sen alle the fen*. The reading in Ak is obviously a corruption since "that men might sen alle the fen" makes little sense, unlike the Vernon reading – "falde hem down in þe fen

See also lines 93: ‘Hethen hounde’ he gan thee calle (‘Heathen hound’ he called you); 145: The soudan gaderd a rout unrde (The sultan gathered a gigantic [also: monstrous] company); 740: We schul make Cristen men of houndes – (We should make Christian men of hounds), also lines 1091, 1170 and 1172.

- **How is that imagery made use of in the Princess’ dream? What does the dream symbolize? What does it foreshadow?**

Lines 418–453

<p>And als sche fel on slepe thore Her thought ther stode hir bifore An hundred houndes blake, And bark on hir lasse and more. And on ther was that greved hir sore, Oway that wald hir take. And sche no durst him nought smite For drede that he wald hir bite, Swiche maistri he gan to make. And as sche wald fram hem fle, Sche seye ther stond develen thre And ich Brent as a drake.</p> <p>So lothliche thai were al ywrought, And ich in hond a gleive brought, Sche was aferd ful sore. On Jhesu Crist was alle hir thought; Therefore the fendes derd hir nought; Noither lesse no more. Fro the fendes sche passed sounde, And afterward ther com an hounde With browes brod and hore. Almost he hadde hir drawn adoun Ac thurth Jhesus Cristes passioun Sche was ysaved thore.</p> <p>Yete hir thought withouten lesing Als sche lay in hir swevening (That selcouthe was to rede) That blac hounde hir was folweing. Thurth might of Jhesu, Heven king, Spac to hir in manhede In white clothes als a knight, And seyde to hir, “Mi swete wight, No tharf thee nothing drede Of Ternagaunt no of Mahoun. Thi Lord that suffred passioun Schal help thee at thi nede.”</p>	<p>And as she fell asleep there It seemed to her that there stood before her A hundred hounds black, And barked at her all together. And one there was that gave her sore, Away that would her take. And she dared not him strike For dread that he would her bite, So threateningly he began to behave. And as she would from him flee, She saw there stood three devils And each burned like a dragon.</p> <p>So loathly (i.e. ugly) they were all shaped, And each in hand brought a spear, She was very afraid. On Jesus Christ was all her thought; Therefore the fiends harmed her not; Not at all. From the fiends she passed sound (i.e. safely), And afterward there came a hound With brows broad and hoary. He almost had her drawn down But through Jesus Christ’s passion (i.e. crucifixion) She was saved there.</p> <p>Yet it seemed to her without lying (i.e. I’m not lying) As she lay in her swoon (i.e. sleep) (that strange was to say) That black hound her was following. Through might of Jesus, Heaven[ly] king, [it] Spoke to her in manly demeanor (i.e. human form) In white clothes as a knight, And said to her, “My sweet lady, You need not dread anything Of Ternagaunt¹⁹ nor of Mohammed Your Lord that suffered passion Shall help you at your need.”</p>
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[mud/dirt].” Perhaps “fen” should be read as a metaphor in response to line 170 and anticipating line 174, hence my gloss “bloody mess.”

¹⁹ OED: “an imaginary deity held in medieval Christendom to be worshipped by Muslims”

3. The Portrayal of the Sultan and the Princess: A Comparative Analysis

- **How is the Sultan presented in the story? Think of his reactions to different situations (rejection by the Princess; learning what his child looks like; prayer in the temple and what follows).**
- **How is the king's daughter presented in the story? Think of her reactions in analogous situations.**

Lines 97–111

<p>When the soudan this wordes herd Also a wilde bore he ferd. His robe he rent adoun; His here he rent of heved and berd; He schuld venge him with his swerd, He swore bi Seyn Mahoun. The table so hetelich he smot It fel in to the flore fot-hot And loked as a lyoun. Al that he raught he smot down right – Serjaunt, squier, clerk, and knight, Bothe erl and baroun.</p> <p>Al thus the soudan ferd, yplight; Al that day and alle that night No man might him schast.</p>	<p>When the sultan these words heard As a wild boar he behaved. His robe he tore apart; His hair he rent from head and beard; He should avenge himself with his sword, He swore by Saint Mohammed. The table so violently he struck [that] it fell to the floor immediately and [he] looked like a lion. All that he touched he smote down right – Servant, squire, clerk and knight, Both earl and baron.</p> <p>All [the time] thus the sultan behaved, indeed; all that day and all that night No man could him control.</p>
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Lines 583–617

<p>The soudan com to chaumber that tide And with his wiif he gan to chide That wo was hir bigon.</p> <p>“O dame,” he seyde biforn, “Ogain mi godes thou art forsworn! With right resoun Y preve The childe that is here of thee born Bothe lim and lith it is forlorn Alle thurth thi fals bileve! Thou levest nought wele afine On Jubiter no on Apoline, A morwe na an eve, No in Mahoun no in Ternagant. Therefore is lorn this litel faunt. No wonder thei me greve!”</p> <p>The levedi answerd and seyde tho, Ther sche lay in care and wo, “Leve sir, lat be that thought; The child was geten bitwen ous to. For thi bileve it farth so, Bi Him that ous hath wrought! Take now this flesche and bere it anon Bifor thine godes everichon</p>	<p>The sultan came to the chamber that time And his wife he started to chide (i.e. scorn) That woe had begun [with] her.</p> <p>“O dame,” he said before [her], Against my gods you are forsworn! With right reason I prove The child that is here of you born Both limb and joint it is forlorn All [this] through your false belief! You believe not thoroughly In Jupiter nor in Apollo, [Neither] in the morning nor in the evening, Neither in Mohammed nor in Ternagant. Therefore is lorn this little child. No wonder they (i.e. the gods) make me unfortunate!”</p> <p>The lady answered and said thus, There [as] she lay in care and woe, “Honorable sir, let be (i.e. put away) that thought; The child was begotten between us two Therefore believe it fares so, By him that us has wrought (made)! Take now this flesh and bear it anon Before your gods every one</p>
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<p>That thou no lete it nought, And pray thine godes al yfere, Astow art hem leve and dere, To live that it be brought.</p> <p>“And yif Mahoun and Jovin can Make it fourmed after a man With liif and limes aright, Bi Jhesu Crist that this world wan Y schal leve thee better than That thai ar ful of might. And bot thai it to live bring Y nil leven on hem nothing Noither bi day no night.”</p>	<p>So that you spare no effort, And pray your gods together, As you are to them beloved and dear, To life that it be brought (i.e that it is brought to life).</p> <p>And if Mohammed and Jove can Make it formed after a man With life and limbs proper, By Jesus Christ that this world won I shall believe even more than you That they are full of might. And unless they it to life bring (i.e. unless they bring it to life) I won't believe in them Neither by day or by night.”</p>
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Lines 634–681

<p>And when he hadde al ypreyd, And alle that ever he couthe he seyde, The flesche lay stille as ston. Anon he stert up at a breyd, And in his hert he was atreyd, For lim no hadde it non. He biheld on his godes alle And seye ther might no bot bifalle; Wel wo was him bigon. “O Sir Mahoun,” he gan to grede, “Wil ye nought helpe me at this nede? The devel you brenne ichon!”</p> <p>He hent a staf with grete hete And stirt anon his godes to bete And drough hem alle adoun, And leyde on til he gan to swete And gaf hem strokes gode and gret, Both Jovine and Plotoun. And alder best he bete afin Jubiter and Apolin, And brac hem arm and croun, And Ternagaunt that was her brother – He no lete never a lime with other No of his god Mahoun.</p> <p>And when he hadde beten hem gode won Yete lay the flesche stille so ston, An heye on his auter. He tok it in his hond anon And into chaumber he gan gon, And seyde, “Lo, have it here. Ich have don al that Y can To make it fourmed after a man With kneleing and preier, And for alle that ichave hem bisought</p>	<p>And when he had all prayed (i.e. when he finished his prayers), And all that he ever could he said, The flesh lay still as stone. Anon he jumped up suddenly, And in his heart he was troubled, For limb had it none. He looked upon his gods all And saw there could no help come; Very deeply grieved was he. “O Sir Mohammed,” he cried out “Will you not help me at this need? [Let] the devil burn each one [of] you!”</p> <p>He lifted a staff with great vehemence And started anon his gods to beat And pulled them all down, And continued till he sweated And gave them strokes good and great, Both Jove and Pluto. And best of all he beat thoroughly Jupiter and Apollo, And broke their arm and crown (i.e. head), And Ternagaunt that was their brother – He left no limb with other (i.e. he destroyed them completely) Nor of his god Mohammed.</p> <p>And when he had beaten them very well Yet lay the flesh still as stone, On high on his altar. He took it in his hand anon And into chamber he went, And said, “Lo, have it here. I have done all that I can To make it formed after a man (i.e. to make it look like a man) With kneeling and prayer, And for all that I have them beseeched</p>
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<p>Mine godes no may help me nought. The devel hem sett afere!”</p> <p>And than answerd that gode wiman Wel hendeliche to that soudan: “Leve sir, here mi speche. The best rede that Y can, Bi Jhesu Crist that made man, Now ichil you teche. Now thou hast proved god thine, Yif me leve to asay mine Whether is better leche. And, leve sir, prey thee this: Leve on Him that stronger is For doute of more wreche.”</p>	<p>My gods may help me not. [let] the devil set them afire!”</p> <p>And then answered that good woman Well courteously to that sultan: “Beloved sir, hear me speak The best advice that I know, By Jesus Christ that made man, I shall teach you. Now you have proven your gods, Give me leave to test mine Whether [he] is a better healer. And, dear sir, allow you this Believe in him that stronger is (i.e. believe in the one that turns out to be stronger) For fear of more affliction.”</p>
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4. The Newborn and Its Symbolic Significance

- **Take a look at the fragment which describes the newborn’s looks – what is characteristic about it? How is it described? What kind of information is provided? What is the newborn compared to?**
- **By looking at the newborn – would it be possible to know what it was supposed to be, i.e., what it could potentially be?**
- **a follow-up question:**
 - Why do you think are the non-existent body parts enumerated?
- **a version of this legend was in circulation in the fourteenth century and some of its analogues differed in the exact form in which they related the child to have been born. Some of them said the child was born hairy all over its body or that in was half-hairy, others describe it as half-animal or half white and half-black – what do all these incarnations have in common with how the child is described in the romance and in what respect do they differ?**

Lines 574–582

<p>And when the child was ybore, Wel sori wimen were therfore, For lim no hadde it non, Bot as a rond of flesche yschor In chaumber it lay hem bifore Withouten blod and bon. For sorwe the levedi wald dye, For it hadde noither nose no eye Bot lay ded as the ston.</p>	<p>And when the child was born, Well sore women were therfore, For limb it had none, But as a round (lump) of flesh cut (i.e. butchered) In chamber it lay before them Without blood and bone. For sorrow the lady wished to die, For it had neither nose nor eye But lay dead as a stone.</p>
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- **What is the child is missing, according to what the Princess says in line 755?**
follow-up questions:
 - Does the form (or rather formlessness) of the child suggest what went wrong? Why such a presentation? What is the significance of the newborn’s appearance?

- Who, according to Aristotle, would be the material cause in the conception of a human and who would be the formal cause (i.e., who would provide the matter and who would provide the form)?
- What can the Princess mean by saying that the child is not the Sultan's in line 807?
- Why is the Sultan unable to fulfil his role as a father? What is he implied to be missing? (Think of the imagery used to describe him and the contrast of his behaviour and that of the Princess)

Lines 751–756

<p>“For in Him is mine hope aflight, The Fader that is ful of might Mi sorwe schal me slake. Yif it were cristned aright, It schuld have fourme to se bi sight With lim and liif to wake.”</p>	<p>For in him is my hope indeed The Father that is full of might My sorrow shall me slake. If it is christened properly, It should have a form to see by sight With limb and life to stir [into life].”</p>
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Lines 799–810

<p>The eeds seyde, “Leman min, Ywis icham glad afin Of this child that Y se.” “Ya, sir, bi Seyn Martin Yif the halvendel wer thin Wel glad might thou be.” “O dame,” he seyde, “how is that? Is it nought min that Y bigat?” “No, sir,” than seyde sche, “Bot thou were cristned so it is – Thou no hast no part theron ywis, Noither of the child ne of me.</p>	<p>The sultan said, “My Sweetheart, Indeed I am glad thoroughly [Because] of this child that I see.” “Yes sir, by Saint Martin If the half were yours Well glad might you be.” “O dame,” he said, “how is that? Is it not mine that I begotten?” “No sir,” then said she, “Unless you are christened as it (the child) is – You have no part in it indeed, Neither of the child nor of me.</p>
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- **The romance makes frequent use of formulaic expressions related to Christianity (e.g. line 2: For Marie's love; line 40: Bi Him that dyed on the rode; lines 56–57: Forsake Jhesus our Saveour / That suffred woundes five?; line 61: Jhesu mi Lord in Trinité; lines 64–65: O God and Persones Thre One / For Marie love, Thi moder fre etc.). The fillers of this kind do not necessarily convey any particular meaning, serving instead as commonplace expressions of faith. It seems, however, that the selection of the formulas used in the romance between lines 478 and 681 does correspond to the content of the story: find any formulaic expressions in the fragment in question: What particular property of God do they underline and how do they foreshadow what the result of the test proposed by the Princess is going to be?**

the following fragments can be used by students to substantiate their answer:

Lines 485–486

And Jhesu Crist mi Lord forsake,
That made Adam and Eve

Lines 512–513

To Jhesu sche made hir mon,
That alle this world hath wrought.

Line 569

Sche bad to Jhesu ful of might

Line 603

Bi Him that ous hath wrought!

Line 674

Bi Jhesu Crist that made man

- **What is the function of comparing the child to a stone in the Sultan's prayer scene? What does the scene tell us about the child and the gods that the Sultan prays to? What parallel does the presentation of the gods here draw between the two?**

Lines 618–660

<p>The soudan toke that flesche anon Into his temple he gan to gon Ther his godes were dight.</p> <p>Biform his eedss he gan it leyn And held up his honden tuein, While men might go five mile. “A, mightful Mahoun,” he gan to seyn, “And Ternagaunt, of michel meyn, In you was never no gile. Seyn Jubiter and Apolin, Astirot and Seyn Jovin, Help now in this perile.” Oft he kneled and oft he ros And crid so long til he was hos And al he tint his while.</p> <p>And when he hadde al ypreyd, And alle that ever he couthe he seyde, The flesche lay stille as ston. Anon he stert up at a breyd, And in his hert he was atreyd, For lim no hadde it non. He biheld on his godes alle And seye ther might no bot bifalle; Wel wo was him bigon. “O Sir Mahoun,” he gan to grede, “Wil ye nought helpe me at this eed? The devel you brenne ichon!”</p> <p>He hent a staf with grete hete And stirt anon his godes to bete And drough hem alle adoun, And leyd on til he gan to swete And gaf hem strokes gode and gret, Both Jovine and Plotoun.</p>	<p>The sultan took that flesh anon Into his temple he went There his gods were arrayed.</p> <p>Before his gods he laid And held up his hands two, While men might go five mile (i.e. For as long as it would take one to walk five miles). “Oh, mightful Mohammed,” he said, “And Ternagaunt, of great might, In you was never any guile Saint Jupiter and Apollo Astarte (i.e. Venus) and Saint Jove Help now in this peril.” Often he knelt and often he rose And cried so long till he was hoarse And he wasted all his time.</p> <p>And when he had all prayed (i.e. when he finished his prayers), And all that he ever could he said, The flesh lay still as stone. Anon he jumped up suddenly, And in his heart he was troubled, For limb had it none. He looked upon his gods all And saw there could no help come; Very deeply grieved was he. “O Sir Mohammed,” he cried out “Will you not help me at this need? [Let] the devil burn each one [of] you!”</p> <p>He lifted a staff with great vehemence And started anon his gods to beat And pulled them all down, And continued till he sweated And gave them strokes good and great, Both Jove and Pluto.</p>
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<p>And alder best he bete afin Jubiter and Apolin, And brac hem arm and croun, And Ternagaunt that was her brother — He no lete never a lime with other No of his god Mahoun.</p> <p>And when he hadde beten hem gode won Yete lay the flesche stille so ston, An heye on his auter.</p>	<p>And best of all he beat thoroughly Jupiter and Apollo, And broke their arm and crown (i.e. head), And Ternagaunt that was their brother - He left no limb with other (i.e. he destroyed them completely) Nor of his god Mohammed.</p> <p>And when he had beaten them very well Yet lay the flesh still as stone, On high on his altar.</p>
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5. The Power of the Christian and Muslim Ritual

- **What happens when the Princess arrives at the Sultan's court? How is the moment of the Princess entering into 'the other' culture marked in the text?**

Lines 373–393

<p>He com with mani gret lording Forto welcome that swete thing When sche was brought in chare. He kist hir wel mani a sithe; His joie couthe he no man kithe – Oway was alle his care. Into chaumber sche was ladde, And richeliche sche was cladde As hethen wiman ware.</p> <p>Whan sche was cladde in riche palle, The soudan dede his knightes calle And badde that maiden forth fett. And when sche com into the halle, Bifor the heyghe lordinges alle, Toform the soudan thai hir sett. Gret diol it was forto se, The bird that was so bright on ble To have so foule a mett. Thei that sche made gret solas The sorwe that at hir hert was No might it noman lett.</p>	<p>He came with many great lords To welcome that sweet thing When she was brought in chariot. He kissed her well many a time; His joy could no man describe – Away was all his sorrow. Into a chamber she was led, And richly she was dressed As heathen women were.</p> <p>When she was clad in rich clothes, The sultan did his knights call And bade the maiden forth fetch. And when she came into the hall, Before the high lords all, Before them the sultan placed her. Great sadness it was that to see, The woman that was so bright (i.e. radiant) of complexion To have so foul a mate. Although she [appeared to] enjoy herself The sorrow that at her heart was Noone could prevent.</p>
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- **Something analogous happens to the Sultan – what is that analogous moment?**
 Follow-up questions:
 - What elements of the ritual of baptism are emphasized in the description?
 - In what sense is the Sultan's baptism a ritual of incorporation into a different culture?
- **(a general question) What is the function of rituals? What are the words and gestures of a ritual supposed to do? Are they just a performance or is there more to them?**
- **(a general question) What binary opposition are laws and rituals part of? Why do people impose the ritualistic frameworks on their actions? (hint: think of the difference between mating and marriage)**
- **What is the difference between what happens to the Princess and the Sultan during their rituals of incorporation and when it comes to the effectiveness of the two rituals?**

a follow-up question:

- What does the tale imply about the Muslim ritual? Why is it ineffective in changing the reality? (think of what we have said about the presentation of the Saracens, including the Sultan, in the tale, about the transformation of the Princess and about the marriage that should have allowed the Princess and the Sultan to become parents)

Lines 907–930

<p>And when it was light of day The riche soudan ther he lay Up bigan to arise. To the prest he went his way And halp him alle that he may That fel to his servise. And when the prest hadde tho Dight redi that fel therto In al maner wise, The soudan with gode wille anon Dede off his clothes everichon To reseve his baptize.</p> <p>The Cristen prest hight Cleophas; He cleped the soudan of Damas After his owen name. His hide that blac and lothely was Al white bicom thurth Godes gras And clere withouten blame. And when the soudan seye that sight, Than leved he wele on God almight; His care went to game. And when the prest hadde alle yseyd And haly water on him leyd, To chaumber thai went ysame.</p>	<p>And when it was light of day (i.e. in the morning) The mighty sultan [from] where he lay Up began to arise. To the priest he went his way And helped him all that he could That appertained to his service. And when the priest had then Prepared [everything] that appertained to this In all manner wise, The sultan with good will anon Took off his clothes every one To receive his baptism.</p> <p>The Christian priest called Cleophas; He named the sultan of Damascus After his own name. His skin that black and loathly was All white became through God's grace And clear without blame. And when the sultan saw that sight, Then believed he well in God almighty; His misery turned into mirth And when the priest said (i.e. pronounced) all And holy water on him laid, To the chamber they went together.</p>
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6. (Apparent) Inconsistencies and the Rhetoric of Proximity

- **There are moments in the tale in which the narrator suggests that there are some similarities between Islam and Christianity and between the followers of these two faiths. Can you think of any such moments?**

the following fragments can be provided as examples:

Lines 181–186

<p>The king of Tars seye that sight; For wretthe he was neye wode, aflight. He hent in hond a spere And to the soudan he rode ful right. With a stroke o michel might, To grounde he gan him bere.</p>	<p>The king of Tars saw that sight; For wrath he was nearly mad, assuredly. He grasped in hand a spear And to the sultan he rode full right. With a stroke of great might, He (i.e. the king) bore him (i.e. the sultan) to the ground (i.e. he unhorsed him).</p>
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Lines 193–198

<p>And when he was upon his stede, Him thought he brend so spark on glede For ire and for envie. He faught so he wald wede: Alle that he hit he maked blede. “Help, Mahoun!” he gan crie.</p>	<p>And when he was upon his steed, It seemed to them that he burned like a spark on a live coal For spite and for envy. He fought as if he would go mad: He made all [people] that he hit bleed. “Help, Mohammed!” he went crying.</p>
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Lines 406–409

<p>Wel lothe war a Cristen man To wedde an hethen woman That leved on fals lawe; Als loth was that soudan To wed a Cristen woman,</p>	<p>Well loath were a Christian man To wed a heathen woman That believed in false law; Also loath was that sultan To wed a Christian woman,</p>
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- **Why are the analogies there? Do you see them as weakening the ‘us’ and ‘them’ division (i.e., undermining the binary opposition on which the tale is based)? Do these analogies make the story less anti-Islamic? (hint: ‘us’ vs heresy / vs religion with some similarities / vs religion that is completely different, has absolutely nothing to do with ‘us’ – which of the three is most and least prone to othering in your opinion? Why?)**

7. The Position of the Narrator and the Implied Audience of the Romance

- **Can you think of any instances of Christians’ behaviours that we would call morally questionable or wrong, but that are justified in the tale?**

prompt questions:

- how does the tale present the Princess’s double-dealing?
- How does the Saracens’ violence compare to the Christians’ anger and the ensuing crusade?

a follow-up question:

- How does the tale manage to present cheating, lying, pretending and slaughter as something positive? What kind of implicit assumptions make it possible to present this kind of deceit in a positive light? How come that this behaviour does not discredit the Princess and the crusaders (and therefore undermine the whole binary opposition the tale is based on), but, quite the contrary, makes them even more positive characters? What kind of assumption does the implied audience of the tale need to share in order to accept the behaviour of the Princess and of other Christians? In other words, who is the implied audience of the tale?
- **What kind of narrative voice is used in *The King of Tars*?**
prompt questions:
 - Does the narrator relate the events or relate and comment on them?
 - Is the narrator’s tone judgmental or non-judgmental?
 - Does the narrator take sides or remain impartial?
- **Do you think the tale is designed to perform the same miracle as it describes, that is to convert infidels? Does it do what it tells in any other sense?**