

The Anxieties of Encounter and Exchange: Saracens and Christian Heroism in *Sir Beves of Hamtoun*

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As Edward Said, Norman Daniel, and Dorothee Metlitzki have pointed out, the purportedly Muslim figures who appear in medieval western literature usually bear little or no resemblance to historical Muslims of the period. Said states, “we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate” (71). Similarly, Daniel and Metlitzki identify repeated stereotypical misrepresentations of Islam in medieval literary texts, such as the depiction of Islam as a polytheistic religion or the depiction of alcohol-drinking Muslims (Daniel 3-4, 49-51, 72-73, 81, 133-54; Metlitzki 209-10). It is certainly true that there is little or no mimetic relationship between literary Saracens and historical Muslims, but it should be noted that literary Saracens, despite their inaccuracies, did connote for the West an extremely powerful, technologically advanced Muslim civilization, which both impressed medieval Christians with its scientific knowledge and immense wealth, and menaced them militarily with its many victories over crusaders and its capacity for territorial expansion.¹ Thus, while the Saracens of western literature may not offer us a historically accurate vision of medieval Islam, they can occasionally offer us some insight into the anxieties historical Islam posed for the West. This essay examines moments in the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Sir Beves of Hamtoun* when the text’s depiction of one knight’s assimilation into a Saracen world communicates historical anxieties about how life in a Saracen

enclave might compromise the Christian heroism of an English knight. The essay argues that *Beves of Hamtoun* both conveys a fear of Christian assimilation into a non-Christian world, and defines a model of heroic action to counteract such assimilation and re-establish the borders between Christianity and Saraceness. However, the text also indicates the ways in which heroic efforts to reconstruct such borders might ultimately fail.

Sir Beves of Hamtoun translates into Middle English an earlier Anglo-Norman original. *Boeve de Haumtone* survived to modern times in three manuscripts, although one of these (Leuven, University Library, G.170) was burned in 1940.² The remaining two manuscripts of the Anglo-Norman tale survive, and date, respectively, to the second half of the thirteenth century (London, Lambeth Palace, 1237, Nos. 1, 2)³ and to c.1300 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, nouvelles acquisitions françaises 4532). The earliest extant translation of the Beves story into Middle English is found in the Auchinleck manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates 19.2.1; usually dated to 1330-1340),⁴ and it is this version which will be discussed here. Other versions of the Middle English *Sir Beves* are found in five additional manuscripts: Cambridge, University Library, Ff. 2. 38 (mid to late fifteenth century);⁵ Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, 175 (fifteenth century);⁶ Naples, National Library, XII. B. 29 (fifteenth century); London, British Library, Egerton 2862 (formerly the Duke of Sutherland manuscript) from the end of the fourteenth century; and Manchester, Chetham Library, 8009⁷ (also known as Mun. A. 6. 31).⁸

The version of *Sir Beves of Hamtoun* found in the Auchinleck manuscript offers a vision of Saracen-Christian interaction which contrasts with that found in other texts in the manuscript. Unlike many of the manuscript's other romances involving Saracens and Christians, such as *Otuel a Kniȝt*, *Roland and Vernagu*, *Of Arthur and of Merlin*, and the fragmentary *Kyng Richard* and *Kyng Alisaunder*, *Sir Beves* does not confine its depiction of a Saracen world to the battlefield. Instead, the text narrates the life experiences of an English noble who is sold to Saracens at an early age, grows up at a Saracen court, serves a Saracen king in various inter-Saracen conflicts, and eventually marries a converted Saracen princess. Many historical inaccuracies do turn up in the text, such as the Saracen princess's very western snow-white complexion (522)⁹ and Saracen worship of multiple gods (606). However, the romance's depictions of wealthy Saracen kings, of a complex Saracen

political scene, and of inter-Saracen conflicts evoke a sense of a self-contained non-Christian world in which opportunities for military and political advancement abound. As a result, the Saracen world represented in *Sir Beves* communicates a somewhat evocative vision of the Islamic world as perceived and experienced by western crusaders.

One of the historical anxieties prompted by crusade and settlement in the East was the fear that western Christians involved in these activities might lose their sense of proper mores and become too similar to their Muslim opponents. As Geraldine Heng notes, crusaders were “enjoined to rescue from infidel pollution the sacred places of the Holy Land, not to visit the contagion of heathen pollution upon themselves” (“Cannibalism” 107). Thus, inhabitants of the crusader kingdoms were adjured not to intermingle sexually with Muslims (Runciman *Kingdom* 101; Lambert 3-4), and were roundly condemned by their western counterparts for becoming too eastern, too non-Christian. According to the author of *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 occurred because residents of the crusader kingdoms forgot their (western) Christian origins:

Then the Lord’s hand was aroused against His people — if we can properly call them ‘His,’ as their immoral behaviour, disgraceful lifestyle, and foul vices had made them strangers to Him. For shameful practices had broken out in the East, so that everywhere everyone threw off the veil of decency and openly turned aside to filthy things. (*Chronicle* 23)¹⁰

Getting too close to non-Christians was also a charge leveled against later crusading forces. In Roger of Wendover’s chronicle entry for 1229, crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire, including the Emperor himself, are accused of eating and drinking with Saracens and of preferring Saracens and their customs to Christians.¹¹ Even writers advocating renewal of crusade in the early fourteenth century, after the fall of Acre in 1291 and the effective end of “the Latin Christian presence in Palestine and Syria” (Riley-Smith 207), raised concerns about future crusader inhabitants of the East “going Saracen.” Pierre Dubois, for example, proposes a plan for the renewed conquest and western settlement of the Holy Land in his tract *De recuperatione terre sancte*, written about 1306. He worries that future settlers of the Holy Land may lose touch with their Christian roots:

Suppose that those who dwell in that land live wickedly . . . that men congregated there from practically every part of the world begin to lead wicked lives and accustom themselves to such a manner of living? And instead of changing it, fix it as a habit, which is another nature, since it alters nature? (Dubois, *Recovery* 114).¹²

Dubois also fears that his plan to marry beautiful, well-educated Christian women to Saracen rulers (and thereby effect these rulers' conversion to Christianity) might give rise to the women's participation "in their husbands' idolatry [eorum ydolatria]" (*Recovery* 124 [*De Recuperatione* 57]). Evidently, fourteenth-century writers share their predecessors' concerns about maintaining a distinctive western Christian identity in the East. Sarah Lambert summarizes the anxieties thus: "Operating on the borders of Christendom, it was vitally important for [Christian crusaders in the East] to recognize and stick to the rules, to identify fully with 'us' and to know and recognize 'them'" (3). How to recognize and affirm this distinction is precisely the challenge facing the Saracen-raised Beves in *Beves of Hamtoun*.

Repeatedly, Beves acts in ways that indicate a profound assimilation into the Saracen world of the text, and undermine his claim to be a model hero of medieval western romance. The romance suggests that immersion in a Saracen world can tempt a Christian knight to stray from the path of righteousness, and exchange his native identity for a Saracen one. In response to this troubling possibility, the text elaborates a model of Christian heroism that emerges at moments of indeterminacy to assert unequivocally the hero's "true" identity and facilitate the establishment of inherited identity so central to medieval romance as a genre.

One of the encounters with Saracens that suggests Beves' uncomfortably deep assimilation into the Saracen world is his first battle. In the Auchinleck text (and in the other Middle English versions), this battle occurs on Christmas Day when Beves is riding with a company of Saracen warriors, one of whom asks Beves what day this is. Beves replies,

I not neuer, what dai it is,
 For i nas boutē seue winter old,
 Fro Cristendome ich was i-sold;
 þar fore i ne can telle nouȝt ze,
 What dai þat hit miȝte be.
 (594-98)

In this speech, Beves explicitly proclaims his Christian identity to all (“Fro Cristendome ich was i-sold”), but also reveals that this identity may have been compromised by his sale to Saracens. Because of his exile, Beves does not know what day it is, a perfectly understandable claim given the differences between Christian and Muslim dating practices. Such ignorance, however, has consequences for Christians as it renders the proper religious observance of holy days impossible. The Saracen’s next words alert Beves to this lapse in the practice of the Christian identity he asserts. The Saracen laughs and tells Beves,

i knowe wel inou3:
 Þis is þe ferste dai of 3oul,
 Þe god was boren wiþ outen doul;
 For þi men maken þer mor blisse
 Pan men do her in heþenese:
 Anoure þe god, so i schel myn.
 (600-5)

Beves’ confession of ignorance and his non-observance of a Christian holy day display his lack of the religious awareness one might expect of a Christian hero. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in contrast, the hero knows, even while questing in the wilds, that the feast of Christmas approaches and must be observed (see lines 748-62). Beves, however, has no such innate knowledge of Christian feast days, a fact which demonstrates the extent of his immersion in a non-Christian world and the religious danger such immersion poses for a Christian hero. What is particularly galling is the fact that even Saracens, although they do not observe Christmas, know more about Beves’ religious heritage and practices than he does; thus, they must play the unlikely role of religious instructors. Such a situation is not to be borne; indeed, it is shameful for a Christian, and provokes an angry response from Beves in the form of a taunting challenge to battle. Fighting Saracens will allow Beves to affirm his Christian identity and manifest physically his difference from his Saracen companions. He can thereby make amends for his ignorance and his failure to observe Christmas until prompted to do so by non-believers.

Beves’ recourse to violent action in this situation is perhaps unsurprising since, as Corinne Saunders has observed, “It is a critical commonplace that identity in

medieval romance tends to be expressed through action rather than interior psychological exploration” (29). Beves does, however, complicate his recourse to action by prefacing it with an appeal to memories of his childhood in “Cristendom” (608).¹³ He recalls that

Ichaue seie on þis dai riȝt
 Armed mani a gentil kniȝt,
 Torneande riȝt in þe feld
 With helmes briȝt and mani scheld.
 (609-12)

Beves then links this Christian martial activity to his genealogical English heritage by adding

And were ich also stiȝ in plas,
 Ase euer Gii, me fader, was,
 Ich wolde for me lordes loue,
 Ðat sit hiȝ in heuene aboue,
 Fiȝte wiȝ ȝow euerichon,
 Er þan ich wolde hennes gon
 (613-18)

Beves’ explicit invocation of his Christian, English martial heritage provokes his Saracen companions to attack him, and a melee ensues in which Beves kills fifty Saracens single-handedly. What is particularly interesting about this episode is Beves’ appeal to a historical precedent of Christian violence to justify his actions and constitute his tardy observance of the religious holiday. Sharon Kinoshita, quoting Arjun Appadurai, states that “group identities are constituted by the conscious mobilization of certain attributes ‘to articulate the boundary of difference’” (83). In Beves’ case, the attribute he consciously mobilizes to define and affirm his Christian identity is violence, and he explicitly links this violence both to Christendom and to his father, Gii of Hamtoun. Battling Saracens, Beves asserts, is part of his Christian, English heritage. Henceforth in the text, violence figures pointedly in any efforts made by Beves to disentangle himself from the Saracen world when he finds himself too deeply enmeshed in it. As Kinoshita has shown in her discussion of the *Chanson de Roland*, however, vio-

lence does not always succeed in confirming the distinction between Christian and Saracen.¹⁴

Although Beves recalls, and lives up to, his heritage in the Christmas Day Battle, his assertion of Christian identity proves fleeting. Six hundred lines later, Beves willfully and explicitly denies his links to his Christian, English family. Entrusted with a message from the Saracen King Ermin to King Brademond of Damascus, Beves travels towards Brademond's city. En route, he comes across a palmer who is actually his cousin Terri. Terri has been sent into Saracen lands by his father in order to seek out news of Beves, and he pursues this task by asking Beves (whom he does not recognize) if Beves has heard anyone speak of a child named Beves, from Southampton, who was sold to Saracens. In a statement unique to the Auchinleck manuscript, Beves laughs and says "Hit is nouȝt . . . gon longe / I seȝ þe Sarsins þat child an-honge" (1307-8). Whereas in other Middle English versions of the tale Beves merely tells Terri to go home and leave the contacting of Beves to him, in the Auchinleck version Beves brutally and definitively severs his connections to his English family by reporting his own death. It might be argued that this incident can be read humorously — Beves does, after all, laugh as he says these words and even makes a grim joke at Terri's expense when he tells Terri to return home and tell his friends that "Pouȝ þow him [Beves] seche þes seue ȝer, / Pow worst þat child neuer þe ner" (1319-20). Still, Terri's powerful emotional reaction to news of Beves' demise (he swoons and then weeps) communicates his deep and serious grief and demonstrates the harshness of Beves' manner of terminating his connection to his English, Christian family. The Auchinleck lines constitute a definitive repudiation, on Beves' part, of his kin and heritage, not a mere postponement of reunion as in other Middle English versions of the tale. Moreover, no reason is given for Beves' refusal to reveal himself to Terri. The Auchinleck text contains no suggestion that Beves must maintain a disguise, or that he might expose himself to danger if he identified himself to his cousin. Instead, a troubling desire for a Saracen life and family seems to motivate Beves' rejection of his English, Christian family.

This troubling desire can also be seen in Beves' next speech. When Terri offers to read the message Beves is carrying, Beves refuses by saying, "He, þat me tok þis letter an honde, / He ne wolde loue me non oþer / Pan ich were is owene broþer" (1330-32). Having harshly severed his ties to his English family, Beves now represents himself as part of a Saracen one and as the pseudo-brother of King Ermin. He

startlingly rejects the English, Christian identity to which he was born, and attempts to replace that identity with a Saracen one. This severance of Christian family ties has been hinted at earlier in the romance in lines such as “Pe king [Ermin] him [Beves] louede also is broþer” (578). Beves’ sense of connection to a Saracen family also seems a logical outgrowth of the fact that Ermin treats Beves more as a son than does Beves’ own mother, who attempts to have Beves killed before deciding to sell him to Saracens (337-54). Ermin, in contrast, attempts to bequeath his kingdom to Beves (555-60), and then, when Beves refuses to convert in order to inherit, promises Beves that he may still be Ermin’s chamberlain and standard-bearer in battle (571-74). The Saracen Ermin certainly seems, at this point in the text, a more desirable family member. Hence, Beves’ assertion of a Saracen family identity has a convincing resonance. Moreover, unlike other Middle English texts that mitigate Christian characters’ performances of Saracen identity by simultaneously asserting their hidden adherence to Christianity,¹⁵ *Beves of Hamtoun* includes no words to attenuate Beves’ bold rewriting of his familial and dynastic affiliations at this point. Instead, Beves’ claims to Saracen “brotherhood” are articulated forthrightly and explicitly. Susan Crane has argued convincingly that, in the chivalric and courtly worlds of the fourteenth century, public behaviour “constitutes as well as expresses identity” (*Performance* 177). In Beves’ case, his public rejection of his Christian heritage and concomitant assertion of Saracen family ties performatively construct him as possessing a Saracen identity. When considered in this light, Beves’ actions have powerful and disturbing implications for a western audience. The idea that a Christian knight might renounce his Christian family and literally make himself the brother of Christianity’s enemies suggests the instability of the boundaries separating Christian from Saracen, and the dangerous ease with which those boundaries might be collapsed by a Christian living in the East. Beves’ words also communicate the attractiveness of the Saracen world and its opportunities. This attraction is so great that Beves consciously chooses a Saracen life over a Christian one at this point in the text.

Such a choice, however, is an impossibility for the hero of a Middle English romance, and the narrative quickly depicts an encounter that clearly differentiates Beves from his Saracen “brothers” and reasserts his Christian heroism. Beves’ first act after his departure from Terri is the destruction of a Saracen temple:

Beues of is palfrei aliȝte
 And ran to her mameri ful riȝte

And slouȝ here prest, þat þer was in,
 And þrew here godes in þe fen.
 (1353-56)

Although he has lived in Saracen lands for many years by this point, Beves has never yet performed so significant a Christian knightly feat as the destruction of Saracen idols. Once again, an act of violence solidifies Beves' claims to Christian heroism after an incident announcing his apparent abandonment of his native heritage. Beves (or the narrator) must remind Beves of his true identity and of the boundary that should separate him from his Saracen lord, and violence seems to be the only means that will serve this purpose. However, violence alone is beginning to seem a rather ineffective method of affirming Beves' Christian heroism. We have, after all, seen Beves use violence before this to assert his Christian identity, but such assertions do not seem particularly durable; even after the Christmas Day Battle, Beves speaks and acts in ways which affirm his Saracen rather than his Christian affiliations. Moreover, we see Beves engaged in acts of violence to defend his Saracen lord and advance that lord's interest. For example, he fights to defend Ermin from Brademond earlier in the narrative (960-1079). Those violent acts work at cross-purposes to Beves' acts of Christian violence because acts of violence in inter-Saracen conflicts confirm Beves' assimilation into Saracen society. Hence, it is not surprising that the text at this point begins to augment violence with other attributes that establish Beves' Christianity. Such augmentation may also reflect the enormity of Beves' verbal rejection of his heritage, and constitute an effort to re-educate the hero and alert him to the error of his wild speech of brotherhood.

Sir Beves' elaboration of a model of Christian heroism that melds violence with distinctively non-Saracen behaviour emerges most clearly when Beves delivers King Ermin's letter to Brademond and is promptly thrown into prison since Ermin's letter requests such action. The text thus establishes Saracen perfidy, and exposes Beves' error in expecting brotherly love and loyalty from a Saracen. The romance then devotes itself to narrating Beves' return to the Christian fold. Beves first signals his sense of sinfulness by asking,

Lord . . . , heuene king,
 Schepere of erþe & alle þing:

What haue ich so meche misgilt,
 Pat þow sext & þolen wilt,
 Pat þe weþerwines & þe fo
 Schel þe seruaunt do þis wo?
 (1579-84)

He then proceeds to pray, saying “Ich bedde þe, lord, for þe pite, / Pat þow haue merci on me / And zeue grace, hennes to gange” (1585-87). Beves here asserts his Christian identity in a new manner: through repentance and prayer. Although not as extended as the acts of repentance depicted in romances such as *Sir Ysumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, *Guy of Warwick*, and *Robert of Cisyle*, Beves’ acts here do seem to testify to what Andrea Hopkins calls the “sudden and profound change of heart” that plays a central role in fashioning Christian knightly heroism in some Middle English romances (21). Immediately after Beves’ repentance and prayer, he receives external confirmation of his status as Christian hero when God works a miracle so that Beves may escape his prison. After another prayer, Beves’ fetters are broken and a massive stone pinning him down magically rolls off his middle. The violence of the temple destruction combines with religious observances and a miracle to establish beyond doubt Beves’ exemplary Christian knighthood and his renewed and improved adherence to the identity dictated by his heritage. Henceforth, the text offers the combination of violence, religious observance, and attendant miracle as a model for the retention of Christian heroism and identity in a Saracen world.

The same cocktail of violence, religious observance, and miracle turns up, for example, in Beves’ fight against a venom-spewing dragon. In a vicious struggle spanning both day and night, Beves displays his usual martial prowess. He repeatedly assails the dragon and eventually succeeds in striking the hundreds of blows that kill it. Beves is aided, however, by a miraculous well containing water “so holi” (2807) that the dragon cannot come within forty feet of it (2804-10). The water of this well refreshes Beves after a long day of battle and, later, heals him after the dragon’s venom has caused his flesh to rankle and swell. Interestingly, the well’s efficacious action is linked both times to an invocation of divine aid. The first time Beves calls on St. George to aid him (2817), and the second time he prays, “Lord, þat rerede þe Lazaroun, / Diliure me fro þis fend dragoun!” (2839-40). In this battle then, Beves once again combines violence with prayer, and reaps the benefits of a miraculous well. As Judith Weiss has shown, the battle clearly asserts Beves’ Eng-

lish Christian heroism (72). The prayers and the holy well identify Beves as a Christian hero, while the reference to St. George signals that Beves is to be read as a latter-day analogue of the saint who held special significance for crusaders¹⁶ and who was increasingly becoming a symbolic part of English military endeavors.¹⁷ *Beves of Hamtoun* again goes to great lengths to assure its audience that Beves has retained his native identity.

Intriguingly, Beves' incontrovertible demonstration of English Christian heroism in the dragon battle occurs just after the conversion and baptism of Beves' Saracen beloved, Josiane.¹⁸ Josiane's conversion paves the way for the sexual and dynastic union of Beves and a Saracen princess, and seems to make such a union unproblematic. However, the efficacy of conversion in effacing former religious identities was not universally agreed upon in the later Middle Ages. As Steven Kruger has argued, among Christians there was much "uncertainty about whether religious conversion truly transformed [Muslim and Jewish] bodies, cleansing them of their impurities, repairing their imperfections, and removing the tinges of animality that clung to them in Christian fantasies" (167). As a result, marital, sexual and romantic relations between Christians and converts could be a charged issue. In *Beves of Hamtoun*, conversion seems at best a partial effacement of Josiane's Saracen identity. Later in the Auchinleck text, after she has married Beves and given birth to his heirs, Josiane is said to make use of a Saracen knowledge of herbs and minstrelsy gleaned during her youth "in Ermonie," her father's Saracen realm (3671-84, 3905-24).¹⁹ Her use of such knowledge demonstrates her continuing links to her heritage. Those links are also foregrounded by the fact that Josiane's Saracen father makes one of Beves and Josiane's sons his heir. Clearly, Josiane's Saraceness remains part of her even after her conversion, and influences the lives of Beves and his dynastic successors. Beves' battle with the dragon, however, explicitly asserts that although he may be romantically and dynastically linked to a convert (and thus enmeshed in potentially problematic Saracen affiliations), he is nonetheless to be read as a paragon of Christian knighthood and a follower in the crusading footsteps of St. George. Once again, violence, prayers, and miracles combine to affirm that Beves has not fallen prey to the attractions of the Saracen world, even though he may be linked to that world through his unconventional wife-to-be.

I am not sure, however, that Beves ultimately does preserve his English Christian heritage intact. His marriage to Josiane and her continued manifestations of

Saraceness evidently problematize any claim to such preservation. More noticeably, despite the various textual affirmations of his status as a model of Christian knighthood, Beves exhibits, in the final part of the text, an inability to fit comfortably into English society. This is seen most clearly in his last battle, a fight against the people of London in which he and his sons kill thirty-two thousand Londoners and thereby make the Thames run red with blood (4529-32). This battle seems in many ways to reinforce Beves' Christian English heroism along the lines traced earlier in the text. He again exhibits great martial prowess and appropriate religious devotion, thanking God for his sons' timely arrival — miraculously in the nick of time — and their decisive assistance against the Londoners (4523-26). The detailed setting of the battle in specific London streets also affirms Beves' Englishness, as Judith Weiss has shown (73). Indeed, Beves' battle has even been read as a pointed commentary on English politics. Judith Weiss describes it as a “distorted reminiscence” of a confrontation between Simon de Montfort and Henry III (74), while Susan Crane interprets it as an example of the ways in which *Beves of Hamtoun* advances English baronial interests at the expense of royal ones (*Insular Romance* 60-62). The ultimate resolution of the battle, which is the installation of Beves' son Miles as the heir of the King of England, also supports a reading of this episode as the final manifestation of Beves' English heroism. Nevertheless, the battle also evinces Beves' ultimate inability to fit in in England.²⁰ Rather than being welcomed by his own people, Beves must fight for acceptance and only achieves it by enforcing it on his compatriots in a bloody battle. Indeed, the high number of Londoners killed and the description of the Thames running red with blood, however typical of hyperbolic descriptions of battle in romance, cast Beves as a military menace to England and its inhabitants, and as a catalyst for civil war. More intriguingly, while Beves' son may remain in England and rule, Beves himself soon afterwards abandons Christian England to return to his Saracen realm of Mombraunt, a realm which he is never explicitly said to “ma[k]e cristen wiz dent of swerd” (4019).²¹ He chooses life in this Saracen realm over his patrimonial earldom of Southampton and life in England. Beves even cedes his earldom to his uncle and thereby rids himself of any seigniorial obligations in England. Finally, in the death-bed scene of the romance, Beves' England-based son is notably absent, a fact which signals once again Beves' severance of ties to his homeland (4590-4616).²² Thus, while Beves asserts through violence, prayer, and divine favour his identity as an English Christian knight, his Saracen upbringing and assimilation cannot be utterly eradicated, and as a result, Beves can

never truly be at home in an English, Christian world. While he has not fully “gone Saracen,” he does not succeed, ultimately, in disavowing his Saracen links.

Beves of Hamtoun thus offers a multi-faceted and intriguing portrait of a Christian knight’s life in a Saracen world. Deeply embedded in the society in which he is raised, Beves displays a disconcerting ignorance of Christian religious observances as well as a troubling desire to replace his English, Christian family with a Saracen one. Such anxiety-inducing assimilation, however, is repeatedly undone by the text’s use of violence, prayer and miracle to re-draw the boundaries separating Beves from the Saracens surrounding him. Even as the romance raises the spectre of Christian assimilation into a non-Christian world, it repeatedly attempts to banish this spectre by depicting a model of Christian heroism. The ultimate efficacy of this banishment, however, is called into question by Beves’ marriage to a convert who never quite abandons her Saracen heritage, by Beves’ inability to fit in in England and find acceptance there, and by his decision to rule the Saracen realm of Mombraunt rather than his inherited English lands. Thus, as *Beves of Hamtoun* raises and addresses concerns about Christian immersion in a Saracen world, it succeeds more at showing the validity of such concerns than at putting them to rest.

Perhaps it is best, however, not to put such concerns to rest but rather to consider them fully. As should be clear from this essay, the Auchinleck version of *Sir Beves* repeatedly raises the issue of assimilation. It is only in Auchinleck that Beves declares himself dead and then proceeds to claim a Saracen brother for himself, and it is only in Auchinleck that Josiane’s reversion to her Saracen upbringing is described in rich and full detail (3671-84, 3905-24).²³ On the other hand, Auchinleck is also the sole manuscript in which Beves identifies himself with St. George, a markedly English model of Christian and crusading heroism. Perhaps this version’s redactor was particularly interested in depicting the full range both of Beves’ immersion in the Saracen world and of his ability to embody a model English Christian heroism. Whatever the reasons for the redactor’s alterations, this manuscript’s extended portrayals of Beves’ ties to the Saracen world as well as of his exemplary heroism raise the possibility that Saracen ties might sometimes be part of English Christian heroism rather than solely a menace to its integrity. Indeed, one might even see the inescapability of Beves’ Saracen links as beneficial to England and its people. For example, Josiane’s Saracen upbringing benefits Beves’ family dynasty: “While Iosian was in Ermonie, / 3he hadde lerned of minstralcie, / Vpon a fiþele for

to play” (3905-7), and this knowledge enables her to win money and food to look after Beves’ uncle Sabor when he falls desperately ill. Josiane’s Saracen ancestry also provides a realm for Beves’ son Gii to rule; Josiane’s father, Ermin, bequeaths his kingdom to Gii, his grandson, and thereby enfeoffs the scion of a noble, Christian, English dynasty. Similarly, Beves’ own martial feats in the East mean that he, too, comes to rule over a Saracen realm. In short, Beves’ troubling Saracen ties ensure that model English, Christian knights end up ruling not only England but also rich and powerful realms abroad.

The appeal of such a vision to English readers in the early fourteenth century should not be underestimated. The first and longest part of Pierre Dubois’ treatise advocating recovery of the Holy Land was addressed to Edward I of England, and Dubois clearly expected Edward to lead the reclamation of that land from “the Saracens who seized it” (*Recovery* 70).²⁴ Moreover, in the section addressed to Edward, Dubois explicitly lists as a motivation for crusade the fact that the enterprise will increase European land holdings:

When these projects have, by the grace of God, been accomplished, Catholics of the same mind will be in possession of the whole Mediterranean coast, from the west all the way to the east on the north side, and the greater part touching the Land of Promise on the south. The Arabs will then be unable to prosper materially unless they share with the Catholics the commerce in their products. This will also be true in the case of oriental peoples and their products. (*Recovery* 156-57)²⁵

Clearly, westerners in the fourteenth century believed that geo-political and economic benefits as well as religious ones could accrue from military activity in the East. Indeed, Edward II showed that one could amass geo-political and economic benefits from merely vowing to crusade. As Christopher Tyerman writes, Edward II took the cross in Paris in 1313

with his wife, Isabella, her father, Philip IV, her brothers, and most of the great vassals of the French king; ... In return for this gesture of open support for Philip IV’s crusading preeminence, Edward secured charters of remission for various fines and debts imposed by the French king on his Gascon subjects. (242-43)

English knights also continued crusading throughout the fourteenth century, and a number of them participated in the 1365 sack of Alexandria, a crusading endeavor noted by chroniclers and historians alike for its material profits (Tyerman 260, 291-93). Thus, romances such as the Auchinleck *Sir Beves*, with its depictions of the land acquisition and material benefit to be derived from Saracen-Christian interactions, seem immensely pertinent to English interests in the fourteenth century.²⁶ If, as Geraldine Heng argues, romance is “a genre of *the nation*[,] a literary medium that solicits or invents the cultural means by which the medieval nation might be most productively conceptualized” (*Empire* 6), then *Sir Beves* implies that tales about Christian knights living abroad and establishing kingdoms there are part of an early fourteenth-century conceptualization of English power and identity. Such grandiose dreams of expansionism are not unalloyed by serious worries about assimilation and loss of Christian English identity in *Sir Beves*. However, the text as a whole suggests that the anxieties of encounter and exchange perhaps must be borne as the price of a Christian heroism that brings about the geo-political, dynastic, and economic aggrandizement of English knights abroad.

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Notes

• This article grew out of a paper presented at the 78th Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 10-12, 2003. I would like to thank Stephanie Cain Van D’Elden for organizing the session on *Beves of Hamtoun*, and I would also like to thank my fellow presenters, Judith Weiss and Jennifer Goodman, for their helpful and kind suggestions and comments.

- 1 See Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby* 16-56, and Southern, *Western Views* 8-12, for discussion of the superiority of Muslim scientific and theological knowledge in the Middle Ages. Christian awareness of Muslim wealth and sophistication is noted in Steven Runciman, *First Crusade* 88; Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Crusades* 190; Christopher Tyerman, *England and the Crusades* 293; and

Southern, *Western Views* 8-12. See Southern, *Western Views* 3, 7-8, 42-43, 105-6, and Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby* 129, 248, for discussion of the military menace posed by Muslims to medieval western Christendom.

- 2 This manuscript was formerly known as the Firmin Didot manuscript and lacked lines 1-911 and 1082-189. It had been dated to the second half of the thirteenth century. All dates and bibliographic information for the Anglo-Norman manuscripts are taken from Dean and Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature*.
- 3 This version consists of two strips from a binding, containing parts of lines 1641-43 and 1672-96.
- 4 This date is taken from the introduction to the facsimile of the Auchinleck manuscript (Pearsall vii).
- 5 This date is taken from Hardwick and Luard, *A Catalogue*. Other manuscript dates, unless explicitly noted, are taken from Eugen Kölbing's introduction to *The Romance of Sir Beves of Hamtoun*, vii-xliii.
- 6 This date is taken from Montague Rhodes James, *A Descriptive Catalogue*.
- 7 According to N. R. Ker, different scholars have dated this manuscript to the reigns of Henry III-Edward I, Richard II, and Edward IV (*Medieval Manuscripts* 362). Most *Beves* scholars seem to concur with the later datings and identify Auchinleck as the earliest English version. See Kölbing's introduction to *The Romance of Sir Beves of Hamtoun*, vii-viii, and Charles W. Dunn, "Romances" 25.
- 8 It should be pointed out that *Sir Beves* enjoyed a wide circulation in Europe in the Middle Ages. According to Dunn, the "original Anglo-Norman romance of c. 1200" became a Continental French romance in the early thirteenth century, a Welsh text ca. 1250-75, a Middle English text in the early fourteenth century, a Norse prose tale in the fourteenth century, and an Irish prose text in the fifteenth century (26). In addition, the Continental French version of the tale spawned a number of other language versions of *Sir Beves*. It metamorphosed into a French prose text in the fifteenth century, "into a Dutch prose version printed in 1502, and into a series of Italian versions" (26). A

“Yiddish poetic version, derived from Italian and frequently reprinted, was composed in 1501, and this eventually served as the source for a Rumanian [*sic*] translation (1881)” while a Russian version appeared in the early sixteenth century (26). In England, the tale also enjoyed wide circulation in later printed versions. For a full list of these, see Jennifer Fellows, “Sir Beves of Hampton,” vol. 1. The print versions are also discussed in her article “*Bevis Redivivus*.”

- 9 All references to *Beves of Hamtoun* are to lines in the Auchinleck manuscript version as presented in *The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, ed. Eugen Kölbing.
- 10 The Latin original of this passage reads, “aggravata est manus Domini super populum Suum, si tamen recte dixerimus Suum, quem conversationis immunditia, vitæ turpitudine, vitiorum fœditas fecerat alienum. Jam enim eousque flagitiorum consuetudo proruperat, ut omnes, abstracto erubescentiæ velo, palam et passim ad turpia declinarent” (*Itinerarium* 5).
- 11 “Item in palatio suo Achonensi fecit convivari Saracenos, et fecit eis habere mulieres Christianas saltatrices ad lundendum coram eis, et ut dicebatur, commiscebantur eis. Item, fœdus quod iniit cum soldano, nemo scivit qua conditione tractatum fuit inter eos, nisi ipse solus; veruntamen manifeste videbatur, quod magis approbaret, secundum quod perpendi poterat per gestus exteriores, legem Saracenorum, quam legem fidei nostræ, quia, in multis ritus ipsorum imitatus est” (Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum* 2: 373-74). The English translation reads, “Also, that in his palace at Acre he had eaten and drunk with Saracens, and introduced Christian dancing women to perform before them, and, as was said, that they had afterwards had connection with them. Also, that no one except himself knew the terms of the treaty which he had entered into with the sultan; and it plainly appeared, as far as could be judged from external appearances, that he approved of the law of the Saracens rather than that of our faith, inasmuch as he followed their customs in several points” (Roger of Wendover, *Roger of Wendover’s Flowers of History* 2: 527).
- 12 The original Latin of this passage reads, “Si enim habitatores illius terre male vivant . . . si homines quasi ex omnibus mundi partibus ibi congregati male vivere incipiant, et assuescant talem modum vivendi, consuetudini que est

altera natura quoniam naturam alterat, non emendationi, deputando?" (Dubois, *De Recuperatione* 46-47).

- 13 This point accords well with Saunders' larger argument that "the portrayal of the individual in romance needs to be seen in terms of the medieval understanding of psychology, and in particular the relation between mind and body" (29).
- 14 Kinoshita's article as a whole argues that the behavior of female characters in the *Chanson de Roland*, and not violence, "secures the difference between pagans and Franks" (91).
- 15 Compare, for example, *The King of Tars*, another text found in the Auchinleck manuscript. This text includes the line "Ihesu for³at sche nou³t" (507) in the midst of lines describing a Christian princess worshipping Saracen idols and dressing like Saracen women.
- 16 St. George is said to have inspired crusaders in a vision at the Battle of Antioch during the first crusade (1098), and also to have appeared to crusaders during the march to Jerusalem in 1099. The *Gesta Francorum* records St. George's appearance at Antioch (69), while Raymond of Aguilers' *Historia Francorum* narrates the saint's appearance on the march to Jerusalem and his insistence that his relics be carried to Jerusalem by the crusaders (3:290). St. George is even said by some to have appeared on the walls of Jerusalem to inspire crusaders, a manifestation recorded in Jacobus de Voragine's life of St. George in the *Legenda Aurea* (1: 242). I would like to thank Jonathan Good for drawing my attention to these references and sending me copies of some of his work on St. George.
- 17 St. George's arms were used by Edward I to identify English troops campaigning in Wales in 1277, and the saint's banner was raised when Edward captured the Castle of Carlaverock in 1300 (Good, "Argent" 7-9). St. George was also the central patron of the Order of the Garter, and letters patent issued in 1351 referred to him as "the most invincible athlete of Christ, whose name and protection the English race invoke as that of their peculiar patron, especially in war." See *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1350-54* (London: HMSO, 1907), 127. I am again indebted to Jonathan Good for these references.

- 18 The figure of the Saracen princess who falls in love with a Christian knight and converts to Christianity is surprisingly popular in western medieval literature. Found frequently in French *chansons de geste*, she also turns up in chronicles such as Orderic Vitalis' *Ecclesiastical History* and Matthew Paris' *Chronica majora* as well as in Middle English romances such as *The Sowdone of Babylone* and *Sir Ferumbras*.
- 19 Josiane's extensive knowledge of herbs and minstrelsy is only one of the characteristics that make her, in Geraldine Barnes' words, "one of the most enterprising women in Middle English romance" (89). For a full discussion of Josiane's characterization and relation to questions of genre, see Myra Seaman, "Engendering Genre."
- 20 Susan Crane also notes the problems this battle poses for Beves' stature as an English national hero. She identifies the problems as products of a tension between the Middle English romance's invocations of English national identity and its concern with baronial prerogatives, rights, and rank, a concern inherited from its Anglo-Norman predecessor text (*Insular Romance* 61-62).
- 21 Although Beves and his son Gii Christianize the whole realm of Ermonie when Ermin, Josiane's father, dies and bequeaths the realm to his grandson Gii (4017-20), no mention of the Christianization of Mombraunt is made in the Auchinleck text of the romance.
- 22 Beves dies on the same day as Josiane and his trusty steed Arundel. Although space here does not permit a full discussion of Arundel and his importance in the text, it should be noted that Arundel, too, signals Beves' ties to Saraceness and his inability to fit in in England. Arundel is a Saracen horse, given to Beves by Josiane before she converts. While Arundel serves Beves faithfully, he also kills the heir to England's throne when that prince tries to steal him. Arundel's actions lead to Beves' second exile from England when Beves refuses to hang the horse in accordance with the decree of the English baronage.
- 23 Jennifer Fellows' parallel-text edition of *Sir Beves* shows that Auchinleck alone depicts in detail Josiane's reliance on minstrelsy skills and herbal knowledge acquired during her Saracen upbringing. Linda Marie Zaerr discusses the unique fullness of Auchinleck's presentation of Josiane in these lines (225),

and attributes later manuscripts' "deletions" of these extensive passages to efforts in the fifteenth century to "revise Josian into a more decorous princess" and excise "repugnant" or "repellent material" (235). Zaerr notes that "This pattern fits with the tendency over [the fifteenth century] to limit the activity of romance heroines" (235). I would suggest that Josiane's reversion to her Saracen heritage in these passages may have been as repellent to later redactors as her agency and independence.

- 24 "qui ipsam occuparunt" (Dubois, *De Recuperatione* 2).
- 25 The original Latin of this passage reads, "Quibus premissis sic per Dei gratiam ordinatis, catholici concordēs possidebunt totam ripam maris Mediterranei, ab ejus occidente usque ad orientem versus septentrionem, et meliorem partem tangentem Terram Promissionis versus meridiem; ita quod bene vivere etiam corporaliter non poterunt Arabes, nisi communicent catholicis commercia rerum suarum; et idem in orientalibus populis, et de ipsis" (Dubois, *De Recuperatione* 89).
- 26 Indeed, as Jennifer R. Goodman has shown, romances like *Sir Beves* continued to be popular reading material for western knights involved in various colonial enterprises in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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