

“STILLE AS STON”:
ORIENTAL DEFORMITY IN *THE KING OF TARS*

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the monstrous birth in the context of the father's conversion in the thirteenth-century *King of Tars*. Miscegenation has to be diagnosed as the source of the child's shapelessness, while the topic of false accusations of monstrosity in what Margaret Schlauch termed the “accused queens” narratives, i.e. the *Constance-Group*, cannot be disregarded, either. In the Middle English romance bestial, and specifically mostly canine metaphors dominate in the portrayal of the sultan; yet, they turn out to be inadequate once he is baptized and undergoes magic beautification, similarly to his offspring, now endowed with a form. The work's didactic design consists in preaching the necessity of conversion to Christianity, while the threat posed by Islam materializes in the monstrous offspring of oriental origin.

Rex eciam Thartarorum ibidem venit et obedienciam Romane ecclesie promisit et fidem confessus est, a quo et coronam suscepit. In territorio Cracoviensi natus est puer cum dentibus, qui statim ut natus est cepit loqui; sed cum esset baptizatus, mox et dentes amisit et loquelam. Vixit autem tribus annis et mortuus est. Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Pertz [1851] 1963: 640)

[The King of Tartars also came there and pledged obedience to the Roman Church and made a confession of faith, and he got the crown from the Church. In the area around Cracow a toothed boy was brought to life, who commenced talking directly after being born; yet, when he was baptized, he lost his teeth and speech. He then lived three years and died].

The above record from *Annales Polonorum*, which is a note produced by the anonymous chronicler for the year 1274, cannot have reverberated in the thirteenth-century *King of Tars* due to the late date of the former, contrary to what

Robert J. Geist once claimed (1943: 260-268). Nevertheless, a similar reference must have been the source of literary accounts of a monstrous birth among the Orientals. Two initially unrelated events, the christening of a Tartar king declaring his subjection to the Church and an unnatural birth, were brought together in a host of literary texts. The random order of the two references gave rise to a narrative appearing both in other historical sources and in romances: that of a Muslim king whose child was born deformed and who subsequently converted to Christianity. This article will attempt to interpret monstrosity in *The King of Tars* and the role it plays in the poem's didactic design.

Judith Perryman, the editor of the Middle English romance, listed the following historical records containing a similar story: Anglo-Latin *Flores Historiarum*, Villani's *Istorie Fiorentine*, Rishanger's Anglo-Latin *Chronica*, the letter of 1300-7 to Jayme of Aragon, the Germano-Latin *Annales Sancti Rudberti Salisburgenses*, and Ottokar's *Österreichische Reimchronik* (1980: 42-44). The first three sources were dated as 1299, while all of them shared the feature of narrating a monstrous birth in the East in the context of conversion. The proliferation of similar accounts testifies to the existence of a (literary) tradition: that of the Tartar king fighting on behalf of Christians. Perryman maintains that the narrative element of such offspring being born to the Muslim king must have been added to the legend later (1980: 45). The historical figure who may have been an inspiration for the delineation of that literary character was probably Ghazzan, a Buddhist or Shamanist convert to Islam demonstrating tolerance for Christianity and fighting alongside his Christian father-in-law (Hornstein 1941: 82-87). In turn the battle between Muslims and Christians recorded in all of the versions could have been the victory over Egyptians in Syria won by the khan Abaga, Ghazzan's grandfather, a Mongol ruler in the years 1265-82 (Perryman 1980: 45). In all the narratives the child born out of the marriage of a Christian princess and a Muslim ruler is deformed: half-hairy and half-smooth, half-human and half-animal, wholly hairy, or a formless lump, as it is in *The King of Tars* (Perryman 1980: 45). The deformity is remedied by dint of magic beautification, here in the form of baptism, which also works wonders for the infidel Muslim father.

Magic beautification, which constitutes the climax of the narrative, impressively rounds off the poem belonging to the so-called *Constance-Group*. The group, deriving its name from Chaucer's heroine in "The Man of Law's tale", includes primarily folktales (despite the very late dating of the texts including those stories) and secondarily romances about the characters whom Margaret Schlauch once termed "accused queens".¹ Nevertheless, in *The King of Tars* the narrative diverges from the usual false accusation of birthing a monster to the

¹ See Schlauch (1927).

actual unnatural birth resulting from what is termed miscegenation: the fear of corrupting the white race through intermarriage and subsequently through the racially mixed offspring resulting from it. John Gilles, the author of *Shakespeare and the geography of difference*, uses the term “miscegenation” in his study of the great Elizabethan’s work, but he diagnoses it as anachronistic and hence questionable. Still, in order to support the appropriateness of that usage he quotes an entry from *A new dictionary of sociology* edited by G. Duncan Mitchell, where the authors trace its origin to the U. S. Presidential elections of 1864. At that time “miscegenation” referred to the mating of people of different stock in order to produce a superior stock. As Gilles indicates, Mitchell provides no alternative for that term and, despite the anachronistic quality of its usage, the word is the most adequate one when discussing the mixing of different races (1994: 189). In *The King of Tars* monstrosity exposes the dire consequences of violating the taboo against marriages between whites and non-whites. The monster is a sign demonstrating the inadequacy of such unions and a form of punishment for those who enter them. Simultaneously the remedial role of Christianity is underlined.

The beginning of the thirteenth-century romance resembles that of Chaucer’s tale, that of Nicolas Trivet’s chronicle also narrating the life of a character named Constance (Hornstein 1940: 354-357), of *Le bone Florence of Rome*, and of St. Ursula’s legend (Perryman 1980: 50). A Christian princess is given away in marriage for the sake of peace between the Roman empire and Muslims since a war breaks out between “a trewe Cristen king/ & an hepen heye lording, / Of Dames þe Soudan” (1980: 4-6). She is the daughter of the mysterious “King of Tars”, whose historical identity has been an object of investigation for scholars, while the discussion over the meaning of “Tars” was thus summarized by Perryman (1980: 48):

The King of Tars is a non-specified king whose name implies much deeper Christian roots than those of a Tartar convert, by linking him with the birth of Christ or with St Paul. The fact that The King of Tars is set in opposition to a Muslim sultan presents the idea of the conflict of faiths and of the supreme power of the Christian god with more point and economy than in the analogues, for the battles and the conversion now arise directly out of the bitter religious rivalry between the followers of Christ and the believers of Islam.

Nonetheless, the Christian princess here does not conduct her missionary plan straightforwardly. What in “The Man of Law’s tale” testified to the iniquity of Constance’s first mother-in-law, the Sultanness, namely her false conversion signaled by the words: “We shul first feyne us cristendom to take” (1988 II: 351),² acquires a positive dimension in the romance about a shapeless child. The

² The quotations from *The Canterbury tales* will be taken from Benson’s edition (1988) and the

Muslim conspirator feigning adoption of Christianity acted ignobly, while the same strategy of the King of Tars' daughter merely displays her intelligence in implementing gradual Christianization of the Orient. Ethical values, such as honesty and truthfulness, undergo relativization: missionary activities of Christians may be carried out stealthily, in the guise of obedient adjustment to the mores of Muslims. The underhand strategy is ennobled by the praiseworthy plans of leading Saracens away from the religion of Mohammad, customarily represented as a crook in medieval tradition.

Initially the (nameless) princess from the thirteenth-century romance sacrifices herself for the benefit of her people, continuously imperiled and fighting so as to protect her against the sultan of Damascus, dead set on marrying her against anybody's will. The mother despairs at the course of events ("þai mader cri & michel wo") [her mother cried and felt much woe] (325), while the maiden intrepidly declares: "For y wil suffre no longer þrawe/ þat Cristen folk be for me slawe" [For I will no longer bear it / That Christian folk is slain because of me] (331-332).³ Thus she constructs for herself the new identity of a martyr saint: the one who puts at danger not merely her body, but also her soul through the obligatory adoption of Islam, superficial as it is.

The dire consequences of the interracial (and, more significantly at that point, inter-faith) marriage are foreshadowed in the princess's dream, even if the vision veers towards comforting the dreamer in the end. Initially she visualizes herself being chased by "an hundred houndes blake" (423), which is followed by an even more telling oneiric image:

Ȝete hir þought, wiþ outen lesing,
 Als sche lay in hir sweuening,
 þat selcouþe was to rede,
 þat blac hounde hir was folweing
 þurth miȝt of Ihesu, heuen king,
 Spac to hir in manhede,
 In white cloþes, als a kniȝt,
 & seyde to hir, "Mi swete wiȝt,
 No þarf þe noþing drede,
 Of Teruagaunt no of Mahoun.
 þi lord þat suffred passioun
 Schal help þe at þi need

(445-456).

numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

³ All the quotations from *The King of Tars* will be taken from Perryman's edition (1980) and the line numbers in brackets will refer to this edition; the translation of the quotations into modern English is mine.

[Yet she thought, without listening, / When she lay in her swoon, / Which strange was to tell, / That a black hound was following her, / Through his power Jesus, the heavenly king, / Spoke to her in the shape of a human, / In white clothes, as a knight, / And told her: “My sweet woman / You should not fear / Of Teruagaunt or of Mahoun. / Thy lord that suffered passion/ Shall help you in thy need].

The black hound chasing her emblemizes an infidel, if one limits oneself only to the numerous references to pagans as dogs that appear elsewhere in the romance: the sultan is initially addressed as one of “hepen hounde” (93), which is reiterated when Muslim soldiers’ attack is that of “houndes on Cristen men” (169). Such canine metaphors appeared in other contexts as well, not only in reference to Muslims, such as the Bishop of Winchester’s answer to Henry III’s request to help (Orthodox) Russians against the Tartars: “Let us leave those dogs to devour one another, that they may all be consumed, and perish” (Paris 1977: 466). The comparison between infidels (and also all dissenters from the official faith) and dogs might have indirectly derived from the idea of *cynocephali*, one of the monstrous races customarily included in the Wonders of the East tradition. *The wonders* (or, alternatively, *The marvels of the East*) are accounts of the journeys made by Alexander the Great, who functioned as yet another monstrous child in medieval literature. The oldest extant medieval narrative is included in the *Beowulf*-manuscript and it narrates the legend that in the Orient Alexander encountered multiple monstrous races, including giants, savages described by him as animals or at least cannibals, dragons, hybrid animals, hybrids of humans and animals, wondrous plants, and even the Phoenix (Orchard 1995: 183-203). In accordance with the strategy of the colonial discourse, the places inhabited by the monsters were thoroughly mapped and therefore described in terms of their geographical location. As for *cynocephali*, they were also called *conopenae* and presented as highly hybrid creatures. Along with other monsters, they were to be found in Hascellentia, “the land on the way to Babylon” (Orchard 1995: 187), and the author referred to them in the following words: “Also there are born here half-dogs who are called *conopenae*. They have horses’ manes and boars’ tusks and dogs’ heads and their breath is like a fiery flame” (1995: 189). The dog-heads, highly hybrid creatures, visualize incomplete humanity: human bodies without sufficient reasonableness having the head as its site, deprived of the capability of developing any spirituality in themselves. Interestingly, in the Middle Ages Saracens commenced to be visualized as *cynocephali* in art, which confirmed their position of the monstrous other in the popular imagination (Strickland 2003: 160). Dog-headed Muslims symbolized senseless bestiality, justifying the crude treatment of those religious and ethnic others in any real-life confrontation, should it occur at all.

The black hound in the princess' vision may consequently stand for her newly-wedded Muslim spouse, the object of her loathing rather than affection. Puzzlingly, in the dream the dog transforms itself into a white-clad knight reassuring her about the safety of her religious beliefs as no one will imperil them among those who believe in what Christians thought were Muslim deities. The princess' bridegroom thus emerges as a figure comforting her, while his words are introduced with the name of Jesus Christ. The sultan's future conversion is already signaled in that dictum, particularly when one considers the association between dogs and holiness frequent in hagiography. C. Grant Loomis records the dream vision the mother of St. Dominic experienced during pregnancy: she saw herself carrying a dog which would set the world ablaze in the future (Loomis 1948: 36). Canine nature would accordingly entail not only monstrosity, but also potential holiness: such Christian virtues as humbleness and submission, humility and loyalty. The world ignited by the dog from the vision above is resuscitated by the revolutionary religious ardour, which rents it from stagnation and rejuvenates it as a result of beneficial spiritual unrest.

The visionary experience of the princess of Tars transforms the nature of the romance: initially chivalric, now it shifts in the direction of what Maldwyn Mills termed "edifying romances", involving not exclusively combating the infidels, but also the emergence of sainthood in the characters (Mills 1992: vii). The sultan's bride already displays her deep religiousness and the ability to sacrifice herself for higher values (here being not only inter-religious peace, but also the missionary agenda of the church). Her suffering will culminate in the traumatic experience of mothering a child begotten by the husband more bestial than human, but she will be steadily protected by the divine providence. Accepting a beast-like man for her spouse must be a torment for the saintly virgin. Still, it is a price she has to pay also for the possibility of bringing Christianity to the eastern wilderness.

The position of the princess in Damascus, where she is queen, appears disconcertingly similar to that of Chaucer's Constance among Muslims. The former's missionary activities, secretive as they are, make her adopt the position of a potential colonizer. The colonization is far from being an obvious and straightforward phenomenon; accordingly, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin visualize its structure as rhizomatic rather than monolithic (Ashcroft – Griffiths – Tiffin 2000: 207). The difference between the colonizer and the colonized ones becomes opaque. Superficially colonized, the princess undertakes the colonizing mission. She thus emerges as a representative of the Other among the Others, a stranger whose mores are incomprehensible for those who are (from the Eurocentric perspective) strangers. Nevertheless, balance is redressed at the point when the princess conceives. A mother who could be blamed for her child's deformity, as mothers usually were in the Middle Ages, she cannot,

however, be the cause of her offspring's possible monstrosity due to her impeccability. It is the father's religious and racial alterity that may result in disturbing the natural growth of the child in its the princess's womb.

Beauty, be it moral or physical, may be attributed exclusively to Christians. The primary description of the princess situates her in a row with other righteous heroines whose physical appearance reflected their spiritual perfection:

þe meiden was schast and bliþe of chere,
 Wiþ rode red so blosme on brere,
 & eyzen stepe & gray;
 Wiþ lowe scholders & white swere

(13-16).

[The maiden was chaste and happy on the face, / Fresh-looking and as red as blossom on a briar, / And eyes bright and shining; / With low shoulders and white skin].

Whiteness symbolizing innocence and deep spirituality acquires a racial dimension here, since the sultan's dark tan is continuously underlined in such passages as “þan come þe soudan, þat was blac” (799). The princess enhances that association when she dresses in white, as when she “com clad in palle” (220) before laying herself on the altar of truce between Christians and Muslims. Her black-skinned spouse embodies everything she herself does not stand for, in accordance with the colonial discourse primarily acting on the level of such clear-cut binary divisions as center/margin, white/black, or colonizer/colonized (Ashcroft – Griffiths – Tiffin 2000: 207). Characteristically, numerous accounts about the Marvels of the East include Ethiopians as yet another monstrous race, as exemplified by the chronologically late but highly popular account in *The travels of sir John Mandeville*, derivative in its nature as it is (Moseley 1983: 137). The sultan's black skin makes him disturbingly similar to the monstrous races, repulsive as they are in their menacingly unfathomable mode.

The image of his bestiality discernible on the level of physicality is complemented by his comportment. What Jeffrey Jerome Cohen summarizes as Saracens' “monstrous, racialized flesh” (2003: 191) acquires a fuller form in the descriptions of how the “soudan fers” (74) acts when enraged. His bestiality astonishes even his own servants, who withdraw from his sight for fear of being slain, as it happens with humans in confrontation with wild animals:

When þe soudan þis wordes herd,
 Also a wilde bore he ferd;
 His robe he rent adoun;
 His here he rent of heued & berd.
 He schuld venge him wiþ his swerd,
 He swore bi seyn Mahoun.

þe table so heteliche he smot
 It fel into þe flore fot-hot,
 & loked as a lyoun.
 Al þat he rauzt he smot doun ri3t; (3=gh???)
 Seriaunt, squier, clerk & knight
 Boþe erl & baroun

(97-107).

[When the sultan heard that word / Like a wild boar he raged; / He rent down his robe; / He rent his hair of head and beard. / He wanted to revenge himself with his sword, / He swore by Saint Mahound. / He smote the table so violently/ It fell on the feet rashly, / And he looked like a lion/ He smote downright everybody he reached / A servant, a squire, a clerk and a knight / Both an earl and a baron].

The sultan does not spare any representatives of higher social strata: his violence is directed indiscriminately against those who surround him. His irrational raving transmogrifies him into a senseless beast, similar to a lion only if we consider the negative symbolism of that animal, often put on a par with a leopard rather than presented exclusively as a noble figure in medieval heraldic emblems. For the Church Fathers, to mention only St. Augustine, the lion stood for untamed fierceness, brutal violence, and ruthlessness in relation to more civilized creatures.⁴ The comparison of the sultan to the animal must be situated within that tradition, which gave room to the positive image of a lion as a symbol of royalty only later.

After the (insincere) conversion of the princess to Islam the couple conceives a child:

þat leuedi, so feir & so fre,
 Was wiþ his lord bot moneþes thre
 þan he gat hir wiþ childe

(565-567).

[That lady, so fair and free, / Was with her lord / Only three months / When he begot a child on her.]

Thus she practices the virtue of wifely obedience so ardently recommended in Chaucer's "Clerk's tale" and its analogues, even when the husband is so inhuman that no communication with him is feasible. Moreover, the princess is granted a chance to mother their child in the future, a circumstance conducive to transformation of their mutual relations. The progeny of such mixed couples, whose differences appeared, using a modern phrase, initially irreconcilable, usually functioned as a common denominator in interracial and inter-religious marriages. Dorothee Metlizky even perceives such children as the characters

⁴ For, among others, animal symbolism in the Middle Ages see Feulliet (2004).

who establish a necessary connection not only between their parents, but also between the two apparently different religions, Christianity and Islam (1977: 140). The child born to the couple would reconcile the two and bring permanent peace in the world otherwise agitated by religious struggle.

Whatever role their future offspring will be, the conception is described as a sacrilegious act committed on the innocent princess, or else as another instance of bestial violence on the part of the sultan. Furthermore, the product of that coupling disappoints all that see it after birth. It becomes a gruesome demonstration of its bi-racial origin. It takes to the extreme the usual image of the child from a mixed marriage, uncanny in its physicality composed out of conflicting elements. While the mixed Muslim and Christian descent of Digenes Acrites from the eleventh-century Byzantine protoromance was only signaled in his name, “Twyborn” (Beaton 1996: 32-51), the child in *The King of Tars* terrifies the beholders with its carnal incompleteness and visible lack of any definable identity:

& when þe child was ybore
 Wel sori women were þefore,
 For lim no hadde it non.
 Bot as a rond of flesche yschore
 In chaumber it lay hem bifore
 Wiþouten blod & bon.
 For sorwe þe leuedi wald dye
 For it hadde noiþer nose no eye,
 Bot lay ded as þe ston.
 þe soudan com to chaumber þat tide,
 & wiþ his wiif he gan to chide
 þat wo was hir bigon.

“O Dame,” he seyð biforn,
 “Ozain mi godes þou art forsworn,
 Wiþ riȝt resoun y preue:
 þe childe þat is here of þe born
 Boþe lim & lif it is forlorn
 Alle þurth þi fals bileue

(577-594).

[When the child was born / The women were very sorry / Since it had no limbs /
 But like a lump cut off from flesh / It lay before them in the chamber / Without
 blood or bones. / The lady wanted to die out of sorrow / For it had neither a nose
 nor eyes, / But it lay dead like a stone. / On that hour the sultan came into the
 chamber, / And he began to chide his wife / That woe began because of her.

“O Lady,” he said before her, / “Against my gods you have foresworn, /
 With the right reason and prayer: / The child that is here of thee born / Is devoid
 of both limbs and life / All because of your false beliefs”].

The lump-like quality of the infant's body is thus customarily blamed on the mother, even though the progenitor of the child represents racial alterity himself. For the sultan, however, the lump-like infant exposes its mother's false conversion rather than his own ethnic difference. The child is monstrous as it both visualizes the principle of excess (exorbitant amount of flesh) and that of insufficiency (with no form controlling the fluid matter, which results in carnal shapelessness). If according to Aristotle, an authority for the medieval natural scientists, a mother (contributing to procreation through *matrix*) endows her infant with the matter, while the form is guaranteed by the father, in the romance in question it is the paternal function that is not fulfilled well. The shapeless child thus demonstrates deficiency on the part of the sultan, who was unable to bring life to the otherwise lifeless matter. The couple's offspring is born dead, since the principle of life has not been bestowed on it by the Muslim progenitor.

Lee Ramsey remarks that baptism, frequent as it is in medieval romance, does not have to be crucial for the plot and the characters' predicament (1983: 51). Nevertheless, in *The King of Tars* its role is pivotal: it constitutes a turning point in the narrative as the child's body is transformed into matter endowed with a shape. The remedial power of the sacrament manifests itself in "limes as hole & fere" (705) that the sultan's scion acquires. His initial bestiality, visible on the level of physicality, now diverges into full humanity. The anonymous author must have been familiar with the legend deriving from Pliny's *Natural history* and continued in medieval bestiaries, which described bear cubs as shapeless creatures licked into a form by their mother (1980: 84). The child in the thirteenth-century romance resembles the bear's young from the legend, while the etymological confusion between *ursus* and *hirsutus* must have resulted in analogous monstrous children described as half-hairy and half-beautiful (Perryman 1980: 84). The sacrament affects not only the soul, but also the bodies of newly baptized Christians, while here it didactically produces an infant as beautiful as its non-heathen mother. The lump "lay stille as ston" (639) when the sultan prayed to his gods, whereas the Christian act demonstrated what Edward Said once termed "the lifelessness of Islam" (1994: 241). The monstrous body of the couple's son thus displayed that quality adequately and questioned the very possibility of Muslims producing offspring alive in both body and spirit.

The final stage of magic beautification will amount to transforming also the child's father in the course of another baptism. His black body will turn white, reminiscent of a similar narrative in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, where Saracen Feirefiz transmogrifies into a Christian, in the future the father of Prester John.⁵ Still, that section of the romance's didacticism will not be ad-

⁵ Lachmann's edition of *Parzival* includes both the Old German text and its modern German translation (Lachmann 2003); for an English translation of the romance see Hatto (1980).

dressed here due to the limited scope of our considerations. What remained of interest for us in this article was the didactic function of the monster itself. In *The King of Tars* it firstly indicates its father’s sinfulness and secondly leads to reconciliation between Islam and Christianity and gradual conversion of Saracens to the latter religion. The formless body symbolizes the uselessness of Muslim beliefs, or perhaps even their harmfulness for the health of one’s body and spirit. Within that economy, conversion is beneficial in that it may restore things to the “appropriate” shape. Hence the monster constitutes a sign of warning and simultaneously an encouragement to subject oneself to baptism.

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