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# Dear Enemies: the Motif of the Converted Saracen and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Among the most exquisitely observed scenes in English literature must be counted the three morning visits of the lady of Hautdesert to Sir Gawain. The poet creates a convincing complicatedness in Gawain's response to the lady's enigmatic behaviour as she flatters, woos, and tempts him while maintaining her roles as considerate hostess and ingenuous admirer; and the reader, sharing his point of view, experiences a parallel sense of disconcertion. This arises in part from the unsettling co-presence of the familiar and the unexpected in the representation of the lady as of much else in the poem; it may be, however, that for medieval readers there were particular familiar/unfamiliar signals in the text that are not as easy for the modern reader to recover. In this essay I shall examine some details of this kind and their possible points of reference in the portrayal of Saracens in the Middle English romances of Charlemagne.<sup>1</sup>

## I.

The motif of a lady with a magic girdle wooing a knight who is effectively a prisoner in her castle is not confined to Arthurian romance. There are numerous wooing women in Anglo-Norman romance, as Judith Weiss has pointed out, and the most active tend to be Saracen maidens wooing Christian knights.<sup>2</sup> In *Fierabras* we encounter the most resourceful of these maidens, Floripas, determined pursuer of Guy of Burgundy; and what I want to suggest is that for contemporary readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the disconcerting behaviour of the lady of the castle perhaps had specific resonances of exotic 'Otherness' through its resemblance to the portrayal of ardent 'beles Sarrasines' such as Floripas. *Fierabras* must have been extraordinarily popular in England: three separate translations into Middle English were made before the end of the

fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup> It is more than likely, therefore, that the writer and readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were familiar with this famous *chanson de geste* and the parallels it offers between the behaviour of the lady and Floripas.

In both cases, the woman is apparently acting disloyally behind the back of the lord of the castle - Floripas's father and the lady's husband. Floripas's disloyalty is immediately recognizable by the experienced reader of romance, where the likeliest friend and rescuer of any imprisoned knight is the gaoler's daughter. Floripas's father is warned by the story of Duke Milon, 'How ys doȝtre hym betrayde', of this very danger (*Sir Ferumbras*, 2007-12). Such 'disloyalty' is commonplace in romantic comedy, where the opposition of father and daughter in choosing a husband is a standard plot motif and the daughter often deceives her father to gain her love. In cases of this kind the resolution usually effects a reconciliation of father and daughter and, where she loves her father's enemy, between the former enemies as well, thus justifying the daughter's apparently disloyal behaviour: an obvious example in Middle English romance is Melidor in *Sir Degrevant*. No such reconciliation can be expected in the *Fierabras* story, though: the father is presented as an evil Saracen and in her love for his Christian enemy, Floripas rejects all that he represents and embraces good. Her disloyalty is therefore justified in terms of the Christian agenda of the romance: it is a sign of grace. Modern readers, however, have criticized Floripas for her rejection of her father.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, by contrast with her brother Fierabras who shows a filial concern for their father and begs him with tears to accept Christianity and save his life, Floripas does seem an 'undutiful daughter'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Fierabras rebukes her for her lack of feeling:

Sustre ne ys he þy fader; alas!  
 Tak of hym pytee:  
 He þe gat & forþ þe broȝte, Thar-for ert þow mys-byþoȝte,  
 To procury hym to slee. (*Sir Ferumbras*, 5823-6)

[Sister, is he not thy father? Alas! Take pity on him: he begat thee and bred thee; therefore thou art ill-advised to seek to slay him.]

But when Balan persists in his impiety, Fierabras belatedly realizes what the unsentimental Floripas has known all along: 'Al ys for noȝt; ȝe A-boute goes, ȝe ne bringeþ him neuere to ȝoure purpos' (5821;

'It's all for nothing; you go round in circles, you'll never make him do what you want'), and outdoes her in his ferocity: 'hewe ech lyme on sonder, / þorȝ-out flechs & bon' (5855-6; 'Chop his limbs to pieces, right through flesh and bone'). There is enough tension here between cultural expectations of normal female and daughterly behaviour and the demands of a plot designed largely to celebrate the Christian faith to suggest that a medieval audience too might have had an uneasily double view of Floripas and her disloyalty towards her father.

The 'unfaithful wife' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* excites different anxieties by her apparent disloyalty: male anxiety about predatory females transgressing behavioural norms; marital and dynastic anxiety about wives cuckolding their husbands. But an interesting parallel with Floripas can be seen with hindsight: the Green Knight's revelation of the shared deception would seem to absolve the lady of any disloyalty and to prepare for the reconciliation of all three parties, in celebration of Gawain's near-total success in the test; yet uneasy doubts remain about the propriety of the actions of both husband and wife. In the case of the lady, unease may be caused by a similar tension between different expectations: the cultural norms of female, wifely conduct and of taboos surrounding the relationship of hostess and guest on the one hand, and on the other, the demands of a plot apparently designed to test the hero's virtue, in which the role of the temptress is traditionally evil. Alternatively, the reader faces the disruptive possibility of a shift into a new kind of plot, where a wife might be expected to seduce her husband's guest: a shift away from the genre of chivalric romance towards fabliau, perhaps; while Gawain's refusing the invitation to return to Hautdesert leaves open the whole unsettling question of the Green Knight's reliability and whether he is even telling the truth about the lady and her actions. These are levels of sophisticated readerly unease way beyond the Floripas model, but the point of departure is the same: the female potential for disloyalty, a theme explicitly related to the woman's behaviour in both texts. Balan is warned not to trust Floripas: 'Many ys þe manlich man þat þorw womman ys by-go' (*Sir Ferumbas*, 2013; 'Many a noble man is ruined through woman'), while Gawain excuses his failure in the test by recalling the examples of Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David, who all, like him, came to grief 'þurȝ wyles of wymmen' (2414-26).

Both women offer the knights a girdle: Floripas's is a magic talisman that has the power to prevent the wearer's dying of starvation

even if he has nothing to eat for seven years, which is as precious a promise to the famished French knights as the promise of invincibility is to Gawain,<sup>6</sup> and the protection it offers is described in terms similar to the lady's recommendation of her girdle to Gawain:

Who so girde hem ther-with aboute,  
Hunger ner thirste shal him neuer dere,  
(*Sowdone of Babylone*, 2304-5)

[Whoever girds it about himself will never suffer from hunger or thirst.]

Whyles that they hyt haben schull they not spylle.  
(*Firumbras*, 107)

[While they have it they will not perish.]

In like wise, the lady assures Gawain:

For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,  
While he hit had hemely halched aboute  
þer is no hæpel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myzt. (1851-3)<sup>7</sup>

[For any man who is girt with this green girdle, while he has it fittingly fastened about him, there is no man on earth that could cut him down.]

The lord of the castle has a material interest in the girdle in both stories. Gawain is first begged by the lady to hide it from her lord, implying that the girdle, or her keeping it in her possession, has a special significance for him; while the Green Knight as Sir Bertilak claims that it is in fact his own: 'For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel' (2358; 'For it is my garment you are wearing, that same woven girdle').

In *Fierabras*, Balan belatedly remembers that his daughter has the magic talisman with which she has been frustrating his plan to starve out the French knights and sends a thief to steal it:

For if y may þat gurdel dure fro hure so take away,  
To wyne þe tour þan am y sure with-inne þis þridde day.  
(*Sir Ferumbras*, 2393-4)

[For if I can thus take that precious girdle away from her, I am certain to win the tower within three days.]

The knights discover the thief, kill him and throw his body into the sea, but realize too late that he had the stolen magic girdle wrapped round his body, thus permanently depriving them of its life-preserving powers:

there was moche sorowe for the losse of soo noble a Iewel.

(*Charles*, p.123)

Ne gete þe sweche a Iuel as þey haue y-lore.

(*Firumbras*, 170)

[They will never get another such jewel as they have lost.]

Gawain uses the same metaphor to express the value of the lady's girdle to him: 'Hit were a juel for the jopardé þat hym jugged were' (1856; 'It would be a jewel for the danger that was decreed for him').

In both cases the girdle is not just a possession but a personal item of dress with special connotations of intimacy: the lady unfastens the girdle she offers to Gawain from around her own body, between the layers of her clothes (1830-1); while Floripas keeps her 'gurdel of honour þat she ys woned to were' (*Sir Ferumbras*, 2390; '... is accustomed to wear') hidden at night in her private chamber, in her own bed (2419; *Firumbras*, 133-4). The thief's search for the girdle is closely followed by his attempt to rape Floripas in her bed, and the account of the theft in this context is disturbingly ambiguous, hinting (like the lady's loosening her girdle to give it to Gawain) at possible sexual significance:

and thenne he came to Florypes, and serched so pryuely

['stealthily, intimately'] that he took the gyrdle (*Charles*, p.123)

And to haue is desyr to Floripe bour he wendeþ ...

Slepyng was þat ladi softe; þe þef him bar ful stille,

And to & fro wende he ofte or he hauede ys wille:

Ate laste þan gurdel he fond liggyng at hur hede.

(*Sir Ferumbras*, 2414-19)

[And to get what he desired he went to Floripas's chamber ... the lady was sleeping peacefully; the thief behaved very quietly, and went to

and fro often until he had what he wanted: at last he found the girdle lying by her head.]

The description of Floripas lying asleep while the thief steals a sight of her naked body, 'as whit as walles bon' (*Sir Ferumbras*, 2427-31; *Charles*, p.123; 'as white as ivory'), clearly demonstrates the force of her sexual attractiveness, connected in some mysterious way with the girdle and its magic. The whole incident provides a rich comparison for the *Gawain*-poet's third bedroom scene, where the lady's nakedness in her fashionable costume is more noticeable than her fine clothes (1740-1).

In both cases the woman acts partly as wooer and partly as temptress. Floripas, overtly desiring Guy and promising to convert to Christianity for his sake, nevertheless offers the French knights some very dubious counsel. First, when Guy proposes that they should sally out of the besieged tower in search of food, in the noble belief that 'better is to vs to deye wyth honour than to lyue with shame' (*Charles*, p.125), Floripas questions the power of their God:

Ful litel ys 3our god of my3t þat vytailes ne sent 3ov none;  
Hadde 3e worschipped our godes free as 3e 3our han done,  
Of vytailes had 3e had plente maugre al 3our fone.

(*Sir Ferumbras*, 2526-8)

[Your god is not powerful: he sent you no food. If you had worshipped our noble gods instead, you would have had plenty of food notwithstanding your enemies.]

She suggests the alternative plan that they should stay in the tower and pray to her gods to send them food and drink and to keep them safe:

Mete & drynke y-nowe he woll sende 3ou aply3t.  
Ne thruft 3e no3t drede the toure schulde be nome ...  
And cometh forth hyder in gode dyuocyoun,  
And kneleth & cryeth to my lord mahoun,  
To termegaunt, and apolyn, and to oþere mametrye.

(*Firumbras*, 236-63)

[He will certainly send you meat and drink enough. You need not fear that the tower will be taken ... And come hither with due reverence,



and kneel and call on my lord Mahomet, on Termagant, and Apollo, and the other idols.]

... prayeþ hem 3erne þat hy 3ov spede as þay buþ gode and hende,  
& alþyng þanne what 3e ha nede to 3ow wolleþ hy sende.

(*Sir Ferumbras*, 2561-2)

[Eagerly pray to them to prosper you for they are good and kind, and then they will send you everything you need.]

The Christian knights, of course, resist the temptation to forsake God and turn to idolatry, and expose the false gods by destroying the idols.

Secondly, when the knights are debating whether to send one of their number to Charlemagne for aid, Floripas advises that they stop worrying about the siege and enjoy their imprisonment as a time of pleasure and an opportunity for love:

Take we it alle in myrþe þat we haue here-inne!

Fyftene maydenes we beȝt now here.

Eche man chese hym a mayde þat hym lyketh to fere!

(*Firumbras*, 856-8)

[Let us rejoice in our situation! We are fifteen maidens here now. Let each man choose the one he likes as his mate.]

Roland replies to her, before continuing the debate, with the same kind of side-stepping politeness that Gawain uses towards the lady of the castle:

"Damsel" sayde Roulond, "ye sey Curtesi;

Thys ys a noble confort of suche a lady.

Welle auȝt 3e to be a lady & welle y-tolde bye!"

(*Firumbras*, 860-2)

['Damsel', said Roland, 'you speak courtesy itself; this is noble consolation from a noble lady. It certainly befits you to be highly valued as a lady!']

Each time, Floripas counsels against honourable but dangerous knightly action in favour of safer courses: praying and waiting, typical feminine roles in war, and here rendered morally dubious as well. This is similar to Gawain's predicament, forced to remain passively with the lady in the castle while the lord and the other men go out to hunt,

and urged by her to take advantage of their isolation in love-talk, kisses, and whatever she means by the cryptic offer of her body for his own pleasure, as well as the climactic temptation of the 'magic' girdle.

All these similarities make it likely that the reader, sharing Gawain's evident uneasiness at the lady's behaviour, should respond not only to the incongruous fact of a woman wooing her husband's guest but also to the echo of the seductive foreign princess with her frank talk of love and pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

## II.

Incongruity and 'Otherness' are even more marked in the appearance and behaviour of the Green Knight, and here also, besides the well documented sources and analogues in Arthurian romance and folklore, there may be an echo of another famous hostile challenger, Fierabras himself. As Metlitzki observes, with his reputation of subjugating Christian nations, killing the Pope, siezing the relics of the Passion, sacking Rome, and raping women, this 'merueyllous geaunte' (as Caxton terms him)<sup>9</sup> embodies 'the whole fantastic might of the Saracens' (p.182). His feats of arms proclaim him an epitome of 'Otherness'.

The action begins conventionally when King Charles with 'al his chiluelarie', having heard Mass, has sat down to a meal with great joy: 'al on mur3þe was he y-sete wiþ a fair baronye' (*Sir Ferumbras*, 46-8). Scarcely have they begun when a single Saracen appears before them, such as was never heard of anywhere 'Of Strengþe, of schap, of hugenys' (51-2); and boasting of his previous feats, though not revealing his identity, he scornfully challenges any one, or two, or twelve of Charles's knights. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is an embarrassed, fearful silence among the knights before the hero eventually comes forward to beg the favour of answering the challenge. The *Fierabras*-poet, like the *Gawain*-poet, saves until last the most striking detail of the giant's appearance: the Green Knight's greenness, and Fierabras's enormous height:

& wan he stod appon þe ground, huge was he of lengþe,  
Fifteuene fet hol & sound & wonderliche muche of strengþe.

(546-7)

[And when he stood up he was enormously tall, uninjured and of marvellously great strength.]

Equally, both poets stress that apart from their giant stature (and the Green Knight's colour) they are both recognizably human beings, perfectly proportioned and in fact physically attractive specimens of manhood. Fierabras is said to be 'A wel fair kniȝt' (1078):

Brode scholdres had he withalle & brustes ful quarree,  
Wyȝ longe sydes & middel smalle, a wel schape man was hee.  
With Browes bente & eȝen stoute, and lokede so þe facoun:  
To seche þe worlde al aboute ne was man of fairer fasoun.

(1072-5)

[He had broad shoulders and a stout breast: with his long torso and small waist he was a well-made man. With brows knit and fierce eyes, he stared like a falcon: a man of fairer appearance was not to be found in the whole world.]

The description of the Green Knight can almost be read as capping that of the Saracen Fierabras: the tallest man on earth, with massive chest, small waist, and every part of his body elegantly proportioned - and green (137-50). In this context it is tempting to think that the *Gawain*-poet might have been aware that the colour green, besides its many natural and symbolic associations, is associated with the religion of Islam through the long-standing tradition that it was the favourite colour of the Prophet, the colour of paradise, and its being therefore the colour adopted by the descendants of the Prophet for their turbans and by Islamic armies for their standard.<sup>10</sup> It would thus be peculiarly appropriate that the colour green should signal the Otherness of this hostile challenger, with his resemblance to the famous Saracen giant Fierabras.

By stressing Fierabras's ideal physique and fair knightly appearance alongside his giant size and his outrageous past, the poet creates a double effect comparable to the marked ambiguities of the description of the Green Knight.<sup>11</sup> In both poems a similar problem had to be solved: how to make the hostile challenger both terrifyingly alienating in his effect on the king and his knights, and also potentially acceptable as a member of their fellowship; for Fierabras will be baptised and become a worthy companion of the douzepers and the

Green Knight will reveal himself as Gawain's convivial host. Jacqueline de Weever analyses the frequent doubling of Saracen women in French epic: both white and idealized and black and demonized (p.55 and *passim*), and one can see something of the same paired effect in the treatment of Saracen champions, where those worthy of conversion are fierce but fair, while the representatives of infidel evil are monstrous and black. Thus, Fierabras' size provides a physical referent for his status as alien, hostile outsider, linking him while in his unconverted state with monstrous Saracen giants such as the Giant of Mautrile and Vernagu - but without their ugliness and grotesque features, so that upon his conversion it is not difficult for Fierabras to be re-presented as an ideal specimen of knighthood.

Similarly, as has often been remarked, the elaborate description of the Green Knight's clothes and horse trappings dwells on the detail of their luxurious, fashionable manufacture and adornment, presenting the Knight as a person of refined tastes and courtly magnificence, quite in tune with the governing values of the court, while at the same time, his green skin and huge size declare his Otherness. The Green Knight's size is expressed in characteristically ambiguous terms: 'Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were, / Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene' (140-41; I believe he was half giant; but in any case I confirm that he was the largest man alive'), so that neither category, monstrous giant or human, can be ruled out. The phrase 'Half-etayn in erde' recalls the biblical verse that describes the peoples of the world before the flood: 'Gigantes autem erant super terram in diebus illis. Postquam enim ingressi sunt filii Dei ad filias hominum, illaeque genuerunt, isti sunt potentes a saeculo viri famosi' (Genesis 6.4; 'Now giants were upon the earth in those days. For after the sons of God went in to the daughters of men, and they brought forth children, these are the mighty men of old, men of renown.' (Douai)). While the Green Knight's great size links him to these antediluvian men of might, it does not preclude his also being human, for the giants themselves were 'half'-beings, born of human mothers.

Furthermore, the reputation of these 'giants upon the earth' is interestingly equivocal: they were 'the giants, those renowned men that were from the beginning, of great stature, expert in war' (Baruch 3.26), but their lasting significance is in teaching a lesson on the punishment of pride: 'the proud giants perished' (Wisdom 14.6); 'The ancient giants ... were destroyed trusting to their own strength'

(Ecclesiasticus 16.8). There are parallels here with the poem's equivocal account of noble and famous but proud heroes of old (1-10), and the warlike early Britons: 'Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden, / In mony turned tyme tene þat wroʒten' (21-22; 'Bold men were bred there, who loved strife, and caused conflict in many turbulent times'), as well as with the conflicting signals given by the Green Knight's superhuman stature and noble appearance on the one hand and his scornful aggression on the other. The *Gawain*-poet may also have known the tradition in the legendary British History that Britain was inhabited by fierce giants before the arrival of Brutus.<sup>12</sup> Thus another aspect of the Green Knight's ambiguity might be his seeming a throwback to the ancient giants, while wearing the most up-to-date knightly clothing.

Fierabras is not the only hostile Saracen challenger to be transformed into a valued companion of the Peers: the story of Otinel seems to have had an equally strong fascination for English readers, also inspiring three separate Middle English translations.<sup>13</sup> One of these, *þe Romance of Duke Rowlande and of Sir Otuell of Spayne*, preserves a small detail of Otinel's behaviour that seems designed to mark off his alien pre-conversion self from his assimilable post-conversion self. In the course of Otuell's elaborate challenge to Charlemagne and his chivalry, a French lord is provoked to lay hands on him and Otuell kills him, thus drawing on himself the wrath of the entire Baronage. He stands at bay, brandishing his sword, and the narrator describes his appearance:

... he rollede his eghne both vp & down,

And ferde als a wilde lyoun,

Brayde vp his browes one hye. (172-4)

[He rolled his eyes both up and down and behaved like a wild lion, raising his knit brows up high; cf. *Otinell*, 120-21]

The comparison with a wild lion is of course a commonplace figure for fierce martial prowess, but the details of Otuell's facial gestures are interesting. He seems to be contorting his face into an image of terrifying hostility, and by exaggeratedly raising his brows, gives even greater prominence to the strange motion of his eyes, rolling up and down in his head. Later, as Otuell prepares for combat with the usual oaths and threats, he repeats his strange action:

he rollede his eghne vp and down,  
 And sware by his grete Mahoun  
 his Enemy sore myghte drede. (424-6)

[He rolled his eyes up and down and swore by his great Mahomet that his enemy should be sorely afraid.]

Roland does nothing comparable, nor do any of the other French knights, nor does Otuell himself once he is converted. However, the same eye movement is noted as the Giant of Mautrible swears to let no French knight pass: 'Alagolofur rolled his yen.../ And swore by Termagaunte and Apolyne' (*Sowdone of Babylone*, 2175-77). Like Fierabras, then, Otinel/Otuell is linked with Saracen monstrosity while at the same time maintaining his attractive knightly qualities.

'To roll one's eyes' is a rare collocation in Middle English; one of the two examples given in *MED*, taken from the section of *Secretum secretorum* concerning 'The disputacion of eyen ... wherin all the some of phisonomye is constitut', states that 'Yf [a man's] eyen rollen about, it sheweth a full grete wodnesse to be appropred to hym' (an interpretation fuelling Desdemona's fear of Othello's 'bloody passion': 'you're fatal then / When your eyes roll so' (V.2.40)).<sup>14</sup> This detail, then, may express something of Otuell's bloodthirsty fierceness as champion of Mahoun, overlaid with the disturbing appearance of real madness. Rolling eyes are clearly cause for alarm and may signal specifically alien hostility.

It is thus interesting to find that the *Gawain*-poet adopts the same detail of behaviour for his hostile challenger, and explicitly presents it as alien:

And runischly his rede y3en he reled aboute,  
 Bende his bresed bro3ez, blycande grene. (304-5)  
 [And he rolled his red eyes about outlandishly, knitting his bristly brows, glistening green.]

The same word *runish*, *runischly* is used in *Cleanness* to describe the writing in an unknown language mysteriously inscribed on the wall at Belshazzar's feast (1545, 1724), and of the outsiders or strangers invited in place of the guests in the parable of the wedding feast (96); this semantic range, spanning the uncouth and the uncanny, seems exactly to fit the circumstances of the Green Knight's behaviour and

its effect upon Arthur's court.<sup>15</sup> Bristly brows and red eyes are also characteristic of hostile Saracens. Both Vernagu and the Giant of Mautrible are marked by their overgrown brows, rough 'as brestles' (*Roland and Vernagu*, 482), while de Weever notes (pp.11, 94) that red eyes, an important signifier (like blackness) of demonic 'Otherness', are conventionally ascribed to Saracens in French epics. The Giant of Mautrible, for example, has eyes that 'glystryd as þe glede' (*Sir Ferumbras*, 4438; 'glowed like red coals'). This association of red eyes with hostile Saracens adds pointed significance to the general interpretation given in the *Secretum secretorum*, that red eyes denote courage and stalwart might.<sup>16</sup> The Green Knight's red, rolling eyes, like his enormous size, link him to the diabolic characterization of Saracen Otherness, most plainly seen in the depiction of monstrous giants, while the elegance of his person maintains the idealized/demonized duality throughout his first appearance. Interestingly, though, once Gawain has met Sir Bertilak, his genial host, the image of the Green Knight both as fed to him by the guide and provided by his own imagination becomes entirely diabolical, as if the duality is resolved into the two opposites. The guide describes a murderous monster with similarities to the equally murderous Giant of Mautrible (2098-109); Gawain imagines a green-clad devil-worshipper (2191-92) - a frequently stated 'fact' in relation to Saracens in the French and English poems - and when the Green Knight appears for the second time, brandishing his huge axe, the resemblance to Alagolafre, noticed by Metlitzki (p.194) is striking. The duality of the Green Knight, alternately figured as subtle ambivalence and as exaggerated antithesis, can thus in one way be seen as constructed within the range of representations of Saracen Otherness in the Charlemagne romances.

The Charlemagne romances provide numerous instances of encounters with an alien culture that yet has strong points of resemblance to the hero's own. Time and again they portray Saracen champions who are outstanding in their chivalric virtues, whose demeanour and discourse are almost indistinguishable from those of their opponents, and for whom the Christians express great admiration, mixed with regret that their alien religion and political allegiance separate them. As Janet Cowen points out, the motif of the converted Saracen is a favourite one in the Middle English romances.<sup>17</sup> Equally, beautiful Saracen women, who express their feelings towards the Christian heroes with unusual ardour and frankness, feature

regularly. It thus seems quite likely that this accessible source of ambivalently figured knights and ladies formed part of the literary context in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was imagined, and furnished exotic models for a hostile/friendly knight and a welcoming lady/seductive siren.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Janet M. Cowen, 'The English Charlemagne Romances', in *Roland and Charlemagne in Europe: Essays on the Reception and Transformation of a Legend*, ed. Karen Pratt, London, King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1996, pp. 149-68; H. M. Smyser, 'Charlemagne Legends', in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, I, ed. J. B. Severs, New Haven, Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967, pp. 80-100, 256-66; *The English Charlemagne Romances*, Parts I-VI, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage and Emil Hausknecht, EETS ES 34-39 (1879-82); *Firumbras and Otuel and Roland*, ed. Mary I. O'Sullivan, EETS OS 198 (1935). Quotations are taken from the EETS editions. Quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 2nd edn, London, Arnold, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Weiss, 'The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows and Carol M. Meale, Cambridge, Brewer, 1991, pp. 149-61.

<sup>3</sup> *Fierabras*, ed. A. Kroeber and G. Servois, Paris, Anciens Poètes de la France, 1860; *Sir Ferumbras*, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 33, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage, EETS ES 34 (1879); *The Romance of the Sowdone of Babylone and of Ferumbras his Sone who conquered Rome*, Princeton University Library, Garrett Collection, MS 140, ed. Emil Hausknecht, EETS ES 38 (1881); *Firumbras*, London, BL MS Add. 37492, ed. Mary I. O'Sullivan.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 170-75.

<sup>5</sup> Herrtage, *Sir Ferumbras*, p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Cooper, 'The Supernatural', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Cambridge, Brewer, 1997, pp. 277-91 (p. 290).

<sup>7</sup> Such formulaic promises of 'magical' protection are also found in relation to talismanic prayer-charms, often written on strips of parchment and



worn girdle-like about the body; I argued that both sources, romance and charm, might contribute to the significance of Gawain's girdle in a paper given at the International Arthurian Society conference, Exeter, 1997; see also my article, 'Gawain's Practice of Piety in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Medium Aevum*, forthcoming 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothee Metlitzki analyses the effect of another wooing Muslim lady, Josian in *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, with her typically Western beauty but her ignorance of 'cristene lawe', as 'both familiar and unfamiliar, a psychological preparation for her standing as the "good" infidel to be "saved" as the wife of a Christian knight' (p. 167). See also Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*, New York, Garland, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> *The Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prynce Charles the Grete*, transl. William Caxton, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage, EETS ES 36-37 (1880-81). p.40.

<sup>10</sup> 'For Islam, the green standard of the Messenger of Allah and the green cloak of 'Alī have become the very emblems of the Religion' (*The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edn, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al., Leiden, Brill, 1960 --, vol. 5 (1986), p.706). I am indebted to Professor W. R. J. Barron for this suggestion, made at the International Arthurian Society conference, Exeter, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the seminal study by John Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, London, Routledge, 1965.

<sup>12</sup> T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity*, London, Methuen, 1950, repr. 1970, p. 24. See further *Des Grantz Geanz: An Anglo-Norman Poem*, ed. Georgine E. Brereton, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1937; James P. Carley and Julia Crick, 'Constructing Albion's Past: An Annotated Edition of *De origine gigantum*', *Arthurian Literature*, 13 (1995), 41-114; Lesley Johnson, 'Return to Albion', *Arthurian Literature*, 13 (1995), 21-24; Ruth Evans, 'Gigantic Origins: An Annotated Translation of *De origine gigantum*', *Arthurian Literature*, 16 (1998), 197-211. For the connection between giants and pride, see J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 156-60.

<sup>13</sup> *Otinell*, ed. F. Guessard and H. Michelant, Paris, Anciens Poètes de la France, 1859; *Otuel*, Edinburgh, NLS MS Adv. 18.2.1, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage, EETS ES 39 (1882); *Otuel and Roland*, London, BL MS Add. 37492, ed. Mary I. O'Sullivan, EETS ES 198 (1935); *Duke Rowland and Sir Otuell of Spayne*, BL MS Add. 31042, ed. Herrtage, EETS ES 35 (1880).

<sup>14</sup> Where did Shakespeare find the name Othello for the character called simply 'the Moor' in Cinthio's story? It is tempting to suppose that he might have adapted it from the famous Saracen, Otuel, as he had borrowed the names of Roland/Orlando and Oliver for the De Boyes family in *As You Like It*.

<sup>15</sup> If this detail of eye-rolling was intended to signify alienness, it may support a similar reading of the intruder's action after his outlandish initial challenge: 'To kny3tez he kest his y3e / And reled hym vp and doun' (228-9; 'He cast his eyes over the knights, and rolled them up and down'). Editors have recognized an ambiguity in these lines but have usually chosen the alternative reading of *reled hym* as a reflexive verb denoting the Green Knight's movement about the hall; however, the scene has greater impact if the hostile challenger thrusts his way up to the dais (221-2) and from such a prestigious spot delivers both his rude words and this alien eye-rolling gesture. See Andrew and Waldron, p. 216. The following lines also make better sense if *stemmed* is taken, as in OED, to mean 'debated with himself', a near-doublet with *con studie* (230-1).

<sup>16</sup> See Robert B. White, Jr., 'A note on the Green Knight's Red Eyes', *ELN*, 2 (1965), 250-52, repr. in *Critical Studies of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, pp. 223-36 (p.225).

<sup>17</sup> 'The English Charlemagne Romances', p. 153. See also Marianne Ailes. 'Chivalry and Conversion: The Chivalrous Saracen in the Old French Epics *Fierabras* and *Otinell*', *Al-Masāq: Studia Arabo-Islamica Mediterranea* 9 (1997), 1-21; W.R.J. Barron, *Medieval English Romance*, London, Longman, 1987, pp. 92-103.