

Title: 'The Significance of the Other in Middle English Romance: Sir Isumbras and the alliterative Morte Arthure'

Abstract (300 words):

This essay argues that the most common way to read the Other in Middle English romance is somewhat lacking. Commonly, Othered figures are read as having a primarily mimetic function, representing contemporary understandings of the Other/Same boundary. However, this reading overlooks the way in which romance texts construct meaning, using generic motifs with specific narrative and symbolic functions. With this in mind, the Othered figures in two texts, *Sir Isumbras* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, are here read according to their narrative and symbolic functions, in the hope that they may suggest part of the generic function of the Other in romance. In Part 1, this way of reading the Other is outlined and defended. In Part 2, the first narrative function of the Other is identified – namely, that of a signal. It is argued that the way that the text's Others are depicted provides a signal to the reader of the kind of problem that the text explores. In *Sir Isumbras*, the Other's depiction indicates that the problem is an individual one, the problem of Isumbras' pride. However, in the alliterative *Morte* the Other's depiction suggests that the problem is a social one, namely the way that the heroic code drives Arthur to military excess. Finally, in Part 3 it will be shown that the Other has a second, more performative narrative function, revealing and articulating the problem explored by the text by acting as a dark mirror of its hero. The Othered figures opposing the text's heroes are used to echo and magnify the heroes' flaws, highlighting and exaggerating them. In *Sir Isumbras*, this merely adds to a didactic, overt critique of Isumbras' pride, while in the alliterative *Morte*, Arthur's dark mirrors themselves constitute the text's sophisticated, implicit critique of the king and his code.

Keywords: Sir Isumbras, Alliterative Morte, Other, Romance, Meaning

'The Significance of the Other in Middle English Romance: *Sir Isumbras* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*'

Introduction

This essay investigates the narrative and symbolic functions performed by the Other in two romance texts: *Sir Isumbras* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.¹ Though critics often read the Othered figures in Middle English romance primarily as indications of the Same/Other boundaries contemporary to them, this essay embarks on a different reading of the Other, one that treats Othered figures as having conventional narrative functions. Reading the Other in this way pays more heed, it will be argued, to the way that medieval romance constructs meaning. What emerges is that the Other performs two main narrative functions, both linked to the central 'problems' that the texts seek to expose or resolve. Firstly, the way that the Other is depicted provides a signal to the reader of the kind of problem that the text is dealing with – in the case of *Sir Isumbras*, the problem is an individual one: Isumbras' pride, while the problem at the heart of the alliterative *Morte* is arguably a social one, since a social code drives Arthur to military excess. Secondly, the Other has a more performative function, revealing and articulating the problem by acting as a dark mirror of the text's hero. The Othered figures opposing the text's heroes possess magnified versions of those heroes' flaws, reflecting their ugly, darker attributes back to them tenfold. In the case of *Sir Isumbras*, the Sultan king amplifies Isumbras' proud habits, while the *Morte*'s Othered figures of Lucius and the giant highlight Arthur's problematic imperial greed.

Part 1: How to read the Other

When analysing depictions of the Other, many critics read from a text's treatment of the Other what its contemporaries defined as Same, what they defined as Other, and what anxieties they entertained regarding the boundary between the two. Though committed to a trans-historical,

¹ *Sir Isumbras*, ed. Harriet Hudson, (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). Available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams//isumfrm.htm> [accessed 10 January 2013]. Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, in *King Arthur's Death*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, rev. by Edward E. Foster (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). All further references are to these editions and are given parenthetically in the text.

psychoanalytic approach, this idea nevertheless forms part of the founding premise of Jeffrey J. Cohen's *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and The Middle Ages*, in which he reads from literary treatment of giants cultural anxieties about identity, sexuality and selfhood.² Another example is Leila K. Norako's article 'Sir Isumbras and the Fantasy of the Crusade', in which she argues that *Sir Isumbras* reveals an early fourteenth-century fear of the power of the Muslim world, one that the text aims to soothe with 'a cathartic virtual crusade'.³

While this approach can be fruitful and compelling, it can also result in an analysis that overlooks how romance constructs meaning. Many critics have observed that romance texts construct meaning in a way that modern readers can find baffling. W. J. Barron, for example, comments on their use of 'expressive conventions', a range of 'extraordinary, even supernatural, incidents, exotic settings, fabulous trappings, and properties which function as images such as objects', to build up layers of meaning.⁴ He argues:

[...] these expressive conventions [...] draw much of their evocative power from their continuous corporate use. Their dual nature, mimetic and symbolic, puzzling to modern readers, presented fewer problems to an age accustomed to [...] read all narrative at more than one level of meaning.⁵

Without having been exposed to the 'continuous corporate use' of such expressive conventions, it can be hard for modern readers to recognise the multiple levels of meaning implied by a certain character, motif or event. With this in mind, it seems that analysing a text's representation of the Other merely to reveal what it says about contemporary attitudes risks prioritising its mimetic over its symbolic function, overlooking the role that the Other plays within the text's scheme of expressive conventions.

² Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and The Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Kindle edition.

³ Leila K. Norako, 'Sir Isumbras and the Fantasy of the Crusade', *Chaucer Review*, 48.2 (2013), 166-189 (p. 169).

⁴ W. J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, quoted in 'Sir Ysumbras' in Amanda Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 118-142 (p. 123).

⁵ Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, quoted in 'Sir Ysumbras', p. 123.

Elizabeth Fowler develops Barron's ideas into her concept of the 'topos'. According to Fowler, a topos is:

a pattern of language (often including a familiar scene or setting and its attendant set of values) that recalls us to a tradition of images, arguments, and feelings rather as if they were stored in a particular location.⁶

She gives the example of the topos of the tournament, one which recalls traditions such as the chivalric code of honour.⁷ She continues:

Each example of a topos reminds us of other examples we have experienced, invites us to compare them, and initiates a process of thinking and feeling that is shaped by the topos. Without needing to be elaborated in abstract philosophical formulae, then, a topos initiates complex philosophical reasoning.⁸

Here, Fowler compares romance texts to philosophical investigations. She argues that romance texts tend to explore a problem much like a philosopher might, placing generic characters in non-specific settings and submitting them to a sequence of events to see what conclusions might be drawn.⁹

Much like Barron, Fowler suggests that appreciation of a range of uses of a topos is needed to understand its full meaning, since the philosophical investigation proceeds by comparing different uses of that topos.¹⁰

The philosophical distinction between 'type' and 'token' will be useful here. Both critics argue that to fully appreciate one concrete example of a topos, one 'token' of that topos, readers must understand its 'type' – the group to which it belongs. This understanding is gained through familiarity with a range of tokens of that type. In our case, full understanding of one token of the Other requires understanding of a range of romance tales in which the Other plays a similar part.

⁶ Elizabeth Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in *Sir Isumbras*', in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Jane Gilbert and Ad Putter (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 97-121 (p. 99).

⁷ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 99.

⁸ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 100.

⁹ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 98.

¹⁰ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 100.

Although depictions of the Other may well reflect the prevailing attitudes of their texts' contemporary audiences, they also perform a shared, narrative function within the romance tradition, as these critics suggest, one that I will argue is inextricably linked to its problem-solving nature.

Part 2: The Other provides a Signal

One function that the Other performs is to provide a signal to the reader of what kind of problem the text explores, or the kind of central critique it is making. When the critique is primarily directed at one character, the distinction between Self and Other is a clear, insurmountable boundary, one that allows focus to remain on the criticised character while her flaw is exposed or resolved through confrontations with the Other. However, when the critique is directed at a society rather than an individual, the boundary between Self and Other becomes a lot more permeable. The Other is brought into the fold and the destabilising effect that this has helps to direct the reader's attention to faults in the society constructed within the text.¹¹

A good example of the former kind of signalling occurs in *Sir Isumbras*. Early on, this poem makes its central problem, the problem of Isumbras' pride, explicitly known. A bird sent by God informs Isumbras: 'Thou haste forgete what thou was / For pryde of golde and fee' (ll. 44-5) and that for this pride he will be punished with poverty. As various critics have made clear, 'Sir Ysumbras is so engrossed in the good life [...] that he forgets to praise God.'¹² By pointing out that Isumbras is at 'play' when he hears this warning, the poet draws attention to Isumbras' idle, thoughtless enjoyment, one demonstrably lacking in pious gratitude. He forgets that his good fortune ('what thou was') is only enabled by God, foolishly thinking himself self-sufficient.¹³ Furthermore, the poet's repetition of 'golde and fee', earlier used to describe Isumbras' payment of his minstrels, makes clear that his pride also takes a financial form: he is so sure of his fortune that

¹¹ Dorsey Armstrong, 'Postcolonial Palomides: Malory's Saracen Knight and the Unmaking of Arthurian Community', *Exemplaria*, 18.1 (2006), 175-203 (p. 179-180).

¹² Hopkins, 'Sir Ysumbras', p. 133.

¹³ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 113)

he wastes money on minstrels, money that could be better spent in Christian acts of generosity.¹⁴

The primary Other depicted in *Sir Isumbras* is that of Isumbras' rival, the Sultan king. The king's Otherness is made clear from the outset. For example, the poet presents Isumbras' first encounter with the king as a test of the kind of man he is. The now dispossessed Isumbras prepares to ask the Sultan for some food, but before approaching him he remarks to his wife: "What maner men, dame, may these be?" / With ful lowde a steven' (ll. 213-4). In his booming voice, Isumbras turns a meek act of begging into a direct challenge to the Saracens to prove themselves. He begins the challenge by defining himself as a Christian, asking for food 'for Goddes love that deyde on Rode' (l. 224). The Sultan refuses, explaining his refusal by defining himself as a Muslim just as firmly 'They leve not upon my lay, / Be Mahoun that the bought' (ll. 230-1). By these declarations the two are set up in direct, apparently insoluble, opposition. The Sultan then further demonstrates his Otherness by defying the Christian sanctity of marriage in an act of *raptus*: he offers to buy Isumbras' wife (ll. 271-2) and then takes her by force, forcing payment upon the indignant Isumbras in the form of a red mantel covered in gold coins (l. 286-7).

At this point, Isumbras is powerless to refuse the Sultan king. This begins to change after Isumbras reaches his lowest point, giving up pride and putting his fortune in the hands of God. In both a religious and a feudal position of submission,¹⁵ he falls to his knees and asks Jesus for guidance: 'Wysse me the way to sum toun / Al amis am I gone' (ll. 371-2). This is moment is key to solving the poem's central problem: by acknowledging God's power over his fate, Isumbras begins to regain all that he has lost. He finds a blacksmith who teaches him to forge a suit of armour, one which allows him to join a battle against the Sultan in which he kills his nemesis (ll. 376-444). The Othered figure, originally an unbeatable opposite, becomes an obstacle symbolically overcome. The Other remains distinctly, unquestionably opposite throughout, never crossing into the Same, while

¹⁴ Hopkins, 'Sir Ysumbras', p. 132.

¹⁵ Fowler, 'The Romance Hypothetical', p. 114.

Isumbras undergoes internal change in order to change his relationship to that Other. In this manner, the text signals that it is in Isumbras, not societal customs or boundaries, that the problem lies.

A very similar signal is used in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Here, the central problem is located in the poem's protagonist, Arthur himself, as his 'downfall is certainly tainted with, if not caused by, his military excesses.'¹⁶ Because of an 'incipient overreaching',¹⁷ demonstrated most forcefully in the final third of the poem, Arthur becomes the very tyrant that 'tourmentes the pople' (l. 3153) that he strives to defeat in the first two thirds, giving Mordred the opportunity to usurp him while his attention is turned towards the East.

Just as in *Sir Isumbras*, Arthur is paired against a series of distinct Others: the giant of St Michael's Mount, Lucius, Emperor of Rome, and Mordred the traitor. Whenever he confronts one of these Others their differences are presented as insurmountable: the option of cooperation is shut down by the text, forcing one to destroy the other (or, as in the case of Mordred, to assure each other's mutual destruction). Recognising these tokens of the 'distinct Other', the reader is primed to interpret the text as a series of tests of the protagonist: each Other provides a different obstacle that Arthur must overcome in order to defeat the problem. When fighting the giant, his desire to conquer is justified by the giant's foul deeds and he responds laudably. Things become less clear in the latter part of his Roman conquest, however, as he oversteps the mark at Metz and begins to become a tyrant himself.¹⁸ Arthur fails the test presented by this distinct Other and the problem of his imperial greed gains the upper hand. He never finds a solution and by the time he returns to England it is to receive due punishment at the hands of his own treacherous kin.

In this final rival, however, Arthur fights against a very different kind of Other. While the giant and the Roman Emperor are depicted as distinctly Other (the giant by his immoral deeds and

¹⁶ Jeff Westover, 'Arthur's End: The King's Emasculation in The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*', *Chaucer Review*, 32.3 (1998), 310-324 (p. 315).

¹⁷ Russell Peck, 'Willfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,' quoted in Westover, 'Arthur's End', p. 315.

¹⁸ Westover, 'Arthur's End', pp. 317-18.

the Emperor by his alliance with the Orient), Mordred is one of Arthur's own *turned* Other. As such, the opposition between them cannot be drawn so distinctly. Mordred has moved only incompletely from Self to Other in his treasonous acts, since he has done so with many of the same aims and beliefs as Arthur (to borrow a piece of terminology from *Sir Isumbras*, he shares Arthur's 'lay'). The poet draws attention to this when Mordred, reminiscing about the 'reverence and riotes of the Round Table' sorrowfully repents 'all his rewth workes' (ll. 3893-4). This positioning of the Other within the realm of the Same complicates the very idea of the Same/Other distinction, making the reader question what defines the Same. As Brent Miles remarks, 'One can ponder whether the denatured King Arthur [...] who waits to be crowned Emperor in Rome, is still Arthur', especially when compared with Mordred who bears all the trappings of the King of England, even a Christian conscience.¹⁹

In their effort to decide who is the rightful king, readers embark upon a critical evaluation of the Same/Other boundary. By bringing the Other into the Same, the poet shifts the focus from the question of how one individual can live up to the ideals of the Same (as in *Sir Isumbras*) to the question of what underpins the society of the Same. In the *Morte Arthure*, the very construct that is meant to support Arthur's rule – the loyalty of his knights – is found to be broken, inviting readers to look for problems within it to find out what has gone wrong. What they find is that the central problem is more complicated than it first appeared. There is another reason for Arthur's downfall, what Jeff Westover describes as 'the contradiction inherent in the heroic code, or the social process that produces and reinforces the aggressive masculinity so essential to the kingdom it undergirds.'²⁰

Arthur repeatedly claims in the text that his knights, through their great deeds and martial prowess, fundamentally maintain his 'manhede' (ll. 399, 4278) – a manhood essential to feudal rule. Thus, in order to maintain his manhood and his rule, Arthur must constantly provide further

¹⁹ Brent Miles, "Lyouns Full Lothely": Dream Interpretation and Boethian Denaturing in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Arthuriana*, 18.1 (2008), 41-61 (p. 58).

²⁰ Westover, 'Arthur's End', p. 316.

opportunities for his court to prove themselves. The usual way for the court to do this is by quelling threats to its existence, what Aisling Byrne terms ‘necessary threat[s]’ exemplified by the intruder at the feast motif.²¹ Arthur, however, not only has to maintain his rule but must also live up to his knights’ belief that he is the best king on earth (l. 289). He is forced to provide the greatest earthly opportunity for their martial success: conquest of the greatest empire, the empire of Rome. His imperial greed, as it turns out, is the logical consequence of the structure of his society, one that forces him to neglect other duties (such as home rule and providing an heir) and allow himself to be usurped. As Michael Twomey argues, ‘the passion binding his men together in loyalty is also the passion that undoes Arthur’s kingship and the entire Arthurian world.’²²

Part 3: The Other provides a Dark Mirror

In the first part of this essay, frequent reference was made to the distinctness of the boundary between Same and Other. This distinctness was shown to be a correlative of the possibility of movement from one side of the boundary to the other, and was demonstrated by the differences between the two. A distinct boundary, however, does not entail *complete* difference. In fact, the second function of the Other is based on the similarities that can be found between the Other and the Same.

This second function is that of a dark mirror. It is closely related to the idea, espoused by Cohen, of ‘intimate alterity’. Cohen reflects that while the figure of the giant exists ‘outside the human body, as the limit of its coherence’, it is also paradoxically found that ‘the monster is fully within.’²³ Despite the extreme Otherness of giants, they are in some respects the Same – we recognise the very features that make them different as part of our intimate selves. What will be shown is that, in much the same fashion, the problematic heroes of romances bear a striking

²¹ Aisling Byrne, ‘The Intruder at the Feast: Negotiating Boundaries in Medieval Insular Romance’, *Arthurian Literature*, XXVII (201), 33-57 (p. 35).

²² Michael Twomey, ‘Heroic Kingship and Unjust War in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*’, quoted in Westover, ‘Arthur’s End’, p. 320.

²³ Cohen, *Of Giants*, ‘Introduction: The Intimate Stranger’.

resemblance to their Othered rivals – only, however, in their problematic traits, the traits that drive the central problem of their texts. In consequence, it appears one of the dividing lines between Same and Other is the division between laudable and condemnable conduct, and one function of the Othered rival is to reflect and magnify the condemnable traits of the text's hero.

In the case of Sir Isumbras, the similarity between his financial habits and those of the Sultan king forms an ironic elaboration of Isumbras' problematic pride. The already repeated phrase 'golde and fee' is used again in the text when the Sultan makes his second offer to Isumbras. He declares 'Man, I wol geve the golde and fee, / And thou that wymman wole selle me' (ll. 271-2). Here, the phrase used to describe Isumbras' sin is uttered by the most sinful figure of all, the heathen, in a bargain that seeks to defile the sanctity of Isumbras' Christian marriage. Isumbras' 'pryde of golde and fee' is amplified by its likeness to a heathen's deeds. The point is further forced home by the king's choice of payment, since the 'mantel' that he forces upon Isumbras ironically recalls the 'ryche robes' (l. 20) he wasted upon minstrels when he was wealthy.

In much the same fashion, the *Morte Arthure* poet links his representation of Arthur to that of both the giant and 'Lucius the lithere' (l. 23), so that his tyrannous tendencies are reflected and amplified in his Othered rivals. An illustrative example is the way he is linked to both figures by the use of lists. When the poem first introduces Arthur it defines him as a conqueror above all else, describing him as the king who 'by conquest had wonnen / Castle and kingdomes and countrees many' and then listing his substantial empire in no fewer than seventeen lines (ll. 26-7, 30-47). When the narrative gaze first turns on Lucius his first act is to send letters to all of the different sultans and kings 'that were seker soudeours to Rome', allowing the poet to define him in just the same way by listing the international reach of his influence (ll. 593, 570-609).

Similarly, when the Roman messengers first arrive at Arthur's court, he demonstrates his empire with a display of foods so rich and international that one Roman remarks 'There ne is prelate ne pope ne prince in this erthe / That he ne might be well paed of these pris metes!' (ll. 229-

30). The food, such as ‘cranes and curlews craftily roasted’, is described at great length, as is the impressive crockery which is ‘closed in silver’ (ll. 196, 206). This sumptuous fascination with the feast is later recalled by the description of the giant’s feast of innocent children. The cannibal eats, from a ‘chargeur of chalk-white silver’, children who have been seasoned with ‘precious spices’ (ll. 1026-7). As Cohen remarks, ‘[t]he spices used to prepare the giant’s feast are just as exotic as those used by Arthur’s cooks, but here they flavor torn humanity.’²⁴ Arthur’s pride and appetite for empire is echoed by the giant’s grotesque lust for human flesh. The problematic extreme of his imperial greed is magnified in its proper place – the Other – in order to point up the impropriety of Arthur’s lust for power.

Conclusion

As has been shown, these romance texts use their depiction of the Other to indicate the kind of critique they seek to provide, then to articulate the boundary between laudable and contemptible traits in their heroes. In doing so, romance uses conventional Same/Other distinctions to create a Same/Other division of deeds. Those deeds not considered laudable when performed by the text’s heroes are exaggerated and amplified in the Othered figures opposing them, demonstrating by comparison how misplaced they are in a hero of the Same. By acquaintance with its role as both a signal and a dark mirror, the accustomed reader can recognise its contribution to a text’s critique, even where this critique is largely implicit as is the case in the alliterative *Morte*.

Word count: 3750

²⁴ Cohen, *Of Giants*, ‘Chapter Six: Exorbitance – The Cruelty of Laughter’.

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