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PART THREE

THE IMPACT OF WAR

PROOF

PROOF

Chapter 10

ORIENTAL DESPOTISM AND THE RECEPTION OF ROMANCE

John M. Ganim*

FROM THE TWELFTH century onward, romance is imbricated in and by the discourse of the Crusades, and a case can be made that its flowering depends on a certain compensation for the erosion of crusader territory. After the fall of Constantinople, crusading rhetoric and crusade motifs reemerge, this time embedded in new forms inspired by the rediscovery of Greek prose romances. A host of new romances and romance epics emerge in several European languages which send their heroes off to battle a disturbingly refashioned infidel.¹ The Ottoman Empire presents a different challenge to the political ideology of crusade narratives, due to its imagined resemblance to an absolutist sovereignty also emerging in Western Europe at the same time, one that threatened the political existence of the knightly class.

Because the following pages cite the prejudices and projections of these romance texts themselves, let me state my argument at the outset. To be sure, the Ottoman Empire was not by any definition of political economy an absolutist state. It adapted the forms and flexibility of successful empires in the region over many centuries past, although it introduced military and financial innovations. While its leaders were demonized in both the romances discussed below and in alarmed responses to Ottoman victories, this itself was not unusual either, and within a very short time, frequent and subtle cultural and political interchanges began to occur. In late medieval chivalric romances, however, a distinctive discourse can be identified. The Ottoman Empire is imagined as an absolutist state, which in fact was a projection on to this formidable adversary of a formation which was emerging not in the East, but in the tendencies towards centralized authority that marked the formerly feudal European states. This projection was an historical irony, since the rise of absolutism in the West fundamentally transformed the feudal culture that gave rise to chivalric romance and to the images of heroism and identity it

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¹ By now the notion that romance was appreciated as much for its topicality as for its escapism is widely accepted. This is especially so in the fifteenth century, a point made persuasively by Helen Cooper, "Romance After 1400," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 690–719. Romance "acquires a new significance in promising to preserve the old values of high chivalry and orthodox piety against the dangers of theological and political innovation" (690).

embodied. At the same time, the ceremony and imagery of absolutist courts themselves, Henry VIII is a striking example, adapted the trappings both of Arthurian romance (though emphasizing the Imperial Arthur) and, occasionally, Ottoman style. The fiction of polar opposition constructed by the romances discussed below is belied by a wealth of evidence of mutual borrowings, adaptations, and influences, political, military, and aesthetic.²

At the conclusion of *Le Morte Darthur*, after the utter devastation of the realm and of the Round Table, Malory tells us that his sources differ as to the fate of the surviving knights. Some versions, he says, state that they never left England, but that he prefers another ending:

Than Syr Bors de Ganys, syr Ector de Maris, syr Gahalantyne, syr Galyhud, syr Galyhodyn, syr Blamour, syr Bleoberys, syr Wyllyars le Valyaunt, syr Clarrus of Cleremounte, al these knyghtes drewe them to theyr contreyes. Howbeit kyng Constantyn wold have had them wyth hym, but they wold not abyde in this royaume. And there they al lyved in their cuntreyes as holy men. And somme Englysshe bookes maken mencyon that they wente never oute of Englonde after the deth of syr Launcelot but that was but favour of makers. For the Frensshe book maketh mencyon and is auctorysed that syr Bors, syr Ector, syr Blamour, and syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy Lande, thereas Jesu Cryst was quycke and deed. And anone as they had stablysshed theyr londes, for, the book saith, so syr Launcelot commaunded them for to do or ever he passyd oute of thys world, there these foure knyghtes dyd many bataylles upon the myscreantes, or Turkes. And there they dyed upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake.³

(1259.34–1260.15)

A century before, a penitential crusade would not have been a surprising endeavor for English nobles, and we have records of even some of Chaucer's acquaintances embarking on armed pilgrimages. Philippe de Mézières, the French soldier and diplomat, had pressed the European nobility to take up the cross again and recover the Holy Land. The Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, another failed attempt to staunch the advance of the Ottomans, was the last large scale Crusade. More crucially, the passage reflects a changed awareness of the nature of the generalized Saracen enemy (often treated with some grace in *Le Morte Darthur* itself), for it is now, and will be for centuries to come, the much more specific "miscreant Turk." And the historical frame of reference is not the loss of Jerusalem in 1187, but the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

I want to suggest, however, that this odd passage, however conventional in its sentiments regarding the ideals of European knighthood, even after the trials of the Hundred Years' War and the War of the Roses, reveals a shift in the significance of crusading narratives. Scholarship has not ignored this passage, nor its context. The place of the "Saracens" in Malory has been well studied over the past decade, often debating exactly what a Saracen might be exactly. Mary Hamel, for instance, noted that Sir

² See, for instance, Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art Between East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) and, for a later overview, Lisa Jardine, *Captives* (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

³ See *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*.

Priamus, a noble opponent who is christened and is welcomed into Arthur's fellowship, was not actually Arab nor Turk, but Hebrew and Greek, and that Malory had softened the contours of Saracen violence that appeared in his inspiration, the Middle English *Sir Ferumbras*. Hamel suggests that the lobbying efforts of the Byzantine emperor in various Western European courts may have been an inspiration.⁴ Donald L. Hoffman argued that Malory's "Saracens" were, as is often in medieval literature, a stand-in for otherness, with a notable prejudice against those from the South, with the reconquest of Spain, rather than the Crusades or Ottoman expansion as the primary current event. Hoffman shifts our attention to Palomides, the Saracen Knight in the Tristram sections of Malory. Despite his nobility and knightly zeal, or perhaps because of his wholehearted embrace of courtly love, he remains other, even after his baptism and inclusion in Camelot. The following Grail books replace a landscape peopled with occasional Saracen enemies with one filled with demonic adversaries. For an analogue, Hoffman points towards the debate between Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX concerning Frederick's proposed relocation of Muslim subjects from Sicily to mainland Italy, suggesting a wider shift from a restrained tolerance to outright phobia.⁵ Meg Rowland finds the passage so anomalous that she rehearses evidence that it might have been Caxton's interpolation, reflecting Caxton's own zeal on the issue, reflected in many other books he printed.⁶ For Peter Goodrich, Malory's elegiac view of chivalry, shifting from history into fantasy, is mirrored in the Orientalizing of his Saracen characters, whatever information he might have received from relatives with first-hand knowledge, as P. J. C. Field surmised.⁷

Malory's passage elegiacally inverts the origin of the Grail Quest itself. Grail romances start appearing within a few years after the loss of Jerusalem in the early thirteenth century, and Helen Adolf long ago plausibly suggested that the Grail Quest was in some sense a transfer or redirection of the crusading ideal.⁸ I want to argue that this new enemy represents a threat on a social and political as well as military and theological level to the knighthood to which Arthur's remnant belongs. The polity represented by the "miscreant Turk" is Empire, not merely a kingdom. To predict my larger argument,

4 Mary Hamel, "The 'Christening' of Sir Priamus in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Viator* 13 (1982): 295–308.

5 Donald L. Hoffman, "Assimilating Saracens: The Aliens in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 43–64.

6 Meg Roland, "Arthur and the Turks," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 29–42.

7 Peter H. Goodrich, "Saracens and Islamic Alterity in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 10–28. See also Dorsey Armstrong, "Postcolonial Palomides: Malory's Saracen Knight and the Unmaking of Arthurian Community," *Exemplaria* 18, no. 1 (2006): 175–203. For earlier engagements between English literature and the "Orient," see Carol Falvo Heffernan, *The Orient in Chaucer and Medieval Romance* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2003) and the classic account by Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), though neither considers the Ottoman Empire more than briefly.

8 Helen Adolf, *Visio Pacis, Holy City and Grail: An Attempt at an Inner History of the Grail Legend* (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1960).

the Ottoman Empire represents a new form of sovereignty and incomprehensible networks of allegiances. Moreover, it is a sovereignty and system that Europe itself is changing into. The rise of absolutism, mirrored in the Ottoman Empire, is undermining the role and function of chivalry and feudalism, even if it borrows the trappings and symbols of the old order.

The concept of “Empire” was one first used by French sources to describe the Ottoman state, and there was no analogous terminology used in early Ottoman records. Nevertheless, Ottoman rulers, largely for strategic purposes, adapted titles that suggested world-historical rule. From the Sufi missions that may have followed or may have preceded their earliest conquests, their majesty was accorded a certain sense of divine right. In an effort to impress the Mongol bands that threatened their Eastern flanks and which they had initially held off in support of the Seljuks, they employed titles that echoed those of Mongol rulers. After the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the Ottomans turn their attention to the Balkans, and as they do, employ Byzantine titles and traditions. Finally, established as the chief Islamic state after the conquest of Constantinople, they deploy both Roman imperial claims and the Arabic word sultan. Combined with the institutionalization of a professional army, the Ottomans predicted the structures of absolutism *avant la lettre*. It differed substantially from its later Western counterparts, of course, not least of all because the land of the Empire was legally the property of the Porte rather than of a hereditary aristocracy. What the Europeans saw was the fusion of energies that fuelled the first conquests of the Ottomans, its *ghazi* zealotry and its military discipline, which stood as a reproach to the failures of their own crusades. But the difference, at least from their perspective, was that this fusion was now embedded in a state. The long history of the association of the Ottoman Empire with despotism, and with what Marx and Engels called “the Asiatic mode of production,” begins almost immediately.⁹

The reception and revival of the Crusades after the fall of Constantinople was almost immediate. William Caxton’s *The History of Godefrey of Boloynne and of the Conquest of Iherusalem* (STC 13175) appeared in 1481 and his translation of the story of Fierabras from the French was printed in 1484 as *The History and Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prince Charles the Grete* (STC 5013). Indeed, many of Caxton’s books are romances

⁹ For overviews of this vast literature, see, for instance, Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Thomas Kaiser, “The Evil Empire?: The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century Political Culture,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 6–34; Richard Koebner, “Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 14 (1951): 275–302. Barbara Fuchs and Emily Weissbourd, ed. *Representing Imperial Rivalry in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) contains several helpful chapters on the merging of admiration and identification, on the one hand, and revulsion and distance on the other, between Ottoman and European empires: see especially Larry D. Silver, “Europe’s Turkish Nemesis,” 58–79 on visual representations, and Carina L. Johnson, “Imperial Succession and Mirrors of Tyranny in the Houses of Hapsburg and Osman,” 80–100 on political projection.

and *chansons de geste* of Charlemagne, who more or less represents a form of imperial kingship for Europeans. In the little-known Franco-Italian *chanson de geste*, *Macario*, an unjust accusation against Charlemagne's Byzantine wife starts the chain of events, largely because Charlemagne himself does not defend her.¹⁰ The narrative begins by the collapse of the marriage alliance and Constantinople itself seems almost preferable to the internecine treachery of feudal France. Luke Sunderland has tracked a number of Venetian and Franco-Italian romances in which Charlemagne comes off badly.¹¹ Charlemagne is represented as a central authority trampling on the privileges of local magnates. Charlemagne in such narratives becomes the double of the imperial Byzantine court he ostensibly is opposing. The romance epic returns to the matter of Charlemagne, or at least what an earlier generation of comparativists called epic degeneration, deploying an underlying narrative politics of empire against empire, however much the plot may tell us of individual adventure. The most popular English medieval heroes to survive into Renaissance retellings, such as Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick, do so partly on the basis of their travels to the East.

The transformation of the Crusades as a symbol is expressed in genre. Dorothy Metlitzki and Geraldine Heng have demonstrated how the romance genre not only represented the Crusades and the Arabic world, the genre itself was shaped by their challenges. Fifteenth-century romances that deal explicitly with the Ottoman threat tend to return to older models for understanding the new challenge. *The Sege off Melayne* revives the cast of characters from the *Song of Roland* to defend Milan against an Arab sultan, giving heroic roles to warrior bishops. Similarly, *Capystranus*, a historical romance based on the actual siege of Belgrade by the Turks, valorizes its title character, giving him, an actual friar who preached a crusade, a messianic role.¹² At a turning point in the siege, his appeal to God results in armies of dead warriors coming back to life and rejoining the battle. Lee Manion notes how *Capystranus* is unusual in imagining a “non-knightly crusader army,” despite its traditional portrayal of the savagery of the Turks and Saracens (169–170).¹³

For centuries, medieval romance had employed familiar motifs such as crusading rhetoric or other forms of spiritual and martial traditions, many of them deriving from

¹⁰ See Rima Devereaux, *Constantinople and the West in Medieval French Literature: Renewal and Utopia*, Gallica, 25 (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012).

¹¹ Luke Sunderland, *Rebel Barons: Resisting Royal Power in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹² Anastasija Ropa, “Imagining the 1456 Siege of Belgrade in *Capystranus*,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (2015): 255–82.

¹³ Lee Manion, *Narrating the Crusades: Loss and Recovery in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Manion tracks the transition from late medieval romance to Early Modern drama, and reminds us that the later English romances seem more concerned with Spain, Italy, and Eastern Europe than with the recovery of Jerusalem. See also the important article by Rebecca Wilcox, “Romancing the East: Greeks and Saracens in Guy of Warwick,” in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): 217–40.

Charlemagne romances, resulting in the defeat or conversion of non-believers. After the fall of Constantinople and the rise of the Ottoman Empire, these stereotypical responses become both focused and troubled. Diane Vincent has argued, for instance, that Christian-Pagan debates in recyclings of Charlemagne romances were actually oriented towards internal, insular conflicts, such as the Lollard controversies.¹⁴

Where earlier romances created such enduring forms as the quest romance, with its ineffable goal of personal perfection, and with its individual knightly protagonist, the encounter with the newly threatening Ottoman Empire required a new generic fusion. The romance epic, from the continuations of *Amadis of Gaul* to Tarquato Tasso to Spenser, invariably finds its heroes slouching towards Constantinople or its refraction in a historical past, sometimes in triumph and sometimes in confusion. Often the hero finds himself in disguise, as a double agent or as a temporarily deranged renegade. In this fusion, and confusion, the crisis of chivalric values becomes explicit. The narrative no longer is a matter of individual perfection, but an imagined clash of civilizations, whose formal expression is the epic. Yet except for the essential difference of religious confession, the clash is between increasingly indistinguishable political entities.

The focus on Constantinople can be tracked in one of the most widespread and influential chivalric romance cycles, *Amadis of Gaul*, which begins in a Spanish original dating from the early fourteenth century but is added to through the early sixteenth century, and is translated into French, English, and other European languages.¹⁵ Don Quixote tosses his romances on a bonfire, but then pulls out the first four books (of twelve) of *Amadis of Gaul*, because they are the best of their kind. Our interest is in the books that Don Quixote consigned to the bonfire, in which the setting moves from Great Britain ("Gaul" might in fact be Wales and the Amadis cycle circles around Arthurian origins) to Constantinople. Consistency of time and place is not one of the concerns of the cycle, but Constantinople becomes the geographic centre of its latter books and of its many sequels. That city becomes the capital of an empire of magic, as Geraldine Heng puts it, and while Amadis's own life may stretch all the way back to Arthurian Roman days, the focus of many of the battles in the cycle involve defending Constantinople from pagans or Saracens.¹⁶ By the fifteenth century, when the cycle is circulating widely, those menacing pagans or Saracens were identified with the "Turks" who already threatened the city and its empire. The magical Constantinople of *Amadis of Gaul* is figured as the source of romance and chivalry, so its defeat presages the extinction of both. As a result, the battles in *Amadis of Gaul*, long, detailed even in the early British books, become horrendous and gruesome in the later books. The future of European Christian

¹⁴ Diane Vincent, "Reading a Christian-Saracen Debate in Fifteenth-Century Middle English Charlemagne Romance: The Case of the *Turpines* Story," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, ed. Laura Ashe, Ivana Dvordjević, and Judith Weiss (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2010), 90–107.

¹⁵ See John J. O'Connor, *Amadis de Gaule and its Influence on Elizabethan Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

¹⁶ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

civilization is at stake, defended by Amadis and his descendants. Books 5 and 6 witness the Turkish attacks on Constantinople, with gory and elaborate land and sea battles. In one of the later books, a pagan Russian king, with his many vassal kings, actually takes the city, but it is regained by Christian forces. While the specific adventures of knightly prowess in *Amadis* are typical of chivalric romance, of which it is the last great encyclopedia and compendium, its world view is that of an epic in the continuations, in which a final battle, or series of final battles if that is possible, may be the last stand of Christian civilization as we know it. *Amadis of Gaul* becomes the source and model for the continental and insular national romances.

One of the most widely cited sequels of the Amadis cycle is Garcí Rodríguez Ordóñez de Montalvo's *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, printed in 1510:

On the right hand of the Indies, there is an island called California, very close to the side of the Terrestrial Paradise, and it was peopled by black women, without any man among them, for they lived in the fashion of Amazons.¹⁷

These women feed their male children and captured males to griffins. Eventually, Califia finds her way to Europe, and takes part in both the attack and defence of Constantinople. Califia is claimed as an inspiration for present-day gender rebels, but she also becomes domesticated as a founding figure of California in public art and popular culture, and her name has become commercialized by a large dairy corporation. Even in Montalvo, she changes valences. She meets a Muslim warrior and joins him in the siege of Constantinople. When the city holds out, she unleashes her lethal griffins, but they are unable to distinguish between Muslim and Christian warriors, resulting in general mayhem. Leading her own forces, she attacks without the griffins. Eventually, she is entranced with Esplandian, and changes sides. He rejects her as unnatural and pagan, but she ends up converting to Christianity and marrying his son, resettling in California to found a dynasty.

Ariosto, Tasso, Camoens, and others write as poets of the nation in a Vergilian mode, and when their heroes fight against the Saracen, it is as the agent of nation against the minions of Empire, but such a pattern becomes increasingly difficult to manage as their plots develop and braid. Think how often, in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, knights fight against their allegorical opposites, only to enact the pitfalls of their protagonists shortly before or after their battle. The many adventures of aristocratic individual characters are eventually gathered, almost in a bibliographic sense, into a national synthesis with the future authority of the *Faerie Queene* herself established at its end, ushering in a new era in which the sphere of these knights will be limited and directed from above.

The drama of the same period, largely after the fall of Constantinople, offers a spectrum of representations, which, while often reverting to earlier simplistic

17 Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo, *Sergas de Esplandián*, ed. Carlos Sainz de la Maza, Clásicos Castalia (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 2003); I am citing the Little translation, Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo, *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandián*, trans. William Thomas Little (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1992).

stereotypes, reflect recognition of a new reality. When, in the St George sword plays of the fifteenth century and after, St George confronts the Turkish Knight, the battle takes place on English soil, and St George is an emblem of Englishness. He is always played with a red crusading cross on a white tunic. The Turkish Knight recalls both the archaic past—the dying and reborn god of the Old Religion—and the future; the relentless professionalized military force of the new imperial order, of which both the Turkish Knight and his Christian vanquisher will be agents. The tradition of the sword dance (itself traceable to Turkish analogues) is adopted to a new paradigm of nation versus Empire. Indeed, in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, pressures from the creditor nations of Western Europe forced the Ottoman state to define itself increasingly in terms of the post-Westphalian nation state, with disastrous consequences for such policies as the relocation of ethnic and religious populations.

In his arresting account of the Turk in English folk plays, placed against the long history of ignorance of actual Turkish experience, David Lawton notes that the “English cult of St George is a crusader cult. St George, who is to be the patron of English national identity, enters English consciousness at much the same time, and in the same context, as the Turk.” I would suggest that Lawton’s typology (the Seljuk Dynasty, the Saracen armies of the sultan and ultimately the Ottoman Empire) is also a progression.¹⁸ The most fully developed exegesis of St George is, of course, the narrative of the *Faerie Queene*, and at least one of the many implications of that work is that knightly virtue deriving from feudalism will ultimately be incorporated into the service of the sovereign herself, and of the nation and state that she rules. Lawton observes the many paradoxical ways in which the Turkish Knight in folk dramas becomes oddly domesticated, becoming part of regional identities and sometimes of deeply Christian festivals, such as Christmas, and as he also reminds us, both St George and St Nicholas first originally appeared in what is now Turkey. “The drama,” writes Lawton “marks the appearance in the later medieval period of a kind of festive Turk, who enacts the role of enemy but is also potentially a double, mirroring the Western Christian.” The adversary, originally a generalized Saracen, now becomes a more specific, though still ambiguous, Turk.

But 1453, as Lawton recognizes, changes the equation, more or less eliminating the hope for a world Christian empire. The Ottoman Empire, a true empire by any political measure, appears to be a monolithic state, at the moment when the feudal west is being reconfigured into the absolutist state. The psychology of projection that Lawton so convincingly describes as a dialectic between otherness and identity, seems increasingly to be understood in political terms. The Ottoman Empire, under Western eyes, seems to loom as an absolute state, which it is not, while the regalia of the Christian feudal west increasingly disguises and often abets a radical centralization of power that dissolves both the knightly class and the hope for a universal Christianity.

18 David Lawton, “History and Legend: The Exile and the Turk,” in *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern*, ed. Patricia Ingham and Michelle Warren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 173–94.

Medieval romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are copied and printed in the fifteenth century. Romances with crusading and Orientalizing themes, often originally French, are especially popular and may have provided reassurance to a newly shaken faith in the superiority and historical mission of the West. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, these plots and characters are retranslated and reworked in the evolving genre of the romance epic, which takes the romance of individual adventure and places it in the service of nation and empire. A brief survey of these romance plots makes clear how easily their themes could be adapted or read in a new light.

Since I began with a reference to Caxton's publication of Malory and the possibility that Caxton himself may have interjected his enthusiasm for a new crusade against the Turk into his edition, we could do worse than to describe some of Caxton's publications as evidence of this revival of crusading chivalry in a new and immediate context. *Godfrey of Boloyne* recounts the First Crusade by way of William of Tyre's history, though chronicle and romance qualities are indistinguishable. The construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is recounted, to underline the significance of its loss to the Turks. The apocalyptic jeremiads of Peter the Hermit are answered by the rise of Godfrey. The holy lance, which becomes a crucial symbol in grail legends, is discovered, resulting in a turn in Christian fortunes. In a vain attempt to repel the superior technology of the Christian war engine, the Turks turn to "ii old wytches" and "iii maydens, for to helpe to make theyr charme," but the Christian artillery tears them apart and their souls go off to hell. When the Christian army enters the city, the phantoms of dead soldiers join them. These details, found in Caxton's source, are shaped as to imagine a disciplined and unified Christian force against a desperate defender, strikingly resembling the actual experience of the last defenders of Constantinople. Interestingly, when Tasso rehearses the First Crusade in his *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581), the knight who exhibits the most typical medieval chivalric behaviour, Rinaldo, must be ultimately rendered subservient to Godfrey's overall strategy and give up individual adventure for the greater good of the unified and organized force.

Caxton prints a version of the thirteenth century *Fierabras* as part of his *The Lyf of the Noble and Crysten Prynce, Charles the Grete*. Caxton's version includes the typical theme of conversion to Christianity as an aspect of the hero's innate nobility, but it also represents the Christian and Saracen worlds as mirrors of each other. The Saracen Fierabras challenges Charles' champions, but the result is dispute and disagreement among them. Roland is especially embittered, violently so, towards Charles. Oliver, not yet recovered from wounds suffered in previous battles, takes up Fierabras' challenge, but is momentarily disarmed. Fierabras offers to spare Oliver if he will convert to Islam, and offer him his sister in marriage. Oliver, however, grabs Fierabras' sword, magically named "baptisme," and wounds Fierabras grievously. Fierabras now himself seeks conversion, but to Christianity, and the two warriors treat each other solicitously. Oliver borrows Fierabras' armor, but in a twist is captured by an invading Saracen army. A second section of the romance opens with the conversion of Fierabras, but then moves to his sister, Floripas, who joins the captured French warriors and Fierabras himself.

In a third section, Charles has returned with an army and rescued everyone. He offers to spare Balan, the Saracen king and father of Fierabras and Floripas, if he converts, but Balan responds contemptuously, spitting into the baptismal font. Floripas, who has rejected her father, herself converts, motivated by her love for Guy of Burgundy.

If the medieval romances of the East acquired new currency and popularity in the fifteenth century, partly by contrasting the feudal fantasy of adventure with the forbidding and total despotism of the Saracen polity, early humanism took what we might consider to be a compromised and paradoxical position. For the early humanists, the proximity of Constantinople to the presumed site of ancient Troy was too much to ignore. Medieval origin myths had proposed that Western European civilization was founded by Aeneas and one Brutus, refugees from the fall of Troy. Thus, European nations were fundamentally Trojan. The fall of Constantinople was imagined as a historical irony, even historical revenge, and a disarmingly positive light was shone on the Ottoman conquerors at times. While eyewitness accounts were available and published, neo-Latin humanist accounts often viewed the battle through the perspective of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. In some accounts, the Greek leaders were described as if they were Priam, and non-existent Cassandra figures were thrown into the narrative, supposedly violated on the altar area of the Hagia Sophia as a delayed vengeance for what the Greeks did to the Trojans.¹⁹ It is possible that Mehmet the Conqueror himself may have encouraged a Trojan identification. Prophetic books, such as the *Visions of Daniel*, also played a role in emphasizing the fulfillment of eschatological predictions. Meanwhile, various caliphs are modelled as apocalyptic figures, who may convert to Christianity and unify the world; conversely, Constantine, the last Byzantine emperor, may, like Arthur, return. In contrast, Aeneas Sylvius compares the sultan to the most reviled Eastern enemies of classical civilization, Xerxes and Darius. It was easy enough to update these tyrannical and totalizing states of the ancient world to describe the Ottoman threat, despite the enmity between the Ottomans and contemporary Persian rulers. The revision of national and cultural identities had been part and parcel of the medieval engagement with Islam and the East, despite an overall tone of demonization. As Thomas H. Crofts and Robert Allen Rouse have pointed out, however, the romances that situate purportedly English heroes in alien territory unsettle fixed notions of identity between East and West.²⁰ Romances such as *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Guy of*

19 For an account, see Marios Philippides and Walter K. Hanak, *The Siege and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453: Historiography, Topography, and Military Studies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 193–296. Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), emphasizes the crisis in older models of *translatio imperii* occasioned by the fall of Constantinople and provides an account of how Italian writers of the *cinquecento* revise earlier Charlemagne romances.

20 Thomas Crofts and Robert Allen Rouse, “For King and Country: Reading Nationalism in Popular English Romance,” in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: Brewer, 2009), 79–95.

Warwick and *Bevis of Hampton*, all popular throughout the fifteenth century, not only face off English protagonists against Saracen antagonists, they sometimes reverse and complicate national allegiances, though there is usually a reconsolidation at the end of the narratives. Such romance motifs are put to new uses in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and scholars such as Jennifer Goodman and Barbara Fuchs have analyzed the ways in which the accounts of exploration and discovery are shaped by the psychology of romance. Fuchs argues persuasively that dramatic representations are especially complex, in that pirates and piracy represent an arena uncontrolled by the Jacobean state. In general, however, these romance motifs, like their protagonists, are now in the service of Empire and royal authority.²¹

The reality of diplomatic and economic exchange, as Jonathan Burton and others have argued, begins to influence the representation of the “Turk” on the Elizabethan stage. Burton argues that instead of a blanket category of “otherness,” representations of Islam, and especially of the Ottomans, was a negotiated “traffic,” reflecting the many complicated connections between a reformed England and an Ottoman diplomatic strategy sophisticated in manipulating both alliances and symbols.²² Calls to take back the Holy Land rang hollow when the entire Eastern Mediterranean was under Ottoman control. As Protestants, the English could be called the “new Turkes” by their continental opponents. By the 1580s, Elizabeth was exchanging letters with Murad III. Even earlier, the Tudor and the Ottoman courts exchanged diplomatic gifts displaying their common splendor.

Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of rich scholarship on the encounter between the Ottomans and Europe, with special attention to Elizabethan drama and with a focus on religious difference, which is how Early Modern Europeans understood this alterity.²³ I am suggesting here that tracing the experience of the medieval chivalric subject of romance in the face of a threatening political order is also worth emphasizing, and that the romance epic—the early modern revision of medieval romance—is the result of that realization. Underpinning my argument are the debates about sovereignty and subjectivity that have concerned political philosophy over the

²¹ Jennifer R. Goodman, *Chivalry and Exploration, 1298–1630* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), and Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), who emphasizes Mediterranean as well as New World encounters.

²² Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama* (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2005).

²³ See Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock, ed. *Cultural Encounters Between East and West, 1453–1699* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2005); Matthew Dimmock, “The Tudor Experience of Islam,” in *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (Chichester: Wiley, 2010), 49–62; Samuel C. Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937) remains important; Gerald MacLean, ed. *Re-Orienting the Renaissance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Gerald Maclean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1588–1713* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

past few decades, from Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State* to Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and his debate with Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*, and to Kathleen Davis' *Periodization and Sovereignty*, on how early modern jurists deployed feudal legal thought.²⁴ In the romance epics which develop over the next centuries, Malory's shell-shocked knights will be moving not only into the holy landscape of a crusading past, but into the hypermodern setting of the absolutist future which, as its first step, will limit their agency as hereditary aristocrats and the possibility of "establishing their lands," despite what the French book saith.

24 See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979); for an important exploration of sovereignty at the end of the Middle Ages, see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). Both discuss Jean Bodin, who described the Ottoman State as more arbitrarily tyrannical than contemporary European states, but whose cosmopolitanism offered a positive alternative. For an extended discussion of Bodin and Hugo Grotius and the early articulation of political theology as "romance," using Fulke Greville's poetry as a fulcrum, see Benedict Scott Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spenser to Milton* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 104–15. "Oriental Despotism" as a commonplace in political thought is not used until the seventeenth century, but its origins are earlier. An extremely helpful contextualization of Bodin can be found in Noah Malcolm, "Positive Views of Islam and Ottoman Rule in the Sixteenth Century," in *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World*, ed. Anna Contadini and Claire Norton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 197–217. For a pioneering exploration of the relation between absolutism and medieval literature, see David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).