

Representations Muslims in Middle English Literature

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Abstract. *This article presents the representation of Muslims in Middle English literature. It is described that is a complex and multifaceted topic, reflecting the cultural, religious, and political dynamics of the medieval period. Moreover, it has been analyzed that the relationship between Christians and Muslims was heavily influenced by the Crusades, trade, and cultural exchanges.*

Key words: *English literature, Christians and Muslims, relationship, Islam, Arabic, the cultural, religious, and political dynamics.*

Introduction

In Middle English romances, such as **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight** and **The Knight's Tale**, Muslim characters are sometimes presented in a more nuanced light. They may be depicted as noble adversaries or even potential allies.

- The character of the Saracen (a term often used to refer to Muslims) can embody both the exotic and the admirable, reflecting a fascination with the East.
- Texts like **The Canterbury Tales** by Geoffrey Chaucer feature Muslim characters in a variety of roles. For example, in "The Squire's Tale," there is a depiction of a Muslim king that reflects both admiration and critique.
- Allegorical representations often use Muslim figures to discuss broader themes of faith, morality, and human nature.
- The presence of Muslim scholars and the translation of Arabic texts into Latin and vernacular languages contributed to a more complex understanding of Islamic culture. This exchange is sometimes reflected in literature that acknowledges the sophistication of Muslim civilization.
- Works like **The Travels of Sir John Mandeville** present an amalgamation of fact and fiction about Eastern cultures, including Islamic ones, often blending admiration with misunderstanding.
- Some Middle English texts use Muslim characters for satirical purposes, critiquing contemporary society through the lens of exoticism. This can be seen in works that play on stereotypes to highlight moral failings within Christian society.
- For instance, in **The Piers Plowman** by William Langland, there are references to Muslims that critique both religious hypocrisy and social injustices.

The representations of Muslims in Middle English literature reveal a spectrum of attitudes ranging from hostility and stereotyping to admiration and complexity. These literary portrayals reflect the historical context of the time, including ongoing conflicts, cultural exchanges, and evolving perceptions of identity. Understanding these representations requires a critical examination of the texts alongside their historical backdrop.

One of the qualities that the romances shared with the *chansons* was a tradition of representing Muslims as the embodiment of everything that was antithetical to the Church. Muslims were represented as pagan idolaters, particularly in English literature, where the audience would most likely have few and infrequent encounters with Muslims. This is not true of the literature of Christian Spain where Lasater says, “the reality was there too close at hand to permit such treatment.” Lasater also suggests that the distance from Muslim culture resulted in a sort of English “enchantment,” which accounts for the generally grotesque depictions of Arabs in Middle English literature [4, 142]. Southern states that “men inevitably shape the world they do not know in the likeness of the world they do know” [4, 32], implying that the literature did not so much reflect the realities of the Muslims as it did of those who generated it.

In the Middle English literature, the Muslims are referred to not as Muslims, but as Saracens. Tolan observes . . .

‘Islam’ in Arabic means submission, submission to God’s will; a “Muslim” is one who has submitted to God’s will. Yet medieval Christian writers did not speak of ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims,’ words unknown (with very few exceptions) in Western languages before the sixteenth century. Instead, Christian writers referred to Muslims by using ethnic terms: Arabs, Turks, Moors, Saracens. Their religion was referred to as ‘law of Muhammad’ or the ‘law of the Saracens’.

The word “Saracens” actually comes from the Latin *Saraceni*, referring to the “nomadic peoples of the Syro-Arabian desert”. In Middle English, this word generally was synonymous with *heathen*, *pagan*, *non-Christian* or *infidel*.

Southern states that prior to 1100, there was no mention of the Saracens in European literature outside of Spain and Italy. This changed after the first Crusade, in 1096. By 1120, almost everyone in Europe knew something about the Saracens, whether the source of information was fact, fiction, or folklore.

Certain themes and stereotypes run throughout the representations of Muslims as viewed by the Christian West, and in relationships between the two religions. The relationship is generally one of conflict. Pope Urban II’s call to the Crusades, at the Council of Clermont in 1095 articulates the official version of the conflict. His address opens with a description of Jerusalem being sacked by.

“an accursed race, a race wholly alienated from God. . . has violently invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by pillage and fire. They have fled away a part of the captives into their own country, and a part they have destroyed by cruel tortures. They have either destroyed the churches of God or appropriated them for the rites of their own religion. They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness. They circumcise the Christians, and the blood of the circumcision they either spread upon the altars or pour into the baptismal vases . . .”[3, 91-92].

The images evoked in this address recur again as themes throughout the Middle English literature in various diluted forms, perhaps illustrating the worst fears Christians held of the Muslims: that they were violent and cruel and would decimate Christian populations; that they were divorced from God; that their religious rites to false gods mocked Christian rites and involved spilling blood and defiling sacred terrain--the material symbols of the bond between Christian man and his God. The literary representations did not go much deeper than this, however, implying that the poets were imagining worlds inhabited by Muslims and not recalling or retelling the stories of battle-worn crusaders returned. All of these may be found as themes in the romance literature of the time. *The Sultan of Babylon*, thought to date from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, will be used to explore these.

Pope Urban II’s address at Claremont concluded with the battle cry he wished the crusaders to utilize: “It is the will of God! It is the will of God!”[3, 93]. Throughout the Middle English literature regarding Saracens, is reiteration of the Christian ideal that their religion must vanquish that of the Muslims, and that any Christian success in “battle and adventure” is evidence of vindication of the Christian God [2, 123]. An example of this, in *The Sultan of Babylon*, is when a Christian character, Savaryz, encourages his fellow soldiers in their endeavors against the Saracens:

Tho spake Savaryz with wordes on he
And saide, ‘My felowes alle,
This daie prove you men worth,
And faire you al shal befalle.
Thenke yat Criste is more mighty
Than here fals goddis alle;
And He shal geve us the victories,
And foule shal hem this day bifalle.’[5, 192-199]

Throughout the poem, Christian soldiers are rallied “To rescue Cristianté fro this hethen,” invoking God in some way, “to gyfe the grace and myghte!” The Saracens correspondingly invoke “Mahounde,” the god attributed to them by the poets distorting the Prophet Mohammed’s name. Although it was the prevailing philosophy behind battle in the Crusades, the idea of vindicating God through battle was not a new one. It hearkens back to Old Testament accounts of the use of the Ark of the Covenant and New Testament stories of Apocalypse.

Another manner of vanquishing the heathen occurs in the convention of conversion and baptism of the Muslims. In the case of the *Sultan of Babylon*, two conversions take place. When King Charlemagne finds the Saracen, Ferumbras, fallen in battle and threatens to lob off his head, Ferumbras converts:

‘O gentil King,’ quod Ferumbrase,
‘Olyvere my maister me hightpromised
To be baptized by Goddis grace,
And to dyen a Cristen knyghte.
Honore were it noon to the
Adsicoumfite man to slo,
That is converted and baptized wolde be
And thy man bycomen also’[5, 1459-1466]

The King spares Ferumbras, who recovers. Interestingly, there is no discussion of what it means to convert, and no religious catechism is imparted to Ferumbras, but this oversight can be forgiven on the battlefield. Later, another character, Floripas is baptized also without religious instruction, which facilitates her wedding to Sir Gye and a happy ending. According to Daniel, motives for conversion are “sexual, sudden emotion, hatred, disappointed ambition, revenge, fear of death, hope of reward, disillusion about the gods, even a miracle, but rarely [any religious/philosophical] reasoning”[1, 130]. The romances are not bogged down by heavy polemic detail or passionately religious conversions that might detract from their audience’s amusement.

Ferumbras spirits away the holy treasures and spends several months with the Sultan, frequently making offerings to his pagan gods . . .

And to his goddess offryng he made,
He and his sone Sir Ferumbras
Here goddis of golde dide fade;
Thai brente frankensesne
Theat smoke up so strone
The fume in her presence,
It lasted alle alonge.

Thai blewe hornes of bras;
Thai dronke beestes bloode.
Mile and hony ther was
That was roial and goode.
Serpentes in oyle were fryed
To serve the Sowdon with alle [1, 676-687].

The Saracens conduct their religious rituals involving the drinking of blood. Perhaps the consumption of snakes is meant to be a grotesque and entertaining detail, and/or to recall the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, and thereby concretely identify the Saracens with evil. This seems unnecessary in light of a story where there are Muslim names, such as Lukefere and characters that invoke a god named Sathanas.

This convention of representing the Muslims as pagans, heathens and/or polytheists has been much debated in academic circles. Norman Daniel suggests that the word “pagan” was used for Saracens possibly because poets imagined a “continuity” between the Muslims and “the pagans of the ancient world” [1, 131]. He also wonders why this was so often utilized as a story-telling device, instead of poets offering “some simplified version of what the academics then thought to be the truth” about Islam. Southern suggests that attributing polytheism to the Muslims was the result of the inexperience of Latins with other religions, and posits that they resorted to the convention, because, they “could only imagine error taking the form of extravagance along familiar lines. If Christians worshipped a Trinity, so (they imagined) must Moslems, but an absurd one; if Christians worshiped their Founder, so (they imagined) must Moslems, but with depraved rites suitable to a depraved man and a depraved people”.

Daniel sees it more as a literary issue, claiming that accurate representations of Islamic practices were not “exotic,” “colorful” or “interesting” enough to capture the audience’s “imagination.” “The whole Christian polemic approach...is not an atmosphere suited to poetic fiction.” He believes that the details of Islam were intentionally distorted for sensationalism, a marked characteristic of chroniclers and encyclopaedists of the time. It also was “one of the greatest howlers of history” to attribute polytheism to a religion that is so strictly monotheistic. This distorted view of the religion also kept artists out of trouble with Church officials who might have been troubled by more accurate depictions of Islam.

According to Norman Daniel, the representations of Muslims as violent idolaters, as discussed briefly here, are the main ones that run throughout some of the later epics and throughout most of the romances. From such light-hearted treatment of Muslims, in the romances, there is a sense that, while the Church may have perceived a deadly enemy, the general population did not. While Pope Urban II’s call to the Crusades fired poets’ imaginations and may have dictated the themes in the literature, it is apparent that poets were not deeply concerned about the details of scholarly refutations against the competing monotheistic religion.

Certainly, scholars involved in Arabic to Latin translations in Spain had an understanding about the true nature of Islam, and must have taken some notice of the inaccurate literary depictions of Muslims in the *chansons*, epics, and romances. To speak out on behalf of Islam, however, would have been in direct opposition to the official Church stand on the proper way to regard Islam and could have had unpleasant consequences.

Conclusions

Throughout the Middle Ages, continued European defeats in the Holy Land did little to add momentum to the Thirteenth Century theological inclinations towards a new era of understanding between the two religions via cultural and literary exchange. Each European crusade that met with defeat, in the Mid-East, resulted in a Papal-sanctified call for Europeans to commit to a new Crusade. The proliferation of positive affects of Islamic culture could have undermined the public fervor to

crusade. Perhaps this is the main reason that Europe never admitted its indebtedness to the Arab world for the enrichment reaped through the translations that sparked the Renaissance.

The demonized images of Muslims, in Middle English literature, were formed during a period of “great imaginative development in Western Europe”. Unfortunately, the image has been reproduced in the West for centuries, and despite scientific advancement and the information age, the Arab world still bears this stigma. Apparently, society believes the stories it tells itself.

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